

**The Art of Inclusion: The Psychosocial Impact of Media Representation on LGBTQ+ Youth**

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### **Abstract**

The 21st century saw a significant rise in LGBTQ+ representation, much of which is catered to queer children, adolescents, teenagers, and emerging adults. However, media's ability to affect the psychological development, mental health, and quality of life for queer youth is still relatively unexplored. Through an analyzation of the current available literature, it was determined that LGBTQ+ representation's influence on queer youth is complex. Findings indicated that representative media allowed queer youth to find support and community by using current media as a tool to connect with others. It was determined that there was a lack of evidence to indicate that representative media made any significant improvements to the risk of queer youth developing psychological issues, although it was found to improve the resilience of queer youth. Similarly, current research found that suicide statistics among queer youth did not significantly decrease during the evolution of LGBTQ+ representation in media, indicating that it has little influence over suicide risk. However, it was found that representative media has the ability to influence the opinions and behaviors of non-queer individuals, reduce the level of prejudice that non-queer individuals hold towards queer individuals, and reduce the risk of bullying for queer youth.

**Key Words:** LGBTQ+ youth, mental health, representation, film, television

## **The Art of Inclusion: The Psychosocial Impact of Media Representation on LGBTQ+ Youth**

For many years, traditional audiovisual media has encapsulated the attitude of local cultures towards a variety of subjects. From nuanced depictions of major world events to the gradual shifts in positive representation over time, primetime television, cinema, and other forms of offline, non-interactive media try to highlight the dreams, prejudices, and fears of the societies that they represent. For example, after Hiroshima endured the first taste of nuclear warfare, American artists created the all-powerful Superman while Japanese directors painted the destruction of the monstrous Godzilla. Whether children of the era saw a nuclear hero or a villain rising out of the fallout depended on the conflicting sentiments arising from the same event.

However, the influence of public opinion on offline media is reciprocal: there have also been instances in which audiovisual media has shifted the attitudes of society in major ways. One example of this is, hypothetically, how the shifting portrayal of gay, lesbian, transgender, or otherwise non-heterosexual and non-cisgender characters has influenced the world's perception of these figures in real life. Much like other minority groups, the LGBTQ+ community has spent the majority of modern history underrepresented, marginalized, and stigmatized by all forms of media. However, over the last fifty years, LGBTQ+ representation has gradually increased from rare to comparatively common, particularly during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Over the course of the last twenty years, queer-presenting characters have started appearing with more frequency in primetime shows, major cinematic events, and even in children's media. This change has, undoubtedly, exposed the public to the existence of LGBTQ+ individuals on a grand scale. Because of the community's previous obscurity and long history of marginalization, it is possible

that in many cases, these appearances in media have also been the first introductions of LGBTQ+ culture to the newest queer generations.

LGBTQ+ media representation has followed several trends over the last twenty-four years, most notably a shift from relying on reductive storylines and stereotypes to giving queer characters more well-rounded personalities and arcs. While stereotypes like the flamboyant homosexual male, the masculine-leaning lesbian, and the portrayal of LGBTQ+ members as criminal or deviant are still being used, offline media is also seeing a vast influx of characters that do not rely on harmful tropes. Family media has been especially inclusive with their portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals, from the 2013 television program *Steven Universe* and its colorful depiction of nonbinary, non-heterosexual characters, to more recent programs such as *The Owl House* and its development of several nontraditional relationships.

Despite the evolution of LGBTQ+ representation, the degree to which these changes have influenced the newest queer generation is currently unknown. While it is clear that the increased visibility has contributed to a heightened visibility of the LGBTQ+ community and their issues, very little has been said about how the recent wealth of representation has influenced the mental health and treatment of the community itself. Due to the risks involved in existing as an openly queer person, especially a queer youth, the psychological effects of a lack of representation rarely could be fully explored in the past. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, having positive queer figures in media have not been considered among the commonly listed factors influencing LGBTQ+ mental health. This, however, does not mean that representation in offline media has no effect on the psychological experience of queer youth, nor does it mean that positive or negative representation has no effect on the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions held by society at large.

While the lives of LGBTQ+ youth have markedly improved over the decades, the psychological health of the community is still significantly worse than the rest of the population, which means that any possible influence on the quality of queer lives should be explored. Currently, it is estimated that almost a third of LGBTQ+ youth suffer from symptoms of major depressive disorders (Russel & Fish, 2016). Due to multiple factors, including mental health and a lack of acceptance in the community, LGBTQ+ youth are also significantly more likely to consider suicide than cisgender and heterosexual peers (Johns et al., 2020). In the multitude of studies conducted to learn the extent of LGBTQ+ mental health issues, many things are considered: whether subjects have experienced threats, whether violence was involved, and whether important figures in their lives such as families, peers, or authority figures were accepting of their identity. One factor that was not considered, however, was the possible influence of media and the ways in which characters that shared their identity were treated. Because of this, it is impossible to tell how extensively these factors have influenced their lives and, more broadly, if these instances of representation are helping to change society's perception of the LGBTQ+ community overall.

Although determining causation between the influx of representation over the last twenty years and any changes in the mental health or perceptions of LGBTQ+ youth would require further research, it is possible to study how queer representation in offline audiovisual media including primetime television, cinema, and news have evolved in tandem with real-world factors such as the psychological improvement of LGBTQ+ youth and the treatment of the LGBTQ+ community by people exposed to said media. I hope to explore these topics in depth by fixating on key points related to either the psychological experience of queer youth or the attitudes and behaviors of the greater society within which they exist.

The first key point that will be explored in this paper answers the question, “How has the evolution of representative offline media influenced the growth and development of queer youth?” The goal of many youth is to explore their own identities and garner social support from family and peers. Being queer creates an added challenge to this goal by limiting their ability to safely express themselves and find support in their communities. Because of this, I will be exploring how LGBTQ+ representation in media helps or hinders the ability of queer youth to express their identities by coming out, as well as the ability to find the support among friends, family, or other communal sources.

The second key point I will be exploring answers the question, “How have portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters influenced the mental health of queer youth?” Depression and anxiety are two commonly referenced psychological disorders that affect LGBTQ+ individuals at a statistically higher rate than heterosexual and cisgender individuals (Ream, 2022). Following the recent increase in positive portrayals of gay, lesbian, trans or nonbinary, and pan- or bisexual individuals within television and movies, more of the LGBTQ+ community are growing up and coming out in a world in which gender and sexuality are more openly depicted and explored. I hope to study the trends of mental illness in queer-identifying individuals in relation to the progression of representation.

The third key point focuses on suicide specifically, answering the question, “How has representative media influenced the suicide statistics of queer youth?” Along with depression and anxiety, suicide is one of the biggest mental health concerns affecting the LGBTQ+ community. The rate of suicidal ideation, self-harm, and suicide attempts within the LGBTQ+ community are still significantly higher than those without. One of the most frequently cited sources of suicidal tendencies within the community is a lack of acceptance by parents, peers, and other important

community figures (Cabral & Pinto, 2023). Considering this emphasis on acceptance, it begs the question whether audiovisual media that portrays LGBTQ+ individuals in a positive light would have a similar influence on queer mental health. I will be studying suicide statistics of LGBTQ+ individuals to find any correlations between significant representation and a change in suicide rates among LGBTQ+ youth.

The final key point explored in this paper is, “How might representative media influence the discriminatory behaviors and opinions held by non-queer individuals towards queer youth?” The experience of LGBTQ+ individuals is not only limited to internal factors: the external issues around how the community is treated is also important to discuss. The degree to which audiovisual media influences public opinion has been studied extensively, but the effects of LGBTQ+ representation on the world at large are still questioned. As I explore how media influences LGBTQ+ mental health and self-perception, I also wish to explore how it may change the attitudes of the heterosexual and cisgender majority towards the queer community.

### **Development of LGBTQ+ Youth Influenced by Modern Representative Media**

In any minority group, the youth are especially vulnerable, particularly in demographics where bullying, living situations, and psychological development can be affected. LGBTQ+ youth in particular make up a population that faces a high risk of bullying, homelessness, drugs, mental health issues, and suicide (Russell & Fish, 2016). These risk factors can shape the lives and minds of developing LGBTQ+ youth and can follow individuals well into adulthood (Russell & Fish, 2016). This is one area in which the evolution of representative media may have had an impact. Although it can be difficult to pinpoint the exact causation of the development of LGBTQ+ youth culture between 2000 and 2020, there are several areas in which representative

media plays a part. Specifically, representative media may have influenced both the development of LGBTQ+ youth identities and the means through which LGBTQ+ youth gain support.

### **LGBTQ+ Youth and Self-Identification**

Personal identity exploration is a hallmark of adolescent development, but for many decades, the discovery, cultivation, and expression of personal identity has come with the risk of rejection, displacement, and physical danger for youth who discover their identities to be queer. Even when not considering the risk of bodily harm, youth who “come out” as gay, bisexual, transgender, or any other non-confirmative sexual or gender identity are at the risk of losing their homes or families, exposing themselves to bullying and other forms of harassment, and putting their safety, civil rights, and religious freedoms at risk (Forenza, 2017). Because of these dangerous elements to coming out, as well as the religious shame that many communities have historically associated with having a non-traditional identity, queer youth throughout recent history have often chosen to conceal their genders and sexualities instead of expressing them.

With the evolution of representative media and the recent influx of stories about coming out and expressing one’s true self, the experience of coming out as a queer youth may have changed. In a world in which the LGBTQ+ community is not only being normalized in film and television, but is also being validated and celebrated, the question remains on whether this normalization has influenced coming out culture itself.

One recent article provides an interesting argument about the impact that modern culture has had on revealing a sexual or gender identity. The article, written by Bergen and colleagues, explores the process of coming out through the research of coming-out experiences of queer youth raised through crucial points in LGBTQ+ history: the era directly after Stonewall, the height of the AIDS epidemic, and the present day (2021). It also focuses on the repercussions of



the youth coming out to their parents rather than coming out to their surrounding community, citing the importance of the parent-child relationship in shaping both personal identity and self-esteem (Bergen et al., 2021).

What Bergen and colleagues found was that there is inconclusive evidence to determine whether coming out to one's parents as a queer youth in the modern day is easier or just as difficult as it was before (2021). However, while they were unable to find a significant correlation between time period and better experiences with coming out, they were able to conclude that the youngest age group reported fewer negative responses from their parents than the older two age groups (Bergen et al., 2021). This was also paired with the results that stated that parents of more recent generations were less likely than others to react with shock or complete unawareness, which was attributed to an increase in LGBTQ+ representation in media and the resulting increase in queer visibility (Bergen et al., 2021). This aligns with the argument that the increase of LGBTQ+ representation has led to increased exposure, which in turn desensitizes important figures in the lives of queer youth, even if their responses themselves are barely different from parents of previous generations.

Another article by Forenza (2017) looked at this topic more directly, exploring the degree to which having positive role models in media, known as "gay icons" for their large queer following and their often outward support of the LGBTQ+ community, influences the coming out process. The study focused mostly on non-fictional people, which were often identified as either queer individuals, such as Ellen DeGeneres and Harvey Milk, as well as individuals that are said to embody queer culture, including Madonna, Lady Gaga, Queen Latifah, and Cher (Forenza, 2017).

The results from Forenza's research lean in a more positive direction, finding that most of the participants that named gay icons as role models were validated by their icon's expression of queer culture, felt accepted by and part of the cultures of their fanbases, and often felt inspired and encouraged by their media to eventually come out themselves (2017). This feeling of acceptance and validation was also applied to several different television shows that are iconic of gay culture, as well as general storylines that involve queer characters coming out (Forenza, 2017). The results of this study imply that queer characters, both in real life and in fictional media, have the ability to help in the difficult coming out process through affirming LGBTQ+ identities, giving LGBTQ+ youth a feeling of oneness and community, and giving youth positive role models who encourage expression.

### **LGBTQ+ Youth and the Evolution of Media Support**

Aside from coming out, one of the most important factors to youth in the LGBTQ+ community is the existence and degree of social support they have access to. This is for good reason: the perception of support from family, friends, and community is a crucial element that has a huge influence on an individual's self-confidence, mental health, and overall quality of life (Cabral & Pinto, 2023). Media's part in the perceived support of queer youth is theoretically more palpable: not only should good representation give youth in the LGBTQ+ community potential tools to teach their support system about the community, but the continued positive portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters would hopefully invoke a feeling of having social support when a youth's relationships do not provide it.

One 2022 article details the degree to which queer youth utilize representative media to educate, negotiate with, or persuade their parents regarding LGBTQ+ issues and their own personal identity (Mares, Chen, & Bond, 2022). Researchers found that teenagers were adept at

framing their media experiences with their parents to both test their receptiveness to the LGBTQ+ community and gently introduce the topic of gender and sexuality into the conversation (Mares, Chen, & Bond, 2022). Queer teenagers who were able to watch television with representation alongside their parents, as well as teenagers who gently guided their families to media that gave positive interpretations of the LGBTQ+ community, reported feeling significantly more supported and accepted by their parents due to the perceived influence of the media (Mares, Chen, & Bond, 2022). This implies that sharing instances of LGBTQ+ representation is becoming an effective and trusted activity that queer youth can use to bridge the gap and open a conversation between them and their families.

In addition to opening youth to the potential of support from friends and family, helping youth to perceive themselves as being supported by a larger community is another area in which LGBTQ+ representation may come to be helpful. One article by McInroy and Craig (2017) seeks to explore this topic. This study, which was written during a period in which gay representation was rapidly becoming a bigger element in traditional media, explores the content of the LGBTQ+ representation in offline media and in order to determine how effective it is creating accurate and sympathetic characters that are supportive of the LGBTQ+ experience. This study concludes that the issue is more complex than previously thought. The vast majority of representation in the media was found to be flat, stereotypical, unrelatable, and a poor reflection of what life is like for real queer people (McInroy & Craig, 2017). However, this did not mean that representation overall was left unappreciated: participants also claimed that, despite the inability to accurately depict them on screen, representation in media created a “common dialogue” of support and positivity by exposing the rest of the world to sympathetic portrayals of queer people (McInroy & Craig, 2017). These portrayals, though flat, helped real LGBTQ+

youth feel validated, empathized with, and supported, often helping them to accept their identities when friends, family, or the local community has not (McInroy & Craig, 2017).

This positive sentiment towards representation is not as intense for every branch of the LGBTQ+ community, however. McInroy and Craig (2015) also conducted a similar study in which they explored transgender representation, its impact on the community, and how queer youth perceived its supposed effectiveness. This study found that transgender representation was horribly neglected in comparison to its gay and lesbian counterparts (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Where gay men and women were shown to have many instances of sympathetic, complex, and benevolent storylines in media, trans characters were more frequently called out as being placed in harsher and more negative storylines (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Trans characters were more frequently given tragic endings, were mocked more frequently for their identities, and were more often given negative characteristics, leading to a collective agreement that trans representation was far from supportive overall (McInroy & Craig, 2015). However, even when this was the case, several participants still pointed out a few trans characters that were portrayed more tastefully and indicated that these instances of positive representation were still helpful in increasing awareness of and rallying support for real trans people (McInroy & Craig, 2015). While much has changed since the release of this article, the sentiment still remains: that positive representation is crucial for the perceived support of any community, and that when done right, it can provide many benefits for youth in particular.

### **The Psychological Health Changes of LGBTQ+ Community Members During Representative Media Progression**

The LGBTQ+ community has undergone a multitude of health crises over the decades, from the Hays-era persecution of suspected queer individuals to the widespread AIDS epidemic

of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, one area of health remains as one of the longest-lasting and most pervasive crises the LGBTQ+ community faces: mental health (D'augelli, 2002). Queer people, particularly queer youth, are at a disproportionately high risk of facing mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, alcoholism, and PTSD compared to other demographics (Russel & Fish, 2016). Because of this, the continued study of ways in which to diminish these effects is incredibly important, both for the queer community and society at large.

### **Mental Health Statistics During Representation Progression Period**

Theoretically, improving the mental health of queer youth through increased perceived support and cultural influence is something that representative media may be capable of. However, this is one of the areas in which direct causation is particularly difficult to prove. Because of this, the most promising approach is to look at queer mental health and measure its changes during the eras in which LGBTQ+ representation became more and more prevalent.

In the beginning of the century, Anthony D'augelli published an article detailing the reality of mental health of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. The article details that queer youth in the early 2000s were found to have more anxious, depressive, and suicidal symptoms than adolescents who were confirmed to be heterosexual (D'augelli, 2002). These symptoms were primarily attributed to parental rejection, repeated physical and emotional abuse, the loss of their support network, and being forced to remain closeted, and youth that reported more of these instances than others developed more severe mental health problems as a result (D'augelli, 2002).

After the influx of representation beginning around the early 2010s, a pair of different researchers published a study that also explores the mental health crisis for LGBTQ+ youth. This study cites that a quarter of queer youth have an anxiety-related disorder and that nearly a third

of queer youth would diagnostically qualify as having major depression (Russel & Fish, 2016). Although this is a small improvement to the results published by D'augelli, the work of Russel and Fish indicate that a large percentage of queer youth are still at high risk of issues such as depression, substance abuse, and suicide (2016). The reasons cited for this are multidimensional: the average age in which queer youth come out decreased drastically over the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, from an average age of 18 in 1998 to just 14 by 2015 (Russel & Fish, 2016). This younger age is reflective of several progressive factors, particularly that queer youth are experiencing greater levels of support, but it also comes at a cost: that because they are coming out in the midst of puberty, their personal identities and mental health are at greater risk from the rejection or bullying that they potentially receive (Russel & Fish, 2016).

A third article by researchers Cabral and Tiago talk about the mental health situation of LGBTQ+ community members and the influence that discrimination and shame have on overall mental health (2023). At the time of their article, members of the LGBTQ+ community were still more likely than cisgender and heterosexual demographics to contract depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, PTSD symptoms, and symptoms of substance abuse (Cabral & Pinto, 2023). However, more research was also being conducted on the effects that social support, community, and interpersonal relationships have on queer mental health, finding that discrimination from the community leads to greater feelings of shame concerning an individual's gender and sexual identity (Cabral & Pinto, 2023). Conversely, they found that higher percentages of social support led to lower percentages of mental health problems (Cabral & Pinto, 2023).

The comparison of these three articles indicate that the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth have not significantly changed. However, the increased research into the subject of social

support on mental health leaves the door open for potential influence of queer representation in the future.

### **Media and Direct Support of Mental Health**

If the mental health statistics of the LGBTQ+ community have had few changes since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it may stand to reason that the evolution of LGBTQ+ representation has had little impact on the mental health of the community at large. However, this assertion fails to accommodate for another important factor: the possible ability of representative media to improve the community's ability to endure existing mental illnesses. As influential as media has become, some speculate that it may be affecting mental health and illness for queer youth in ways that are not often explored.

An article published in 2015 by Craig and colleagues explores the potential ways in which media assists LGBTQ+ youth by touching on the topic of mental fortitude and adaptability. These traits, broadly defined as resilience in the study, can manifest in several different coping strategies: escapism through positive representation in media, finding a community in fanbases, fighting against the discriminatory or violent treatment contributing to mental health issues, and gaining strength (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015). Each of these factors contribute to a heightened level of resilience, which in turn helps queer youth to recover more quickly from verbal abuse and discrimination, escape from harmful or psychologically taxing mental environments, and avoid more harmful behaviors such as suicidal ideation (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015). These findings provide good examples of ways in which representative media may help in living with or recovering from mental illnesses that arise as a result of one's identity and community backlash.

Not everyone has a positive idea of representative media's influence on mental health, however. One article by Johnson indicates that bisexual individuals are not as well supported by the potential validation and community that representative media may offer (2016). In this study, researchers examined the mental health of bisexual individuals, their perception of how representation in media may have shaped their mental health, and whether participants felt that their identities were validated and supported through the representation portrayed in film and television (Johnson, 2016). This study found that, unlike other branches of the LGBTQ+ community, bisexuals felt that most of the representation they saw in media was negative, failed to accurately support real bisexuals, and often even had a negative influence on their mental health (Johnson, 2016).

### **LGBTQ+ Suicide Statistics Throughout Representative Media Progression Period**

Among every psychological issue faced by LGBTQ+ youth in the twenty-first century, there is one consequence of poor mental health that poses a greater risk than the rest, and that is the potential to commit suicide. Queer youth make up a disproportionately large number of suicides and are among the highest-risk demographics when it comes to suicidal ideation and attempts (Ream, 2022). Because of this, lowering the percentage of suicide victims in the LGBTQ+ community should be a major priority in the pursuit of the health and safety of queer youth.

As is the case in many other areas, the evolution of representation in media has the potential to affect the circumstances surrounding suicidal ideation in queer youth. However, it is unclear how and to what extent media is responsible for queer mental health throughout the years. One approach to answering this question is to study the statistics from before and after the media representation shift and compare any changes in numbers to important media events that



were occurring at this time. This is not evidence of direct causation, but as indicated by the previous section, good LGBTQ+ representation in media can be a reflection of the validation, encouragement, and sense of community that queer youth have access to in their respective time periods. Therefore, if the suicide statistics of queer youth shift in the years after significant LGBTQ+ moments in media, one can correlate those instances as times in which queer youth received more or less perceived support, thus influencing the factors that aggravated their suicidal symptoms.

A 2000 study published by Bagley and Tremblay illustrates the dire mental health situation of queer youth in the beginning of the century. When surveying LGBTQ+ youth in several states across the country, researchers found that the percentage who attempted suicide ranged from 20.6% of youth in more left-leaning states and just above 38% of youth in right-leaning states, a drastic increase from their heterosexual peers who reported between 4.2% and 11.3% attempting suicide during the same period of time (Bagley & Tremblay, 2000). This indicates that between a fifth and a third of queer youth had attempted suicide in the early 2000s, a number that is also confirmed in other sources (D'augelli, 2002). These statistics reflect the state of support that LGBTQ+ youth were receiving at the time: while shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Will & Grace*, and *F.R.I.E.N.D.S.* featured representation of non-heteronormative individuals, queer-identifying characters were few and far between, and essentially nonexistent in media geared towards adolescents or teenagers.

These numbers can be compared to statistics gathered from suicides over the course of the late 2010s, an era well into the evolution of queer media representation. A study published in 2022 compiled and compared suicide statistics between the years of 2014 and 2019, hoping to determine what percentage of queer youth were represented in the statistics compared to the rest

of the population (Ream). What they found was to be expected: queer youth were still significantly overrepresented in suicide statistics, particularly in the latter half of the five-year period (Ream, 2022). Interestingly, the LGBTQ+ community had seen a rise in suicides after the year 2016, representing 13% of suicides in the years before 2016 and 20% of suicides after (Ream, 2022). This increase in suicide coincides with a leap in negative queer representation on screen, most importantly many instances of the infamous “Bury Your Gays” trope: Poussey Washington from *Orange is the New Black*, Denise Cloyd from *The Walking Dead*, Lexa from *The 100*, Mary Louise and Nora from *The Vampire Diaries*, and many more queer-identifying characters were killed off in 2016 alone (Geier, 2016). These highly publicized instances of the poor treatment of queer characters, paired with the very real legislative and political issues coming to light surrounding LGBTQ+ human rights, created a media landscape in which queer people, especially queer youth, may have felt less validated and more rejected, leading to a lack of perceived support in their enduring mental health struggles. This leads to the potential conclusion that media has great potential to influence youth suicide, although only the potential negative effects can be inferred from current documentation.

A third article by Johns and colleagues, however, provides a different angle to the statistics gathered by Ream. According to their research, despite LGBTQ+ youth being overrepresented in suicide statistics, suicidal ideation among queer youth decreased significantly from 32.8% of participants surveyed in 2015 to 23.6% of participants surveyed in 2019 (Johns et al., 2020). Furthermore, research cited from 2017 indicated that 23% of LGBTQ+ youth surveyed had previously attempted suicide (Johns et al., 2020). While the statistics still indicate that active suicide remains a large problem, this shows that the queer youth population at risk of

suicide is ever so slowly beginning to decrease, albeit more hindered than helped by the queer characters on screen.

### **Evolution of LGBTQ+ Community Treatment as Result of Representative Media Trends**

The last, and perhaps most pervasive, possible consequence of the development of representative media is the effect that it has on the outside community. LGBTQ+ youth are still subject to the biases, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors of non-queer individuals, and as previous sections have demonstrated, this often leads to loss of perceived support, an increase in mental illness issues, and increased risk of suicide (Cabral & Pinto, 2023). The possible influence that LGBTQ+ media representation may have on heterosexual and cisgender individuals is, therefore, twofold: media representation could act as to influence opinions and attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, but it could also give people of authority, as well as the community itself, tools to reduce the instances of discrimination and violence that LGBTQ+ members face.

### **Media's Influence on Opinions and Prejudices Against the LGBTQ+ Community**

Media has not always been kind to queer individuals, but over the last twenty years, a significant effort has been made to incorporate LGBTQ+ characters into common culture and to expose the general public to queer people, queer issues, and queer humanity. This has led to groups that have historically reacted negatively to the LGBTQ+ community, groups that are isolated from queer populations, and groups that are otherwise ignorant about the LGBTQ+ community to face more exposure than has been previously possible. This leap in media representation and the subsequent increase in exposure could potentially lead to more desensitization, more understanding, and less prejudice towards queer youth.

One study by Madžarević and Soto-Sanfiel explore the possibility of using positive representation to reduce biases towards the LGBTQ+ community. Using a variety of films that depict homosexuals in a positive and sympathetic light, researchers exposed participants to a piece of representative media and then gave them a questionnaire reflecting their opinions on gay people, their sympathy towards the gay characters, and their ability to identify with gay people (Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018). Their answers were compared to the opinions they gave on the gay community several months before, finding that on average, individuals who were exposed to sympathetic media representing a gay character displayed a lower level of homophobia by the end of the experience (Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018). In addition to this, they found that how much an individual was able to relate to and sympathize with a gay character also reduced their level of homophobia, though this factor was more readily influenced by previously established friendships with gay-identifying people (Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018). These findings agree with the hypothesis that media can be a powerful tool for persuasion when it comes to lessening the effects of bigotry and ignorance.

Another study, conducted in 2014, focused on the influence that media has on decreasing the prejudices held towards bisexuality. Researchers collected a variety of media pieces featuring representation of bisexual characters, ranging from positive, well-liked figures to people that leaned more into negative characteristics or played into detrimental stereotypes about bisexual people (Matsuda, Rouse, & Miller-Perrin, 2014). Interestingly, this study produced results that conflicted with set expectations: individuals who previously indicated lower attitudes towards bisexuals continuously gave low ratings to bisexual representation, even when exposed to the most well-rounded and sympathetic figures (Matsuda, Rouse, & Miller-Perrin, 2014). This indicates the strength of prejudice and the lingering effects that bigotry can have on a community

and implies that even under the most positive and encouraging of circumstances, there are areas in which media's influence may be simply too weak to produce a significant difference.

A second article focused on how media could shift perspectives on transgender and other non-cisgender individuals. In this study, participants were tested for biases against gender diversity and then exposed to a forty-five minute media piece with positive media representation of transgender or other gender diverse individuals (Taracuk & Koch, 2021). This yielded promising results: individuals who were exposed to positive representation reported holding lower degrees of bias against gender diverse people than they did before the viewing and also gave less discriminatory opinions than individuals that did not view the representative content (Taracuk & Koch, 2021). These presentations, however, did not influence previously held beliefs or political opinions concerning LGBTQ+ rights, limiting its effect to beliefs surrounding gender diverse people as individuals (Taracuk & Koch, 2021). While not as strong as researchers hoped, these results still show that media can be used as a tool to reduce prejudice concerning LGBTQ+ youth, though it might not change their standings on queer activism or civil rights

### **The Changes in Tools Against Violence Towards the LGBTQ+ Community**

The violence committed against queer youth expands across all ages ranges and demographics, from the conversion camps victimizing children throughout the last century to more recent instances of queer suppression and cyberbullying. One of the most promising uses of media is its potential to reduce this trend of violence by shifting society away from discriminatory views and guiding them towards a safer and more open-minded approach to queer individuals.

One particular article published by researchers Burk, Park, and Saewyc (2018) studied the influence that anti-discriminatory school media had on the potential to decrease bullying and

prejudice against queer children. This study focused on schoolwide interventions that play movies focused on LGBTQ+ issues, followed by conversations surrounding queer people, what the characters went through, and the themes shown throughout the film, not only exposing children to LGBTQ+ people but doing so in a sympathetic and involved way (Burk, Park, & Saewye, 2018). Results from this study found that queer youth who attend schools that partake in these interventions faced fewer instances of discrimination, less bullying, and had fewer mental health issues than youth whose schools do not participate (Burk, Park, & Saewye, 2018). In this instance, representative media played a huge part in changing behaviors towards queer youth and creating safer and more accepting environments.

### **Conclusion**

The twenty-first century fostered a surge of LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream film and television. This rise in representation pushed queer characters from the confines of adult media into the frontiers of family-friendly and children's content. Because of this, queerness has reached a new height of visibility among all demographics, most notably among children and adolescents. With this new wave of enlightenment comes a new set of norms for youth who wish to explore their genders and sexualities, leaving some to wonder if these years of exploration will leave the youngest generation with the same psychological scars of their predecessors. As the positive and negative representation of queer folk in the media continues to evolve, the effects it will have on the mental health, safety, and the societal acceptance of youth in the LGBTQ+ community will continue to shift with it. This paper explored the effectiveness of media influence in the areas of LGBTQ+ youth development, LGBTQ+ youth mental health, LGBTQ+ suicide statistics, and the treatment of queer youth in cultures beyond the LGBTQ+ community. It is with these questions that the complex and multifactorial impact of media representation was

identified, as well as areas in which further research or the continued evolution of media is required.

The first key point of this paper explored the psychosocial development of LGBTQ+ youth with a focus on personal identity and the ability of youth to receive real or perceived support for this identity. With its newfound abundance of queer role models, the numerous avenues it provides to achieve perceived social support, and its ability to be utilized as a catalyst for conversations about gender and sexuality, this paper discovered a sound argument for the benefits of media representation in improving developmental factors in LGBTQ+ youth. Analyzing the available literature found that while viewed as unrealistic and failing to properly represent real gay individuals, media representation of gay characters and relationships were recognized as positive influences in the eyes of the LGBTQ+ community, giving individuals the ability to draw validation and support from the few characters that were portrayed tastefully in shows and cinema (McInroy & Craig, 2017). However, there is still a deficit in appropriate representation for trans and gender diverse individuals, with significantly fewer trans characters evoking the same feelings of support and community as their gay counterparts (McInroy & Craig, 2015) Conflicting results were also found for the future of parent-child conversations regarding sexuality, providing more standardized avenues for queer youth to expose their parents to LGBTQ+ identities, gauge the potential of their parents to be supportive of their burgeoning identity, and begin the conversation in a safe and open environment (Mares, Chen, & Bond, 2022). Representation in media has also resulted in a new age of acknowledgement for differing sexualities, leading to less shock for parents of queer children and a better chance for queer youth to come out without receiving a reaction of anger or rejection (Bergen et al., 2021). These developments, however, have yet to provide significant improvements in support from coming

out overall, despite showing promise for better opportunities in the future (Bergen et al., 2021). Despite these negative factors, the positive results of the studies indicate that there is indeed a benefit to showing positive representation in media to LGBTQ+ youth for supportive and communicative purposes.

The second key point of this paper explored how the evolution of representation in media affects negative mental health factors in LGBTQ+ youth. Research into this topic found that, unfortunately, very little has changed in the mental health statistics of LGBTQ+ youth from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present (D'augelli, 2002; Russel & Fish, 2016). Ironically, it appears that the reason for this lack of support in the second key point is the same reason why the first key point showed potential: with the evolution of new methods to open the discussion of sexuality to one's family members, queer youth are able to come out easier and at younger ages, resulting in earlier exposure to detrimental social treatments that ultimately harm their mental wellbeing (Russel & Fish, 2016). Despite this, continued research uncovered the potential for media to instill higher levels of resilience in queer youth, giving them a means to escape from, fight against, or gain support to better cope with the discrimination and prejudice that they face, resulting in better mental health outcomes (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015). This finding implies that, despite current research pointing to little significant positive impact on mental health, future research into this topic may yield more promising results.

The third key point, evaluating the influence of LGBTQ+ representation in media on the suicide statistics of queer youth, resulted in a complicated implication. According to recent research, there has been no significant decline in the representation of LGBTQ+ youth in suicide statistics over the early to late 2010s (Ream, 2022). Furthermore, it was implied that the



representation of queer youth in annual suicide statistics increased in the latter half of the 2010s, indicating that positive representation is not influential when compared to the impact of negative representation and political discrimination occurring at a given time (Ream, 2022). This is in spite of the fact that the population of LGBTQ+ youth that possess symptoms of suicidal ideation has steadily decreased over the past two decades (D'augelli, 2002; Johns et al., 2020). These findings cast doubt on the assumption that supportive representation could be passively reducing queer youth suicide statistics over time, but the implication that largescale media trends may have a much greater impact creates need for future research that can explore those trends in a more positive context. Although it has not yet been documented, it will be reasonable to assume that, should a largescale positive LGBTQ+ media trend occur, it may be just as influential as the currently documented negative one.

The final key point pinpointed the ways in which media influences the opinions and behavior of non-queer communities towards LGBTQ+ youth. Fortunately, several different studies found a possible impact of LGBTQ+ representation on reducing homophobia, transphobia, and other types of bigotry towards queer youth. This includes discovering the ability of sympathetic gay characters to slightly reduce homophobia in ignorant or bigoted individuals, as well as the ability of positive representation of trans and gender diverse individuals to reduce negative opinions and discrimination against gender diverse groups in the LGBTQ+ community (Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018; Taracuk & Koch, 2021). It was also found that positive representation in media is successfully being utilized in schools to reduce the local queer youth population's chances of being bullied, assaulted, or otherwise discriminated against by their peers (Burk, Park, & Saewye, 2018). As perhaps the most promising set of results, the findings within this key point indicate that positive representation may provide a solid means of reducing

the prejudice, assault, or other forms of discrimination that queer youth face in today's cultural climate.

The development of queer representation in media is a subject that has faced controversy for its entire duration, but its potential to create a better world for queer youth is crucial, as is the applications it has in areas beyond psychology. Sympathetic media representation interventions, when harnessed, may yet prove an unmatched tool for teachers, employers, and families to reduce the pain that queer youth still face at the hands of their peers, of future coworkers, and of friends and family members that fail to support them. From a media or marketing perspective, the LGBTQ+ community's collective desire for positive queer representation may also create a roadmap for filmmakers and television creators to find success in a demographic that is still, even despite the countless queer characters that made their way to the screen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, relatively untapped. In these areas, and many more, the possibility of someday creating media that markedly improves the lives of queer youth will offer countless benefits, not only to the youths themselves, but to the communities that they call home and to society overall.

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