

**Closets and TV Screens: LGBTQ Representation
on Prime-Time Network Television in the 1990s**

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Abstract

Throughout the 1990s, prime-time network television introduced a vast increase of LGBTQ representation to American programming. This new programming was a huge step for the visibility of the LGBTQ community in America. In this paper, I study the relevance of this sudden increase and its impact on American culture and the LGBTQ community. In my research, I studied the influence of LGBTQ representation in mainstream media and the treatment of LGBTQ identities in 1990s prime-time network programming. Additionally, I determined the general frequency of LGBTQ representation on the three main networks of the 1990s—ABC, CBS, and NBC—as well as the popularity of select television episodes featuring LGBTQ representation. I researched existing literature to determine the influence that LGBTQ representation holds and the state of LGBTQ representation on network television in the 1990s. Representation in mainstream media is significant as television has the ability to introduce people to new ideas they might not otherwise encounter. The depictions of identities and topics on television influence individuals' world views. Additionally, LGBTQ representation was increasing throughout the 1990s, but that representation was not always positive or equitable. To determine the frequency of networks' depictions of LGBTQ identities, I compared episodes featuring LGBTQ themes at their core to the total number of episodes in the programming up through the 1999-2000 television season. Generally, LGBTQ representation was pretty low and entirely absent from some programming. To determine the popularity of LGBTQ-themed programming, I studied Nielsen ratings of particular episodes and seasons. LGBTQ programming brought in audiences. Overall, representation of the LGBTQ community in the 1990s was increasing but not consistently positive.

Keywords: *LGBTQ, representation, television, 1990s*

Closets and TV Screens: LGBTQ Representation on Prime-Time Network Television in the 1990s

Television is ever-present in the modern age. Between cable television and streaming media, there are countless television shows and programs for people to consume today. Since its conception, television has been used to tell continuing stories. Each episode allows for a deeper look into a longer story of its characters. Whether these stories are serious crime dramas, scripted reality television, or light-hearted family sitcoms, they all serve one purpose: to entertain a wider audience. In America, that audience has always been diverse. However, the stories being told through television did not always reflect the audience. Specifically, people identifying as LGBTQ have not consistently been portrayed on television. Today, television shows better reflect the audiences they are meant to entertain. Work certainly remains to continue portraying queer stories on the modern screen; however, the queer representation presented to audiences today is leaps and bounds ahead of where it was just a few decades ago.

The 1990s saw a drastic increase in gay representation on television programming. The handling of LGBTQ representation in this time period was all over the place. Some television series celebrated the existence of queer characters while others were quick to use LGBTQ identities and stereotypes as the butt of a joke. Of course, many television series never even tackled the topic of LGBTQ characters, rights, or themes. Throughout the entire decade, the television shows that did embrace queer characters and storylines were helping bring LGBTQ identities to American entertainment and, by extension, the average American household. The representation of LGBTQ identities in television continues to be an important factor in entertainment today, and the 90s ushered in a new period of representation that would allow for LGBTQ rights to continue to expand.

For the last several decades, the United States has seen drastic changes in the civil rights of its LGBTQ community. The queer community had made its place in the world known with the Stonewall Riots in 1969, allowing for a new era of queer recognition and activism that the world had not previously seen. Just over a decade later, the AIDS epidemic would start, which ignited a wave of queer activism as the gay community fought for their lives and demanded support from a government that ignored their existence. These moments in American history were monumental for the gay community and would ignite a wave of progress that still affects modern society: “Without Stonewall we have no AIDS activism, and without AIDS activism we have no marriage equality—a social condition that surely has had a beneficial effect on our health” (Halkitis, 2019, p. 852). The LGBTQ community made themselves known with the Stonewall riots. Between these early gay liberation movements and the eventual marriage equality ruling by the Supreme Court in 2015, the queer community would still suffer great growing pains in the decades between as they fought for equality.

The 1990s presented the gay community with unique challenges as they fought for their equity. The election of President Bill Clinton in 1992 is a great representation for the complex feelings toward the gay community in the early 90s: “He was the first President to say the word ‘gay’ in a public speech and to actively court gay and lesbian voters” (Marzullo et. al, 2011, p. 528). Yet, Clinton supported “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” military policies, “making homosexuality in the armed forces an offense that could result in dishonorable discharge for service members who explicitly ‘came out’ through words or behaviors” (Marzullo et. al, 2011, p. 528). Additionally, Marriage equality for gay people was non-existent in America at the start of the 1990s. While several gay couples attempted to obtain marriage licenses “as early as the 1970s,” U.S. congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, which “[allowed] a state to not

recognize marriages performed in other states” (Marzullo et. al, 2011, p. 529). The bill was signed into law by President Clinton.

While gay people were becoming more known (yet more taken advantage of) politically, their appearances within the media also grew greatly. More LGBTQ individuals and characters were being featured on network television than ever before, “leading Entertainment Weekly’s Jess Cagle . . . to call the decade ‘The Gay Nineties’ because of the explosion of gay men and lesbians in mass media within the decade” (Martin, 2014, p. 196). The “Gay Nineties” would be a turning point for LGBTQ people in America. As LGBTQ people made themselves known through queer liberation movements, society was ready to feature them on television. While the process of representing LGBTQ individuals in the mainstream media would be a rocky and questionable one, progress was occurring nonetheless. LGBTQ identities were being brought directly into the home of everyday Americans.

The 1990s were a time of great cultural change for America and the entire world. With the emergence of LGBTQ identities into the mainstream media on a larger scale, the otherwise heterosexual America, from the urban coasts to the rural middle regions, would be introduced to topics and identities they may have never experienced before. The sudden blossom of LGBTQ identities on television in the 1990s is significant in the progress of the LGBTQ community and relevant in understand television’s impact on modern society.

- **Why does representation matter in mainstream American television?**

The 1990s saw a shift in the paradigm of American television regarding queer representation. Several storylines depicting queer characters in 90s television simply used these characters as the butt of stereotypical jokes. Some characters were presented positively, and the shows made efforts to create progress in society. Queer lives exist all

around in everyday society, and reflecting these lives through characters in popular media helps create a society that is more accepting of LGBTQ people. Today, queer storylines are more common, just as queer lives are accepted more today than they were in the 1990s. My goal is to discover the correlation between these two factors.

- **How common was queer representation in the 1990s?**

While queer representation was becoming more common, it was not present across the board. Most popular shows did not feature queer characters in primary or main roles; queer characters were often side characters, recurring characters, or one-off appearances. I want to gauge how many shows from the three major networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS—depicted queer stories in their programming. I also intend to study which shows included gay characters in primary, recurring, or one-off roles.

- **How were queer characters depicted by various television shows at the time? (i.e. were certain stereotypes reinforced, were queer characters treated as equals to the rest of the cast, etc?)**

Along with the frequency of queer characters in television programs, the way these characters are treated in their shows is important in determining the quality of their depictions as queer representation. I want to determine if these depictions of queer characters are generally positive or negative. I want to examine if the shows reinforced or broke certain stereotypes about queer people. I also want to examine how surrounding characters in the stories reacted to the sexualities/gender identities of the queer characters and if the audience was meant to empathize with these reactions. Additionally, I want to examine if these characters lacked depth and were simply used as the butt of jokes to serve a show's comedy.

- **What are the Nielsen ratings for the episodes depicting the LGBTQ representation? Additionally, what are the ratings for the succeeding episodes and the average rating for the season?**

In studying the Nielsen ratings for these television programs, I will be able to get an idea of the popularity of these individual episodes and the continued popularity of the show following their depictions of LGBTQ characters. Studying the average Nielsen ratings for the entire season, I will be able to get a general idea of the casual viewership of the show at the time. The Nielsen ratings for the episodes depicting LGBTQ storylines will give me another idea of casual viewership; however, if certain aspects of the LGBTQ storylines were previously advertised, I will be able to determine if viewers were more or less inclined to tune into the shows. Studying the Nielsen ratings of the following episodes will tell me if viewership decreased, continued roughly the same, or increased, which gives me an idea if viewers reacted negatively or positively to these queer storylines.

The 1990s brought about a new era of for LGBTQ individuals in America. While progress was being made, this process could be painful and long. The role television played in this cultural shift is significant. Through studying this shift and these aspects of LGBTQ representation, I will further understand mainstream television's role in representing the LGBTQ community throughout the 1990s.

Why does representation matter in mainstream American television?

Television is a dominating force in the everyday lives of Americans. Today, anyone can access "television" from nearly any device thanks to streaming and video-on-demand services. Even before the age of streaming, television ownership was through the roof: "In the 1980s, the

presence of TV sets in American homes increased to 98 percent” (Korie, 2014, p. 16). With such a great presence in the American lifestyle, it is no wonder that television has become a driving factor of modern pop culture as well. With constant exposure to television and other forms of media, humans are influenced by the images and representations they see onscreen. When representing certain identities and backgrounds such as LGBTQ identities, the media must be particularly thoughtful in how these portrayals will be perceived. Their portrayals can affect the perceptions society has toward the LGBTQ community. Larry Gross, a professor of communication and expert on gay and lesbian studies, states in his book *Up From Invisibility*, “Television has become the key source of information about the world, creating and maintaining a common set of values and perspectives among its viewers” (Gross, 2004, p. 6).

Historically, representing marginalized groups on television has not been the most popular course of action for the ones controlling the creation of popular media. Portraying minorities on television was just not seen as profitable to them, especially considering the role of advertising in televised media: “In such circumstances, their decisions are inevitably weighted toward the safe and predictable, toward formulas that have worked in the past, and their goal is to attract the largest possible audience of individuals whose spending power appeals to potential advertisers” (Gross, 2001, p. 4). Maintaining a status quo remains the safest bet when there is a desire to turn a profit. Of course, the status quo around the time of the 1990s focused on a world that was largely heterosexual. Gay people did eventually begin to find more representation, especially through the 1990s; however, many portrayals still reflected the status quo and “biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda, “which, according to Gross, are “these are mostly white, mostly middle-aged, mostly male, mostly middle and upper-middle class, and overwhelmingly heterosexual (at least in public)” (Gross, 2001, p. 4).

Maintaining this status quo allows for other demographics to be sidelined and oppressed further in a society that already does not recognize them. When television is a culture's primary source of knowledge on other cultures or identities, it is important to represent marginalized backgrounds thoughtfully and equitably.

As television exists as a major part of modern culture, there is no question that what is shown on television influences this culture's attitudes about that topic. A study conducted in 2007 found that positive and equitable representations of LGBTQ characters on screen do allow for people outside of the LGBTQ community to empathize and hold positive feelings toward the community (Bonds-Raacke, et al., 2007). This study compared the public's perception of gay characters to real-life gay people, and they found that "those recalling a positive portrayal later showed a more positive attitude toward gay men than those recalling a negative portrayal" (Bonds-Raacke, et al., 2007, p. 27). This study is just one example of findings that positive representation or education of LGBTQ identities can result in the general public holding more positive feelings toward LGBTQ individuals.

Positive representation of LGBTQ individuals is not exclusively for the education and informing of the general, largely heterosexual American society. Positive representation is also immensely beneficial to members of the LGBTQ community and LGBTQ youth. When one's personal identity is represented on screen in a healthy and even celebratory manner, a sense of belonging is provided to that individual. One study interviewed teenagers on this topic, specifically using *Glee*—a show featuring several LGBTQ characters, stories, and themes—as a reference for this potential belonging: "They overwhelmingly identified sexuality as a problem some teens 'have to deal with,' and connected visibility of these problems within the *Glee* narrative to productive cultural discourses about the transition from adolescence to adulthood"

(Meyer & Wood, 2013, p. 444-5). When teenagers, young adults, or anyone in search of their own identity is looking for guidance, positive media representations can provide a sense of comfort or belonging in a world that might marginalize these individuals.

Positive depictions of LGBTQ people are crucial to creating a more accepting world. Today, an estimated “one in six adult members of Generation Z” identify as part of the LGBTQ community, and this number is believed to continue growing in the future (“More Americans,” 2021). If television represents identities more equitably, more people can understand the world around them or even themselves. In the 90s, this option was not always available, but it was becoming more accessible through LGBTQ-themed programming.

How common was queer representation in the 1990s?

While the representation of LGBTQ individuals on television expanded greatly during the 1990s, the presence of LGBTQ characters on various programming was sporadic. Some series dealt with LGBTQ representation frequently, even featuring series regulars that identified as LGBTQ. However, several of the most popular television series of the 90s featured no LGBTQ representation whatsoever. To get a better idea of what LGBTQ representation looked like in the 90s, I calculated how frequently some of the most popular television series from the three major networks of the 90s—ABC, CBS, and NBC—featured episodes with LGBTQ themes and storylines.

Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh’s *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present: Ninth Edition* features rankings of the highest-rated television shows at the end of each television season (lasting from September through May of the following year) from 1989 to 2000 (Brooks & Marsh, 2007, pp. 1692-5). These rankings would be used to determine to find the most popular television shows from the 90s. Looking exclusively at

fictional sitcoms and dramas, I determined which three television shows from each network appeared most frequently on the annual rankings. The most popular series from ABC were *Home Improvement* with 7 appearances, *NYPD Blue* with 7 appearances, and *Roseanne* with 6 appearances (Boncho, et al., 1993-2005; Finestra, et al., 1991-1999; Werner, et al., 1988-2018). From CBS, the most popular series were *Murphy Brown* with 6 appearances, *Murder, She Wrote* with 5 appearances, and *Touched by an Angel* with 4 appearances (Fischer & Lansbury, 1984-1996; Siamis, et al., 1988-2018; Williamson, et al., 1994-2003). From NBC, the most popular shows were *Frasier* with 7 appearances, *Seinfeld* with 6 appearances, and *ER* with 6 appearances (Casey, et al., 1993-2004; Crichton, et al., 1994-2009; Shapiro, et al., 1989-1998).

After finding the most popular series from each network, I determined how many episodes of these series featured LGBTQ themes or storylines. Stephen Tropiano's book *The Prime Time Closet* offers an in-depth look at the representation of queer characters on television, featuring a thorough listing of television series and individual episodes featuring LGBTQ themes (Tropiano, 2002, p. 261-311). Considering the most popular television shows from each network in the 90s, I was able to determine how many episodes of these series featured LGBTQ storylines. As Tropiano's book was published in 2002, only episodes from the series' premier up through the 1999-2000 season (ending in May 2000) were considered. Upon determining the number of episodes including gay themes, these numbers were compared to the total number of episodes of these series up through May 2000 to find the percentage of episodes that featured gay themes.

From ABC, *Home Improvement* was one of the most popular shows, and it had 203 episodes during the 1990s ("*Home improvement*," n.d.). However, *Home Improvement* did not feature any episodes prominently featuring LGBTQ themes; 0% of *Home Improvement* featured

LGBTQ themes (Tropiano, 2002). *NYPD Blue* ran 154 episodes from its premier through the 1999-2000 season, and 25 of those episodes featured LGBTQ-themed plots (“*NYPD blue*,” n.d.; Tropiano, 2002, p. 289-90). These figures indicate 16.2% of *NYPD Blue*’s programming related to LGBTQ themes. Finally, *Roseanne* featured 221 episodes from its premier through the 1999-2000 season with 6 LGBTQ-themed episodes (“*Roseanne*,” n.d.; Tropiano, 2002, p. 296). These figures indicate 2.7% of *Roseanne*’s programming was LGBTQ-related. All together, ABC’s most popular programming consisted of 578 episodes with 31 being LGBTQ-related, meaning 5.4% of ABC’s most popular programming depicted LGBTQ themes.

From CBS, *Murphy Brown* had 247 episodes from its premier through the 1999-2000 television season, and three of those episodes featured LGBTQ themes (“*Murphy brown*,” n.d.; Tropiano, 2002, p. 289). These figures indicate 1.2% of *Murphy Brown*’s programming was LGBTQ-themed. *Murder, She Wrote* aired 247 episodes from its premier through the 1999-2000 television season, but no episodes featured LGBTQ-themed programming (“*Murder, she wrote*,” n.d.; Tropiano, 2002). *Touched by an Angel* aired 142 episodes from its premier through the 1999-2000 television season, and one of those featured LGBTQ themes (“*Touched by an angel*,” n.d.; Tropiano, 2002, p. 303). These figures indicate 0.7% of *Touched by an Angel*’s programming featured LGBTQ themes. All together, CBS’s most popular programming consisted of 653 episodes with 4 being LGBTQ-related, meaning 0.6% of CBS’s most popular programming depicted LGBTQ themes.

From NBC, *Frasier* aired 167 episodes with five featuring LGBTQ themes (“*Fraiser*,” n.d.; Tropiano, 2002, p. 277). These figures indicate 3% of *Frasier*’s programming in the 1990s featured LGBTQ themes. *Seinfeld* aired 173 episodes throughout the 1990s, and seven of them were LGBTQ-related (“*Seinfeld*,” n.d.; Tropiano, 2002, p. 297). These figures indicate about 4%

of *Seinfeld*'s programming featured LGBTQ themes. Finally, *ER* aired 135 episodes from its premier to the end of the 1999-2000 season, and 19 of those episodes featured LGBTQ themes ("*ER*," n.d.; Tropiano, 2002, p. 274). These figures indicate 14.1% of *ER*'s programming depicted LGBTQ themes. All together, NBC's most popular programming consisted of 475 episodes with 23 being LGBTQ-related, meaning 4.8% of NBC's most popular programming depicted LGBTQ themes.

These figures provide a general idea of how often the major three networks featured LGBTQ-themed programming in its prime-time series. Based on these numbers, ABC featured most of the LGBTQ representation within its most popular programming of the 1990s. NBC comes in at a close second, but CBS trails behind considerably. However, it is important to note that the episodes accounted for in *The Prime Time Closet* (and therefore my calculations) do not consider whether the depiction of LGBTQ themes is "positive" or "negative." These episodes simply feature LGBTQ themes and storylines, and that aspect is the primary consideration.

These numbers roughly represent what LGBTQ representation looked like during the 1990s on paper. Of course, representation was highly sporadic. While ABC featured the most amount of LGBTQ representation of the three major networks, one of its most popular sitcoms, *Home Improvement*, featured no gay representation at all. The same instance is true with *Murder, She Wrote*; one of the most popular dramas of the time period featured no representation of LGBTQ themes. Additionally, of all the shows used in this study, only *ER* and *NYPD Blue* have LGBTQ characters considered "series regulars" (Tropiano, 2002). This factor undoubtedly helps these shows and their networks achieve higher percentages of LGBTQ representation among the competition.

Ultimately, gay representation was not very common in prime-time television programming in the 1990s. Few shows feature recurring LGBTQ characters, and even fewer shows feature regular LGBTQ characters. By the end of the 1999-2000 television season, there were “more than 25’ gay characters in prime time, there are really only seven who appear regularly in sitcoms and drama series. . . . That’s out of over 600 regular characters on more than 85 prime-time network series” (Walters, 2001, p. 13). That percentage of regular gay characters comes down to less than 1% of all characters. While LGBTQ themes and stories were touched on occasionally by major television networks, the overall representation was inconsistent and lacking.

How were queer characters depicted by various television shows at the time? (i.e. were certain stereotypes reinforced, were queer characters treated as equals to the rest of the cast, etc?)

LGBTQ representation in popular media has had a rocky history up to the modern day. Prior to the 1990s, the quality of LGBTQ representation was very weak and far less common: “When presented in mainstream film or television until quite recently, gay characters were almost exclusively portrayed negatively, as either villains or victims In both capacities, they were rendered as problems to be solved and almost always reflected gendered stereotypes that characterize gay men as effeminate and lesbians as masculine” (Shugart, 2003, p. 68). This perpetuation of stereotypes was far from over by the 1990s, but the shift was beginning. By the 1990s, the presence of LGBTQ representation was present yet inconsistent on the small screen. When LGBTQ characters were featured in prime-time programming, the quality of this representation was largely inconsistent as well. Queer characters were portrayed positively occasionally, with healthy and nurturing narratives supporting a more inclusive world for the

LGBTQ community. Yet, negative representations were also broadcasted, reinforcing harmful stereotypes for cheap laughs or denying LGBTQ characters the fulfilled lives that heterosexual characters were able to live.

When LGBTQ characters were represented on screen, their sexualities were often reduced. A character could be gay and out as a known fact, but the expression of this sexuality is largely minimized: “The homosexual has regularly been depicted as the peripheral ‘lone’ queer destined for a lifetime of partnerless . . . Mainstream television programming in North America retains a status quo in what is acceptable for public consumption when it comes to sexualized bodies, and whose sexuality is expressed” (Manuel, 2009, p. 276). In denying the entire LGBTQ experience on mainstream television, large networks can easily manipulate audiences regarding their depictions of LGBTQ characters. While the representation might be present on paper or as a statistic, the quality of the representation might feel empty.

A common trope seen frequently through the 1990s was to feature LGBTQ characters, but deny them the full experience of queerness. Characters might be described as gay or queer, but their sexuality is not often expressed on screen: “in the supposedly gay ‘90s, the gay character can’t get kissed, caressed, stroked . . . at least not before the cameras” (Walters, 2001, p. 66). When gay characters are denied the gay experience on screen, the overall representation of the LGBTQ community is diminished. Queer people are shown as a demographic that exists, but their true selves—the passion, the desire, and the romance that other heterosexual characters get to experience—are hidden away. This factor may be implemented to “ease” heterosexual viewers at home into the idea of queerness, but it ultimately diminishes the reality of LGBTQ living.

Occasionally, networks did decide to feature intimacy between LGBTQ individuals in their prime-time slots during the 90s. However, these instances were faced with a slew of issues and mishandlings as well. In 1991, NBC's drama *L.A. Law* featured "the first lesbian kiss on network television" between characters C.J. Lamb and Abby Perkins (Gross, 1994, p. 151; Wallace, et al., 1986-1994). Yet, the network claimed they "were not attempting to create a lesbian character" and were simply trying "to add texture to C.J.'s character" (qtd. in Gross, 1994, p. 151). With a statement such as this one, NBC does minimize the actual representation the character could otherwise bring. An effort is being made, but ultimately it allows audiences to dismiss the reality of an LGBTQ character. While audiences are shown the character experiences same-sex attraction, NBC's wording implies the portrayal might not be fully queer. Yet, credit must be given to NBC for including the kiss and attempting to create a possibly-LGBTQ character. The representation did bring "attention from right-wing media watchdogs" and "lesbian and gay media viewers and activists," but the right-wing crowd proved to be far more vocal (Gross, 1994, p. 151). Eventually, NBC relented to the more vocal crowd and ended C.J. and Abby's storyline. The ultimate minimization of this representation might be a detriment to the overall progression of LGBTQ representation through the 90s, but the steps taken by NBC to include the kiss were a big step for LGBTQ representation in the time period.

Kisses between queer couples on network television would become a controversial topic as the 1990s continued for a variety of reasons. In *Roseanne* episode "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," a lesbian character lays a kiss on Roseanne (Williams, et al., 1994). ABC was met with a slew of demands from right-wing activist groups to get rid of the kiss, which led to studio intervention: "The execs at ABC—pressured by right-wing groups—attempted to get Roseanne to either edit the kiss or cancel the entire episode" (qtd. in Martin, 2014, p. 156). It is notable that Roseanne is

not a gay character, and she acts unfavorably in response. The kiss was based on a misunderstanding of sexuality. Therefore, the kiss is hardly inherently queer. Yet, the controversy persisted as the studio pressured *Roseanne* creators to pull the episode. The episode ultimately aired, but “a warning about the episode’s ‘mature’ content preceded its start and skittish advertisers, such as Kraft Foods, pulled all of its consumer products advertising from the episode.” However, the episode would become “the most-watched episode in [the] series’ history” (Martin, 2014, p. 156). Despite vocal backlash and a threat of losing money from advertisers, the episode drew attention and ultimately views. While the depiction of the kiss may not have been inherently representing LGBTQ people on screen, the episode’s performance proves that LGBTQ topics were a popular topic amongst viewers.

While moments of queer intimacy were becoming more common on network television, show producers still found ways to minimize the ultimate impact the moments could have. With the kiss on *Roseanne*’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the camera angle allowed for the touching of lips to not be explicitly seen: “the camera showed Sharon’s head from the back and Roseanne’s eyes expressing surprise at—and distaste for—what was happening” (Martin, 2014, p. 156). Between hiding the explicit kiss and showing Roseanne’s negative reaction toward it, representation is once again minimized. The same issue appears in the famous episode of *Friends*, “The One with the Lesbian Wedding,” featuring the marriage of recurring characters Carol and Susan (Crane, et al., 1996). However, the episode did not feature a kiss at all: “After the controversy surrounding the episode of *thirtysomething*, and same-sex kisses on *Melrose Place*, *Picket Fences*, and *Roseanne*, most producers simply played it safe. So viewers got to see Carol and Susan wed on *Friends*, but they didn’t get to see them kiss” (Becker, 2006, p. 179). *Roseanne* featured an episode with a gay wedding sans a kiss in the same season (Gross, 2001, p.

92). Going as far to show a gay wedding but not featuring a kiss absolutely minimizes the quality of LGBTQ representation. In an effort to avoid controversy and maximize the comfort of heterosexual viewers, television studios often delegitimized the very real emotions and experiences of LGBTQ individuals.

Beyond denying LGBTQ characters the full LGBTQ experience, LGBTQ identities could also fall victim to being treated as a punchline in the 1990s. LGBTQ characters might appear and only be featured as a punchline, rather than characters with fully valid identities: “Gay characters are cropping up as the late-’90s version of the requisite ‘wacky neighbor’ of sitcom convention. They’re there for quirky comic relief. . . . Homosexuality is a running gag” (qtd. in Walters, 2001, p. 117). For example, throughout the first few seasons of *Friends*, Carol’s sexuality is often treated as a joke. Ross and Carol’s marriage falls apart upon Carol’s sexual awakening, and this backstory is intended to be humorous and amusing:

ROSS: To hell with her. She left me!

JOEY: And you never knew she was a lesbian. (Crane & Kauffman, 1994, 2:50)

This exchange (from the first scene in the very first episode of *Friends*, “The Pilot”) is followed by a riotous laugh track. The gay identity is being treated purely as a joke in this instance; Carol’s sexuality is a detriment to protagonist Ross. When audiences are meant to only view LGBTQ identities as jokes, the real-world experiences and lives of LGBTQ individuals are minimized. Audiences can internalize these depictions and potentially dismiss the very real issues the LGBTQ community face.

LGBTQ identities would also be frequently utilized with the “mistaken identity” trope, where heterosexual characters are mistaken as being queer. These plots almost always only used LGBTQ identities as punchlines rather than valid identities. Again, *Friends* utilizes this trope

often: “Throughout the series, there have also been questions raised about Chandler’s sexual orientation” (Bright, et al., 1994-2004; Tropiano, 2002, p. 216). Chandler’s effeminate qualities frequently make him the subject of scrutiny, despite being depicted as otherwise heterosexual throughout the entire series. With this trope, gay stereotypes are reinforced while not even including LGBTQ characters at all. Again, this trope also almost exclusively turn LGBTQ identities into jokes as well.

However, one episode of *Seinfeld*, “The Outing,” was able to utilize this trope in a somewhat subversive manner, creating a conversation of LGBTQ issues to the small screen in the early 90s (David, et al., 1993). Titular Jerry Seinfeld and his friend George are mistaken to be a couple after joking about being gay together, to which they aggressively deny but affirm their tolerance of: “On one hand, Jerry and George’s panicked response and insistent denial reveals a profound unease with homosexuality. . . . On the other hand, they are equally anxious to convince her that they are not bigots, that their disavowal does not come from homophobia. They are desperate to prove that they do not have any problem with ‘that’” (Becker, 2006b, p. 206). The episode undoubtedly uses potential homosexuality as a joke. However, their characters go to great lengths to prove their tolerance of homosexuality. This episode can be seen as “critiquing Jerry and George’s heterosexual insecurities” and generally making fun of the fear and anxiety surrounding gay panic of the time (Becker, 2006b, p. 206). The episode blends comedy and social commentary in a unique way that brings attention to relevant issues of the time. *Seinfeld* creators even received a nod from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) with a GLAAD Media Award following the episode “for its ‘continued inclusion of gay and lesbian characters’” (Fox, 1994).

While much LGBTQ representation throughout most of the 90s minimized the LGBTQ experience or played off of stereotypes for laughs, more positive portrayals of LGBTQ found their home on network television by the end of the decade. Television would be changed forever in 1997 with episodes 22 and 23 of the fourth season of ABC's sitcom *Ellen*. Titled "The Puppy Episode," the episode featured Ellen Morgan (and actress Ellen DeGeneres in extension) coming out as gay (Marlens, et al., 1997). This episode was the first of its kind: "For the very first time, a television series 1) featured a lesbian character in the lead role; and 2) the character was played by a real-live, bona-fide lesbian" (Tropiano, 2002, p. 245). The featuring of a gay woman in a prime-time slot on a major network was monumental for television. Audiences at home could witness stories both entertaining and enlightening from the point of view of an LGBTQ individual. Despite some backlash from vocal right-wing groups (including a letter denouncing ABC and Disney signed by notoriously homophobic pastor Jerry Falwell and other anti-LGBTQ figures), the episode was a hit: "None of this, however, diverted the high ratings, the critical acclaim, and an Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series that came *Ellen's* way" (Tropiano, 2002, p. 247). This step was monumental for the LGBTQ community and the status of their representation in media.

Unfortunately, *Ellen* would be canceled one season later due to low ratings and other production issues. Despite the critical acclaim of "The Puppy Episode," ABC still decided to open it and further episodes of *Ellen* with a "parental advisory" and "started interfering with the show's writing . . . and stopped promoting the series" (Tropiano, 2002, p. 248). While LGBTQ individuals were gaining strong examples of positive representation on screen, ABC was not sure how to handle gay-led television just yet. Of course, Ellen DeGeneres would go on to experience further fame and acclaim, leading her own talk show *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* for 19 seasons

(Lemen II, et al., 2003-2022). While ABC might have gotten cold feet, America at large seemed prepared for gay-led television.

Despite *Ellen*'s cancellation, LGBTQ representation was still looking up in the latter half of the 1990s: "Regular and recurring gay male characters were present on a variety of prime-time shows. . . With the launch of the 1998-99 television season, there were more gay characters of color on American television than ever before, and *Will & Grace* introduced prime-time television's first gay male lead character" (Hart, 2000, p. 67). Gay people were being made more visible through television and popular culture in America. To straight people who may not have known any out LGBTQ individuals, queer people were able to be seen as equal, everyday people.

When *Will & Grace* aired on NBC in 1998, positive LGBTQ representation was further solidified in American pop culture. From its very beginning, the series promised a sitcom about Will Truman, a gay man, and his group of eclectic friends, which included another gay man, Jack McFarland (Kohan, et al., 1998-2020). The series was an instant hit: "NBC moved the freshman series to the highly visible post-*Friends* timeslot at the end of its first season—a sign that the network had tremendous confidence in the show" (Becker, 2006a, p. 174). NBC's confidence in *Will & Grace* shows tremendous success for television with queer themes at its focus.

Admittedly, Will could occasionally fall into the trope of suffering from "limited gayness": "Will possesses none of the usual stereotypical traits that signal to an audience he's gay. . . . In fact, according to Mutchnik, focus groups that viewed the pilot for NBC researchers had no idea Will was gay" (Tropiano, 2002, p. 250). This aspect of the show can be perceived as positive and negative. Positively, audiences are shown a gay man that breaks stereotypes that might be overplayed at the time. Negatively, the show might be pandering to a straight audience and

providing them comfort with a toned-down idea of queerness. However, the show also features series regular Jack McFarland, who fully embraces queerness and his more “effeminate” personality. Together, Will and Jack balance each other out and provide a widescale audience with a genuine queer friendship that also educates wider audiences on queer identities—all while being funny, too.

Beyond these sitcoms, dramas of the 1990s were also a great place to feature LGBTQ representation. Dramas would typically deal with newer or heavy topics, and discussing LGBTQ identities offered groundbreaking opportunities for networks through their dramas. Dramas such as the surrealist *Twin Peaks* took advantage of this opportunity, featuring the transgender FBI agent Denise Bryson (Frost & Lynch, 1990-1991). Bryson’s identity is embraced on the show: “Bryson explains that while posing as a transvestite during a sting operation, [she] realized wearing women’s clothing relaxes [her]. Cooper is amazed by Bryson’s discovery and is completely supportive of [her] lifestyle choice” (Tropiano, 2002, p. 133). Granted, featuring a transgender character in a surrealist show might seem like a decision made for shock value. Tropiano notes, “In a world in which everything and everyone is a little bit off, gay and transgender visitors often feel right at home” (Tropiano, 2002, p. 133). However, including the total support of the series protagonist Dale Cooper might validate the transgender representation to a heterosexual viewer. While validation of representation should not rely on the support of heterosexual outsiders, the step was significant in the early 90s for queer representation. Additionally, *Twin Peaks*’ inclusion of a transgender character so early in the 1990s is groundbreaking, especially considering the lack of transgender representation in comparison to other queer identities.

Throughout the 1990s, the quality of LGBTQ representation on television grew significantly. While shows, especially early in the decade, often reinforced stereotypes or used LGBTQ identities as punchlines, the sudden blossom of queer identities appearing on screen was noticeable. As the 90s progressed and LGBTQ individuals become more known and understood in the wider culture, representation clearly shifted to something more positive. Eventually, Ellen would come out and *Will & Grace* graced the airwaves. While the media would still have a while to go to fully embrace all forms of LGBTQ identities and the LGBTQ community at large, the state of representation was much stronger and healthier at the end of the 1990s than it was at the beginning.

What are the Nielsen ratings for the episodes depicting the LGBTQ representation?

Additionally, what are the ratings for the succeeding episodes and the average rating for the season?

To gauge the general audience of LGBTQ-themed episodes and the shows as a whole, I studied some episodes' and series' Nielsen ratings. Nielsen ratings are numbers that give networks and audiences a general idea of the popularity of certain shows during each time slot every week. The number indicates the percentage of total American households with television sets that were watching a certain program during its timeslot. Encyclopædia Britannica gives the example: "a rating of 20 denotes that 20 percent of American households tuned in to a particular program" (Encyclopædia Britannica). Through studying these numbers, I was able to determine the popularity of specific episodes with LGBTQ themes or characters. Additionally, I looked at the following episode's Nielsen rating to determine if viewers tuned in again the following week to view the program following their LGBTQ-themed episodes. I also compared these numbers to the show's average Nielsen rating for the entire season to gauge the general popularity of the

show at the time and the popularity of the LGBTQ-themed episodes in comparison to the rest of the season. Overall, the results were pretty scattered.

ABC's *Roseanne* season 5, episode 8, "Ladies' Choice" features recurring character Nancy, who comes out as a lesbian (Williams, et al., 1992). "Ladies' Choice" received a Nielsen rating of 21.4 ("Broadcasting's ratings," 1992a, p. 23). The following episode received a Nielsen rating of 22.4, showing a slight increase in viewership between weeks ("Broadcasting's ratings," 1992b, p. 17). Additionally, the average Nielsen rating for the entire season was 20.7 (Brooks & Marsh, 2007, p. 1693). With a slight viewership increase between weeks, it can be assumed that audiences were not turned off by Nancy's coming out and chose to tune in again the following week. Additionally, both episodes rating higher than the season average shows that the episodes were generally more popular amongst viewers compared to the rest of the season.

NBC's *Seinfeld* season 4, episode 17, "The Outing" is another episode that positively represents LGBTQ identities (David, et al., 1993). While "The Outing" does not feature any explicitly LGBTQ-identifying characters at its focus, LGBTQ themes are at the core of the episode. As discussed earlier, "The Outing" gracefully blends LGBTQ identities with comedy and treats the subject matter with respect. The episode received a Nielsen rating of 18.8 ("Rating's week," 1993a, p. 21). The following episode received a rating of 16.0 ("Rating's week," 1993b, p. 35). Between the two episodes, a drop in ratings can be seen. However, both of these episodes still score higher than *Seinfeld*'s season average of 13.7, showing that both episodes were still generally popular in relation to the rest of the season (Brooks & Marsh, 2007, p. 1693). However, the drop in ratings is still present.

An early episode of NBC's *Friends*—season 1, episode 14, "The One with the Candy Hearts" features a date between recurring lesbian characters Carol and Susan (Crane, et al.,

1995). This episode received a Nielsen rating of 15.9 (“Ratings,” 1995, p. 21). The following episode received a rating of 16.9 (“People’s choice,” 1995, p. 26). The average Nielsen rating for the first season of *Friends* was 15.6 (Brooks & Marsh, 2007, p. 1694). There is an increase in ratings between episodes, and, once again, both episodes remain above the threshold of the average rating for the season. With the slight increase in ratings and both episodes rating above the season average, the LGBTQ representation can be considered successful for the show.

ABC’s *Ellen* season 4, episodes 22 and 23, “The Puppy Episode” was a monumental episode of television that changed LGBTQ representation forever (Marlens, et al., 1997). The two-part episode aired in one night and garnered a rating of 23.5, making it the highest-rated program for the entire week (“People’s choice,” 1997a, p. 36). The following week saw a big decrease in ratings to 12.7; however, *Ellen* still claimed the top-rated position for its timeslot the following week as well as a position in the ten highest-rated episodes of the week (“People’s choice, 1997b, p. 36). While a decrease in ratings was present, *Ellen* still remained popular compared to other showings. Additionally, both episodes once again remain higher than the average season rating for *Ellen*, which was 10.6 (Brooks & Marsh, 2007, p. 1694). Additionally, “The Puppy Episode” was highly advertised by ABC as Ellen’s Coming Out episode (Tropiano, 2002). This aspect of the episode goes to show that audiences were actively tuning in to watch Ellen Morgan come out as gay and that LGBTQ themes did pull in audiences at the time.

Gauging an audience’s perception of LGBTQ characters and storylines is a difficult task, especially when looking at shows that premiered 30 years ago. However, looking at these Nielsen ratings can provide a general sense of what audiences liked at the time. While there does not seem to be a consistent increase or decrease in ratings following LGBTQ-centered episodes, the episodes still seemed to be generally popular amongst audiences. This popularity is

particularly indicated by each LGBTQ-oriented episode rating higher than their respective seasons' average rating. Additionally, it is already known that the end of the 1990s saw the premiere of *Will & Grace* following *Ellen*'s trailblazing coming-out episode and the prior positive depictions of LGBTQ identities and topics. While individual episodes depicting LGBTQ identities seemed lacking in the 90s, the general audience response when they did occur indicates general popularity regarding these topics. While viewers' opinions on LGBTQ rights may be ambivalent, the general topic drew in viewers for networks.

Conclusion

The 1990s were a period of great change for America, the larger global society, and the LGBTQ community. The LGBTQ community in America continued to suffer many hardships throughout this decade as they fought for a more equal society for all. The mainstream media was just one specific place where this battle was fought consistently. By examining the state of LGBTQ representation on prime-time television in the 1990s, greater knowledge can be gained regarding the progress that the LGBTQ community has made since then. Examining the significance of media representation, the frequency and popularity of LGBTQ representation in television, and the treatment of LGBTQ identities by media during the 1990s provides insight to further understand this progress and its importance.

Throughout the 1990s, the state of LGBTQ representation in the mainstream media was improving, but not entirely up to par with "good representation." Of course, there was a drastic increase in quality between the beginning of the decade and the end of the decade, especially considering multiple programs starring LGBTQ actors and characters were making their way to the airwaves. Regardless, there was still much to be learned about portraying LGBTQ identities fairly and responsibly. Overall, stereotypes could be perpetuated through these representations

occasionally or the full LGBTQ experience might have been watered down by networks to obtain a “middle ground” for viewers. However, the increasing presence of LGBTQ identities on screen largely seemed to be supported by viewers as a whole, with episodes featuring LGBTQ themes airing as some of the most popular episodes in their respective seasons.

In examining the importance of LGBTQ representation in media, I was able to establish relevance for this topic as a whole. Representation is a topic that transcends all backgrounds and all forms of media, and it is a hot topic in an evolving culture. Representation can largely influence a culture’s beliefs and understanding about that particular topic. In understanding the importance of representation, society can move forward from the LGBTQ stereotypes that tended to be reinforced or the vision of LGBTQ identities being minimized in 1990s television programming. While *Home Improvement* may not have featured any LGBTQ representation at all, it is still relevant to discuss today; the show made a conscious choice to not include these themes and identities while its peer programming was. *Friends*’ fairly consistent treatment of LGBTQ identities as jokes could influence heterosexual audiences to dismiss the validity of LGBTQ identities. On the flip side, *Will & Grace* prominently features a variety of queer identities in the mainstream media, which allows the general public to gain a better understanding and knowledge of identities they may have never encountered before.

Observing specific networks’ quantity of LGBTQ-themed programming also provides a better understanding of the state of LGBTQ representation. To understand the general state of LGBTQ representation on prime-time network television, it is relevant to know how much representation was being broadcast. However, it is impossible to know whether every single moment of this representation is positive, negative, or somewhere in between. Therefore, studying the general quality of representation and its trends throughout various programming is

also significant. If a certain network were to feature a high percentage of LGBTQ representation, but most of it was doing a disservice to the LGBTQ community, the representation really would not be worth much toward the overall progress of LGBTQ equity. However, most representation generally fell somewhere in between, occasionally reinforcing stereotypes or giving half-baked portrayals. Yet, this LGBTQ representation was still pretty sporadic; although, once again, this aspect was becoming less of an issue later in the decade with programming such as *Ellen* and *Will & Grace*.

Finally, in examining the Nielsen ratings for some selections of generally more positive LGBTQ representation, I could understand the general popularity of this programming. It is impossible to know exactly how audiences responded or just how many viewers actually tuned in to the programming. Nielsen ratings are based on sample sizes from select areas throughout the country and not the en masse viewership. However, they are able to provide a general idea of audience sizes and viewership for each program. Ultimately, networks are going to air whatever brings them in money. The mere presence of LGBTQ representation on network television in the 90s is proof alone that it was not losing networks any money. However, the Nielsen ratings of the programming I studied indicate that viewers absolutely tuned in to watch LGBTQ-themed programming. Regardless of the viewers' views, LGBTQ-themed programming was drawing in the audience. From what is known about the influence of representation on television, it can be assumed that viewers tuning in to this positive programming can have a positive influence on the perception of the LGBTQ community to otherwise ambivalent viewers at home.

Issues Encountered

Throughout my research, I did encounter a few issues or drawbacks that hindered my ability to fully understand my topic. For one, this subject is one that is not discussed very often in

highly contemporary academic writing. This topic was at its most relevant 30 years ago, so a handful of the resources I could find were pretty dated by now. Fortunately, several of these resources were primary sources from the 90s that I was able to examine and make firsthand conclusions about. Nielsen ratings were also difficult to track down at times, as they are not compiled in one collective database or permanent archive. However, through research of primary sources, many are still accessible. Additionally, there is not much literature that covers every aspect of the LGBTQ spectrum. For example, there is very little writing that covers transgender and bisexual identities in relation to writing that covers gay and lesbian identities. Of course, this factor may be due to these identities being underrepresented or not discussed as much in the mainstream media of the time. These identities definitely open up the door to further research.

Further Research

The topic of LGBTQ representation in the 1990s leaves many questions to be studied. While ABC, CBS, and NBC were the three primary networks of the time, several more networks such as Fox were emerging as well. The representation of LGBTQ identities on television could be tracked through those newer networks as well. Additionally, breaking down the LGBTQ spectrum and focusing in on the representation of certain identities throughout the 1990s could reveal further biases between identities and the mainstream culture. Additionally, the increase in quality and frequency of LGBTQ representation throughout the 1990s would be highly worthwhile to track. Breaking down the entire decade by year and observing which shows and networks featured LGBTQ identities would show further details on the the growth and societal progression of this issue.

Final Thoughts

Studying the sudden growth and embracing of LGBTQ identities by network television throughout the “Gay Nineties” provides a deeper understanding of the progress that has been made for LGBTQ individuals in American society. Examining the impact of television and entertainment in modern culture is significant and can allow society as a whole to witness what great progress can take place in less than a generation. This long and continuing process of representing LGBTQ identities on television began long before the 90s and continues into the present day. However, the boom of LGBTQ representation in the 1990s was a significant step toward a more equitable world for all.

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