

LGBTQ+ Representation in Film and TV

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UHL Senior Seminar

5/10/19

## **Introduction**

In 2016, an FBI survey found that LGBTQ+ Americans are targeted twice as much as Muslim Americans and African Americans, four times as much as Jewish Americans, and 14 times as much as Hispanic Americans (PBS NewsHour, 2016). There is a lack of acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in America that needs to be addressed. It should be noted that acceptance of minority groups is often tied to the amount of exposure an individual has to a certain group. Studies have also shown that people's perceptions of the world and the individuals within it are heavily influenced by the media that they are exposed to, specifically film and TV. Therefore, fair representation of LGBTQ+ people in the media is necessary to promote acceptance of the community. However, even with the rapid increase of LGBTQ+ representation in media in recent years, LGBTQ+ people have not seen a significant increase in acceptance (Miller, 2018). It follows that the current state of representation has not adequately addressed the needs of the LGBTQ+ community since acceptance rates of the community have dropped significantly over the past year (Miller, 2018). The goal of this study is to identify problems with LGBTQ+ representation in film and TV and provide recommendations to filmmakers and audience members on how to portray and understand a more fair and diverse array of experiences within the LGBTQ+ community. Through our findings, we hope to promote acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community and to broaden understanding of their diverse experiences.

## **How Visual Media Shapes Our Worldview**

TV and film are not just entertainment. While cynics often dismiss shows and movies as mindless nonsense, Macey, Ryan, and Springer (2014) found that TV is a powerful socializing

agent. This is due to the way in which fictional visual media shows viewers the world in ways they may never see it in real life. De Zengotita (2006) discussed this phenomenon in *Mediated*. The creation of film and TV allowed individuals to feel like they experienced something, even if they weren't there to personally witness it (De Zengotita, 2006). This is highlighted by the popularity of the show *You Are There* (CBS) in the 1950's around the time when television was becoming more commonplace in American homes. *You Are There* accurately depicted historical events, allowing viewers to feel like they were experiencing the event in real time. Episodes included a wide range of events and time periods such as the sinking of the Titanic and the assassination of Julius Caesar. De Zengotita (2006) claims that television inherently causes viewers to apply the events of the characters to themselves as individuals. Viewers watch TV and movies because they want to feel like they are there and like the story is happening to them.

De Zengotita (2006) solidified this point by bringing up the "where were you when 9/11 happened?" question that Americans often ask each other. This question is rooted in the notion that even if any given citizen wasn't at ground zero in New York City on September 11, 2001, they still feel like 9/11 is an event that happened to them. This social phenomenon is due to the oversaturation of visuals we have seen from that event. The assassination of JFK, the moon landing, and even events such as the Academy Awards are cemented in the minds of viewers as something that they themselves personally experienced due to the imagery from those events that people have seen time and time again in television and film. De Zengotita (2006) argues that TV and film viewers will always insert themselves into the narrative at least on a subconscious level. This also applies to fictional stories. It is in this way that film and TV have the power to shape people.

The concept of viewers inserting themselves into the storylines of films is further explored by Ison (2015) and Macey et al. (2014). Ison's (2015) book is an all-out tribute to the teaching power of films. The author recounted all the concepts she first encountered at the movies and cites the specific films that impacted her life (Ison, 2015). The topics discussed range from "How to go crazy" and "How to be drunk" to more serious concepts such as "How to be a writer" and "How to die in style." Ison (2015) stated, "movies formed my perceptions and influenced the choices I've made" (p. 2). Though Ison discussed film's powerful impact on only her mind as an individual, Macey et al. (2014) explained that all people are impacted by the messages in visual media. The writers all hail from diverse social backgrounds, groups, and cultures but they still all came to the conclusion that TV has shaped the way they navigate the world. This shared reality led the authors to conclude that it is vital for all people, regardless of whether or not they actually create fictional visual media, to be hyper aware of TV's ability to craft our outlook on nearly every topic.

Perhaps the most striking example brought forth by Macey et al. (2014) discussed how television writers almost always use vegetarianism as a joke. Calling upon characters such as Phoebe from *Friends* (1994–2004, NBC) and Lisa from *The Simpsons* (1989–Present, FOX), the authors discussed how deciding to not eat meat is not inherently funny yet there are an overwhelming amount of jokes on television shows about that exact topic (Macey et al., 2014). Viewers unfamiliar with vegetarianism who encounter the concept for the first time while watching a program like *The Simpsons* or *Friends* are forced to have a negative interpretation of it, since that is the tone in which it was first presented to them. These viewers will continue to have a negative view of vegetarianism if they never stop to question why they feel this way. That

is why Macey et al. (2014) feel that both creators and viewers should be hyper aware of how television shapes the way people view the world.

Macey et al. (2014) also explained that television is not a mirror of society, as so many writers have stated before. The scholars insisted that the mirror metaphor is not true because TV does not reflect the whole picture. As explained with the vegetarianism example, what is often portrayed in television and movies does not ring true for all people. Still, as Ryan and Macey (2013) explained, television is the principal circulator of the cultural mainstream. It takes the public world and inserts it into private, individual living rooms. Therefore, its impression on the “whole picture” cannot be denied. As Ison (2015) stated, watching TV or going to see a film is not just an event, it’s a way of life. TV and film touch lives and therefore have the power to shape people.

Ryan and Macey (2013) explained that the power of film and TV to captivate the public lies within audience members’ identification with the characters. Viewers actively participate in identification because individuals enjoy seeing characters who they perceive to be similar to themselves go on journeys in which they succeed in the end. Cohen (2009) explored the ways in which identification has been researched and defined within the field of media studies. Even though most viewers will admit to feeling it, identification can be hard to perfectly pin down. Cohen took a critical look at the various psychological studies on the topic and determined that there is a spectrum of identification. Still, Cohen (2009) concluded that “identification is an imaginative process through which an audience member assumes the identity, goals, and perspectives of a character” (p. 12). Cohen (2009) explained that just reception and spectatorship

rarely occurs for viewers of film and TV. They are almost always experiencing identification. Without identification, visual media would have no emotional impact.

While most people are conscious of their feelings of identifying with fictional characters, they often fail to see how those same characters inform and shape their own identities as individuals. However, Ryan and Macey (2013) brought forth an experiment that suggests this process is occurring. Upon conducting extensive interviews, Wright (2006) found that characters do shape individuals via the character Dr. Cathy Gale on the British show *The Avengers* (BBC). Dr. Cathy Gale was the first female partner for the show's male protagonist, John Steed. She was smart and contributed equally to the adventures depicted on the show. After collecting a number of personal accounts, Wright (2006) concluded that the character Dr. Cathy Gale lead viewers to reevaluate a woman's role in British society. Many interviewees cited Dr. Gale as the first emancipated woman they ever saw. Both men and women stated that Dr. Gale's presence on the show made them question their assumptions of what women were capable of contributing. Dr. Gale was fresh, new, and unique as a character. She was not the stereotype of women that everyone was familiar with seeing on TV. The example of Wright's (2006) study on Dr. Cathy Gale highlights the impact and importance of stereotypes and how they shape our perception of people.

Steele (2011) further explored the impacts of stereotypes and found that stereotypes cause people to feel their otherness. Otherness is the identification that one individual is very clearly different from every other individual in a given setting. The example Steele (2011) brought forth was of a white student in a classroom full of African American students. He stated that it is important to note that this feeling of otherness is not exclusive to groups that are typically seen

as minorities (Steele, 2011). All individuals experience feelings of otherness. Otherness is rooted in what Steele (2011) called “identity contingencies” (p.10). These contingencies are things individuals have to deal with in a given situation because they have been given an identity by the rest of the group. Stereotypes reinforce “given identities” and therefore increase the frequency of identity contingencies occurring. People are all aware of stereotypes. They usually know that when someone looks at them, they are aware of the stereotype of that individual's societal group. An awareness of stereotypes leads to the burden of individuals feeling as though it would be detrimental to fulfill their stereotype, even if part of their social group’s stereotype rings true for them as an individual. Steele (2011) explained that this phenomenon is due to the fact that they feel it will in turn confirm the stereotype for others.

The negative effects of stereotypes have actually been qualitatively proven to affect human psyches via test scores. Steele (1997) explained that “disidentification” with school among young African American women leads to dissatisfaction with school and low test scores. The demographic’s unhappiness with school and grades is due to the fact that the stereotypes associated with young black women do not portray them as high-achieving in an academic sense. They do not see a visual representation of themselves being successful within the institution of school. Over time, this sentiment begins to wear on their confidence within academia and leads to lower grades. Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) evidenced the powerful effect of positive stereotypes versus negative stereotypes. The authors found that when Asian women were reminded of the stereotype that Asian people are smart just before they took a test, the women received high marks. When the same group of women were reminded of the stereotype that women are stupid before a test, they received much lower scores. Both test groups showed that,

regardless of whether the stereotypes are positive or negative, individuals still internalize the stereotypes and thus are affected by them in a variety of ways. Internalization is a process in which attitudes, values, standards, and the opinions of others integrates into one's own identity or sense of self (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015).

Stereotypes are internalized by people due to their prevalence in media. When young black women see themselves depicted in media, even if they are portrayed as academically unsuccessful, they identify with the character and therefore internalize character traits including negative ones. Therefore, visual media plays a large role in perpetuating and confirming stereotypes. Lester and Ross (2003) define this concept as “pictorial stereotypes.” The authors found that communicators are charged with the responsibility of accurately depicting information for their viewers. Yet, as Lester and Ross (2003) pointed out, many filmmakers rely on stereotypes to do their depiction work for them. Lester and Ross (2003) also explained that stereotypes are useful for creators because viewers easily recognize them and instantly “understand” the character. However, the viewers actually misunderstand these characters because the stereotypes become unintended representations of the societal groups they are depicting. While convenient for filmmakers, representing people through stereotypes can be incredibly damaging and is almost always inaccurate due to the fact that stereotypes describe people with collective traits rather than unique characteristics, which in turn leads people to lose sight of the individual.

Some researchers argue that misrepresentations of people in film damages the lives of individuals. For example, Dyer (2002) asserted, “How social groups are treated in cultural representation reflects how they are treated in life... that poverty, harassment, and self-hate are



shored up and instituted by representation” (p. 1). It is in this way that accurate and well-rounded representation in film and TV is important for the advancement of minority social groups in society. As Dyer (2002) explained, this is due to the fact that “how we are seen determines how we are treated because the way we treat others comes from the way we view them” (p. 1). Stereotypes force people to view people as only that: a stereotype.

Stereotyping, especially in visual media, is a vicious cycle that has the potential to impact everyone regardless of their identity because of a concept called collective social memory. Both Lester and Ross (2003) and De Zengotita (2006) stated that visual messages play a profound role in the construction of our social memory. The example of the “Where were you when 9/11 happened?” question is an offset of collective social memory. People remember events, individuals, and stories as they were depicted in the media. Even if we have a higher level of visual literacy as an individual, the social memory of stereotypes linger, thus increasing the potential for stereotypes to have a negative impact on individuals or communities. Therefore, even if an individual is only exposed to a certain stereotype once, it can be continually damaging over time. As De Zengotita (2006) explained, it is wildly uncommon for an individual to never or seldom be exposed to a stereotype. Therefore, stereotypes become a negatively impactful self-perpetuating cycle that is extremely difficult to escape due to social memory.

### **Specific Issues Related to LGBTQ+ Representation in Film and TV**

As Gerbner (1998) puts it, “Television enters life in infancy; there is no ‘before exposure’ condition. [It] plays a role in the formation of those very ‘predispositions’ that later intervene (and often resist) other influences and attempts persuasion” (p. 176). If Gerbner (1998) is correct, then it is even more imperative that the LGBTQ+ community is represented fairly lest they

become their stereotypes to people that are not a part of the community. If the LGBTQ+ community is simply represented through stereotypes that are presented in TV and film, then it is likely that other aspects of the community are being left out of the public's eye. This then makes sense as to why LGBTQ+ people are continuously speaking out against negative stereotypes and asking for more fair representation in film and TV.

The majority of LGBTQ+ representation has a narrow focus on the community and provides little room for character growth or relatability for their audiences. As Keegan (2006) put it, "...we queers are overwhelmingly white, male, wealthy, thin, young, fashionable, and seronegative. We live in expensive urban lofts and spend our free time whipping straights into shape with our catty relationship advice and snappy sense of style" (p. 108). But that's just one niche of the LGBTQ+ community, and portraying the same stereotypical gay man in film and TV diminishes the community as a whole when there are other LGBTQ+ experiences that can be portrayed. It also demonstrates how society has yet to incorporate LGBTQ+ people into the collective whole "in a manner that does not threaten the assumed cultural meaning of family, home, marriage, economy, and nation" (Keegan, 2006, p. 109). TV and film are broad categories of media to try to change. However, one way to start combating negative stereotypes is to simply acknowledge that they exist. The LGBTQ+ community has been trying to bring light to these issues since the early 1970s.

The end of June of 1969 marked the event of Stonewall and the beginning of a large LGBTQ+ movement that partially focused on how the mass media, and popular culture in general, has long perpetuated and promoted negative stereotypes of the community (Connolly, 2018). Connolly (2018) wrote,

...such activism from 1969 through 1974—from initial, somewhat diffusely organized public protests by loosely affiliated liberation groups to early attempts by the National Gay Task Force (NGTF) and others to interface more systematically with the Hollywood studios, advocating change through a combination of publicized demonstrations and private negotiations. (p. 69)

Since the 1970s, there has been an increase in LGBTQ+ representation in film and TV, but many in the LGBTQ+ community still think that much of the representation is unfair and ultimately does not portray the wide variety of experiences the community has.

In terms of the amount of LGBTQ+ representation in TV, numbers have been increasing over the past few years. However, there is still discussion on the fairness of these representations and if representation is going in a positive direction for the community. By counting characters in original scripted Broadcast TV series premiering between June 1, 2017 and May 31, 2018, GLAAD (2018) found that of 901 series regular characters on ABC, CBS, The CW, FOX, and NBC, 58 characters were LGBTQ+, which is an increase from the 43 that were reported the prior year. The overall percentage of LGBTQ+ regular characters on scripted broadcast series was found to be 6.4%, an increase of just over 1.5 percentage from the previous year. This is the highest percentage of LGBTQ+ series regulars GLAAD (2018) has found on broadcast TV since they started gathering data on it in the 2005-06 season. However, gay men still make up the majority of the 86 regular and recurring LGBTQ+ characters at 47% (GLAAD, 2018). In addition, there are only four transgender characters expected on broadcast network primetime scripted programming for the year (GLAAD, 2018). Using the same data collection method for scripted primetime cable programs, GLAAD (2018) found that the number of LGBTQ+ regular

and recurring characters has increased to 173, an increase from the previous year's 142.

However, gay men still represent the majority of LGBTQ+ regular and recurring cable characters at 42%, or 72 characters (GLAAD, 2018). The same data collection method for streaming services Amazon, Netflix, and Hulu was conducted and it was found that there were 70 regular and recurring LGBTQ+ characters, which is up from 65 in the previous report.

Almost all of these TV services have increased the number of LGBTQ+ characters their shows have, which is a step in the right direction. However, there is still a lot of skew and disproportionality in the way these characters are being portrayed. For example, gay men are by far the largest group of people being represented from the LGBTQ+ community. While a large portion of the LGBTQ+ community is gay men, they do not make up the majority of the community, as film and TV may lead people to believe. Gates (2017) found that more women than men identify as LGBTQ+, which means that portraying the majority of LGBTQ+ characters as gay men does not represent the real majority. In addition, the number of transgender people represented in shows from any of these TV services can still be counted on just one hand.

Another problem about representation on television is that, even though the number of LGBTQ+ characters is increasing, not all of these portrayals are fair. LGBTQ+ characters are often only in a story to serve as the punchline to a joke, to benefit the plotline of a straight character, or to have their story end in tragedy. As GLAAD's (2018) report states, "[These shows] included the deaths of an overwhelming number of lesbian and bisexual women characters. These deaths were often in service of another straight, cisgender character's plotline..." (p. 6). This phenomenon of gay characters' plots resulting in tragedy is so common that it has earned a title in popular culture known as "Bury Your Gays." This is problematic because LGBTQ+ people connect their

own experiences to the representations in the media. With such a bleak ending for so many of these characters, there is a negative message being sent to LGBTQ+ viewers about their own futures.

Another common phenomenon similar to “Bury Your Gays” is “Dead Lesbian Syndrome,” which implies a tragic ending for most LGBTQ+ female characters. Guerrero-Pico, Establés, and Ventura (2018) studied the phenomenon of “Dead Lesbian Syndrome” and stated that “...in the 2015-2016 season of U.S. scripted broadcast TV, 26.5% of lesbian/bisexual women characters (17 out of 64) were killed off” (p. 314). In addition, it was found that lesbian and bisexual women characters achieved a happy ending only in 16% of the cases in the 192 series that included them (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018). It was also found that many lesbian fans look to lesbian characters in the media as a source of comfort, “to affirm their lesbian experience and to reduce negative feelings about their lesbian identities, and to lessen social isolation” (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018, p. 314). But even with lesbian fans looking to these characters as a source of representation and affirmation of their own experience, many of the characters in the media are presented unfairly. As Guerrero-Pico et al. (2018) pointed out, “TV content might be also linked to the construction of an object of desire—the ‘hot lesbian’ trope—which is more aimed at pleasing a heterosexual male gaze than to provide a model of reference for lesbian women to identify with” (p. 313). This further supports the idea that LGBTQ+ characters are often framed by heteronormative ideologies to please some heterosexual desire, rather than being characters that the LGBTQ+ community can actually identify with. Waggoner (2017) found that in the 2015-2016 television season, a large proportion of LGBTQ+ characters were killed off. Looking more in-depth on how these deaths affect viewers, Waggoner (2017) specifically

studied the fan response on social media when Lexa, a much-loved lesbian character on the CW Network's television show *The 100*, was killed off by a stray bullet. Lexa had been the love interest of the show's bisexual female lead character, Clarke. Lexa's death sparked outrage online. The show's producer was accused of queerbaiting and lost over 47,000 Twitter followers within 24 hours of the episode's premiere (Waggoner, 2017). The hashtags #LGBTFansDeserveBetter and #CancelThe100 also started trending on posts about the show all over the world (Waggoner, 2017). This response from fans shows that the LGBTQ+ audience is fed up with the "Bury Your Gays" trope and that something needs to change in the way that the community is being represented and treated on TV. The article goes on to mention that this example of LGBTQ+ representation could be a reference point for TV producers going forward on how representation should and should not be treated (Waggoner, 2017). Waggoner (2017) also talked about how social media is a major communication tool for how to create more successful acts of change. It is pointed out that many TV shows make decisions based off of profitability and not necessarily creativity, so the article goes on to suggest that "...it is not enough merely to gather a community online to protest, but social change is more likely to occur when the activism targets the economic side more so than the creative one" (Waggoner, 2017, p. 1889). This leads to the idea that in order to create change in the television industry, it might not be enough to just raise awareness about the issue. People should highlight the financial benefits for the industry as well.

Earlier examples of gay stereotypes and homophobia include a movie titled *The Gay Deceivers*, a film about two men who fake being gay to avoid the draft. As Connolly (2018) observed, "...protesters sought to undercut the film's presumed separation of homosexuality from

masculinity and patriotic duty by underscoring the ‘traditionally’ patriotic and masculine gay men the film ignores” (p. 72). To break this down, the film says that in order to be a homosexual man, one must not have such strong masculinity (Connolly, 2018). However, this is not the case because there can be gay men that are patriotic and masculine, which the film undercuts. Stereotypes like this can be detrimental to young boys, showing that if someone is gay, they must not be a strong, patriotic man, and if one is strong and patriotic, then they are automatically straight. Overall, this stereotype simply causes issues for younger generations who do or do not grow up gay.

Lesbians face a similar issue when it comes to their femininity being perceived as contradictory to their sexuality. Wittig (1993), a radical lesbian, once said, “for what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude... a relation that lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual,” thus arguing that lesbians are not women (p. 108). While her idea was probably well-wished, media continues to portray lesbians unfairly, making it difficult for them to assimilate into mainstream culture. This problematic view of lesbians makes it hard for queers to be seen as anything other than “recognizable to the heterosexual viewing audiences of television and TV movies” (Keegan, 2006, p. 113). Again, this reinforces the idea that queerness is only queer if defined by the heterosexual community media.

Lesbians and gays are not the only ones who face unfair representation in media either. Johnson (2016) looked specifically at representation of bisexual individuals and the effects it has on them. In his study, Johnson surveyed 627 respondents. Of these respondents, 46.5% felt that the media's portrayal of bisexuality is mostly negative, and 35.7% felt that it is somewhat

negative. When the respondents were asked to what extent they believe that one's worldview is shaped by the media they consume, 71.4% said "quite a bit," 28.3% said "somewhat," and less than 1% said "not at all." The fact that so many respondents thought that people's views were shaped by media yet thought the portrayal of bisexuality is negative is concerning. This shows that there is a problem with the way bisexual people are being represented. The survey also showed that 38.9% of respondents who had been diagnosed with one or more mental disorders felt that their disorder or its symptoms were "somewhat affected" by the representation of bisexuality in media. Positive representation in media is not only important to educate people outside of the LGBTQ+ community, but to help those who are part of it and provide characters that they can actually connect with. Johnson (2016) came to the conclusion that "...improved media representation of bisexuality would create a less biphobic climate and allow for improved mental health for people who are bisexual" (p. 394).

Another group in particular that is less represented than other marginalized groups is the transgender community. This group of people, when represented, often do not have very fair representation. Miller (2015) explored this negative representation of transgender characters in film comedies by analyzing a number of Western farcical films. It was found that in all of the films, the transgender characters are distanced as objects of ridicule rather than actual characters: "The films construct the cisnormative identities as the ones the audience should identify with, while the transgender identities of these same characters should be laughed at" (Miller, 2015, p. 127). Kaur (2017) also explored transgender representation by analyzing Hindi Cinema. He asserted that:



LGBT characters in Queer Hindi cinema bear the burden of crude jokes and are generally shown as objects of ridicule. During the so-called ‘Golden Era’ of Hindi Cinema, i.e. the period from mid 50s to mid 60s, LGBT characters were generally shown as companions to heroines or heroes. Some of the actors, would cross dress deliberately in an attempt to evoke laughter. (p. 27)

Having transgender characters so often be presented as objects of ridicule is an unfair representation of the community. This is why it is important to not only look at numbers of transgender characters in film and TV but to also look at how these characters are being portrayed. Capuzza (2017) looked at the representation of lead and supporting transgender characters in nine U.S. scripted television dramas and comedies that aired between 2008–2014. Qualitative content analysis techniques were used and episodes were analyzed for casting, visibility, identity, embodiment, and social interaction. This study had some positive findings and suggested that transgender representation in television is going in a positive direction with more diverse representation. However, the study also found that “transgender people as a population and a political community, trans men, and genderqueer characters remain largely invisible” (Capuzza, 2017, p. 214). It was found that of the little exposure transgender people get, it disproportionately focuses on trans women, leaving trans men and non-binary characters almost entirely absent. This is troublesome as the ratio of transgender people in real life is not being accurately portrayed, which leads to a misunderstanding of the community. So while there has been representation of transgender people in film, more often than not it alienates these individuals rather than representing them as dynamic characters. Transgender characters are

often just meant to be a comedic effect for the cisgender viewer. These characters are rarely represented as characters that transgender people can actually identify with.

Not only is there a lack of fair LGBTQ+ representation in film and TV in the way characters are portrayed, but there are also differences in the way LGBTQ+ characters are filmed, which may prevent the normalization of the LGBTQ+ community. Martin (2014) looked at the stylistic choices, camera angles, and spatial relationship between actors in three contemporary sitcoms during intimate scenes with gay characters. The study focused on male gay characters and found that intimate scenes between characters are often obscured more with same-sex couples than similar intimate scenes with straight couples. The conservative approach to how these scenes are filmed results in a sense of heteronormativity. Filming intimate scenes differently for gay characters than for straight characters perpetuates the idea that gay intimacy is not normal and more uncomfortable to watch. Even if gay characters are being represented, these intimate scenes are obscured in a way that makes them more comfortable for a straight audience to watch. This only further distances the gay community instead of helping to promote acceptance from society.

Along with obscuring the way that gay characters are shown on TV, there is a massive inaccuracy in the way that the lives of gay characters are portrayed in TV and film. Goltz (2009) explored the way that aging gay men are portrayed and how it is problematic for the gay community. By looking at over 70 films and 30 TV series, Goltz (2009) found a number of cases where value is placed upon the young, gay male body but where older gay men are devalued and represented with untrue stigmas. Goltz (2009) wrote “A prevalent cultural myth in mainstream and gay cultural discourses paints the image of the ‘older’ gay male as an isolated, miserable,

and bitter sexual pervert...” (p. 6). It is argued that this common depiction of aging gay men as being depressed and isolated is harmful to young gay men as it shows them false “truths” of what will become of them if they live a gay life. In fact, “The depressed and isolated mythologies attached to older gay men, while ever-present in cultural discourses, have continually proven to be inaccurate reflections of the majority of older gay populations” (Goltz, 2009, p. 6). Even though the dark future for gay men that is often represented is rarely true in real life, it has harmful effects on young gay men, as the only depiction of their futures that is represented is usually pretty bleak. It is not enough to merely increase representation of gay men in film and TV. Media creators must look at a broader range of experiences and make sure that there is some accuracy in what is being shown.

Another problem that has been found is that many LGBTQ+ people do not seem to identify with any of the representations in media. López (2018) used qualitative research methods to study how LGBTQ+ people in a rural region in Spain feel about their representations on TV series from English-speaking countries. Data was collected from 43 individuals, with ages ranging from 15 to 59 years old. Of these 43, 21 individuals self-identified as gay men, 11 as lesbian, 9 as bisexual, and 2 as pansexual. After being asked questions about popular TV shows and media representation with LGBTQ+ characters, many of the respondents “...claimed that characters are mainly stereotyped, with some highlighting an abuse of labels or a lack of representation” (López, 2018, p. 1829). Only 23% of the people surveyed thought that the representations are a good reflection of LGBTQ+ people’s reality. Additionally, when the participants were asked if they were able to identify with the representations, “70% stated that they were not feeling much or at all represented” (López, 2018, p. 1829). One of the study

participants stated that, “...the majority of lesbian characters are portrayed as promiscuous and being available all day to have relationships, when that is not the case in the real world” (López, 2018, p. 1829). However, there were some participants that did feel like they could identify with some of the representations, with 23% who thought that representations, while not great, are improving (López, 2018). While this study did not interview a very large sample and was restricted to people in rural Spain, it did have some significant findings. The fact that individuals in the LGBTQ+ community do not identify with many representations in TV shows that there is a disconnect to reality in the way that these representations are being portrayed. Finding a way to represent the LGBTQ+ community more fairly, and finding a way to include a wider range of experiences, is something that both TV and film needs to do. Of course, not every single experience can be represented, but more diversity is needed.

Now, more and more queer people are taking control and directing and producing their own queer films, which will hopefully lead to better representation. The Chinese film *Mama Rainbow*, a documentary about six mothers coming to terms with their queer children, showcases the acceptance that queer folk are aiming to achieve through better representation. As Deklerck (2016) said about the queer people in the film, “the LGBTQ children featured are without question all ‘good LGBTQ people’: they are invariably honest, successful, well-educated, loving, filial, healthy people growing up in middle-class and respectable families” (p. 236). This normalization of queer children not only gives a more holistic view of the community, but it also provides a bridge. This bridge acts as a way of connecting family members to their queer loved ones which, again, acts as a way of normalizing gayness and coming out. This normalization not

only helps the LGBTQ+ community feel more accepted but also helps reduce negative stereotypes or connotations that some families have toward their queer children.

One TV show that has been more successful than others with LGBTQ+ representation is *The L Word*. The show was created and directed by an “out” lesbian and follows the story of a group of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender friends and partners in Los Angeles. Kern (2014) used qualitative research methods to learn more about what viewers of *The L Word* think about its representation and stories. The study talked to 34 people of widely varying cultural and demographic backgrounds, including people with a myriad of LGBTQ+ identifications and some people not identifying as LGBTQ+. Of these participants, many of them stated feeling a deeper connection and identification with *The L Word* than they did with other TV shows (Kern, 2014). “*L Word* audiences have stated that the show presented an unseen community to which they belonged and could relate” (Kern, 2014, p. 447). This show was different than many others that have been looked at in that the critique of LGBTQ+ representation was overall positive from viewers both in and outside of the LGBTQ+ community. When Kern (2014) talked about the community of viewers that was created from the show, she said, “It is productive because it increases cultural understanding of LGBTQ issues. More importantly, the show offers increased visibility of marginalized LGBTQ identities, and an increased sense of an accepting, larger, and cohesive LGBTQ community” (p. 447). While it was stated that the show is not perfect and there are still some questions of the accuracy of representation in *The L Word*, the show certainly serves as an example of one that has an overall positive reaction to representation and could be used as an example for other media creators to learn from.

There has been a lot of discussion about how to make LGBTQ+ representation on TV more positive and fair and how to impose change for the industry and community. One possible option is reality TV. While reality TV shows have not traditionally been very vocal on social issues in the past, the presence of more inclusive and politically active shows have started emerging. Weiss (2017) talked in-depth about how an episode of *Project Runway* used its platform as a popular reality show to increase representation and awareness of gay couples. The episode featured guest judge Jesse Tyler Ferguson, who is an actor and founder of Tie The Knot, a charitable foundation that raises money, through the sale of ties, for marriage-equality organizations across the United States (Weiss, 2017). The episode also brought into the spotlight the personal life and relationship of one of its contestants and clearly endorsed and supported his engagement to his partner. Weiss (2017) explained that,

...by devoting an episode of a popular, well regarded program to the cause of marriage equality in the abstract, by partnering with a prominent organization devoted exclusively to that cause and promoting both the organization and its own broadcast, and by not only highlighting but enthusiastically celebrating the same-sex relationship of one contestant in particular, *Project Runway* showed that even the much-maligned genre of reality television has the potential to offer its audiences something beyond mere entertainment.

(p. 258)

Overall, this episode of *Project Runway* had a positive response from viewers and people both in and outside the LGBTQ+ community. This idea of incorporating causes into TV programs could be easily transferable to other reality shows to help increase representation of LGBTQ+ people and other minorities.

Along with creating characters for LGBTQ+ people to identify with, film and television have the opportunity to teach those who do not identify as LGBTQ+ more about those that do. Walters and Rehman (2013) studied the effectiveness of using film to teach people about the transgender community. In their study, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. They either had no exposure to the concept of being transgender, watched a 14-minute news documentary about the transgender community, or watched a 28-minute news documentary about the transgender community. The results of the study supported the idea that showing participants a short film about transgender people would "...produce a higher accuracy of transgender knowledge" (Walters & Rehman, 2013, p. 336). They found that those shown the film were more likely to increase their empathy toward transgender people and that "individuals who watched the film for 28 minutes reported significantly greater scores assessing accuracy about transgenderism," meaning they were more informed on topics that surrounded trans people (Walters & Rehman, 2013, p. 343). When individuals were shown the film, it was also shown that their empathy was altered depending on whether or not they knew someone who was transgender (Walters & Rehman, 2013). In addition to this finding, Walters and Rehman (2013) also said, "These data suggest that instructors could use a short, easy-to-implement, low-risk film in their courses or training exercises to improve basic knowledge about the transgender concept" (p. 343). This study supports the idea that people learn from the films they see, which makes the need for more accurate portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community even more vital. The study also supports Gerbner's (1998) claim made earlier that TV and film influence a person's views of the world. By portraying fair representations of LGBTQ+ characters, people can gain a better understanding of the community and break down stereotypes and stigmas.

So what have actors and creators done to change the misrepresentation they see in the media? Some have started their own film companies that focus solely on LGBTQ+ representation. “Wolfe Video, founded by Kathy Wolfe, began in 1985 as a company focused on lesbian film but later expanded to LGBT film more generally” (Wuest, 2018, p. 31). While it is hard to find entire film companies that focus on LGBTQ+ characters, there has been a plethora of LGBTQ+ films within the past few decades, and even a few movements. Pink programming is a new movement that is steadily gaining traction in the film industry in an attempt to give queer artists light for their films and acting. Pink programming is a movement that tries to gain LGBTQ+ traction by highlighting and fighting issues that the queer community faces. As Dhaenens (2018) stated:

Films belonging to the ‘gay scene’ trail of 2012 and 2013 were described as targeting gay, lesbian, and bisexual audiences, having a predominantly ‘pink’ theme or sensibility, featuring homosexual side characters or motives prominently, or showing the (lack of) progress society was making in tolerating and accepting gays.” (p. 799)

This is one way that queer people are combating stereotypes that are currently highlighted in mainstream movies. At the film festivals that were mentioned, films are more likely to be seen by other influential filmmakers who can later incorporate these same experiences into their own films.

Pink programming is also seen as a movement that influences queer politics. When pink programming started, popularity surged in regards to audiences. People, both queer and straight, gained interest in LGBTQ+ film festivals. To quote Dhaenens (2018), “they have evolved into established, successful cultural events” (p. 72). Rich (2013) also talked about these festivals and



said, “Not only do LGBT audiences want to see themselves represented, they expect certain narratives to be featured in the program, represented in a manner that does not upset or surprise them” (p. 94). Pink programming has become a method that LGBTQ+ people use to share their needs and wants with filmmakers to increase the likelihood that LGBTQ+ people are represented in a fair manner.

While pink programming is a positive step for LGBTQ+ movie stars and filmmakers and is creating change in the industry, LGBTQ+ films are also being used as teaching moments to change people’s perceptions. Richardson (2008) explored the idea of using film as a way to educate people about LGBTQ+ people and used the film *Get Real* to help teach a group of South African student teachers about the struggles that LGB youth faces. Many of the student teachers did not even realize that kids could know that they were gay and thought that sexual orientation was something people discovered when they were adults (Richardson, 2008). However, after watching the film and discussing the issues and representations in it, the student teachers gained a much better understanding of the challenges and feelings that LGB youth face and learned how to communicate with those students in the classroom (Richardson, 2008). Richardson (2008) said, “I chose *Get Real* primarily because it features a queer adolescent who is not portrayed as confused, sad, or ‘going through a phase.’ Steven is a confident young person who celebrates his gayness” (p. 65). Richardson (2008) went on to say why this was a valuable teaching moment for his students:

Initially, I had the choice of using the film to transmit “knowledge” I wanted these student teachers to have about LGB adolescents or getting the students to identify issues the film raised for them. The former approach might result in a discussion of the “facts”

about queer adolescents: harmful stereotypes, how South Africa's schools could become safer and more supportive of LGB people, and so forth. (p. 65)

This quote highlights exactly why it is so important to talk about the issues queer people face rather than chalking it up to the stereotypes that most people think of. When there is an open conversation about the issues this community faces, then those issues can be addressed.

Richardson (2008) also said, "Films like *Get Real* can be used to illustrate the complex ways in which LGB adolescents negotiate their daily lives, particularly in schools. It can also challenge student teachers to recognize the broad diversity of masculinities, femininities, and sexualities" (p. 71). This idea shows that film can be used for more than just entertainment and teaching in the theater and at home. It can be brought to the classroom to reach a wider audience and contribute to more meaningful discussions of the LGBTQ+ community to increase understanding and help reduce prejudice, homophobia, and heteronormativity.

### **Youth Reactions to LGBTQ+ Film and TV Representations**

The issue of representation is especially salient for youth and young adults in the LGBTQ+ community. It is necessary to review the current literature regarding how representation in film and TV affects this particular subset of the LGBTQ+ community. In doing so, we can obtain a fuller understanding of what is working and what is not working in regards to how the community is portrayed in the media. By analyzing how the youth both inside and outside the LGBTQ+ community react and internalize the messages given by the media, we are able to build a foundation for change in order to decrease the negativity toward the community.

The literature on LGBTQ+ youth's responses to general media representations of the community is surprisingly positive. Two studies by the same primary researcher clearly

demonstrated that media is used by LGBTQ+ youth to combat negative stereotypes and to form a positive self-image. In a study by Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia (2015), the researchers interviewed LGBTQ+ young adults ages 18-22 in order to identify positive ways the media impacted resiliency against the hardships of life. A salient theme that emerged through the data was the use of media as a coping mechanism (Craig et al., 2015). Individuals would seek out positive media representations of LGBTQ+ characters in order to counteract the negative stereotypes seen in the real world (Craig et al., 2015). This correlates with the data found in a previous study by Craig and McInroy (2014). Using the same age range as their other study, the researchers sought to investigate how media influenced the forming of identities outside the technological world (Craig & McInroy, 2014). The researchers found that LGBTQ+ youth use online resources to find out information about the community and relate to role models found on the internet (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Clearly, media provides a somewhat easily accessible avenue for identity formation and clarification for LGBTQ+ youth.

Current research has also demonstrated that specific representations of LGBTQ+ characters who overcome hardships can positively impact identity formation for LGBTQ+ youth. In a study by Gillig and Murphy (2016), a sample of 469 LGBTQ+ and heterosexual youth ages 13-22 were shown a video clip depicting two gay men and were asked questions regarding their attitudes after viewing this representation. Since the representation depicted two members of the LGBTQ+ community finding happiness and accepting their identities, LGBTQ+ youth felt like they could relate to the characters and expressed a feeling of hope after watching the clip (Gillig & Murphy, 2016). If LGBTQ+ youth find online representations to be helpful in accepting their true identities, we can assume that an abundance of representations in cultural film and TV

would begin to lessen the stigma of having an LGBTQ+ identity. Participants in the later study by Craig et al. (2015) also indicated that positive storylines and resilient LGBTQ+ characters allowed them to feel more capable in their daily dealings with discrimination and stereotyping. The main theme in both these studies is that positive storylines that highlight the strength of an individual to overcome adversity are necessary to engender these feelings of hope in LGBTQ+ youth. Regardless of the type of media, it is clear that LGBTQ+ youth use these representations in order to form identities and fight the discrimination seen outside the virtual world.

The TV show *Glee* provides a helpful example for how to portray LGBTQ+ characters in a way that highlights their struggles but also their achievements. Dhaenens (2013) conducted a textual analysis of 16 episodes in the first two seasons in order to come to a conclusion about the positive or negative aspects of gay representation. He found that the presentation of gay characters as having both struggles and positive experiences helped the show to distance itself from heterosexual norms (Dhaenens, 2013). However, to an extent, the show did still confirm heterosexual normality by pushing the merits of being heterosexual in a predominantly heterosexual society, which highlights the point that no representation can be a perfect portrayal of reality. Another textual analysis came to a similar conclusion. Sarkissian (2014) heralded *Glee* for having a variety of LGBTQ+ characters with a variety of different experiences. Through the characters that represent all aspects of what it means to be LGBTQ+ in high school, the community is portrayed as multifaceted and complex with an emphasis on the fact that no two people have the same experiences (Sarkissian, 2014). However, this author also noted the comparison between homosexual and heterosexual relationships and how this might be used to present heterosexual relationships in a more positive light (Sarkissian, 2014). These results are

interesting but should be taken in context with the other studies since the analyses were only performed by single researchers and the ideas and viewpoints of LGBTQ+ youth themselves were not included in the studies.

Even though many studies have highlighted the positive aspects of current LGBTQ+ media representation on youth, other studies have shown that there are downsides to how the community is portrayed. Many researchers have found that LGBTQ+ youth finds current media representations to be stereotyped and not representative of the broad range of experiences within the community. Another study by McInroy and Craig (2017) involved interviewing youth ages 18-22 in regards to their thoughts on TV and media representations. Participants believed that the media portrayed LGBTQ+ characters as one-dimensional and stereotyped and therefore failed to capture the complexity of experiences that the community faces (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Due to these one-dimensional qualities, participants also felt like LGBTQ+ characters were condemned to specific storylines that were either all positive or all negative, which again contributed to stereotypical views of the community (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Driver (2007) indicated, as relating to films about queer girls, that the films that are truly empowering are the ones that promote the fact that coming out and accepting one's identity is not a static formula and does not always fall into predefined categories (Driver, 2007). The best films for helping LGBTQ+ youth in their quest are the ones that emphasize the creativity and uniqueness of each person's journey and the fact that being different is not wrong in any way (Driver, 2007). Stereotypes are spread when the media fails to acknowledge that people are different and have unique experiences. It is clear that LGBTQ+ youth are conscious of the fact that their

experiences are being negated through the exclusion of a wider variety of themes and character traits in current TV and film representations.

Another concern from youth was that the media does not provide equal representation for all the groups of the LGBTQ+ community, such as bisexual and transgender characters or LGBTQ+ people of color (McInroy & Craig, 2017). In another study by McInroy and Craig (2015), interviews from a sample of LGBTQ+ young adults aged 18-22 indicated that participants on the whole saw the transgender population as negatively portrayed through TV and film. Specific comments focused on the fact that there are few transgender characters and the ones that are present in the media are stereotyped and not presented in a positive manner (McInroy & Craig, 2015). On the whole, transgender characters are far less common than gay or lesbian characters. The somewhat positive analysis of LGBTQ+ youth toward gay and lesbian representation seen thus far could potentially have something to do with the fact that these types of characters are simply more common than transgender ones. In addition, when considering the myriad of experiences that LGBTQ+ youth face, we must also acknowledge that some are affected by an intersection of being both a sexual and a racial minority. Although LGBTQ+ characters in the media are becoming more prevalent in today's society, racial minority LGBTQ+ characters are still fairly rare. For LGBTQ+ youth of color, this exclusion of half of one's identity often leads to confusion over how to integrate both parts into a meaningful whole (Driver, 2007). It also brings into focus the question of defining categories and how they affect those who don't fit into those categories (Driver, 2007). Film and TV representation needs to portray all aspects of LGBTQ+ identity, especially those that are a combination of unique social and cultural factors.

Interestingly, studies have also shown that there can be stereotypes in TV and film made by the LGBTQ+ community itself. Ciszek (2014) analyzed 20 video submissions to the *It Gets Better* project, an organization focused on helping LGBTQ+ youth realize their potential to persevere and become stronger individuals despite adversity. The analysis of the videos allowed the researchers to come up with dominant themes in the narratives produced by LGBTQ+ youth (Ciszek, 2014). The study found parallels between the videos from *It Gets Better* and the myth of Cinderella, with LGBTQ+ youth painted as young heroes or heroines who can change the world through only their hard work and effort (Ciszek, 2014). While it is admirable to inspire LGBTQ+ youth to believe in their own individual power, the author pointed out that the one-sided portrayal of only stories that emphasize a fairytale ending obscures the fact that this does not always happen for everyone (Ciszek, 2014). We run the risk of blinding people to the realities of the world and society if we only focus on a handful of cases that do not represent the lived experiences of the community. Ciszek offers the suggestion that representation should be accompanied by resources for youth, which could help them along the path of finding their identities (Ciszek, 2014). These resources could further explain the diversity of experiences and provide suggestions for those struggling to find their identity.

Some research has shown that it is important for LGBTQ+ media to highlight the impact of structural factors in addition to focusing on individuals overcoming hardship on their own. Ciszek (2014) raised the issue of personal agency and structural factors in the outcome of one's life through the Cinderella myth, which emphasizes the fact that a person can be anyone they want to be as long as they have persistence. However, by drilling this message into the heads of LGBTQ+ youth, we would be failing to acknowledge the huge role that structural and cultural

factors play in life outcomes (Ciszek, 2014). Education is a huge factor that the media often overlooks. A study on transqueer female to male individuals emphasized the importance of changing education in order to eliminate stereotypes of needing surgery or hormones to fit in with the dominant culture (Siebler, 2010). Siebler (2010) pointed out that instead of embracing gender and sexuality as a continuum, media has sanctioned the idea that a person needs to fully transition to either male or female in order to be accepted in society. Instead of just being recipients of media, we need to be active participants in educating the youth in our society about film and TV portrayals (Siebler, 2010). It is also necessary for educators to stand up and take a role in youth education about openness toward the spectrum of sexuality and gender choices (Siebler, 2010). Teachers can use media such as films that fairly portray the variety of experiences for LGBTQ+ characters to open up a discussion on what it means to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community (Siebler, 2010). Kachgal (2011) also emphasized the need to look beyond the media itself to identify other factors that could help create positive attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community for those not in the community. The article addressed a report by GLAAD (2018) that attacked the problem of how media can help decrease levels of homophobia in the teenage population (Kachgal, 2011). The intention of the study was to identify what aspects of LGBTQ+ representation helped non-LGBTQ+ youth to become more comfortable with the community (Kachgal, 2011). However, the results seemed to only advocate for assimilation instead of promoting visibility and acceptance (Kachgal, 2011). Kachgal (2011) proposed a different way in which the study should have been conducted. Using critical media theory developed by Semali and Hammett in 1999, power relations are acknowledged as being critical to how media representations are portrayed, and political ideology is accepted as inherent in all



representation (Kachgal, 2011). Therefore, the job of the educator is to allow youth to question the political and social meanings of the representation while also bringing into question their own subjective ideas and biases (Kachgal, 2011). In this way, film and TV can be used as tools by educators to guide youth to adopt a view free of prejudice and discrimination. However, the important message is that media by itself is simply not enough. Media should be used alongside open discussion to promote understanding, both within and outside the LGBTQ+ community.

LGBTQ+ film and TV representation does not just affect LGBTQ+ youth themselves. Studies have shown that heterosexual youth find the current representations to be stereotyped and instrumental in further alienating the LGBTQ+ community. In a study that examined high school students' attitudes toward lesbian sexuality in the media, Jackson and Gilbertson (2009) found that the overwhelming majority of participants viewed these characters as "hot" and "experimental" instead of as individuals expressing their true and natural desires. Youth tended to deny the validity of lesbian identity by not addressing desire and by holding to one exclusive version of what it means to be a lesbian (Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009). In a different study utilising a sample that was 95% heterosexual, Miller and Lewallen (2015) discovered that the mere presence of any gay character in film or TV can automatically bias viewers toward homonegative attitudes. Students were primed with either a feminine gay male representation, a masculine gay male representation, or no gay male representation and asked to rate their homonegative attitudes and list feminine and masculine qualities associated with gay men (Miller & Lewallen, 2015). Interestingly, the content of the representation did not produce significant changes in attitudes, but the existence of a gay male character appeared to have negative effects even when he was portrayed in a well-rounded and comprehensive manner

(Miller & Lewallen, 2015). The study by Gillig and Murphy (2016) previously cited also found that representations of nonconforming behavior by LGBTQ+ characters caused discomfort for heterosexual participants (Gillig & Murphy, 2016). This provides evidence against the theory that overall contact with a group increases positive feelings and reactions toward the group (Gillig & Murphy, 2016). These studies indicate the need to express a more broad and open understanding of what it means to be part of the LGBTQ+ community. Members should not be classified in only one way but should be allowed to express themselves in whatever way best suits their desires. In addition, if even a comprehensive representation can prime negative attitudes, we must acknowledge that society has a deep-rooted prejudice toward those who do not fit into the normative heterosexual category. Clearly, it is not simply exposure to the LGBTQ+ community that is lacking in current TV and film representations.

Some LGBTQ+ film and TV representations have actually been specifically formatted in order to blind people to their own prejudices toward the community or, on the opposite side, to open up the eyes of the audience to these prejudices. Peters (2018) examined the portrayal of homophobic characters and how that impacted viewers' self-perceptions of their own attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals. By portraying homophobic characters as often closeted homosexual individuals themselves, these films and TV shows encourage the belief that homophobia does not affect the privileged individual viewers (Peters, 2018). Female millennials, the target audience, are made to believe that they are beyond the stereotypes and prejudices of homophobia since they can cheer on the LGBTQ+ characters portrayed on the screen and accept these representations without protestation (Peters, 2018). Creating this attitude blinds people to the ongoing battle against homophobia, which may actually be taking place in viewers

themselves without their knowledge (Peters, 2018). Instead of shielding youth and young adults from the rampant homophobia in society, we need to be educating them about how different types of representation of the LGBTQ+ community affect members, a goal that is subtly demonstrated through the children's movie *Paranorman*. Gordon (2016) cited the kids' movie *Paranorman* as using a hidden message to emphasize the problems of youth in the LGBTQ+ community through the phenomenon of social ghosting. Social ghosting uses the appearance of a ghost in order to emphasize cultural problems and help the main characters work through these issues (Gordon, 2016). Throughout the movie, the main character Norman is ostracized for being able to speak to ghosts, which parallels the experiences of those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community (Gordon, 2016). Agatha, the ghost of the story, is portrayed as an evil witch when in fact she was killed just for being different from the rest (Gordon, 2016). In order to save his town, Norman must make peace with Agatha by listening to her story and convincing the townspeople that different is acceptable (Gordon, 2016). Although the majority of the film makes no explicit reference to the LGBTQ+ community, audiences can see how messages of tolerance and acceptance of different youth can be disseminated within the community through simple films. Using the return of a ghost to help the town change its attitudes of intolerance also seemed to work well for inspiring positive feelings for people who are different. Representations that blind viewers to societal problems only serve to further alienate the heterosexual community from the LGBTQ+ community. In comparison, a cleverly written storyline that subtly incorporates acceptance of all youth can help increase positive feelings toward the LGBTQ+ community and other minority groups.

Through the research that has already been done, we can see that there is a mixture of positive and negative reactions of youth toward representation of the LGBTQ+ community. With the information gathered, we hope to further analyze what specific characteristics of film and TV representation serve to create positive feelings toward members of the LGBTQ+ community for both members and nonmembers.

### **Conclusion: Awareness Among Filmmakers and Audiences**

The current state of LGBTQ+ representation in film and TV is not entirely accurate or effective, which brings to mind the argument discussed earlier from Macey et al. (2014). The authors debunked the common quote that TV is mirror of our society. The prevalence of stereotypes in media, and therefore our social memory, proves this to be true. Our world is diverse and so are the stories that spring from it. The experience of a white straight cisgender man is not universal, yet most film and TV would lead us to believe it is. This is why Lester and Ross (2003) also argued against the “TV is a mirror” statement. The authors stated that the media is not society’s mirror but is instead its fabric (Lester & Ross, 2003). This distinction is important because it calls to mind visual media’s true power to craft our view of the world. While we may “sew” our societal identities together, some of the fabric which we use comes from the media we consume. In fact, Fleming (2017) implied that we are cinema. The films we consume are a part of our very being since they craft and shape our culture while also being the result of it. In turn, it takes a conscious effort to “unbecome it” (Fleming, 2017, p. 1).

With all that in mind, there are ways in which filmmakers can create better “fabric” from which we can “sew” together our societal identities and thus “unbecome” cinema. Lester and Ross (2003) believed that the only way to combat stereotypes in social memory is by continually

replacing those stereotypes with better representations of unique and well-rounded individuals that hail from a large variety of backgrounds and social groups. In turn, the social memory of any given community will be a positive and accurate one instead of being an underdeveloped stereotype. Representation has the power to change minds, just as TV and film have the power to shape minds.

In recent years, film has become a vehicle for promoting human rights. In fact, Tascon (2012) explored the current explosion of “Human Rights Film Festivals” by conducting a study at several different festivals that he attended. The festivals studied only featured films that are centered on various human rights issues. Though this study focused on the impacts of films that speak about the topic of human rights, it is not a far jump from the notion shared by Lester and Ross (2003) and Dyer (2002) that representation in narrative films could be utilized to also promote human rights. As Lang (2005) described, “changing norms and conventions can reveal tendencies in receiving systems to tolerate or foreground diversified systems of values as time passes by.” Though the current state of TV and film mostly “backgrounds” diversified representations of social groups, there is a strong argument that focusing on creating better representation in film and TV can lead to better treatment of those social groups in society overall. Nearly all the texts discussed concluded that filmmakers becoming aware of their responsibility to fairly depict people and thus presenting audiences with better representations of people that are devoid of stereotypes will lead to less stereotyping in real life. A majority of the authors also suggest that a hyper awareness of the messages we are being presented through media is important as well. As Thoman and Jolls (2004) outlined, school children are taught language and literacy so that they can process information. However, most of the information in

the modern world comes through the media. In fact, many children are watching TV before they are even able to read or write. The authors argue that media literacy should be taught in schools, so that kids can be aware of how to process and analyze the messages they are being presented. The same sentiment can be said for adults. If all viewers have the ability to recognize unfair representations when they do appear, the negative impact of those representations will lessen. Still, it should be noted that the impact occurs regardless of the viewer's depth of media literacy. That is why Thoman and Jolls (2004) recommended a dual approach to better representation: increase media literacy in viewers and decrease the amount of negative representation presented by filmmakers. This will allow for the better treatment of various minority groups, especially the LGBTQ+ community. The research summarized above provides a starting point for those who wish to continue to study representation effects on the LGBTQ+ community. We hope to further the research by extending the literature on what types of representations truly create positive reactions from the community and stimulate support and acceptance from those outside the community.

### **Research Questions**

Current LGBTQ+ representation in film and TV has a lot of the narrative focusing on the character's sexuality whereas heterosexual characters in film and TV usually don't have their sexuality as blatantly expressed. With LGBTQ+ characters, a lot of movies and TV shows focus on the emotions that are tied to either coming out or to their sexual awakenings. While coming out or having a sexual awakening is an important part of an LGBTQ+ person's life, only showing this one part of a person's life may not leave room for expressing other aspects of their identity, which is an unfair representation of the community. However, since LGBTQ+ people's

sexualities and experiences coming out are important aspects of their lives and identities, maybe the community believes that those aspects should be the main focus of movies and TV that feature LGBTQ+ characters. We want to study whether or not the LGBTQ+ community has an opinion on this matter and whether or not this focus impacts the way non-LGBTQ+ community members perceive the community.

**RQ 1:** *What are the problems or challenges when the central theme of the narrative focuses on the sexual orientation of the characters?*

One of the issues faced when trying to find what types of representation are helpful and harmful for the LGBTQ+ community is finding a balance between negative and positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters. Throughout our review of literature, we found that many peoples' worldviews are heavily influenced by the media they consume. Because of this, it is important that LGBTQ+ characters in film and TV have representation that is not harmful to the way that people view or treat the community. Of course, it would not be realistic to portray all LGBTQ+ characters in the same way. However, since we are trying to improve representation, it is important to know how audience members react to negative portrayals of these characters and to know what kinds of messages are being shown. We want to study the reactions of both community members and non-community members. In this way, we can compare and contrast the feelings viewers get when exposed to negative portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters in order to create more accurate and less harmful representations in film and TV.

**RQ 2:** *How do people (community members and non-community members) react to negative portrayals of the community in film/TV? How do they differ?*

The issue with attempting to create a larger amount of “good” representations in media is that it is nearly impossible to objectively define what good representation is. Good representation can occur in a variety of ways for various community groups. However, it is much simpler to seek out “bad” representation. As clearly outlined by the scholars mentioned in the literature review, bad representation should be labeled as harmful representation for the sake of the discussion on how to improve representation in the media. Harmful representation utilizes stereotypes, one-dimensional characters, and perpetuates social stigmas tied to a certain group of individuals. In turn, non-harmful representation would be devoid of that. Non-harmful representation would not rely on stereotypes or overused tropes and would instead create layered and unique characters. While some might say our claim that filmmakers should only use non-harmful representation could limit creativity in the film and TV field, this is not the case. In fact, it would allow filmmakers to truly be creative. They would not repackage the same storylines and characters audiences have seen time and time again. Instead, they would create something novel and unique. With our study, we hope to further define what exactly harmful representation is for LGBTQ+ individuals so that we can make well-informed recommendations to filmmakers on how to make their various projects helpful instead of harmful.

**RQ 3:** *What types of film/TV representation of the LGBTQ+ community are considered harmful and should be eliminated?*

Through the literature, we can see that education has a huge impact on people’s perceptions of minority groups. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how certain kinds of representations affect attitudes and prejudices toward the LGBTQ+ community. This is especially important when we consider how representation affects youth perceptions, since it is



easier to change attitudes and prejudices before they get ingrained into everyday life. With our research, we hope to identify specific ways in which LGBTQ+ film and TV can be used to change negative stereotypes toward the community and establish a more holistic understanding of what it means to be LGBTQ+. In the future, this representation can help both members and non-members to better understand themselves and others through what is portrayed in the media. The pervasiveness of film and TV in today's society makes it a prime candidate to help spread awareness and acceptance instead of hate and intolerance.

**RQ 4:** *How can LGBTQ+ film/TV representation be used for education?*

### **Methods**

For this study, we recruited participants to take our survey by using network sampling and by posting the link to our survey online on various social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. The link to our survey took participants to a Google Form which presented the following questions:

1. What is your age?
  - a. 18-23
  - b. 24-29
  - c. 30-35
  - d. 36-41
  - e. 42-47
  - f. 48-53
  - g. 54-59
  - h. 60 or older
2. What is your gender identity?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Non-binary
  - d. Prefer not to say
  - e. Other \_\_\_\_\_
3. What describes you best?

- a. White
  - b. Hispanic or Latinx
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. Asian
  - e. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - f. Middle Eastern or North African
  - g. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
  - h. Prefer not to say
  - i. Other \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your identification with LGBTQ+ community? (Check all that apply.)
- a. I do not identify with the LGBTQ+ community
  - b. Ally
  - c. Lesbian
  - d. Gay
  - e. Bisexual
  - f. Pansexual
  - g. Transgender
  - h. Asexual
  - i. Other \_\_\_\_\_
5. How often do you watch TV and/or films?
- a. Every day
  - b. 4-6 times per week
  - c. 1-3 times per week
  - d. Less than once per week
  - e. Never
6. How often do you see LGBTQ+ characters in film and TV?
- a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Very often
7. If you know beforehand that a film or TV show has LGBTQ+ characters, how does that affect your likelihood to watch it?
- a. Definitely makes me more likely to watch it
  - b. Might make me more likely to watch it
  - c. Does not affect my likelihood of watching it
  - d. Might make me less likely to watch it
  - e. Definitely makes me less likely to watch it

8. Do you think that the current LGBTQ+ representation in film and TV is more often positive, negative, or neutral?
  - a. Positive
  - b. Negative
  - c. Neutral
  - d. There is an equal amount of positive and negative representations
  - e. I don't know
9. Do you think representation of the LGBTQ+ community in film and/or TV is stereotyped?
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always
  - f. I don't know
10. Do you seek out representations of yourself in film and TV?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Not sure
11. How often do you see characters in film or TV that represent your social identities? (e.g. age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc.)
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always
12. How important is it to you that film and TV fairly represent LGBTQ+ experiences?
  - a. Very Important
  - b. Important
  - c. Moderately Important
  - d. Of Little Importance
  - e. Unimportant

At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group to gather more data on the subject. The question was worded as follows:

1. Would you be willing to participate in a more in-depth, in-person focus group with us?

The focus group will be an hour to an hour and a half in length. If so, please leave your name, city, and email address so we can contact you.

We conducted three focus groups: one online that was composed of LGBTQ+ community members and two in-person ones that had a mix of both community members and non-community members. The online focus group had three participants, the first in-person focus group had five participants, and the second in-person focus group had three participants. Each session was about an hour to an hour and a half long. There were at least two researchers present at each focus group to lead the discussion and take notes on the participants' responses. Focus groups were taped with the permission of the participants. Participants were asked to sign a modified consent form before the focus group started so that they were aware of our intention to use the footage for a school project.

We kept our focus groups fairly open-ended to let the participants lead the discussion as much as they could. However, we did ask relevant follow-up questions and guided the discussion when necessary. In addition, we showed clips from five different TV shows and films and asked about their responses (positive, negative, neutral) to each of the clips. We let participants elaborate on their feelings about each of the clips and representation in general. The clips we showed are listed below:

1. *Bojack Horseman*: Starting at 0:27 - <https://youtu.be/R9NNNapsP-I?t=27>
2. *Clueless*: Starting at 1:08 - <https://youtu.be/iuL2loyB1bk?t=68>
3. *Glee*: Starting at 0:22 - <https://youtu.be/OpjZZx5F8JI?t=22>

4. *Rocky Horror Picture Show*: Stopping at 1:20 -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCZDWZFtyWY>

5. *Brooklyn 99*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDGkCeElzhM>

Based on how the conversation was going, some of the follow up questions that we asked participants included the following:

1. What role do stereotypes play in representation? Are they always negative?
2. What suggestions would you offer filmmakers who wish to portray fairer representations of the LGBTQ+ community?
3. Is LGBTQ+ representation in film and TV something you think affects your identity and mindset?

Whether or not these questions were asked depended on the trajectory of the conversation.

Sometimes questions were added or eliminated to further the discussion. The participants' responses to these questions and the video clips sparked lively conversations, which allowed us to obtain qualitative data on what people think about the various types of current representation in the media. Participants were not offered compensation for either the survey or the focus group. Participation was solely on a volunteer only basis.

### **Analysis**

After receiving the online survey responses, we looked for trends within age groups, genders, sexualities, races, and other various societal identities based on their answers to the multiple-choice questions. From there, we were able to gather data on how certain demographics feel about how the LGBTQ+ community is represented in film and television. We also looked to see whether or not certain groups value accurate representation of the community more than

others. While it was a bit more difficult to analyze data from a qualitative sense, our focus groups allowed us to hear real-life accounts of how representation has impacted individual lives. We transcribed all of the focus groups and looked for recurring themes within various participants' responses as well as for their emotional responses to the questions. By doing this, we were able to find commonalities and differences among all of the different focus groups. From this information, it was possible to uncover some ideas as to what helpful and harmful representation looks like in order to make recommendations to filmmakers.

## **Discussion**

### **Participants**

Our online survey yielded 189 complete responses. While we did not ask participants where they lived, the comment box at the end of the survey showed that individuals were from multiple areas around the country. While a few were from Europe, most were from the local Colorado area. 142 participants identified as female, 35 were male, and 10 were non-binary. Two participants declined to identify a gender. Of those people, the majority was white with 142 people. The remaining individuals were Hispanic, African American, Asian, or interracial. We had 99 responses from people aged 18-23, 22 from ages 24-29, 11 from ages 30-35, six from ages 36-41, 17 from ages 42-47, seven from ages 48-53, and 11 from ages 54-59. The remaining 16 participants were 60 years or older. 47 individuals indicated that they did not identify with the LGBTQ+ community, 71 people stated they were allies, 21 people identified as gay, 15 identified as lesbian, 31 identified as bisexual, nine identified as pansexual, eight identified as

transgender, and three identified as asexual. The remaining participants identified under the umbrella term queer, with one person stating that they were a parent of a gay child.

We had a total of 11 participants in the focus groups. Four individuals identified as bisexual, two identified as gay, three identified as heterosexual, and two identified as lesbian. The online focus group consisted of only LGBTQ+ community members, while the two in-person groups were mixed with heterosexuals. We mention this because there is a long-standing goal to make safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community. We wanted to see if there was any difference in the quality of discussion between just community members in comparison to a mixed group of people, since some people might not feel completely comfortable fully expressing themselves in a mixed setting.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

We used two forms of data collection. The first was an online survey via Google Forms that asked concise questions about demographics and opinions about current representation using a sliding scale of options. The survey can be found starting on page 41. Our second form of data collection was a series of focus groups, two of which were conducted in-person and one which was online via Zoom video chat. We prompted a discussion about representation by showing various examples of LGBTQ+ representation from film and TV shows (links to those clips can be found on page 44). The focus group transcripts can be found in the appendix on page 68.

Data regression analysis was used to determine if there were any trends or correlations between the questions asked in the Google Forms survey. All of the responses were coded into binary numbers for charting and graphing correlations. Anyone that identified as more than one LGBTQ+ category was coded as “queer, non-specific” so that people who answered “queer”

were labeled “queer, specified.” Most everyone that identified as an ally to the LGBTQ+ community only selected ally and was coded as such. If participants labeled themselves as something in the LGBTQ+ community, that was deemed more important and they were coded for that. One person answered, “Understood but not actively involved” when they answered how they identify with the LGBTQ+ community and was coded as an ally. It should be noted that, according to the Human Rights Campaign, an ally is a person who supports equal civil rights, gender equality, LGBT social movements, and challenges homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia (Miller, 2015). Despite this, some people who meet this definition do not identify themselves as allies, meaning that while some people may identify as allies, they may not take the social initiative to meet the key components of an ally. Some of our participants may have been allies but not labeled themselves as such. Since this definition was not explained to our survey participants, it is important to note that our responses may have differed slightly in comparison to if this had been explained beforehand. Later in the study, it was brought to our attention that SPSS, a statistical analysis software, could run a Independent Samples t-test for us to determine if average feelings on different topics were different between LGBTQ+ groups and non-LGBTQ+ groups. We used this method to obtain additional correlations and graphs.

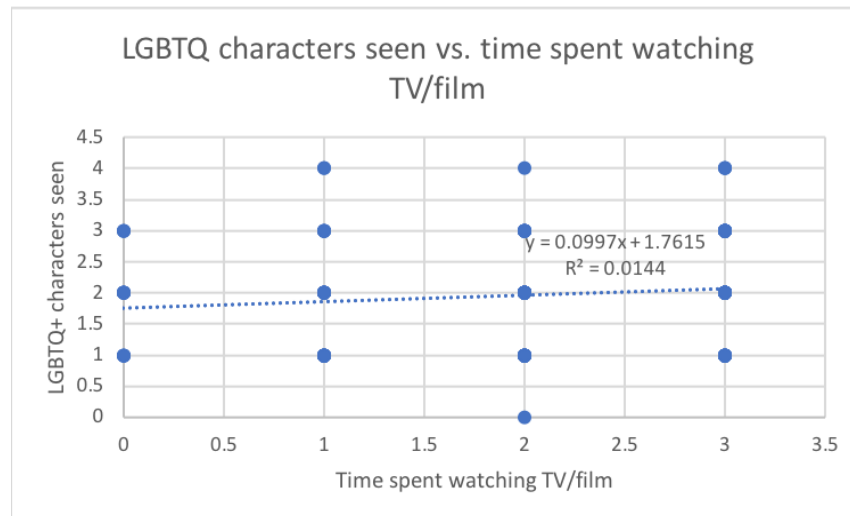
For the focus group analysis, we searched our transcriptions for common themes and key words to determine trends in people’s opinions and views on representation. We also compared the relative responses to each of the various video clips.

## **Results**

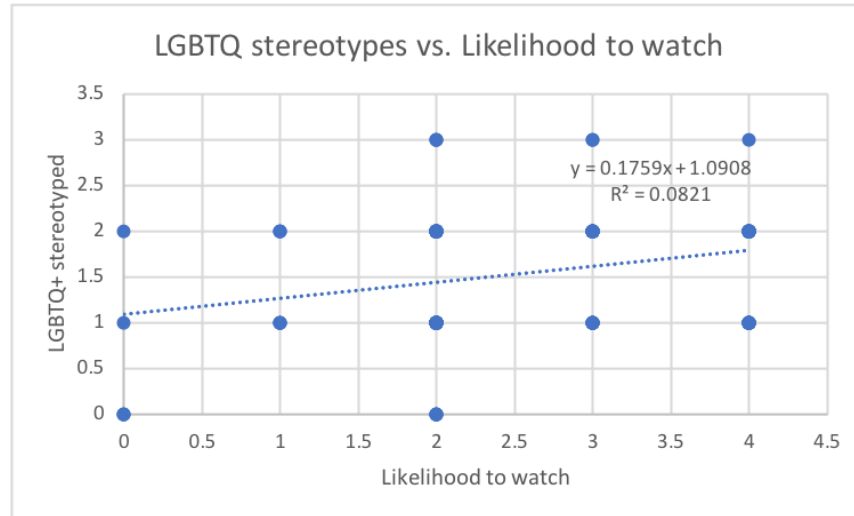
Our data suggest a trend between time spent watching TV and film and frequency of LGBTQ+ characters seen in film and TV. This conclusion was expected, since more time



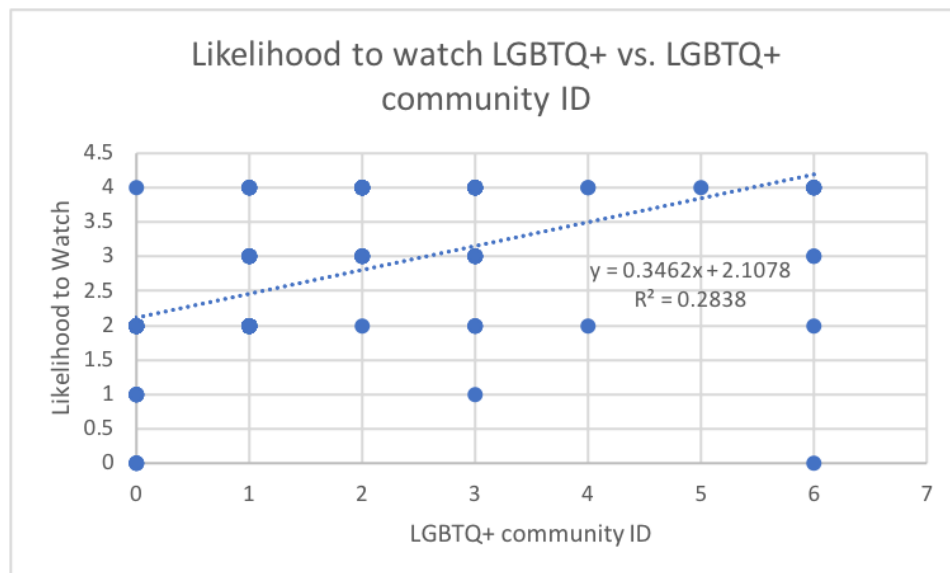
watching film and TV increases the likelihood of seeing LGBTQ+ characters, as shown in the graph below.



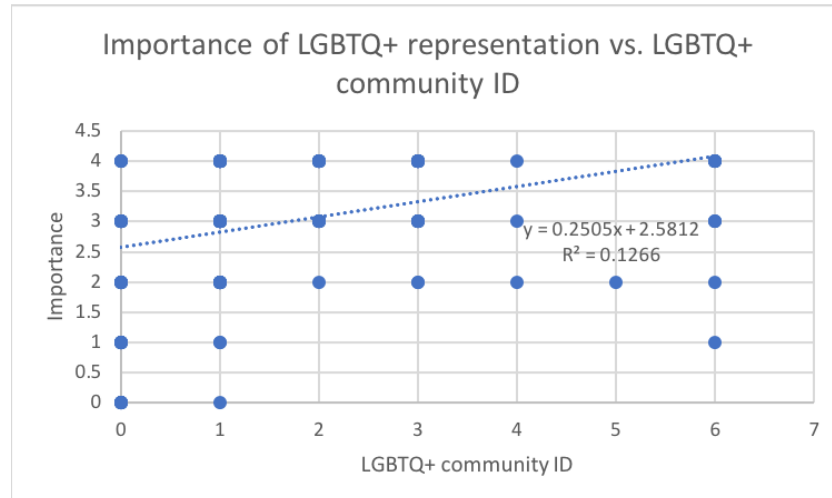
There was a positive correlation between whether having a LGBTQ+ character would make participants more likely to watch a TV show or film and whether or not they believe LGBTQ+ characters were often stereotyped in film and TV. This indicated that perhaps the presentation of an LGBTQ+ character was more important than whether or not this character was stereotyped. Results from this correlation are shown in the graph below. This correlation could also be explained by the fact that people who are more likely to watch shows or films with LGBTQ+ characters are more likely to be exposed to stereotypes when watching film and TV.



There was also a correlation between LGBTQ+ identity and likelihood of watching a show or film if they knew beforehand that there was an LGBTQ+ character in the script. This indicates that members of the LGBTQ community may be more likely to watch a show if it is advertised as having characters from the community.

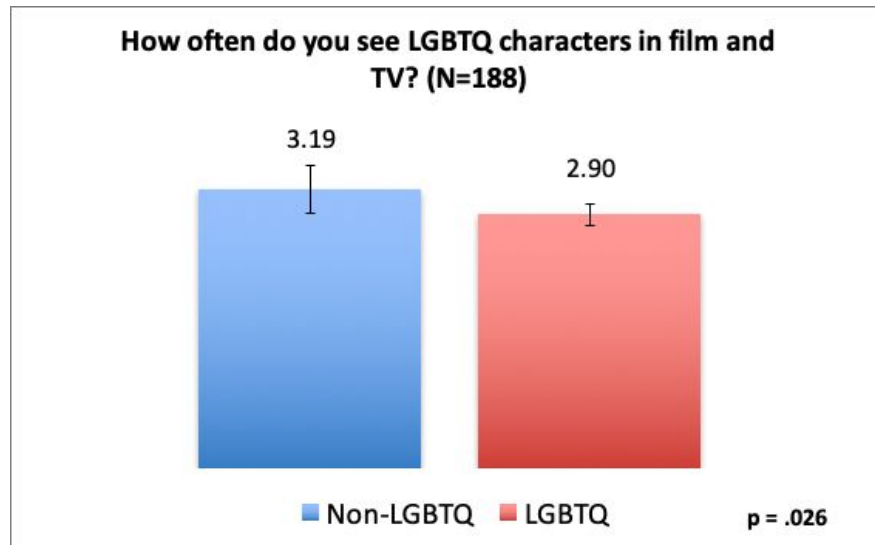


There was also a positive correlation between LGBTQ+ community identity and feelings toward the importance of having representation for the community. It is clear that community members are concerned about the types and amount of representation currently portrayed.

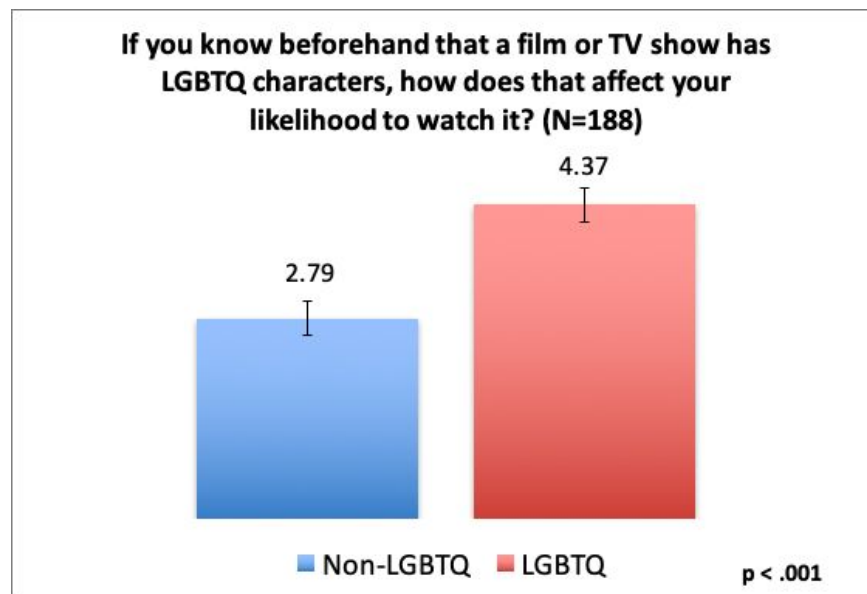


However, from the focus groups, we found that community members and non-community members are both interested in changing LGBTQ+ representation for the better. Specific themes and recommendations are discussed in the following section.

According to the Independent Samples t-tests that were run, it was determined that non-LGBTQ+ people typically report that they see more queer characters in film and TV than LGBTQ+ people do. Non-LGBTQ+ people may be seeing more queer representation because they notice it as being out of the ordinary, while community members do not. Community members are also more often seeking out representation of LGBTQ+ characters, so they may notice more when a film or TV show is lacking them.

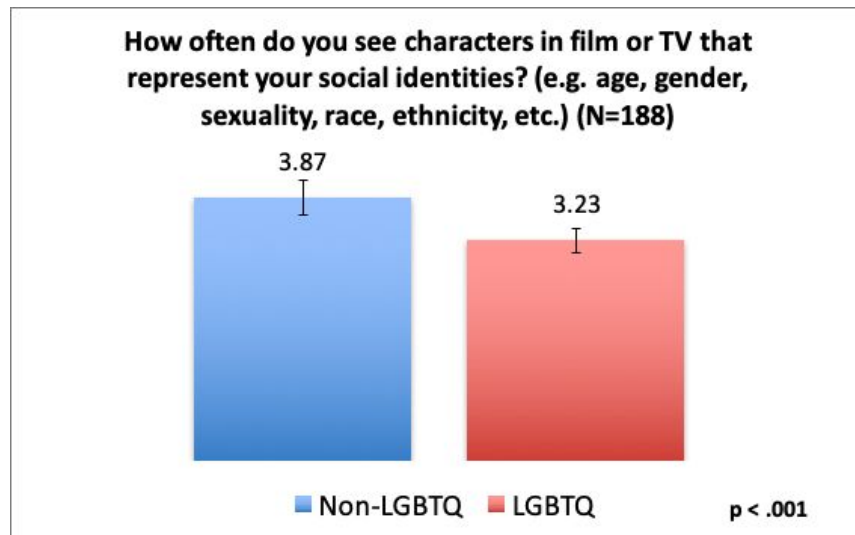


Another result was that LGBTQ+ people were more likely to watch something if a queer person was known to be a character ahead of time. This could be because everyone is constantly looking for more representation that relates to themselves, which means that queer people would be more likely to seek out and watch this representation.



Finally, our data showed that non-LGBTQ+ people were more likely to see characters that related to their social identities than LGBTQ+ people were. This may be because there is

less LGBTQ+ representation in film and TV, which makes it hard for community members to find accurate representations of their identities.



## Discussion

General trends from the survey and focus groups are organized based on our original research questions. We intended to analyze these conclusions in light of our goals to provide recommendations for filmmakers who want to increase fair representation for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

With our research, we wanted to establish ways in which representation could be used to educate the population on the LGBTQ+ community. In addition, we wanted to figure out ways that new representations could be used to eliminate stereotypes that could be harmful to this population. In regards to stereotypes, the findings were mixed. Participants indicated that some stereotypes are okay but that there should also be wider representations of those who don't fit the stereotypes. This is surprising because we went into this project with a mindset that all stereotypes might be harmful. However, it appears as if the stereotypes themselves are regarded as helpful for some members of the community. Participants wanted more diverse

representations in order to educate non-members of the variety of personality traits and characteristics associated with the community. For members in the community, the diversity would allow everyone to feel connected through the media, something that is important in identity formation.

Filmmakers should also be informed about the community and the dominant stereotypes before they portray them. Non-informed representation often made participants feel as though the stereotypes were being forced on them. By having filmmakers research the community and the dominant stereotypes, they would be better able to portray how members may or may not fit these stereotypes and provide alternate representations for those who don't fit the typical mold. To obtain these more holistic representations, participants suggested that members of the LGBTQ+ community need to be involved in the making of film and TV. Some participants suggested having LGBTQ+ actors play LGBTQ+ characters. Others believe that LGBTQ+ members should direct and produce the media in order to ensure a more diverse and realistic representation of the characters. Either way, participants stressed the idea that those creating the representations have a responsibility to portray individuals fairly and accurately. Filmmakers should be held responsible for what they portray and thus should be more mindful of the ways in which they are portraying LGBTQ+ characters. Having LGBTQ+ members involved in the production of media would help filmmakers to obtain a more holistic understanding while also giving community members a role in the representation that affects societal mindsets.

Some participants expressed dissatisfaction that the media portrayed stereotypes without providing the whole context surrounding them. Future representations should seek to portray LGBTQ+ characters with more complex storylines. Many participants detailed how it is

important to show all aspects of a gay character, not simply his or her sexuality. Even though his or her sexuality is a big part of the individual, there are other characteristics that should be given equal weight in representations. For example, participants enjoyed the character Rosa in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* because the show did portray her coming out but did not use her sexuality as her only personality trait. Her storyline included her sexuality but moved much beyond it, which in a sense normalized it. In fact, the clip from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* was the only clip we showed that every single participant had totally positive reactions to. Representations that focused exclusively on a character's sexuality were viewed as one-dimensional and not helpful in promoting understanding and awareness. In particular, it is important to portray what happens after a person establishes their sexuality. By giving screen time to the potential hardships an LGBTQ+ individual may experience after coming out, media would be better able to detail and discourage discrimination against the community.

In addition, participants indicated that media outlets should provide more diverse representations of LGBTQ+ characters in relation to race and ethnicity among other characteristics. Intersectionality, or the combination of different factors of a person's life in creating discrimination, was mentioned frequently. Participants felt as though the LGBTQ+ characters were predominantly Caucasian and thus did not represent the broad spectrum of different identities. LGBTQ+ individuals of different races face a unique combination of discrimination, something which participants believed should be shown in media representations. Religion was also brought up as something that should be addressed in LGBTQ+ representation. Although religion is sometimes a touchy subject in regards to its stance on different sexualities, it is important to portray that being a part of the LGBTQ+ community does not necessarily mean

that an individual is not religious. Religion is a part of the community that should be addressed when attempting to create accurate pictures of LGBTQ+ individuals. Representations that include race and religion should be combined with LGBTQ+ identities in order to form a more holistic understanding of the community.

Participants were also concerned with how negative reactions are portrayed in the media. They indicated that representations of negative reactions toward the community should be framed as negative so that viewers are aware that they are harmful reactions. By portraying negative actions toward an LGBTQ+ character and not being clear about the wrongness of this behavior, media is essentially condoning discrimination toward these individuals. These negative outcomes of expressing oneself as LGBTQ+ should be portrayed. However, representation that specifically shows the unfairness of treating others negatively should also be shown in order to create the message that intolerance of anyone is wrong. In addition, stereotypes that vilify the community should be avoided. For example, one participant outlined how lesbian love is sometimes portrayed as destroying heterosexual marriages. This harmful stereotype would lead to negative reactions toward the community. It should be restructured to show the reality of the situation, involving two women naturally falling in love. The community should not be framed as a group of individuals who wish to disrupt the sanctimony of marriage or the heterosexual relationship. They should be portrayed simply as individuals who have just as much of a right to happy relationships as anyone else.

Using humor in representations of the LGBTQ+ community was a complicated subject. Participants were generally divided as to whether it would be beneficial to use humor in representation in order to broaden awareness of the community. Humor was identified as



sometimes positive and sometimes negative depending on the context. Generally, participants believed it was positive when it opened up a discussion and diffused uncomfortability that may have been associated with something viewers had not encountered before. This could be seen in the situation with *Bojack Horseman*. Asexual characters are not often seen in the media.

Therefore, participants viewed the use of humor as acceptable, since viewers might otherwise feel uncomfortable with the type of sexuality portrayed. Humor was detrimental when it situated LGBTQ+ members as the “punchline of the joke.” This type of humor was viewed as being there simply to amuse viewers and not to provide the audience with more awareness of the community. Humorous representation that does not seek to educate was deemed negative, since it reinforced popular stereotypes about the community and supported the underlying message that being LGBTQ+ was somehow something to laugh at.

In our focus groups, we uncovered the richest and most useful data regarding our study. Since findings in a study about film and TV are best represented through a film, a summary of some of our main findings from these focus groups can be found in this video essay about our qualitative results: <https://bit.ly/2XZrYOO>.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Many individuals stated that representation in film and TV was very important to them when they were figuring out their sexuality at a young age. A possible subject for future research would be to see how representation affects young people. Although one of our research questions hoped to delve deeper into this issue, focus group participants only briefly discussed the importance of LGBTQ+ representation that is geared toward young children. More research needs to be done on how this may affect the beliefs of children growing up within and outside of

the community. Furthermore, researchers could look to see if there is any difference between gay adults who were exposed to gay representation at a young age versus those who weren't.

Our research questions were fairly broad and sought to cover a lot of material that may be helpful to the LGBTQ+ community. More research is needed on specific aspects of representation and how it may affect LGBTQ+ members of different ages and backgrounds. In addition, we did not focus on one specific identity but rather referred to the group as a whole. More research needs to be done on the different subsets of the community and how representation may be affecting them differently. For example, many participants indicated the lack of representation for transgender individuals. Future research could investigate how this may affect the formation of a transgender identity and/or how it may impact a person's decision to transition to a different gender identity.

### **Limitations**

It should be noted that we mostly received responses from people in the local Denver area. Metropolitan areas are typically more accepting of various lifestyles, so there could be a bit of liberal or left-leaning skew in our results as opposed to if we had interviewed more rural residents of Colorado and the U.S. It also would have been helpful if we had had more participants for our survey in order to provide more variance and to determine if our correlations were stronger in some areas where we currently only see a weak trend. We also received few responses from individuals from different countries. Knowing how much culture influences people's values and beliefs, it is necessary to take this into account when interpreting our results. Perhaps our participants had been greatly influenced by the individualist culture of the United

States. It would be interesting to see how recommendations for filmmakers may change if participants come from a more collectivist culture, such as those typically seen in Asia.

Our focus group sampling was also limiting in the sense that we only had 11 participants who were all college-aged students. This could create a bias by only showcasing a limited perspective in our findings. Younger generations are typically more accepting of different identities that stray from the norm. We may have seen completely different results if we had been able to obtain participants from the older generations. Although we sought to obtain as many participants as possible, the recruitment process was not as successful as we had hoped due to time restraints.

In addition, our topic is subjective, since there is not one proper way to capture every LGBTQ+ experience on screen fairly. One in 10 people of the U.S. population is gay, and each has their own opinion of how they'd like to be represented. Our conclusions are in no way absolute. We instead attempted to find what is agreed upon by a majority of LGBTQ+ individuals in order to use those results to draft suggestions for better representation practices among filmmakers. We hoped to provide a starting point for future research into how we can better represent individuals from this community.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that representation plays a major role in today's society. Today's children are being exposed to more and more media representations, from TV shows watched at home with families to YouTube videos accessed on phones at school. This influx of media influence makes it even more important that filmmakers seek to represent their audiences fairly and accurately. Throughout history, the LGBTQ+ community has been systematically disenfranchised and

discriminated against due to our nation's changing views about what is acceptable. In the modern age, we need to make sure that these individuals have access to representations of themselves on the big screen. By changing representations to reflect a more broad picture of what it means to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community, we hope to inspire our nation to become more accepting of different identities. Although no one character can capture the intricacies and individualized experiences of everyone, we can provide a range of portrayals which will hopefully encompass a broader range of personalities and characteristics. Change is never easy, but today is the day to start. We hope that our research will be the starting point for future researchers who are passionate about making sure that everyone is portrayed equally and fairly through entertainment outlets such as film and TV.

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## **Appendix: Focus Group Transcription**

### **Transcript from in-person focus group #1:**

**Participant 1:** Hi, I identify as he/him his and I also identify as a gay male. I'd say that most of my exposure [to LGBT people] was just from movies and TV not really family or from role models in real life.

**Participant 2:** Hi, I identify as a bisexual woman...and same. A lot of media and especially social media as well which big LGBT space so I saw it there and I also saw a lot from the TV shows.

**Participant 3:** Hi. I also identify as a gay male and I'm also a film major so LGBT representation is one of the things that I'm very very passionate about it and something I was trying to see more of. I don't think it's anywhere near perfect but I definitely think it's come a long way.

**Participant 4:** Hi. I identify as a straight woman. I actually don't watch a lot of TV or films so my exposure is not a lot. I think the only time that it really comes up in my life is when I'm a youth leader. Especially coming from a Christian background, the controversial topics of LGBT does come up and so it's my job as a youth leader to teach them that it's wrong to see the LGBT people in a negative aspect.

**Participant 5:** Hi. I identify as a straight woman. I think it's important because we should see more than one type of person in stories.

### ***Reactions *Bojack Horseman* clip***

**Participant 4:** I think overall it was positive. I feel like there were some moments where it seemed negative but in a way that was insensitive while trying to be sensitive, especially for the character Bojack. It seemed like he was joking to cope with it.

**Participant 1:** I think it's overall positive especially because when Todd came out to the Bojack but he mentioned that he wasn't in a place to joke about it and I feel like that was important to show that he wasn't comfortable to joke with it with everyone about it. it's important to make that distinction between joking with friends and joking with the whole world.

**Participant 3:** I think it was overall positive because he jokes about it and then he lets him know that that's not OK since that's really close to true life. It's pretty realistic in terms of how that goes down, even for people that are accepting. They don't really know exactly how to process or talk about somebody coming out, so it's interesting because we don't see a lot of films and stuff that shows somebody processing someone coming out in that way. It's either really negative or really positive. It's typically usually one extreme on either end so that was cool to see the realistic medium.

**Participant 2:** I agree. I agree some of Bojack's comments were kind of towing that line like "OK maybe that might be too much" but I think it was important to show the tension that can occur when you come out to show somebody how to process properly and knowing when it's gone a bit too far. I think it was intentional to be that way to make it realistic.

**Participant 5:** I think it was very positive especially because it's a very funny show, ya know? It's not a drama, so they portrayed it in a humorous light because of that. I agree that the "oh no that's too far" line was very important for the sake of representation since it shows that jokes aren't okay all the time.

### Reactions of a clip from *Clueless*

**Participant 4:** I did not catch anything that guy said but I'm pretty sure that was pretty negative. I just thought it was very interesting how a lot of individuals who identify as LGBT get explained in this way. There are a lot of stereotypes that are tagged onto them and they just announced that they identified in this way yet people think that the stereotypes must apply then. I don't see why people just accept a stereotype is true.

**Participant 2:** I think the logic there is a little problematic like "oh he dresses well yeah that makes sense!" Just like putting everything with in that box because his identity fits within it. I think that stereotypes exist in such a weird space for people in the community because we do use it to identify others in the community. Even in lesbian culture, there are people who say "oh yeah I can tell if a girl is gay by XYZ things" even though they can't you can't. I like think everyone is struggling because it's kind of true but obviously also not.

**Participant 1:** I think especially with stereotypes, people want to put a certain type of group of people into one category and I don't know I think I [the clip] was definitely negative. It didn't take anything more than his sexuality into account. I also wanted to talk about how the LGBT community is hyper sexualized, so like for example, if you're gay people assume that you have a lot of sex or that you're always trying to find a partner. You take one aspect of someone's identity and make it their whole identity.

**Participant 3:** Yeah, I agree. I also totally forgot that even happened in that movie just because I don't particularly like that movie. I didn't think it was very funny but it definitely shows how taking one clip out of context is a little complicated because you don't have the context. Things out of context will always exemplify the stereotypes. At the same time, in terms of strictly representation or using words, like that, it's a comedy and that's sort of the point. They don't really understand - it's not like they do by the end of it - but it's like one of those things where I kind of give them a free pass because this movie was made in 95 and this is the start of gay culture being in the mainstream. So, maybe it's bad because they very much need to know for more than what is shown over and over but at the same time they were at least there and talked about. So, maybe I don't know. I think it could be good. I think it's important for it to be talked about and put it out there and in that way you can sort of justify those characters opinions of the gay character because that's sort of what the movies about. It's literally titled *Clueless*. They don't know what's going on. They don't know about things. I don't think it's all straight up bad.

**Participant 1:** I agree with you but for representation it's sort of hard to only use those stereotypes because if someone were to come out to those people afterwards, they would be like oh well you don't fit into this category or this category and that would be confusing and harmful for that person. I also agree that it's important to identify that the movie was made in the 90s and it is a movie about stereotypes. It wasn't trying to say this is what it's like to be gay.

**Participant 2:** I agree. Obviously, this is a movie that making fun of that one dimensional nature but you can't always control what people take seriously and take as a joke. Some people might think? "Oh yeah, those stereotypes are true. Of course he must be that!"

**Researcher: Do the characters think negatively that he's gay since they're using stereotypes?**

**Participant 3:** I think the guy is pretty negative about it but the girls...they care less, especially the main character. Him being gay makes her feel better that they didn't have sex - in a weird bad way - but I don't think they feel badly about him being gay. I don't think they necessarily look down on being gay but I will say you can see the male character sort of feels uncomfortable about it.

**Participant 1:** Yeah I agree. I think it was just sort of a realization. I don't think it was at all "my god, that's such a bad thing."

**Reactions of a clip from *Glee***

**Participant 4:** I noticed a lot of people look very uncomfortable in the background. They seem to have a very unsettled facial expressions. I don't know what that means but yeah.

**Participant 2:** I feel like this is a situation where it might be sort of a meta-commentary because she comes out and then another girl because says "I made out with a girl once", sort of that diminishing of the big moment. Then also we have Jane Lynch, who identifies as a gay woman. She makes a joke and undercuts the seriousness of coming out as if it's like a cultural fad or something but I don't know I'm trying to decide if it's intentional or not - if it's supposed to be a genuine reaction from the character or making fun of reactions like that since she herself is gay.

**Participant 3:** I think that it was good that the girl that was coming out was upfront about it and very clear about it and it was very uplifting in that regard. I do think it's interesting that Jane Lynch's character reacts that way. We have so many different reactions to her coming out like her girlfriend is very supportive, some people are like oh no some people are like "oh what does this mean." There are people that seem to be very much giving their support but it sucks that they show somebody that doesn't want to have to deal with the coming out process because it is such a big deal for members of the LGBT community. It's a very important time - it's not the person's entire existence but it is a very big deal to them. So, it's sort of like a good representation because it shows some supportive and some non-supportive so that makes it more realistic but I agree the reaction from Jane Lynch is odd.

**Participant 1:** I have two things to say about this clip, one - I think it was really good that she mentioned that she thought maybe it was a phase because a lot of gays deal with that and also other people think that it *is* a phase and that people can just "revert back" to being straight. Second, I like how she just owned it in a way, like despite this "I'll still cut you." It's like it's not her whole identity but it's a part of her. Someone wants to be recognized not as just the gay guy or girl, they want to be recognized for their talents and qualities and then on top of that they also happen to be gay.

**Participant 5:** I had a similar reaction. I liked the line about how she said "oh I'm gay but I'm not afraid to still cut a bitch." I think that it was important just to show that she's so much more than just a gay. I thought that was pretty cool.

### **Reactions of a clip from *Rocky Horror Picture Show***

**Participant 1:** I think the word "transvestite" is not PC anymore so it was OK at the time but now we have other ways to talk about it. I think the other thing is that the character is very hypersexualized. So again, it just promotes that hypersexualized identity that some people believe to be true about the LGBT community.

**Participant 4:** I have never seen this movie but I know that there is some sort of historical context and significance to it. However if someone were to watch it without that knowledge, I think that they would begin to believe that this is what it means to be a transgender person and probably think it's OK to use the word transvestite instead. What they are shown starts building up in their heads every single day and create what they believe to be true about the person that's being represented.

**Participant 3:** I've never seen the movie but I know that it is meant to be really absurd - like that's sort of what the joke of it is - but I don't want to excuse it because I don't want to say "Oh that's fine because it's the joke" or whatever but it's a weird line to tell because I don't think it's in a derogatory way in this movie specifically.

**Participant 2:** It could go either way. It's either a dramatized depiction of an LGBT person and aspects of their life but in saying that [this film is] overall absurd. I think it's another mixed bag culturally, it's so big but I just don't know it seems like they're going for a shock factor. Still, it could be a good thing because it's also about being unapologetically yourself. There are real people in the world who decide to present like Dr. Frankenfurter so like it's also kind of important to show that as well.

**Researcher:** So we've heard a lot of discussion about stereotypes and how sometimes they are true. Do you think that showing characters who fulfill those stereotypes is a bad thing that should be avoided or that it's sometimes okay?

**Participant 2:** It's another tricky question because I think it's important to acknowledge that the stereotypes are sort of a part of the culture and that there are people that exist that fulfill those stereotypes. However those stereotypes aren't representative of who they are as a person nor do they apply to all gay people. So like for example, showing very butch lesbians, that's not the only thing that exists for gay women but butch lesbians do exist and so I think it does depend on like the sort of the context of what the movie is. If you're using it as cultural shorthand that's not okay because stereotypes do have those connotations that could be perceived as negative but if a person does fulfill stereotypes that's fine. It just has to be shown that there's more to them than just that. I did however take a class on LGBT literature and there was definitely a lot of discussion about what it's like to not see people that look like yourself in media. It is harmful because it doesn't make sense the one image that I'm being shown over and over again doesn't actually represent who I am. So, this clip seems empowered because it shows that this person is owning their transgender identity. It is very complex though because there's a question of is owning an identity that feels like a stereotype a good thing or does it just limit it people to just those stereotypes?

### **Reactions of a clip from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine***

**Participant 3:** I love that show.

**Participant 2:** Yeah, me too!

**Participant 3:** Brooklyn Nine-Nine is a really good show overall as a whole for representation not only with LGBT but also with women and people of color. It's really cool to see that on such a mainstream network show. I think that particular clip was filled with jokes because it's a comedy show and that's the point. I think it's perfect that the character Rosa comes out in that way because it is just like the character. That's definitely how she would be in real life if she were to come out. She would do it in the way that makes sense for her to do it - it's part of the character. I think that it's important because the show does address the fact that she's bi because it comes up on and off but it doesn't define her as a character and so much more of her story lines don't have to do with [her coming out] because she is a person who is older and has settled into her sexuality. It doesn't completely define who she is as a person and so that's why I think that representation is good. It can't only be "look this character is gay" because of that it becomes a token gay character.

**Participant 2:** I agree and I think that even the jokes were coming from a place of acceptance and positivity. For example, how Jake didn't really care that she was gay, he just cared that they didn't think the same character from *Saved by the Bell* was hot. Now compare that to the *Bojack Horseman* clip I, with Todd coming out and the jokes that Bojack used to cope with it. It didn't come from such a positive place. It feels a little bit more like they were like asexuality is the awkward thing that's in the room as opposed to how Boyle is the awkward thing in the room, not Rosa being Bi.

**Participant 1:** I really liked how it showed how many people are sort of forced to come out because somebody else found out and then she felt like she had to tell everybody else. So I think



it showed how to take care of it after you come out and how to like move forward when something like that happens - how you can just own it and control your own story instead of somebody else controlling it.

**Participant 3:** Yeah I agree and especially with the character Rosa. One of the characters asks her why she took so long to come out and with this character it's like one of those things where it's like yes technically this is coming out but it's not a thing where it's like should we say something, should we not say something? It's like one of those things where it was never professionally relevant. She was never really hiding it, she just never felt the need to actually to address. It never really mattered and now to avoid any confusion she came out to everyone officially. It's cool cuz it's like a very different type of coming out because it's in a completely different context and it's not like she's never come out before in her life. I think it's interesting since you don't see a lot of that.

**Participant 4:** Yeah, and going off of that, I wanted to talk about how the character Charles was kind of fumbling in saying "bye not bi" because it wasn't coming from a place of being rude or offensive it was actually coming from a place of sensitivity. I think it's cool because it shows how even being overly sensitive feels alienating and weird. I think it's similar to the thriller *Get Out* and how in the story when a black man goes to his white girlfriend's parents house to meet them, the dad tries to relate to him only using stereotypes and although it seems he's being sensitive, it's actually alienating in its own way. It's weird because they're trying to connect on that level but it's not actually necessary. It's like putting them up on a pedestal which doesn't feel like a complement - it's an awkward pedestal. It's like with the line in the *Glee*, how the girl's response to Santana coming out was "oh yeah I made out with a girl once" as if that matters to the situation. It's like forcing a connection there where there isn't one.

### *General Questions*

**Researcher: Does LGBT representation in television and movies affect your identity and or generally affects how you and other people view others that have that identity?**

**Participant 3:** As I said before, I'm a filmmaker and representation is really important to me. Obviously I love movies and I consume so much media! Before I ever came out, in the early stages when I was trying to figure out whether or not I was gay, it was important for me to see what it looks like and what examples there are of that because it totally matters to and it definitely influenced my opinions and my coming out. I think it's necessary for people who don't need to one out to understand the lives and experiences of those people that do or have. Like sure yes it's just a movie but media is so ingrained in us. It's integral to society and culture so it definitely matters 100%.

**Participant 1:** Yes and going off of that, I think it just really sets the tone for how people address identities that are different from theirs like for example, growing up I didn't have other options other than media. I realized on my own but it's more like giving an example of how to act. As a kid you sort of see parts of characters you relate to and then kind of create your own identity from that.

**Participant 3:** I totally agree. I think that is so many people's initial reaction. You start to look at media, you start to look around at the things around you because culture is so ingrained in us and in so many different ways everybody is affected by media. So yeah, I think it has a huge impact in terms of representation. I think that it can both be good and bad because it does depend on the variety and the quality of that representation since people will create their identity from those representations.

**Participant 4:** Also on the flipside of that, I know that if you don't identify as LGBTQ media can be very informative in that way - about their lives and their experiences because you've learned about how LGBTQ people struggle and how they operate in the world. For me, somebody who doesn't follow media a lot, - like I've never really watched any of these films or shows before but I can definitely say that that it affects me indirectly because everyone else around me is going to be consuming media and following it so I'm going to learn from them and that's going to shape my opinion and my knowledge. So it's definitely important when media represent LGBTQ because people around me are going to watch it and form their own opinions about it.

**Researcher: Any recommendations to filmmakers on how to improve representation?**

**Participant 3:** This is very clearly something I think about a lot. One of the things I think is important is that no matter what identity or sexuality you're trying to represent that you have to make sure that you're never saying anything that's a blanket statement or that "this is true for everybody." I think that this can be kind of like a larger thing in terms of like being preachy about something because being preachy means you're not telling the full truth and it doesn't really show different aspects of the same sexuality or identity. I don't think we should ever oversimplify the problem. It kind of goes back to how the current representation is mostly based off stereotypes and I think that like that that's fine it shouldn't be stopped necessarily but there should be more representation of other people who identify as gay and don't for fill the typical stereotypes. We have to make sure we show different versions of that sexuality because yes, of course there are people that do for fill those stereotypes but there are also other sides to it. I think there's not necessarily one specific way to represent a gay person, we just need to make sure we're not oversimplifying the representation of that type of person.

**Participant 2:** I think it requires a little bit of stereotypes in a way but i needs more research and thinking beyond that. I think that's true for no matter what subject you're making a film or television show about. When you are making something and you don't know about the culture of course you are relying stereotypes day but we need to activity try to go beyond that and we need to make sure that gay people are part of the picture when working on the project. I don't think they have to identify within the community to talk about it. I think it requires a little bit of extra work sometimes and I think you really need to know about the culture and history of the people that identify that way. Filmmakers have to be careful about how they're engaging with it and also understand that if they don't identify that way, their scope of knowledge about it will never be full-fledged. It'll only ever be based on their own biases from their own background.

**Participant 1:** I think one of the biggest issues that we've been overlooking is that there's not a lot of gay people in those positions of power that are making the films and television shows. They can't take the real world experiences and apply it to the narrative. Even if you research and consult with LGBTQ community members, a lot can get lost in communication. If you actually have someone that genuinely has an insight on what it's like to be that type of person then it'll always be better. Also, going off of the conversation about stereotypes, I think it comes down to showing more intersectional identities that people don't tend to think about. It's not just one person's identity, all of their identities make up who they are. For example, looking at Tan France from *Queer Eye*, I'm a gay Muslim and he's a gay Muslim and but I've always been told that being a Gay Muslim is an oxymoron so it was really cool to see myself on screen in that way. It's sort of life-changing in a way to know like this is possible and I can identify as both of those things. So it's okay to show stereotypes but you need to make sure that you're not saying that these are the only people that exist.

**Participant 3:** I think also we have to make ourselves move past the coming out story. It's interesting to note that all the clips we watched was a coming out in some way or another but then it's like done. In real life you move on with your life but so many of the films are only about coming. It doesn't really show the remainder of the life that the person lives as a gay person. It's always like that is what the plot revolves around and I understand yes it happens and yes it's important but I think it's also important to show what happens afterwards because people come out now when they're pretty young and they have the whole rest of their life after that. Stuff still happens to them and we should know what that is. You know talk about other stories that happened to them. I think that religion is an interesting point as well because I identify as a Christian gay man so I think that a lot of media relating to LGBT shows religion always an opposition of being gay which is not necessarily always true. I know it's not common for a lot of LGBT community because a lot of them are not religious or are rejected by people who have certain religions but that is something that I have not messed myself. I've never really seen my religion be representative in a positive light in relation to being gay. I've only seen it in a negative light. Just because somebody's not straight doesn't mean they can't be religious. Neither one of those is mutually exclusive. It can be frustrating to constantly see religion be represented negatively when I feel so positively towards my community that is religious.

**Participant 4:** I think that a lot of the time media can be an educational moment and it's important to have discussions on what it means and what it is to come out. It can be beneficial to people who don't know about those identities. I think that filmmakers need to be aware that they do have that responsibility and they are being educational even when they think they aren't.

**Participant 3:** I think that Brooklyn Nine-Nine could be used as a guide for other filmmakers because it's definitely better than some models to go off of. I think that we are really lucky in that we're getting a lot more representation that is a better quality. At least I'm noticing there's a lot of clear representation in media for gay women, I don't know specifically about the men so I would have to research that myself but I think there are TV shows and films that are finally getting past the coming out stories. Why is it in the TV world the gay people only deal with like three things? Still, I think we are getting to a point where there is a lot of good representation

with stories that are not just coming out. I definitely think Brooklyn Nine-Nine would be one to watch and understand how to get people to see that characters are more than one thing.

### **Transcript from in-person focus group #2**

#### **Reactions after *Bojack Horseman* clip:**

**Participant 1:** The clip was highly positive on my part. I've already watched *Bojack Horseman*, so I love Todd's arc. They slowly reveal he's asexual throughout the series and I know in later seasons they especially show him in asexual relationships. They do a good job of explaining it while also keeping the humor

**Participant 2:** It is cool to see them going into more rare sexualities like asexual, just because it's one that is really not at all talked about even within the community. There's just like a stigma around it in terms of people are kind of saying that asexuals aren't part of the community... So it is nice to see it kind of put in that positive light. Some of the jokes that *Bojack* makes are some of the ones that less informed people make, so that is kind of like a starting point, and if the arc gets better than it's good to know.

**Participant 3:** When people are uncomfortable they often use humor, and humor makes people more comfortable, so humor in scenes like that makes people more comfortable in a situation where they might have not felt comfortable before. So I think it's positive.

**Participant 1:** Kind of adding onto that, the show does a great job of that too because Todd for most of the season is just like the humor reprieve from the rest of the show, occasionally the focus of emotional arcs, but like, the fact that he's asexual isn't even teased until like the third season, and then it's like officially revealed later in the fourth season. So it's like, not his defining characteristic but they make it a good part of his character later after you're already familiar with the character.

**Participant 2:** That's a good way to do it!... That is one of the major things that you see with LGBTQ characters, especially in like early, when it was first starting to be introduced to the media, that is like all that they were, that like trademark gay character and they had nothing outside of that, which was annoying. It is certainly one of those things that, kind of, even though it's like a, make awareness kind of thing. Which is kind of what it does... Their asexuality is a part of who they are, but it's not the entirety of who they are.

#### **Reactions after *Clueless* clip:**

**Participant 1:** The delivery of it is still funny, but it is still just like every stereotype about a gay man in the 90s, is pretty much the joke.

**Participant 2:** It's based entirely on stereotypes of how they dress well, and some of the terms they use for gay men are just in themselves kind of problematic... But yeah you have things like

that where, yeah, even though they react to it kind of positively, in the way that they're just like, oh yeah he's gay, well I guess now I can't date him basically. Which is nice to not have an initial negative reaction, like oh now time to socially ostracize him. But it's still like an issue of using all of these terms and basing them on stereotypes. Like that's the one character thing that they are gay, all of their characteristics are all of these stereotypes about being gay. And I'd really like to see some getting away from that to have it more like how it was in the Bojack asexual character, where it's like, yes, that's a part of his character, but the character has so many other traits and characteristics to go along with it.

**Participant 1:** Yeah. And even currently some LGBT-friendly shows use stereotypes as like a joke or for a generality and stuff but every stereotype is in some way bad even if they're reacting to it in a positive tone, and especially when all it is is back-to-back of listing stereotypes.

**Participant 2:** And I think that stereotypes can have its place just because like... I think there is a difference between a show's creator who is not a member of the LGBTQ community using stereotypes versus someone who is a part of the community and understands more where those stereotypes come from. A good example is lesbians and plaid. Within the lesbian community, that is something that is kind of integral to their personal... kind of it's a joke to us like if you wear plaid, it's a signifier that you're in our community. But if you then have kind of, especially a straight white woman, come in wearing the plaid and they're then wondering why lesbians are hitting on them and it's like, well it's because you're using part of our culture, part of the stereotype that goes with us. So not having that integral understanding of where those stereotypes come from and then using them regardless can become problematic, which you see a lot in cinema when they try to stereotype LGBTQ characters.

**Participant 3:** It's interesting how some stereotypes like wearing plaid are like a choice that you can embrace, but then other stereotypes, like the high voice of a gay man, there's like nothing you can do about that. It's not like something your community can embrace. I've never really thought about this before but I wonder how using those different types of stereotypes in film compares. Because, like you said with wearing plaid, if the maker is lesbian and understands what they're doing, then it can be okay, right?

**Participant 2:** It comes across better, especially within the LGBTQ community. We're all like, oh yes! They understand.

**Participant 1:** And, correct me if I'm wrong, but it's kind of like part of the fun in actually portraying some stereotypes is the humor of the fact that you know you fit a stereotype. Like the plaid thing, you're like, this is funny. And I'm like, this is stereotyping a lesbian. So I guess that's like the difference between...

**Researcher:** What should the balance be with stereotypes in film?

**Participant 2:** I definitely think that stereotypes have a place just because they do represent a large number of people and I think that when you are initially introducing a controversial topic like gay characters, it's okay to kind of view that as an introduction to where you're like yes, this

is what the gay community is and it's kind of about normalizing it. And then from there, you need to progress into moving away from stereotypes and exploring deeper stories into deeper characters. And I think that media, when they're doing things like this with representation, whether it's LGBTQ, whether it's women versus men, whether it's race, things like that, media has such a hard time moving away from stereotypes just because they then normalize so many things. Which then it goes from being an introduction to the community to being very destructive. Like this is the one mold and if you're not fitting this mold, you are not gay.

Then you have gay women who have to be butch or else they're not women, and gay men that have to basically be women. The way they speak and act, and then all of these things that have to be, which is restricting to their identity, it's detrimental then to things like mental health

**Participant 1:** Yeah, I agree with that and kind of incorporating it into the question of what is the right balance. I think it's like good character writing that extends beyond just the LGBT and beyond just the stereotypes. Even if that is the main facet of their character is the fact that they're LGBT, you can make stereotype jokes especially if they fit a stereotype, because some people exist in it, but like, if that's every joke, and you're not really like using it in any clever way or challenging it and showing something beyond this, then I think that's where it's just problematic. And it just works better too if you have someone who is more developed, then the fact that when they do fit a stereotype sometimes, that joke becomes more prominent. Or even if it's not a joke, it just like stands out more and has more of an impact because it's beyond what they normally just are.

**Participant 2:** Especially if you look at the role that LGBTQ characters play a lot of the time. So you do have the gay man who the straight woman is interested in, like oh he's gay but maybe I can turn him not gay or something along that line. You have the gay man who's every woman's best friend. And it is very restrictive in terms of character development and how strong the character is and how much you can relate to it. Because representation should be about the characters who they represent being able to project onto them and understand them. But if they're constantly stuck in stereotypes of things that people do not relate to, it's no longer beneficial to representation at all because you have just people who are like, this is just a joke character that I do not want to relate to.

**Participant 1:** Even if someone is like a stereotype of that person does exist, and that's real, there's always a difference between realism and film. Because film, you're choosing to depict something and it changes the context of the scenario, even if you know the most stereotypical gay person ever, and then you depict them on a film, it becomes different once it's on a film, because now every choice you make is choosing to showcase some part of that in some way, and so it becomes an act of deliberation instead of an act of happenstance.

**Participant 2:** Definitely. Especially when it gets stigmatized outside of the film, how people react to it culturally, you then have people who are like, oh well I was a lesbian and I wear plaid but now I don't want to do that because I'm constantly getting asked on the street, oh are you a lesbian? Like people make assumptions about me because of the stereotypes that are portrayed in the media. And it has a detrimental impact on real people's lives, to be like I was fulfilling this

stereotype but now I have to change a large part of who I am, gay men especially are being forced with this reaction of not having that masculinity factor and so they are intentionally doing things like changing how they speak which can be like a time-consuming thing to constantly focus on. Imagine walking around all day and constantly say I have to watch what i'm speaking, I have to watch how I'm saying it, fake all these interests and fake all these stereotypes that straight men are being pushed to, which is a whole other flip side of the coin kind of conversation.

### **Reactions after *Glee* clip**

**Participant 1:** It's kind of on the nose, isn't it?

**Participant 2:** Yes, but the reactions from the other characters involved in the situation are kind of where... like, the coach's exasperated reaction of "can this just be over with?" That's like such a huge part of what sets back representation, because it's people saying like you don't need representation, like, you have your gay characters, what else do you want? But then you have the other kids in the audience who are looking at each other like disgusted, which, it's fine to show that, since that is a reaction you will get, but you have to frame it in a negative light. You have to frame them as the people in the wrong. It's the same thing with rape jokes, where you have to frame the abuser as the person in the wrong, not the victim, in order for it to be in anyway an acceptable thing. Same way as you have to frame the people who see LGBTQ as bad, you have to frame them in the wrong in the media. If you don't do that, then you are just enforcing this idea of the coach being exacerbated by more kids coming out, like "can this just be over? Can this just not be a thing anymore?" Ideally, you get to a point where it doesn't matter and where you don't have to make a big deal out of it anymore. But at this point in time, it is a big deal because we are fighting for our rights and for our representation in the media.

### **When asked if it makes a difference that the person making the joke is gay in real life:**

**Participant 2:** The you're towing the line between the difference of the actress and the role, and like I get where you're coming from, and now that that's coming from an actual gay woman, it's fucking hilarious, but it's also like, people who don't know that. So it's one of those things where it is very good but only if you understand where it's coming from.

**Participant 3:** I obviously agree that it is super important to support people when they come out because it is a really big deal, but also, at what point are you overdoing it because also nothing has changed. Like, nothing has changed about who they are. Like, great! I'm proud of you for coming out, but you're still the same person.

Obviously I'm looking at this clip from a very different perspective, but from the coach she said, you're strong and she kind of supported them but then was like, okay, great, now that that's over... And I was like, oh, okay, that's kind of cool because, like, it is a big deal for her and yeah, she's really strong and that's great for her, but also she's the same person and then she continues with her day

**Participant 2:** Ideally, that's what happens. But she doesn't just get to continue with her day now. She now has to contend with homophobes that are going to be actively possibly harassing her. And it does become this thing where it's integral to who you are and the decisions you make, so, for example, if she came out as dating the other cheerleader, any time they think about wanting to hold hands, about wanting to kiss in the hallway, they have to make a conscious decision of "is it worth the risk?" So yes, Ideally, it's like, okay! Cool! You're gay! That doesn't actually change anything and we can just move on with our lives, and that's what we should be working towards, and it is important to show it in that way, but we are not necessarily at a point in society where that is what happens, and so we do have to be actively supporting these kids and being like, your life is about to get a little bit harder, and I hate to tell you this especially in our political climate, but your coming out has changed your life in ways that you will probably not understand until you are faced with the blunt truth that people are assholes. So yeah, I think ideally you show their support in that way that it's like, you actually as a person have not changed, it's the environment around you that has changed its perception of you that needs to be addressed. SO ideally, what you're talking about is where we wind up. But unfortunately, with the prevalence of homophobes, that's not what happens.

**Participant 3:** And when I said she goes on normal with her day, I meant the coach goes on normal like teaching the day.

**Participant 2:** Ideally, that's what happens. SHE's like, cool! Moving along. Which is what I think should happen. So now that I understand that's kind of where you're coming from, I fully agree with you

**Participant 1:** And I feel like that character of supportive but also kind of indifferent, kind of like, we're past this in a way kind of character is becoming more common and popular and I think that's what they were going for in a way. But also, I got the sense, and based on what I vaguely know of Glee, this was probably not even close to the first character to come out as gay on the show, especially based on the response. So part of it is still like self-commentary of like, well we got another character give the I'm coming out spiel, and so it kind of exists in like a weird space where... like my original comment of it feels overdone, it's cause I feel like, at least with me personally, I've seen this same exact speech like a million times before. SO it's like, if you've done this before, why don't you do it differently? And if you want us to take it seriously, why don't you take it seriously? There's just a lot of weird layers and I don't think it works very well.

**Participant 2:** It's part of that like weird transition period of using stereotypes of the coming out story and then you need to progress past that into other aspects of the gay experience. So like, we've had thousands of different coming out stories from shows like Glee, from a lot of rom-com movies, it's always about some discovery of like, oh, hey I'm gay. That's the stories that we get. And the next phase is yeah, how does it impact our lives? How does it impact our lives? And other facets of the gay experience that really is a next step and need exploring. And I think shows like One Day at a Time, that one has like a lot of LGBTQ representation but it's not necessarily the coming out story. It's about how you navigate the day-to-day life and the people you meet and the reactions you have to that and so that's where I would like to see media move.



You have all these stories about coming out and it is overplayed, and in our society we're at that point where, if you come out as gay, it's not like a huge game-changer. Like, it's not like Ellen DeGeneres getting fired anymore. We're past that point now, and I know that Glee is probably in the day and age of closer to it actually mattering, but now we need to progress forward with stories and not just give us the same like recycled, I'm coming out and this is a big deal, like, it shouldn't have an impact on anything that happens to you.

**Participant 1:** And I think like, going back to the clips we've already seen, I think a good comparison is the Bojack scenes where Bojack was also sort of like this indifferent but positive sort of... and then immediately starts making jokes or getting at something else. I feel like that's a better way of doing it, where like this coach was kind of indifferent and then wanted to quickly move on, but it was in a totally different, not as effective manner.

**Researcher: Do you think having more representation of coming out being a normalized thing could change how it is in society and make it more normalized? So is it better to have it normalized in film or not?**

**Participant 2:** Yes and no. Kind of a complex answer. Yes, representation as any time as like baseline early levels is fantastic. Get people to be aware that lesbians are a thing, bisexuals are a thing, asexuals are a thing, like get people to be like this is a thing that you cannot escape from. Like, we exist, so sorry, but we exist. But then you have to have actual good representation for it to be beneficial to it progressing society into ways that aren't hateful. There are like two groups: You get good representation where you get respect and you get normalized and people are no longer afraid to come out which is like the ideal scenario. You also have the negative group to take in where is constant negative stereotypes, its stereotypes where people are forced into molds. We see this a lot especially with women and lesbians where their either the butch and man-hating or else you're not a lesbian. So you have to show them in positive, diverse lights in order for it to be actually beneficial. You see it a lot with the stereotypes of black characters—if they are always constantly negatively portrayed, but they are getting more portrayals... so you're increasing the amount of representation but it's only representation of the negative light, then it's not beneficial. So you do have to walk that fine line of getting more representation but getting more good representation.

**Participant 1:** And adding to that in the context of the question, which part are we normalizing, you know? There's like a huge breadth of experiences, so saying we're going to like normalize it, so I think it definitely can have an impact but are you portraying the same story we've seen a thousand times or are you doing a new twist? For Moonlight for example, that was a story that's pretty much never shown on the screen about gay black men from a very specific background and context, and it had an entirely different effect because no one had seen this. It was powerful and definitely showed a side that people don't know of normalizing it, but it was also a story that people didn't know, whereas a clip like the one we just saw, I don't know who that's going to change anything for. I feel like if you're someone who is already watching the show, you already agree with the sentiment so it's not really going to change anything.

**Participant 2:** You have to look at the intersectionality of things. So with *Moonlight* where it kind of intersects race with LGBTQ status, because there's so many diverse stories to tell, but we have watered it down to kind of white lesbian and the white male, and you get all these stories that kind of restrict it. You have the same issues with any other segment where it's like, Hollywood has this one character that it likes a lot, and then it will, through the masses, introduce new characters, like characters LGBTQ-wise, race-wise, gender-wise. And you see a lot of current issues, so you see things like *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, things like *Glee*, things like *Bojack* apparently who has introduced asexuality which is kind of a new idea. As gay and lesbian segments become normalized, it can then help branching things for asexuality, for bisexuality, because that's a good starting point where it's easy for people to understand, oh there are people who like men and people who like women and they also happen to be the same gender. Like that is an easy thing to kind of like start off with. And then you get into, oh, you like both men and women, oh, you don't like anyone in any way, or oh, you just don't like sex but you're here for a romantic relationship. And then you get into these subsets of people in very specific situations in very specific contexts that need to be represented like asexuality on *Bojack Horseman*, because the asexual community has been perceived, even within the LGBTQ community, with a lot of the same misunderstanding and hate that the original gays and lesbians were met with when they first came out. Say, like, when *Ellen DeGeneres* came out. So you have all these new identities coming forth that need to be represented. Since lesbians and gays have been represented, now it is time to move on into their stories in order to get them normalized and them in a safe environment.

**Participant 1:** Absolutely. I also think that... in general. If you watch pretty much any typical, run-of-the-mill action movie, like the kind of films my dad would actually watch, not the stuff that I would watch, pretty much the only representation you're going to get is maybe a lesbian for like the villain character maybe. Which is it's own issue. *Atomic Blonde* technically had a nice feminist twist on it, but still it's like I can't remember the last gay or bisexual man that I've seen in a popular action film, and I feel like that's where it can have an effect of normalizing by putting it in there. And so if it's like a rom-com that's a place where it's already becoming pretty common...

**Participant 2:** But then you get into issues of storylines. So, this will be something that will forever infuriate me, but for some reason all lesbian rom-com storylines, and I shit you not it is all of them, are some variation of straight woman in a marriage meets exotic new girl and cheats on the husband and like becomes a lesbian. And that's like such a problematic stereotype. It's lesbianism destroying straight marriages, and that's the stereotype and that's why you have so many lesbians who get forced into that and get accused of that, and it's like no! Sure, it happens, but like, that is not the only story you should be telling about love between two women. It should be more than that. It should be like the real experience like oh my god I just saw a hot woman and I don't know what to do. Like, there are so many other stories to tell and instead we choose the one storyline that kind of demonizes lesbianism. It is something to be hated and resented

**Participant 3:** And the one that is probably not very relatable for a lot of lesbians. And the one that's not very relatable for straight people.

**Participant 2:** It's so bad. And the flip side of this coin is gay men storylines where you have, it's often times trying to interject kind of masculine ideals into what would typically be a very feminine situation of like intimacy, and you see— and we can go into how all gay LGBTQ rom-com movies are always so sexualized, like *Love, Simon* was fantastic in that it was not sexualized at all, it was simply about this teenage boy who is like frick I gotta come out. And so stories like that are so much more impactful to us because it's not sexualizing us, it's not forcing us into things like demonized roles, it's not, especially for gay men, forcing them into kind of violent relationships when they're trying to introduce or interject toxic masculinity into these relationships because they're like, of course two men who live together are going to be like... and that's not necessarily what happens. And of course the flip side is not to get them into generally feminine roles only. It's a dichotomy of various people's experiences that you can go into. Like, just talk to a real gay person and have their stories told and it's so much better than what Hollywood is currently giving us.

### **Reactions after *Rocky Horror Picture Show* clip**

**Participant 2:** I tend to have a positive view on that movie just because I know it's culturally significant to LGBTQ in terms of the fact that it was kind of groundbreaking for that to be shown on TV. It was pulled off on a lot of places. I don't know, it's one of those things that has informed our culture and shaped LGBTQ culture a lot especially, like, drag culture is heavily informed by *Hotel Transylvania* (laughter). That's my ten cents on it.

**Participant 3:** I feel like when you're watching that you have to realize that's one of the first representations, and kind of like you were saying earlier, just the fact that that was representation makes it positive and now if it were made today, like I haven't seen it, but I know if it was, it would be completely different. Even if it were to be made the same today, the same parts of it could be considered negative representation, right? I would say positive just because of when it was made, just the fact that it was representation, right?

**Participant 1:** And this is, I'd say, positive for me, too. But I'd say this is one of the ones that I feel the most disconnect personally. If I didn't know the context of how important this was to the LGBTQ community, that they really like this film and treat it positively, if I saw this without context, I wouldn't know if it was a positive or negative thing because you know it's easy (mumbling). It feels like this film is the least qualified or least informed because there's so many historical elements that make it okay in ways I wouldn't have originally guessed were problematic. The part of it that I do get, there's a part of it that's kind of like reclaiming a bit to where it's like these were already sort of like stereotypes but they're making it their own and reclaiming it, similar to people taking back their terms like queer. That's like the element that I do get, but beyond that there's a lot of things that, like, I'm like, "Okay the LGBTQ community likes this and is fine with it so I don't think I need to worry about it as a bad thing."

**Participant 3:** I feel that way a lot.

**Participant 2:** Yeah, I think there's kind of something to be said about kind of reclaiming stereotypes and fully embracing them in things like the drag queen community. And kind of the

stereotypes that are portrayed in that movie. Like, you have people that are aggressively being gay and being, like, who they want to be. And that's something that's something that was highly looked down upon and they were basically saying, "We are like this and you cannot change us and there's nothing you can say that will take this away from us." Something about reclaiming them is super powerful and super empowering especially to a community that marginalized. But then you have these become normalized and then like, what do you do with these stereotypes because stereotypes change and so it's a constant battle of do I want to fit this stereotype because this is who I want to be versus do I not want to fit this stereotype because I want to get outside that and make people see me as more than just that characteristic. Especially the flamboyant gays who have to walk this line of "I really enjoy having these done-up outfits" who are have these bigger than life personalities and they have to walk that line between that and filling a stereotype and they shouldn't have to make that choice. And it shouldn't be kind of pressured onto them that way. But it is and kind of just navigating that is another queer experience that people can look at and explore and it's just not done. And broadening stereotypes will combat that because it becomes "Here's these 40 stereotypes versus these two that were originally here." And then at that point it no longer becomes stereotyping, it becomes just kind of a cultural identity which is a lot better in like a positive light versus a kind of constricting one.

**Participant 1:** And it's kind of like a paradox, too, in like this film had paved so many roads and so many effects that now looking back on it you're like, "What? They could do that?" Like I can't think of any other film where it's okay to say, like, transvestite. And this film was like flaunting it but it's also the key reason that is the case now is because this film did it. Now it seems far behind because this film paved that road originally.

**Participant 2:** Yeah. And it's kind of, not necessarily a good film, but it's also one of those things that introduces the broader range of LGBTQ spectrum because it pulls in things like transvestite and transexual and things like that where it's not just about gays and lesbians, it's about this whole community that a lot of times parts of it get overlooked or overshadowed or even within the community are pressured out so you have things like TERFs who are trans-exclusionary-radical-feminists where they're like here for women and lesbians but then you get into like transexual and you get into things like this where it's suddenly not okay. And it should be part of under an umbrella term that encompasses all these people and the movie kind of broaches that, like, "This is all of the types of people that are here, not just gays and lesbians and not just (incoherent)."

**Participant 1:** Yeah it's one of those things where you grow more progress you grow more complex. Like before we had no rights and once you meet a certain level then you grow more. So it's kind of just those levels add more to the fight and more complex.

**Participant 2:** Yeah, as much as we would love everything to be black and white, everything is such a gray expansion of complex issues and interplay and to ignore all of that is easy in the beginning because you just want a baseline decency. But then you get into complex issues. Like when you're trans you have to get into changing your ID and get people to stop misgendering you and stop dead-naming you. And there aren't a lot of trans stories being told and a lot that are being told are problematic because they aren't letting trans actors play them. And that's the other

side of representation because it's not just what's the story being told it's also who's telling the story and what actors are playing them. Because if you're taking LGBTQ+ roles away from LGBTQ+ actors, like there's something to be said about actors being able to play any role, but if the actors are being pressured out of the system then you aren't helping. That's behind the scenes that happens to actors that have lived these stories (incoherent).

**Participant 1:** I think that's something that's being framed really roughly for a lot of people to just say, aren't actors allowed to play anything. And that message gets lost. I feel like the real problem is that sure they can play that, but we have actors that have experienced that and they should be able to play that.

**Participant 2:** It's like even outside LGBTQ+, should deaf characters be played by deaf actors? There's deaf actors, so give them these roles of deaf characters with the experience to draw on. And part of that can be linked to method acting and what do you know about the intricacies of this topic. But it's just, like, Scarlett Johansson role, like the idea of white washing a character. It's an interplay of the system of Hollywood and what Hollywood does to these stories and about trying to make these few actors fit this mould that doesn't reflect the majority of the world. And they've kind of normalized it by this point which is very unfortunate because there's so many great stories to be told but none of them are being told. Like we have these powerful stories but none of them are being explored. It's heartbreaking to see these people who have these incredible stories that could connect with other people but then have these same straight men play who, I don't know, it's just heartbreaking to see that happen.

**Participant 1:** But it's so complex because even if we won that, now we have these specific niche disadvantage actors playing the same characters, and you have the follow up issue of why can't they play different characters.

**Participant 2:** (incoherent) I always play villains!

**Participant 1:** The progress never ends (laughs).

**Participant 2:** That's the other thing is people want a clean cut conclusion but that never happens because these issues are so complex with institutionalism. It's a non-stop battle. You have to completely revamp the system.

### **Reactions to *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* clip**

**Participant 2:** God, I love Brooklyn Nine-Nine!

**Participant 3:** It's so good!

**Participant 1:** Write that down!

**Participant 2:** It's so good. That clip specifically. I identify as bisexual and everything she said is such a mood! It's like you just see (incoherent) and you're like, God! Quality! But the way

they presented it is in such a positive, accepting light. Like the questions that were asked are so important. And the fact that they weren't negative and like, Jake? Is that his name? Where he was like the only issue I take with that is who you chose. That's just such a great representation of acceptance in a friend group and even though she looked like of nervous doing it and was very brisk. It's so good to see those positive reactions to it. It's such an important part of it. I just love Brooklyn Nine-Nine, it does so much for progressing.

**Participant 3:** It's also great that that's one of the newer seasons. So Rosa is completely developed and we know so much about her and they just add this one new thing and then it's not a huge deal. And obviously it comes up because it's part of who she is but it's not like a focus of an episode.

(Participant 1 and Participant 2 talking over each other)

**Participant 2:** Which is like such a huge storyline for LGBTQ people who have non-accepting parents or parents that try but just do not get it. These are all stories that Brooklyn Nine-Nine does such a good job of how people view it and how to portray it in the show. And with Rosa she is constantly (incoherent) as a woman, as a bisexual woman, to do things that she wants outside of this one character role. It's just so good to see. There's always like a rush of just happiness when you see a character you relate to being reacted to positively within the community. Look at like female superheroes, it's the same rush of like YES. This is positive representation that empowers people and encourages them to come out and to normalize it. It's so good! I love it. It's so dear to my heart and means so much to me and other members of the community. I love Rosa.

**Participant 3:** I also love with Rosa, I think that a lot of shows that even if they have a Bi character, they don't even put that person with a female character because it's more out of the norm. So if they have someone who's bi, they want to utilize it so they give them a female partner. But Rosa has both. So they actually utilize the bi and not just lesbian or straight.

**Participant 2:** That's part of the issues with bisexual representation. Like if a bisexual woman dates a man, suddenly she's straight or if she's dating a woman, she's strictly gay and it's vice-versa for men as well. And it happens within the community as well where if you're in a "straight" relationship you do not belong in our community because you're hetero-passing and you do not have a place, you aren't facing the same issues as us. It's like, well, you're also stigmatizing me, hello! But to see Rosa get both male and female and to constantly assert herself, like, I'm not gay, especially with her parents, I'm not gay, not a lesbian. I am bisexual. Please use the correct term. That's such a huge stigma. In a world where you don't necessarily know all these identifiers, like asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, things like that, you don't necessarily need to be having specific words for that. You can just be like, this is what it is. I don't know. But to enforce that I'm still a member of the LGBTQ community, it is so important to normalize it and normalize the language surrounding it.

**Participant 1:** Yeah and I mean, also adding to what you said about her being developed, Brooklyn Nine-Nine is a great example of how you can do it both ways because on the other

hand, Captain Holt was pretty much introduced as a gay man since the beginning and it's been a defining part of his character and they've done really well with his development in a very smart way and at the same time they had this other character where they didn't really tease that [sexuality] in the beginning and they still brought it on later in a very nice and mature and good way. Even in a way to where, like, it told a story very well and had all these elements and even if you know some of these elements and don't care, there's so much there that there's something for everyone in Brooklyn Nine-Nine. Like, even if you don't care, you might appreciate the jokes. Or even if you don't like the jokes you might like this other element. Which is just so much to offer.

**Participant 2:** When shows or movies combine all these possible perspectives or storylines, you have so many different things to explore. And that's how shows don't get stale; that's how shows continually engage their audience and gain audience because they're like, here's this new character that we would love to introduce to you, who is basically you. And seeing kind of, seeing that projection is so important because if you don't, if you cannot personally relate to a storyline, it doesn't necessarily have the same impact it would otherwise. And you can see the power of what happens when people have other people that represent them in media where it's like, well, if they can do it so can I, and that's such a powerful thing to tell someone and to show them that they're capable of doing things. And it's just something that everyone constantly writes down the power of, like, fantasy. But it's not necessarily the stories, it's the ability of people to be empowered and to feel like this could be me. It's such a powerful thing to think and feel and live with and representation is how you get that. And without representation it's like, well obviously there's no place for me because there's nothing shown in culture and media.

**Participant 3:** The other thing I love about Brooklyn Nine-Nine is

**Participant 1:** Can we see more clips?

**Participant 3:** Right. Like you said, Holt in the first episode is basically introduced as gay and then Rosa, seasons in, comes out as bi and with both of these characters, if you asked me to describe them, I would tell you, I don't know, six or seven things and then I would tell you, oh yeah, and they're gay.

**Participant 1:** Yeah exactly.

**Participant 3:** Before they're gay, they're a person. And that's like

**Participant 2:** That's good character writing!

**Participant 3:** Yeah! It's good character development because I think of them as an entire person with a whole personality that also encompasses being gay. But it's not like they're a gay person with this personality. They are a person who is also gay.

**Researcher asks if Participant 2, because she is LGBTQ, would list other things before mentioning the character was gay or not because that's the part they identify with**

**Participant 2:** I think especially when I'm giving show recommendations, especially to fellow friends in the LGBTQ community, a lot of times I'll be like, there's a gay character and that's literally all that matters! Because it's just such an important part of representation to be so excited about, like, Brooklyn Nine-Nine has TWO gay characters and everyone is accepting and loving of them. And even Terry Crews, he plays this typically masculine male and he has aspects of that but he also has very effeminate roles where he, like, you could project being gay onto him. Which is this whole other thing of gay-coding in media and like being officially gay versus gay-coding or queer-baiting. But Brooklyn - oh my god - Brooklyn Nine-Nine does such a good job of having official gay characters, confirmed by the show, like, Sorry, angry homophobes, you cannot get around it, they're gay. But then also having characters that you can project onto even though they're not necessarily confirmed as gay. You can still a lot of your personality traits in them, which is just so important in terms of representation and how media interacts with audiences and gets audience engagement and passion for the show. Yeah I one hundred percent would start off with Rosa is gay!

**Participant 1:** Yeah.

**Participant 2:** We love her! We stan one bisexual queen! And it's her!

**Participant 1:** Yeah and when someone does it right it kind of stands out and you want to pay attention to that. Like, for BoJack Horseman I recommend to a lot of people. I do, like, when I first recommend it I mention it's funny, you know, but it's smart, and I'll pretty soon say it does a pretty good job of portraying depression and it's the only show I know of that portrays an asexual character.

**Participant 2:** Yeah.

**Participant 1:** I usually bring that up because it's an interesting fact that tells you a lot about the quality of the show.

(mumbling)

**Participant 2:** Yeah and there's like a lot of people, there's a lot of media where it's like, they portray these things but it's not well done. And so to have these high-quality shows in media portraying these [characters], it's so important and it raises the standard for everyone else. Like, this is possible and I'm gonna need y'all to step-up your game. Because seeing, if you, we've held Hollywood to the same standard, a very low standard. So you think of the Bechdel Test. Like, we've held them to this low of a standard and they've barely been able to get above that. And then you see these shows come forward with these fantastic storylines like Brooklyn Nine-Nine where it forces other media to be like, well, we're losing ratings to these shows and we kind of need to be able to incorporate the same things. It's just a matter of competition kind of breeds progression. So in that way, good representation is so important in terms of leveling the playing field and getting everyone on the same page that, time's a-tickin' and y'all are about to start losing profits.



**Participant 1:** Yeah.

**Participant 2:** It's incredibly important.

**Researcher: What are one or two things to improve LGBTQ+ representation that you would tell a filmmaker?**

**Participant 2:** Involve members of the community. I think if nothing else, just involve members of the community. There's so many members of the community that are like, Yeah I'll get involved, and they get overlooked or forced out. Shows that have incorporated the LGBTQ community, shows that have that experience, just tend to depict it better because they know what's happening and actually know what's relevant. So I think that might just be the most important thing to do is just involve members of the community who know what to do because then you're not just basing it off of stereotypes and you kind of get the buy-in of the community itself because they're like, other members have supported this so it's not just some outsider trying to represent us.

**Participant 1:** My answer was going to be similar which was, you know, try to incorporate LGBTQ members behind the camera or behind the screen or just in the general process. Even if it's just, okay, you're making a short film, you're the director, you're the writer, you know, even if you're not LGBT, you can still get LGBT feedback. If you're choosing actors you can try and choose actors that are actually LGBT. You know, just try and incorporate them somehow and have a perspective that's more than just your own, forever limited, view. I mean no matter how much you learn you're not gonna learn what you can actually experience. That would be my first one.

**Participant 3:** Earlier you were saying, just talk to any gay person and they're gonna have a better story than ninety percent of rom-coms, right? So I feel like this is part of incorporating people which is like, talk to people and get real life experiences and put those into a movie instead of trying to think of what would fit people. Just use whatever does fit people and then use it in a movie, right?

**Participant 2:** That was gonna be my second one! Damn it. But just look at the stories that you're writing and try to diversify it. Exactly what you were saying of like, here are a few stories that fit the rom-com stereotype and then there's nothing outside it. Literally just write a different story. Just stop for two second and ask, has this been done before? Yes? Well, maybe we should change something. Just write different aspects of the experience. We've had so many coming-out stories. We've had so many of self-discovery but instead tell stories of about your day-to-day life with it. Things like homophobic families is something that gets explored a lot but not necessarily the friend side of it. Like, who's now your adoptive friend-family. There's not a lot of stories about the community itself about how you kind of have this second family that develops, especially if you have negative reactions in your personal life, how you then get this new family of the LGBTQ community, who's so supportive of you, and how that's grown into your new life experience. There's not a lot of stories like that. I think that if you tell those stories you get a

broader view of what our community is like which is telling it from inside the community which is not an outsider-looking-in type deal which is how it's normally portrayed.

**Participant 1:** There's a good quote actually, but I can't confirm this, I heard there was a quote, where someone asked how George R. R. Martin wrote such good female characters and he said, well, see, the interesting thing is, I think of them as people.

(laughter)

**Participant 1:** And I think that applies to the same thing as like, just, develop them as full characters beyond just LGBT. Make that key. If you want a coming-out story, give it weight, but you can give it weight while still staying funny or whatnot. You know, if you wanna make a joke about a stereotype, you can make a joke about a stereotype but the end of the joke can't just be, they're gay ha ha ha. There's gotta be something more, you gotta give more. Just write good characters the way you would anyone else but with LGBTQ experiences.

(mumbling, talking over each other)

**Participant 3:** I can't do another one.

**Participant 2:** I think you also have to look at the intersectionality aspects. It goes back to just good character writing. Like looking at a woman lesbian who is white will experience being LGBTQ different than a black woman and you have to look at all of these different facets and how they combine and intersect. You cannot look at those different aspects unless you talk to people who have that experience. But there's so many different facets and how they all interact is wildly complex. It's like dissertations galore. But it's something you have to take into account otherwise you get these one-dimensional characters that are like the standard (mumbling, laughter) lesbian. You get these stories specifically about the standard white lesbian or white gays but then you get *Moonlight*, which touches on the intersection of race and sexuality and it's so important (mumbling). It's pretty good. And you also have to look at Oscars and the bias they have towards (stops, clicks nails).

**Participant 1:** I don't know, I'm not gonna talk about that.

**Participant 2:** But you see that critical roles play a huge part in it. Audience views and ratings versus critics' views (mumbling).

**Participant 1:** Especially for something like *Moonlight*.

**Participant 2:** It's kind of like how animation as seen as kids stuff when it's not and the same thing is applied to LGBTQ culture. But it's so important to so many people. It just gets overlooked and I really wish it wouldn't.

**Transcript from online Zoom focus group:**

**Participant 1:** My name is Dion. I'm bisexual. I was born in New Jersey, but I was raised in Tampa. How LGBT representation in the media, I feel like in the past couple years that it's been it's been more. It's been growing I guess you could say. Like I definitely feel like when I was in high school that there wasn't like much of it. Like it wasn't OK. Like when I was in high school, it still was there was like a double standard kind of. It was OK if you were a girl and you were gay, but it wasn't OK if you were like a guy. Like I feel like in the media now there's a lot more shows and there's a lot more representation. I feel like it's growing and I still feel like it's not where it should be.

**Researcher:** So we're going to start with this clip here. I'm going to share my screen so hopefully you guys can see it. Can you see my screen now?

**Participants:** Yes.

**Researcher:** OK so I'm going to play it and then you guys just discuss what you think is relevant, what your initial reactions are towards this clip, stuff like that.

#### ***After Bojack Horseman clip***

**Participant 1:** It's like a, it's kinda a coming out story. I feel like if you're part of the LGBTQ community, that you all like have a coming out story and it's either positive or negative depending on who you told and how they react. So I feel like Bojack wasn't like, I feel like he was supportive but he was also like very taken aback by that.

**Participant 2:** It was pretty positive like I've never really seen much of like an asexual coming out sort of deal on TV so it was like a very, I don't know, it's kinda like lukewarm. Like they weren't happy or sad about it but I'm glad he felt better about it so I didn't really have any negative reactions to it.

**Participant 3:** Yeah I watch Bojack. I agree with Liv. I feel like kinda at first when they were trying to push that whole storyline with Todd it felt like a little forced. Like I was like, wait what's going on. But then it was actually pretty cool because I feel like at least not a lot of TV that I watch there's not a whole lot of asexual characters and like a lot of representation for people who are asexual, so I thought that was kind of cool. Just people love that show. It's a great show.

**Researcher:** **Do you think that this clip would be, how would it affect viewers that were LGBTQ members versus viewers that weren't? Do you think it would change anybody's opinion or something like that?**

**Participant 2:** I think it's educational for people who aren't part of the LGBTQ community. I think people who are in, I think it would be a mixed bag. Some people don't see that as the same amount of involvement in the LGBTQ community and some people do, so I think that it depends on...but I think it would be a good educational tool for people who aren't.

**Participant 1:** Yeah I agree. I agree with that.

**Participant 3:** I feel like I could see people that are part of the LGBTQ community not being wild about it just because of Todd. He's like, I don't know, he's not like the best character in the show and it's like, I feel like it's like, oh all of a sudden he's asexual and it's like I don't know why. I think it would like put a weird light on that. I don't know if that makes sense.

**Participant 2:** Yeah no it's kind of, it kinda felt like it could be out of place with the character. It's kind of a random choice to make. And like the story they built I guess.

**Participant 1:** Does that character, I mean, like is he like a negative character? I don't know, I don't watch that show.

**Participant 3:** He's kinda, I mean, he's not. The whole show is kinda goofy, but he's like particularly goofy. Like he doesn't, he's always like trying to get his shit together and he's living on Bojack the horse's couch and he never really knows what's going on or what he's doing and he's always doing something crazy and all the sudden it's like oh I'm asexual or whatever and they try to get really deep with him all of a sudden and it's like wait weren't you just like a loser living on this guy's couch and now you're trying to push this like storyline with this character. It was weird. But...

**Participant 1:** OK.

**Participant 3:** But I don't know.

**Researcher:** **Would there have been like a better way, do you think, to integrate that aspect of his personality into the show as a whole? Like without it being so abrupt?**

**Participant 3:** Um I think so. I don't know how that would be, but I felt like it was like a little like wait a minute. You know, cause it was later in the seasons too. It was like now they're getting serious with Todd's storyline and I'm like wait this is interesting.

**Participant 1:** They could have went about it with like in a funny way. you know, instead of it being so like serious.

**Participant 3:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** **Do you think that humor would have helped portray it in a better way for members of the LGBTQ community or...**

**Participant 1:** Yeah because, oh well, that's like you're stepping on hot rocks when you like joke about the LGBT community, but like as a member of it, it's like I crack jokes all the time so I feel like that could've been like an easier way to go about it especially since it's like a comedy

you know I wouldn't like have expected that.

**Participant 2:** It's kind of random without like it. just kind of felt like a, I don't know, you just don't really know why it was there kind of thing and that's when it just kind of like representation is more than just like inserting something like look it's in the show now. That doesn't really have any meaning to it.

**Researcher:** Right so I'm going to share the screen again and we'll go on to the second one.

**After *Clueless* clip**

**Researcher:** Alright. Initial reactions?

**Participant 1:** Go ahead.

**Participant 3:** I was going to say, I love that movie. I thought it was kind of funny, but I could see people not thinking that's funny though. Like cause the way like all the stereotypes like Cher picket holding like whatever he said I was like ooh but whatever. You can go ahead.

**Participant 1:** I was going to say the same thing. I was like he was kinda just like going off the stereotypes like oh he does all of these things, he must be gay.

**Participant 3:** Yeah.

**Participant 2:** Yeah but I still thought it was like it was funny enough where I didn't mind it. Like I thought it wasn't like you know harmful stereotypes or anything. And so and I think like he was partially supposed to be like a character that would stereotype people so I really like I've seen it like a million times and I've never really like had a problem with it.

**Researcher:** **So going off the topic of stereotypes, do you think there are specific stereotypes that would be harmful to the community? Maybe not specifically those in the in the clip but maybe others that you've seen?**

**Participant 3:** Uh I would have to say, I don't know why. Okay I feel like, you guys watch Orange is the New Black right?

**Participants 1 and 2:** Yeah.

**Participant 3:** I felt like when that came out, like not that it was a bad stereotype, but I felt like everybody was like all of a sudden like a little gay, like a little bit of a lesbian or something. Like it was ooh that's so hot they're so hot like I guess it put a bad light on lipstick lesbians a little cause at that time I was dating somebody and I had come out like not too long before that and it was always like oh my god you guys are so hot like you guys are too pretty to be gay kind of thing and it just kind of always reminded me of that and I was like, I mean it's not bad it's just kind of weird. I don't know if that makes any sense but...

**Participant 1:** It does.

**Researcher:** Anything else about this clip? Anything that would be maybe negative or is it all just kinda neutral?

**Participant 2:** I found that like in, sorry.

**Participant 1:** No you go ahead.

**Participant 2:** Okay. I found that like in recent years there's been kind of like an embracing of these stereotypes so maybe it would have been like an insult but at this point like I'll stereotype myself and be like I'm gay I can't do math and stuff like that but like I said I feel like it was it wasn't like harmful stereotypes and it didn't really go into that territory that maybe some other media does with like saying all the mean things.

**Participant 2:** It's also like a classic movie. Like you know.

**Participant 1:** And I feel like they were talking amongst friends so it wasn't like meant to be like mean. They were just like stating what was obvious.

**Participant 2:** Yeah there was really no like bad feelings towards the character himself. She just like truly didn't realize that he it was just kinda like a funny like way that she didn't see any of these signs and I thought they handled it okay.

**Researcher:** Alright next clip.

**After *Glee* clip**

**Researcher:** Alright what about that one?

**Participant 2:** Like knowing the show itself, like knowing the context and how the show treats gay people, like it definitely wasn't a bad scene, but I never really liked how they handled a lot of their um like gay material. So the scene itself was okay, but I do feel like the character of Jane Lynch at the end saying the national nightmare of kids coming out kinda like made it a joke that I didn't like that much. Like of people finally coming out and owning it, it kinda became like they made jokes like okay can we get over this now and I didn't really like that very much.

**Participant 1:** I like how she handled it. Like she sat everyone down in the same room and was just like this is what I am. If you have a problem with it, you know, kiss my ass pretty much. It's just like, she handled it really well. I wish I had handled it like that. Like, gathered everyone in the same room and just been like you know what fuck you guys kinda. Excuse my language, but like I feel like she handled it well and going off what Liv said, I feel like Jane Lynch kinda just like was just like okay are we done with this? Like it matters. Like she made it seem like it didn't matter, but it still matters.

**Participant 3:** Yeah. I thought it was kinda like, not funny, but um that one girl that was like I made out with a girl once. I feel like it's like a reaction that everybody says when you're like oh like this is my girlfriend or like I'm gay they're like oh I made out with a girl in college once. I'm like oh that's like a thing now.

**Participant 2:** Yeah. Especially with girls, it's like everybody seems to think like oh I've kissed a girl that makes me like in the like I can understand this even if they're not gay. And I feel like girls always have that stereotype of it's like fun and edgy to like kiss a girl and stuff like you know kinda showed some of that.

**Participant 1:** That goes to that I feel like that double standard. It's always been it's always been okay for like girls to be gay or like for you to like experiment with girls because that's like the thing to do.

**Participant 3:** I guess. I don't know. I still, I guess up until recently I kinda felt like a little bit of the opposite like people were like a little afraid of lesbians or something until it was like oh just kidding it's like these like good looking lesbians not like these butch girls like that scares people a little bit or did. I was like are you afraid of me or whatever?

**Participant 2:** Yeah like when... real lesbians people get scared.

**Participants 1 and 3:** Yeah. I agree.

**Participant 1:** I'll sip my tea to that one.

**Participant 2:** But no I thought I, I'm glad she had her moment of coming out because I guess maybe Jane Lynch's character doesn't realize how important that is to somebody to tell everybody, but you can kinda see that it was important to her so I appreciated that kinda level that was kinda placed on it. The importance.

**Participant 3:** Jane Lynch is gay in real life right? Is that a thing?

**Participant 2:** I think so, yeah.

**Participant 3:** I think that's like kinda like ironic too... They're kinda like alright get over it but she's actually gay in real life. I don't know.

**Participant 2:** That would make her, give a lot of like ironic winks like...

**Participant 3:** Right.

**Participant 1:** Yeah.

**Participant 2:** So that makes me feel a little better about it.

**Researcher:** Do you think that in representation in general, that the coming out part of the story is given more importance than like other aspects of the story or do you think it's portrayed fairly or what do you think about that?

**Participant 1:** Oh I definitely think like coming out is like the main focus of the story. And then what happens like down the line isn't really focused on like the bullying, the name calling, all that. It's not really focused on especially in the media. It's like oh I'm gay now, okay. But what about what's happening before? What about like the future after that? Like they don't they don't really focus on it.

**Participant 2:** I agree. I think, I think it's given, like when you come out everything's suddenly okay and that everything's gonna be okay now that you've put your feelings out there, but that's not how it is at all and it really isn't that big of a part. Well and once you do it, it's not the most important thing, but in the media it's like every story for a while was like the coming out and then forget about what comes afterwards.

**Participant 3:** Yeah. And like I feel like, I don't know. I feel like there's two different types of like dangers, I don't if that makes sense. Like for dudes like people could like, I mean, anybody could beat up anybody but I feel like you're a little scared cause you're like okay now everybody knows kinda thing. And somebody might follow you home like if you're with your girlfriend they're like oh what are you guys going to, you know, like or at the bar like you're still a little like, I wouldn't, this is gonna sound bad but like I don't think.. Especially I live on Long Island in New York it's like very um it's not like it's progressive but not as progressive as you would think living in New York. So like I don't think I would ever kiss my girlfriend at a bar. Depending on where we were. Because if you do it ,they're like wait what are you oh can you do that again? Or whatever and it's like just some drunk asshole trying to follow you home, but for a guy it's like someone might try to beat you up kinda thing. Which could happen for a girl too but it's still a little like you're like this isn't so great. I'd rather just not like..

**Participant 2:** Yeah. I wouldn't really bring that out like...in public especially like or especially like at a bar or like anywhere with night life because it just feels like scary.

**Participant 1:** I think like the most I've ever done in public is like hold hands. Just because of everybody's eye is kinda on you. Even when you're just holding hands with someone.

**Participant 3:** Yeah. I agree.

**Participant 2:** And like that kinda goes back to like the story stops with the coming out story in shows a lot.

**Participant 1:** Mhm.



**Researcher:** Do you think that representation could help prevent some of these things? Like if the media were to portray different representations, would you feel more comfortable being outward with your expressions of affection?

**Participant 2:** I think the key is the representation. A lot of it is like the token character or like the stereotypical character or like the... like in Orange is the New Black...look at all these characters but I think the key is to make it a normal thing and like not even need to have a huge discussion. Like this show has a gay character, this show is good like morally good. I think it shouldn't have to be this big conversation at this point. Whether a gay person is on television or a show.

**Participant 3:** I agree. I um I feel like it's funny, like not funny, but like I feel like sometimes like even watching shows with my parents like I've been out for a few years. It's like, I feel like every show throws in a little, throws it in a little bit and that it's like, I feel like they're like alright we get it like you know kinda thing. But I was thinking of the show The Fosters. I don't know if you guys have ever seen that show. That's like a very normal show. Cause it's just like, not normal, but it's like this family. Like you never, you like you're aware that those two women are together, but it's not like we're gay, we have all these children. Like you know, it just makes it I feel like it blends it more and makes it more cohesive, I don't know.

**Participant 2:** And I feel like I tend to like those shows more where it's just like a thing and it's not gonna be like, like that was my problem with Glee was like the whole show revolved around like these gay characters but it turned into them being a stereotype of themselves and these like really weird storylines and I just, I never liked Glee's handling of gay characters. I thought it was very like odd. I didn't enjoy it.

**Participant 1:** I also feel like the media's kinda pigging backing on the whole rise of the LGBT community. They kinda are like well okay this is becoming like a normal thing. You know, let's throw it in the show to spice it up a little.

**Participant 2:** It becomes a money grab a lot of the time. So that's annoying.

**Participant 3:** Yeah I agree. I feel like, yeah it does. Especially with two like, I feel like they'll throw in like oh this girl's gay and then like the makeout scene and everyone's like oh my god did you see that, you know, it's like stupid.

**Participant 2:** And when you like know the show just, you know they just sprinkled that in because they knew they would get those viewers, it just is annoying. Like I'm not gonna watch your show just because I am in the community, like I'm annoyed.

**Participant 1:** It makes it really annoying because it's just like why? Like just for the views? What what does that do for you?

**Participant 2:** Yeah and like they don't even get a fair storyline or anything it's just like they're gay, watch our show. Cause you're gay. I'm not gonna watch it.

**Participant 1:** They're even, they're even doing that on Disney now. And that's for like small kids.

**Participant 2:** Yeah like that scene at the end of Beauty and the Beast where uh the two men dance together and everyone was like this is such a huge step for the LGBT community. These men were dancing together for five seconds at the end.

**Participant 3:** Yeah. I thought that was forced. I was like what the hell?

**Participant 1:** Very much.

**Researcher:** Do you think that there should be more LGBTQ representation geared towards the younger generation? In order to like promote awareness or is it too much at that age? What are your thoughts on that?

**Participant 2:** I don't think that matters because I think it would help a lot of younger people who are confused like I was for a long time and I really don't think, with age being gay isn't like a sexual thing but like a lot of parents will assume that it's like something that their kids shouldn't see so I think like I said before like it's really just about normalization and integration into just like normal society rather than making it like a thing that you should be afraid of. So.

**Participant 3:** Yeah I agree actually. I feel like if there were to be more representation in like younger TV shows, unless it was like a natural thing and just like oh okay like she has two mommies or she has two like daddies or whatever that would, I don't know. Because I feel like it would cause like a lot of like uproar. Everyone would be like boycott Disney, boycott AB whatever ABC Family or whatever it is. You know but. I don't know. It's sticky.

**Participant 1:** It's a very touchy subject. It's like, there should be, it shouldn't be a big thing. It should be a normal thing, but most of the parents nowadays just like oh my gosh there's a gay character I can't believe they're showing my child that. Why would they ever show my child that? It's like, they're showing heterosexual characters, what is the problem?

**Participant 2:** I do know recently there are some like gay characters on like Disney shows like geared towards like a really young audience like 10-12 year olds or something and I think that was I think that was positive even though there was like...I don't think it's as serious as it was maybe ten years ago like it's not as big of a scandal it just, people freak out for a day and then move on with their lives. And I feel like we kinda have to do it in increments like slowly and not all at once because you know we don't want to scare the straight people. So...

**Participant 3:** Yeah I agree and I feel like the fact that you said that it's like oh there's like a gay character on a show like I don't watch this or whatever. It's like your child watching a TV show isn't going to make them gay, you know what I mean? A lot comes from understanding.

**Participant 2:** I really don't think they know that though. I really think they think you can like convert somebody and that the fact that there seems to be more gay people out in the open now are people thinking look at all these people who have been converted from this media. When really it's just the fact of more wider acceptance. But people really think like you can be changed like initiated into that so...

**Participant 3:** Have you guys seen that movie, sorry to interrupt. I can't think of the name. It just came out. With like Nicole Kidman and it's like about this guy that he's like lives in the south and he goes to like this conversion camp or his parents sent him there.

**Participant 2:** Boy Erased.

**Participant 3:** Boy Erased. I thought that was great cause that's something that not a lot of people think about. Cause a lot of people think like America is like New York and California sometimes you know. And I was like oh my god this actually happens. This is a thing. And this poor kid and he's trying to be straight like I thought that was good. That was amazing.

**Participant 2:** And then the same, The Miseducation of Cameron Post also came out last year which was kind of a similar story with a girl. So I think those stories are incredibly important to show like the actual like drawbacks you'll go through. Like whether you're being sent to a camp of some sort...you can be changed back. And I think it's good to, especially for the media like lots of education on the fact that you can't be converted and you can't be changed back. And that's what people don't get. So those were good things.

**Participant 3:** Yeah, I know. I watched that movie and I went home and I was like oh my god I love my parents like they didn't send me to boot camp.

**Participant 1:** When I first was like coming out and my parents tried to pray it away because we were very religious and we go to church all the time so. That movie kinda like hit me very hard. It touched a very sensitive subject and I was actually very happy that it was made and it was made for the public to see that.

**Participant 3:** Yeah and I kinda yeah I agree cause I grew up Catholic too and my mom did not have a good time with it. At first it was like she's like I always had a bunch of gay men friends I just never knew a lesbian and I never thought it would be my daughter. Like I'm afraid for your soul, the whole thing. Then it shows how his mom does change and just like you're my child and that's kinda like what happened with me and my mom. It's like, you know, I thought that was great.

**Participant 1:** Same. Like my parents are 100% accepting now, like I guess they kinda seen that it wasn't going to change like what are you gonna do?

**Participant 2:** My parents were Baptist and I never told them and I never will probably, so like movies like that kinda make me sad too cause I know like I'll never have that moment of telling them or of being afraid. So I just keep it a secret.

**Participant 3:** Yeah. Yeah everybody's different. Everybody has like different situations too, you know. Not everybody can just like, I mean like I've heard of friends like getting kicked out of their house and stuff like that.

**Participant 1:** Mmhm and getting like sent away and going like to an all boys school or girls school. Like some of my friends I haven't seen since high school because they came out.

**Participant 3:** It's scary.

**Participant 2:** I think that's what's positive about movies like that it's not like a token character or it's not like a way to come see our movie there's gay people in it. It's actual hard stories and hard truths that we experience. And to see those on screen was kind of very important. And actual representation of like the hardships of it so I thought those are like really good examples of those kinds of movies.

**Researcher:** Alright, I'll share the next clip.

#### **After *Rocky Horror Picture Show* clip**

**Researcher:** Alright, thoughts?

**Participant 1:** Um that movie's a classic first and foremost. Secondly uh, I don't know. Like I've always thought of that word as like kinda negative just because that's what I've been told. Like you're not to call someone who identifies as that that word. So but in that movie I...like they're like making it a they're like putting a joke on it.

**Participant 2:** Yeah I agree. Especially like with the knowledge that the writer and like a lot of the characters were in the community. And also it was like over thirty years ago. So I never really I never really like would say like that the movie was being like harmful. I think it was just poking fun kind of.

**Participant 3:** Yeah I agree. Like from what Liv said like that movie is, well both of you guys, that movie is a classic. I felt like it became like not like a standard but it's like me growing up I was like alright transvestite cause of them, you know what I mean? It's like because that was the only thing that you did see so I guess it was like one of the first things so it did set like the bar a little bit. But I'm not saying it's a positive bar but it's just like oh it's this, right? You know, cause you don't really know.

**Participant 2:** It's kind of a gray area. I'm not sure.

**Participant 1:** Yeah I still really, like with the knowledge I have now I wouldn't use that word.

**Participant 3:** No like now it's like no but like...

**Participant 1:** Maybe like maybe like ten-fifteen years ago like yeah that was the word that you used for that group of people.

**Participant 2:** I really think that's the only movie that could get away with that. And I think because of the fact that I don't really feel any negative feelings towards it like I think it did like as a classic movie I think it handled it like on that line where there wasn't like an outcry or anything it was just kinda like this movie kinda knows what it is and it's whole thing like so. And it's also like an important movie in the LGBT community in a way. Like it is a classic for a lot of people so. Yeah.

**Participant 1:** Yeah, during uh Philadelphia pride year, they show it every year.

**Participant 2:** I think like at this point we can acknowledge that the word is wrong, but we can acknowledge that the context that the movie was made in and the fact that it's become a part of the culture and like an appreciation for it so I think it like it straddles that in a way.

**Researcher: How do you think representation like that might affect people not in the community? Do you think it would have a negative effect on them? A positive effect?**

**Participant 3:** I feel like not like a negative effect but I feel like that's probably that's what I meant I guess because I um I don't have a lot of people who, I don't know a lot of people who are transgender who cross dress so it's like they're probably just like oh this is what is it, right? That's why it's like alright that's why they call them like you know transsexuals? Is that what they call them? That's probably what the standard like that's what they think, you know, we should call them. So I feel like it is a little negative then. But that was a while ago that movie.

**Participant 2:** Yeah, it was a long time ago. And I feel like people who aren't in the community watching it would just be like this is weird. Like they wouldn't really get any of that like joking manner. They would think it's weird and not really understand it. But I don't think it would set their standard because they'd just kinda be like what is this?

**Participant 1:** It would definitely make them ask questions. Which is always a good thing. You know, stay informed. But I feel like they would just kinda be left in do I say that word? Or do I not?

**Participant 2:** And the people like people involved in the community that I've ever watched it with ask me like so is he a he? Like they don't get it. So I think like they'll ask questions but I think the fact that it's just this very playful musical I think a lot of viewers should just kind of know there's not really an answer. It's not supposed to be an educational movie. It's not supposed to set your standard. I think it is what it is and like a lot of people who watch it seem to know that. So I don't think it's ever been often a movie that people get educated from. It's just not that.

**Participant 3:** That being said though, I feel like there isn't like a lot of representation for people who are transgender, like personally I feel like that's like a big... people are like well have you

ever thought about becoming a man? Or whatever and I'm like no, you know. And it's like well can you explain this to me? And I'm like to be honest, I don't think I even know much about it just because I don't have friends and it's like I feel like people look to you to explain it to them just because like you're some sort of part of the community in a way. And I'm just like uh, you know. So I feel like there isn't a lot of representation.

**Participant 2:** Yeah I feel it's like the next hurdle. People don't really understand it and there's not a lot of good representation at all. There's not any good educational material on it in media. So I think that's kinda the next thing to deal with. Like representation...

**Participant 3:** They have that one show. Jazz, Grown Up Jazz? Or whatever it is. I forgot the name of it but...

**Participant 1:** I think the most that they have to go off of is maybe like RuPaul's Drag Race. And that is not the best representation, just because they're very catty. For lack of a better word.

**Participant 2:** It just confuses a lot of people. Yeah I really think that's like something important. But cause you know ten years ago, like Glee was like the thing that people were like oh my god like people are gay, people are coming out. there's this like it's this thing. So I feel like trans people haven't really gotten that kind of renaissance yet where people want to learn more. They're just confused so I think that's definitely something to deal with in the future. In the media.

**Researcher:** Alright, I will show you guys our last clip.

#### **After *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* clip**

**Researcher:** Thoughts?

**Participant 2:** Love that show. Like love that show so much. And I like the way they handled Rosa's character. I think her like kind of no nonsense attitude about it just like here it is like that's it was like a new way of seeing it. It didn't have to be this big thing. She just wanted her coworkers to know. And I thought it was really nice.

**Participant 1:** I like that she opened it up for questions. You know, in a very short, you know, time. But you know, she opened it up for questions, and it seemed like they had a general consensus of what a bisexual was, but they still wanted to know more. Which I thought was great.

**Participant 3:** Yeah I agree. I don't watch that show, but I thought it was pretty funny the way that they like presented the whole thing and like her coworker like "bye, I mean, having sex with men, and women, whatever you do," like I thought it was like the perfect way to do that.

**Participant 2:** Yeah cause I thought it was really cute. They were all interested. They were happy for her, but they were also interested and they wanted to ask questions and they were just

curious. None of them were like oh my god like how did this happen? They were just like oh, how long have you known? Like that's so like that's fun. And I think it's like a really, I think that goes back to what we were talking about earlier that just kinda being normalized and people were just kinda like yeah like it doesn't have to be this ginormous thing. She just was letting her friends know. They were interested and they moved on. And I thought it was really nice. Also it's like one of the first like, you don't see a lot of bisexual characters who like don't get the question are you sure? Or like make a choice. It's like she knew what she was, and everyone just kinda accepted it. And I thought it was positive and cute and funny.

**Participant 1:** Shout out to Brooklyn 99 cause that's amazing.

**Participant 2:** Yeah it is. Like it's always very like wholesome. I think it's such a good show.

**Researcher:** Do you have any like any recommendations for filmmakers who want to accurately portray LGBTQ community? Like what kind of ideas or recommendations would you offer them?

**Participant 1:** I would say put actual gay people in movies and not straight actors. First and foremost.

**Participant 2:** Yeah that's getting old.

**Participant 1:** Yeah like like what was I watching? This new show came out called Now Apocalypse with Avan, I don't know how you say his last name. And the boy from Awkward. And it's like Avan is a straight male in like the real world, but he plays a gay character. How hard would it be for you to get a gay guy to play a gay character?

**Participant 3:** Yeah, I agree. That was like um. That movie that came out with Rachel McAdams where she was like...

**Participant 2:** Disobedience?

**Participant 3:** Yes. I mean like it was great because there was Rachel McAdams, I was just like okay, you know.

**Participant 2:** It's just like, yeah. And I think especially with like I think with gay people you can get away with it, but I think with trans people, it's kind of an issue more than like if we put a wig on Jared Leto, now he's transgender. Look what we did. And I don't think that that's right at all. I think it's negative. The best advice I could give to like a filmmaker or something would be to hang out with a group of gay people. Cause that's where I got so much of like the community and like the culture and the way we talk and the like distinct humor that seems to be within us. I would say like go like be with those people first before you like just try to write a very one dimensional character. That you really don't understand.

**Participant 3:** I mean they are kinda, I don't know if you guys watch American Horror Story, but Sarah Paulson has played a lesbian a few times. And I was like woo. But not all the time. That's the other thing.

**Participant 2:** Yeah. I think with like outside of transgender people, I think with gay people you can get away with the actors because you know you're not changing like their appearance like they're gay now but at the same time it's just kind of like wouldn't you give a gay person like a gay actor work or let them represent themselves? It kinda like would be the polite thing.

**Participant 1:** And it's not like there's a lack of gay actors out here. Like you have a large pool to pick from. You also have the new up and coming actors to pick from so it's just like...

**Participant 2:** Yeah you can't use that excuse. Like there's not gay actors.

**Participant 1:** And I was like just because an actor or an actress is great at what they do doesn't mean they can play all the roles.

**Participant 2:** Yeah and like you know gay people have been like disenfranchised so why not give them more? And you can't say like this was the best actor for the job when there's literally like you said like a giant pool you have. It would just be like the right thing to do. To try to cast a gay actor. Just for the reason of like historically like give us a break, I guess? Like help us out a little bit.

**Researcher:** Is representation of the community something that you think affects your personal identity and mindset? Would you say it's something that you find is helpful to you, that helps you as a person?

**Participant 3:** I would say growing up, confusing for sure. Like I don't know. Like from what I said before, it's like sometimes there would just be like super feminine girls or like super butch and it's like there's no in between. It was hard to find an in between. You're like okay this is good. Or not good, but I'm like it's okay to be like this or just like floating around like you don't have to be one or the other.

**Participant 2:** I feel with the representation the problem was there wasn't a lot of nuance. It was one or the other. So you felt like you had to be one or the other. And you don't feel like you can be a nuanced person, but you realize you're like well that's who I am and I have to be like this very masculine or feminine person. And I have to adhere to this to be like accepted. And seen as like I'm not lying. I think it like with representation it needs nuance and it needs like that gray area. And that in between. I think that's what it lacks and what would be helpful.

**Participant 3:** Yeah yeah that's true. It's almost like you're doing these things just to prove it to other people like I'm not lying and I'm like literally I don't care. Like bye like.



**Participant 1:** And like at the end of the day it's like I don't care. Like this is who I am, whether I'm portrayed in the media or not, this is who I am. It took me a long time to find out who I am, but at the end of the day, it's like who I am like period.

**Participant 2:** But I do think it's helpful with realizing like some media is confusing but some you're like hmm. That might be me. So I think that's helpful when it's not you know horribly stereotyping you, but it's just making you the joke of the show like it was with like early 2000s stuff. Where it was like the punchline. And it needs to not be the punchline for once.

**Participant 1:** Yeah and I was like how many times have we seen the overly feminine gay boy like it's over. Not all gay men are like that. Hello. I'm right here.

**Participant 2:** So really it's about giving us that complexity that straight characters get. Like a character will have an entire movie that's a character study of them. And a gay person will just be the gay best friend instead of anything deeper. And we need like real stories and like actual character study and good writing so.

**Participant 3:** Yeah I would say that they are trying though. I feel like there's more movies that are coming out recently.

**Participant 1:** Oh yeah definitely.

**Participant 3:** Love Simon, was that that one? I thought that was really good cause it's like he's like a jock right? It's like...

**Participant 2:** Yeah he wasn't really much of anything, like he didn't adhere to... that's why he was so confused like I don't do any of these things but I like men and it was cute.

**Participant 3:** I thought it was good.

**Participant 2:** And it was true...we don't get a lot of comedies, we don't get a lot of romantic comedies. Cause it's a serious thing. It's either like conversion camp or you're the stereotype. We don't get just like a normal fun movie like that so that was really nice.

**Participant 1:** Like I even read the book, and the book was like amazing. The book was better than the movie of course. But like he was just like a normal small town kid and it was just kinda going through it. I thought that was a great thing to do. Like my family went to go see it which was absolutely insane.

**Participant 3:** Oh that's awesome.

**Participant 2:** Yeah, I saw it in the theater. Everybody there was just like laughing with each other and like crying at the end and it was like a very communal movie where you're like all feeling the same thing and it was really cute and nice.

**Participant 3:** Yeah I liked how you were like guessing too who it was so it was like oh my god like he's so cute.

**Participant 2:** But that was cool cause it also surprised you. You couldn't find the stereotypical gay character, you were like who is it? And that's very realistic. It's not always going to be obvious, and it was nice that they give that like trope that heterosexual people get where it's like oh like guess who she ends up with and then like with gay people in a movie you know who they're gonna end up with cause there's only one other gay character. And this one you got choices. And that was nice.