

**Ideology reproduction on Television: Queerbaiting and the challenges
of LGBT representation on the small screen**

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Abstract

This research focuses on the influence of television media in reinforcing hegemonic ideologies and the oppression of queer identities on TV; and consequently the strategies audiences use to counter the predetermined messages by changing their forms of interactions and decoding of media. I describe the process of minority representation and new forms of audience participation being reflected in contemporary media, primarily the creation of slash fiction through participatory culture and the queerbaiting phenomenon. I analyzed a variety of TV shows through their audience reception, as selected by their portrayal of queer characters or use of queerbaiting tropes; and I found that the number of queer characters has risen over the years but a new trend within production companies has started to cancel queer-centered TV shows. Among them, same-sex female romance is the most often canceled, however, same-sex male romance has been more successful thanks to the popularity of slash fiction.

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1. Introduction

As the world progresses, the entertainment business and media production must evolve alongside new ideals and values; but the changes are slow to come. There are levels and degrees of representation that the small and big screens are willing to risk when it concerns minorities. Since the beginning of industrial cultural reproduction, the audience has always been seen as a passive subject with limited agency in media production. Traditional media held strict dominance over the production process and audiences were never invited to contribute; nowadays, however, we are seeing an unprecedented level of audience participation in cultural production facilitated by new technologies (Jenkins 2006). Through the analysis of culture industry and audience theories, this paper aims to describe the stages of minority representation on TV and the role and influence of audiences within media production when it comes to minority representation, simultaneously trying to identify the challenges and achievements of queer representation up to date.

2. Literature review

2.1. Media and the Reproduction of Ideology

Before the time of participatory cultures and audiences taking hold of the narrative, mass media was less a space for sharing and more of a tool for control. In the culture industry thesis, scholars see it as a hierarchical relation between the masses and cultural reproduction as a means of oppression; or more exactly, ideological control. Naturally, the audience landscape has shifted irrevocably in modern times; yet the question still stands as to what role the media plays in helping maintain modes of dominance and the reproduction of ideology through cultural production. Adorno and Horkheimer (1993, as cited in Keltie, 2017) created the term ‘culture industry’ as a critique of the mass production of media that threatened the characteristic difference between high and low forms of art; making the cultural industry a consequence of the newly educated masses who seek to enjoy the previously unattainable cultural products. When art becomes a product and its reproduction mechanical, it is no longer a luxury but a commodity. In the cultural industry thesis, mass-produced cultural texts are devoid of individuality and a mere standardized product which leads to a monopoly of culture (Keltie 2017 p. 20). Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis on the culture industry reflects on Marxist conceptions of ownership of the means of production when related to mass media; they propose that this control over the means of production makes the cultural industry capable of ideological reproduction.

There are many descriptions of ideology, these being the production of meaning and ideas within a social group or class, the ideas that legitimize a dominant political power regardless of its truthfulness; it may signify a way for people to make sense of the world or it can also be described as a way for individuals to relate to a social structure (Eagleton, 1991, as cited in Keltie, 2017). Keltie (2017) cites Engels (1893) in his construction of ideology as a false consciousness, in which a subject will act in unquestioned ways because certain actions and beliefs have become naturalized, or the norm, as dictated by the dominant social classes. In this sense, ideology is strongly attached to power and social structures; when applied to the context of mass media and the opportunity to mass reproduce ideas through cultural goods, Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of cultural industries as a tool of control becomes clearer.

This does not equate the media system with a single ideological position but as the mechanisms of distribution of ideas for the ruling class (Eagleton, 1994 as cited in Keltie, 2017). Other scholars believe that the act of consumption of media is more significant than the ideological messages within it, while some consider the over-consumption of media as a way of distracting the audience from political action by occupying their time with media texts rather than socialization or political action. Furthermore, Althusser (1971, as cited by Keltie, 2017) proposes the role of media as a single institution that functions alongside others to disseminate ideological messages and reinforce the status quo; he then proposes that these can be separated into Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). The former relates more to repression through, more often, violence foremost and ideology second while the latter refers to specialized institutions that work to reproduce ideology, some of these being the education system, the church, and the arts, among others; that work through firstly ideology and secondly repression. The ISA, however, is simultaneously a place where the masses may find more opportunities to resist and occasionally express themselves; thus user participation can be conceived as a method for said masses to take advantage of said opportunities to express themselves and negotiate (or resist) ideological positions within the culture industry as an ISA. The only way to challenge these ideological positions is through an active role in decoding messages from part of the audience (Keltie 2017, pp. 17-18).

Where ideology can be imposed by force and actively countered by audiences, a more heinous form of dominance resides in the subconsciousness of society: Hegemony. Eagleton (1994, as cited in Keltie, 2017), describes hegemony as a strategy for dominant classes to maintain the “consent” to rule by the subjects in a given social structure. Whereas the ruling

class may earn the consent to rule thanks to ideology, power can only be held through hegemony; therefore creating a semblance of freedom and self-government. Through hegemony, ideology becomes a “lived practice embedded in the unconscious, inarticulate dimensions of social practice” (Eagleton 1991, as cited in Keltie 2017, p. 19).

Take, for example, the most blatant use of ideology through media: propaganda. Adorno and Horkheimer (1993) point out how National Socialists in Germany used the radio to sway public opinion, also known as controlling the masses; because for the audience, the fact that the radio was free gives an illusion of ‘non-biased authorities who are disinterested produces of cultural products (as cited in Keltie 2017, p. 19). In modern times, social media acts as the radio; where these free services allow users to be part of cultural production thinking that these platforms are free of market control (Keltie 2017, pp. 19-20). Keltie (2017) points out that while the cultural industry analysis proposed by Adorno is helpful in the understanding of media, especially during its early stages, it does not consider the resistance and evolution of popular culture as well as the role of the audience (p. 22).

2.2. Minority representation & the Hayes Code

Minority representation, in this way, also reflects how media shapes ideas and may sometimes work to maintain the ruling class's dominance; nevertheless, scholars believe that the culture industry will adapt to social changes and cultural shifts but in a slow fashion. In their research report, Gerbner & Signorielli (1979) state that Television is the current central and universal storyteller in our society, and the art of story-telling has always been an inherent characteristic of human socialization. The world of television, according to them, is entirely occupied by those who have more use in terms of life opportunities and chances, or in other words status and power; therefore, dominant social groups tend to be over-represented to the point it might even be disproportionate to their real numbers in population. Consequently, minorities who do not possess such opportunities are represented on television with a limited scope of action, stereotypical roles, fewer life chances, and undervaluation (p. 5). Interestingly, Gerbner & Signorielli (1979) also conclude that younger viewers born into the Television era are less likely to express an independent view of reality because they have been inculcated with TV's depiction of people since infancy (p. 29).

Similarly, Cedric Clark (1969) proposes a theory of representation of racial minorities on television, he claims that the commercial nature of this medium only allows for content that reflects and agrees with the status quo social structure. Clark defines three stages of

representation: non-recognition, ridicule, and regulation. The first stage consists of no inclusion of minorities in the media; the second stage, however, allows some recognition but only in the context of a joke or humiliation. This serves as a twofold function between acknowledging a social group, which sees it as an improvement over being ignored, but also firmly establishing it as below the dominant culture. When minority groups begin to react against ridicule through social action, or sometimes even violence, the media finally moves toward the regulation stage. In the regulation stage, minority groups can only be shown within the “normal” stage of society; meaning a very idealized form of how these minorities should behave within the dominant culture. Clark describes the example of black characters being portrayed always in the context of law and order because they were often associated with crime and violence. He also identifies the last stage of ‘respect’ but does not believe that non-white groups may ever reach it; yet for Clark, European minority groups have preceded this stage (Cook, 2018).

While his initial theory was concerned mostly with racial minorities, this framework can also be applied to other oppressed groups. When considering media as a tool for ideological reproduction, the representation of oppressed minorities may sway the masses' opinions and attitudes toward them. In the case of LGBT+ or Queer representation, additional codes and norms were adopted by Hollywood to censor any “inference of sexual perversion” (Maltby 1999 as cited by Bridges, 2018). The Hayes Code, implemented in the 1930s, prohibited any inclusion of homosexual themes and was active until 1968; queerness existed only through implication and metaphors, this is an example of the non-recognition stage. Once queer characters started to appear, they were strictly portrayed through stereotypes such as flamboyantly gay men or hyper-masculine lesbians; this is considered to be the ridicule stage. During the 80s and following the devastating AIDS epidemic, queer communities began to become more politically active in response to the defamatory and dehumanizing portrayal of AIDS through the media. The regulation stage, however, is distinct for every minority thus making it harder to define it; in terms of queer representation, this can be seen as portraying LGBT characters within traditional gender roles, meaning respecting the gender binary, and de-sexualization (Cook 2018). During the 90s appeared what Streitmatter (2009, as cited in Brown & Martin, 2022) calls the “respectable gays”, who had two or more of five characteristics: they had to be charming gay men, they had to be physically attractive; they had to have ‘taste’, be successful, and be chaste. Queer representation then was reduced to “homonormative gay characters” (Brown & Martin 2022, p.5). Homonormative is defined as

the portrayal of a queer couple that mirrors the ‘normal’ heterosexual married couple; a popular example is the famous gay couple in the sitcom *Modern Family* (Brown & Martin 2022). This example demonstrates what the regulation stage is about, while still being a giant leap into respected representation and playing an important role in shifting the audience's perception of queerness, it is still very reflective of what the media is allowing queer characters to be: a modest gay version of a traditional family.

However, while it may seem that queer representation has advanced a lot in the past decade, it is only more visible within Western media and predominantly white. Simultaneously, media production in the East is still in the stages of ridicule and even non-recognition; South Korea, for example, has seen an exponential growth of global viewership in their media. The famously called K-dramas or Korean dramas have been growing in popularity and can now be accessed across the world through streaming platforms. Nonetheless, a recurring trope within mainstream television shows resorts to comedic misunderstandings of characters being queer; turning queerness into a joke and a nonsensical situation. Chinese television, on the other hand, outright banned depictions of gay characters on Television (The Guardian, 2016). Contrastingly, Thailand's media landscape in the past couple of years has turned from a primarily heteronormative representation of romance that prioritized male dominance and female submission to a pop-culture landscape that celebrated queerness through a television subgenre called “Boys Love” or “BLs” that became widely popularized alongside celebrity culture (Baudinette 2023, p.1). Regardless of the different stages of representation that mainstream media finds itself at, there is always a sort of ‘indie’ queer content being made by both small-scale media production companies and ordinary people online.

2.3. Audience theory: active audiences and the stages of participation within media production

Presently, media producers have been challenged by the audiences for the means of production with the new availability and accessibility brought by new technologies, with an emphasis on social media. People's activities online range from uploading to spreading content through their smartphones and other devices and are proving to be more willing to produce media of their own and potentially even contribute to established media institutions; this is known as ‘audience participation’. This term can be described as non-professional taking part in a commonly closed professional environment of media production, such as television (Jenkins et al., 2013).

When talking about audience participation, te Walvaart et al. (2019) focus on participation within the production process of television; bringing up foremostly the study previously made by Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) which defined the ‘political’ and ‘corporate’ conceptions of participation, to understand the different ways the audience can participate. The political notion focuses on the shifting power relations within media production and considers the audience as citizens who take part in it. The corporate notion, on the other hand, sees audiences as consumers who react to media content; and this is more concerned with how media companies respond to consumer desires and vice-versa (Jenkins et al., 2013; as cited in te Walvaart et al., 2019). Corporate participation is inherent in commercial media that tends to cater and be more attentive to consumers’ wishes (te Walvaart et al., 2019). It can be inferred then that according to the corporate notion of participation and taking into consideration ideology reproduction, media production will try to cater to the audience's desires should there be a big enough reaction from consumers as a way of benefiting both parties; but, the levels and degrees of variations from the status quo within said content is yet to be seen.

Producers within media industries, to retain control over means of production, must differentiate themselves from audiences by claiming they are not trained properly or able to provide quality input (te Walvaart et al., 2019). Participation has three levels of influence in the production process: behind the screen, on screen, and beyond the screen. Behind the screens is when producers utilize audiences' opinions and feedback, sometimes even as a source, albeit selectively. On-screen relates to more often scripted participation, and sometimes just reactions, which can be seen in talk shows or comedies with studio audiences to react in real-time; nevertheless, it is used mostly as a way of bonding but hardly as a narrative support. Beyond the screen is what audiences can contribute through social media, yet producers only value these interactions as a way of bonding rather than useful input, reducing them to a form of spreading content for free rather than a productive dialogue between parties.

Within the culture industry thesis, audiences are reduced to the role of consumers thus completing a cycle of capitalist production, where their consumption becomes a form or permission for continuous manufacture (Keltie 2017, p. 24). The rise of audience theory challenges this view of mindless consumption and grants agency to the audience. This theory argues that media messages must be encoded to satisfy the audience through meaningful discourse. Stuart Hall's (1980, as cited in Keltie 2017) Encoding/Decoding introduces a new

model of audience reception, where the audiences play a role in the reception of a media text and they make meaning out of it; this decoded meaning can affect, influence, entertain, or persuade the audience. This way, the action of consumption is where the meaning is produced rather than during the process of production (Keltie 2017, p. 24). Gerbner (1998) agrees with the complexity of decoding a message, where individuals are influenced by personal experiences, relationships, and consumption habits when understanding a message. In his work, he also states that Television plays a role in ideology since infancy as it has established itself in almost every household, making it harder to separate our conceptions of the world and the influence of Television (Gerbner 1998).

In his work, Hall compares this process to the concept of denotative and connotative meaning; where denotative meaning speaks of the most common-sense message of a text and the connotative meaning transforms it through ideology and signification. He states that there are three manners of interpretation: the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated code, and the oppositional code. The first is the condition in which the audience accepts the message as decoded through the dominant hegemonic position and ideologies. The negotiated code is when audiences are aware of the hegemonic position but adapt the ideological messages to reflect their own. On the other hand, the oppositional code does not use the hegemonic position to interpret the code but rather makes use of an alternative framework of knowledge (Hall 1980, as cited in Keltie 2017). In audience theory, as the audience gains agency, it becomes the primary maker of meaning and opens a space for discussion of ideas and interpretations given by individuals.

This new conception of the role of the audience is still contested by scholars, who bring up the use of stereotypes to maintain certain social ideas; television, in this sense, can be subtle in the ways it reproduces ideology through character archetypes and recurring narratives and representations (Keltie 2017). Looking into the case of queer representation, this subtle reproduction of dominant hegemonic ideology can be seen through the regulation stage of representation, where strict archetypes and only certain storylines are allowed for queer characters. Nonetheless, the broadcasting sphere is a competitive one and multiple opposing messages could be airing at the same time, broadening the scope of representations. To bring back the example of the sitcom *Modern Family* (2009-2020), its conception already speaks of a level of cultural change around sexuality that permitted a gay storyline to be broadcasted and reflects an increase in the visibility of queer characters within mainstream media (Keltie 2017).

In addition, modern technologies and developments in the media landscape allow audiences to explore and be exposed to a myriad of representations of multiple ideologies; never before has it been so easy to watch a foreign show that depicts new ideas and broadens our understanding of the world. The internet, specifically, is providing a new level of participation in cultural production that grants individuals the opportunity to create cultural texts of self-representation; a case often seen in trends such as “gender-bending”, where people create an alternate version of a character by changing their gender, or “self-insert” in which individuals write stories featuring the reader (or ‘oneself’) interacting with a famous character or celebrity. And yet, the internet is not a balanced power structure of ‘legitimate’ cultural production but a key player in the changing field of media production.

2.4. Participatory Culture and Queerness

The very rise in audience participation alongside the accessibility to internet platforms designed for socialization breeds the interaction of producers and consumers as participants of media within a completely new set of rules, this phenomenon of pseudo-collaboration, because not all participants are equal in power, is called Participatory Culture (Jenkins 2006). Participatory culture takes many forms, from commenting on forums and being active on social media to self-publishing a graphic novel online or uploading your first short film online. For queer individuals, the internet represented a way of partaking in queer-positive communities with the protection of anonymity yet with a freedom of expression that was deemed unsafe in public (Cho, 2015). Platforms such as Tumblr began to receive an influx of queer-identifying users and became one of the most influential spaces for participatory cultures. Naturally, these online platforms have rules and regulations users must abide by, yet there are loopholes when it comes to consuming the freely shared content made by ordinary members of the audience and the concept of ownership.

Participatory culture is defined by a set of characteristic cultural practices. These communities emphasize artistic expression and civic engagement, where support for creating and sharing self-made content with peers is rampant and individuals are made to feel as if every contribution matters (Jenkins et al. 2009). Participatory culture is also tied to some type of membership and informal mentorships are created in the exchange of information, as well as creating a degree of social connection with other members (Keltie, 2017). The changes brought upon the media landscape through the increasingly demanding participation of audiences allow for a new player: the prosumer, also known as the producer-consumer. In

consequence, consuming habits change alongside it; whereas before the only available content had to be provided by media producers, now members of the audience work to continue developing content concerning a pre-existing piece of media with no intention of benefiting monetarily but with the simple mindset of personalizing the original content, and finding fellow audience members willing to listen. Whilst this change in consumption is overthrowing traditional forms of media ownership, audiences did not stop consuming cultural products but simply started to adapt and extend them.

But participatory culture is not mutually exclusive with the internet, the latter permitted exponential growth yet the basis of it lies elsewhere. The cultural industries' serialized novels craze during the Victorian era, in response to the new printing technologies and alphabetization of the masses, began a commotion of people beginning to invest themselves in these media pieces. For example, the character Sherlock Holmes became so popular that autograph collectors began requesting Sir Arthur Conan Doyle for his character's signature (Brombley, 2017). But most notable in the history of the detective is the deliberate killing of the character and the subsequent public outrage that pressured the author to take up the story once again. This collective action from the part of the audience also shows a degree of the political notion of participation that was previously described, all during a time when audiences were not asked for feedback or 'ratings' but were seen as an exploitable market of newly literate crowds looking for some entertainment.

We call a loyal audience of one media text (or personality) fans. Jenkins (2006) explains how online fan communities are self-organizing groups that focus on collective production, debates, and circulation of meanings in response to various media content of contemporary popular culture. These communities are past the limitations of locality, their existence is held together by shared emotional investments and knowledge or interests (p. 137). Fan culture, also known as 'fandoms', is the very embodiment of participatory culture and a great interest in audience study. Fandoms have created a whole vocabulary around the intricacies of participation and practices, such as Fan-fiction, which are original stories related to a piece of pre-existing media made by and for fans; or 'shipping', which is the action of pairing two characters as a romantic couple with or without the confirmation of the 'canon'. The canon in fandom culture refers to the events within the source media text or any information relayed by the author through a different medium, a sort of fictional 'facts' in a text from which the fandom is based. In his work, Jenkins (2006) shows an interest in the fan community built around Star Trek, explaining how the fans were an activist audience fighting to persuade

producers to keep the show on the air and simultaneously advocating for specific changes in its content to better reflect their agendas. However, the fans invested in one show are but a small fraction of the whole network audience and their requests in regards to content would hardly be considered in the production process. The Star Trek fandom, however, remains a model example among fan communities who followed their practices.

Early fan communities such as the Star Trek fandom also kickstarted one of the most characteristic aspects of participatory culture, a Fanfiction genre known as Slash fiction. This is an important contribution to pinpoint due to its connections with queer themes, being primarily a genre of stories that featured same-sex relationships, inspired by pre-existing media and, as inherent to participatory cultures, freely shared. Slash fiction consists of pairing two same-sex characters as they develop a more intimate relationship that often concludes in intercourse, there are different approaches as to what slash fiction means in a larger context, whether it is simply a mirror of female desires or a challenging literary movement against the patriarchal standards in the media (Jenkins, 1992). The main narrative style of these stories did not focus on sexuality but on intimacy and emotional quality rather than the final crude act, most of the time they follow a formulaic structure that sets the scene with equal importance to the climax of the story. Some scholars view slash fiction as a way of rejecting the dominant social construction of femininity and invites to imagine romance outside the bonds of gender and sex roles, or in other words a romance between equals (Russ 1985, as cited in Jenkins, 1992).

Slash fiction represents the audience's oppositional code form of interpretation, whereas shows like Star Trek would depict close male friendships but pair them off to secondary female characters who had half the presence on the show, or within the plot, than the captain's chair. Where these common tropes on television can be interpreted as a reproduction of heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies, slash fiction was the direct response from the audience through interpretation and the remaking of meaning. Within slash fiction common themes relate to the discovery of sexuality, repression, internalized homophobia, and the tragic quality of love outside of socially accepted standards. What slash means for queer representation, however, is still to be discussed; at a time when queerness was scarcely discussed on TV and the Hayes Code was only recently discontinued, the Star Trek fandom may have put into motion a whole new standard of what queer representation could be.

2.5. Queerbaiting and the exploitation of queer audiences

It could be argued that queer representation in mainstream media has only recently surpassed the regulation stage of minority representation with charts-topping titles such as *Heartstopper* (2022-) and *Young Royals* (2021-), both Western productions featuring queer storylines as the focus of the show; but this trend is very recent. Before explicit queerness started to become profitable, many fans began to realize that some productions may have been inciting queer audiences without risking being labeled ‘gay’ and called this phenomenon “Queerbaiting”. Queerbaiting as a concept was conceived within fan communities and is said to have been born around 2010, and the term refers to producers using homoerotic tension between heterosexual characters with no intention to question said character’s sexuality (Martínez Bataller, 2019).

It is important to differentiate queerbaiting from “queer reading”, the latter refers to the audience’s interpretation of characters as queer through making sense of the subtext while the former relates to a deliberate narrative choice that producers take for exploiting the queer audience market (Martínez Bataller, 2019). While it might prove difficult to differentiate when the audiences are experiencing queerbaiting or queer reading, there are sometimes some obvious clues as to identifying queerbaiting. *Bury your gays*, for example, is a common trope within queerbaiting that consists of presenting an openly queer character and shortly killing them off in tragic ways. Another usual queerbaiting strategy is utilizing queerness as a ‘running joke’, where characters can be misunderstood to be a couple or one of them being queer in general and thus making the characters react against said speculations in a dramatical fashion; some call this a “No Homo, Man” situation (Rose, 2013).

Certain conditions allow for queerbaiting to occur, these being a growing portion of the population becoming supportive of LGBT communities and the subsequent progression of LGBT rights, such as same-sex marriage; this way, a division among audiences is created between the prejudiced and the supportive. Furthermore, it is necessary to highlight the socio-political aspect of queerbaiting because it would not exist as a narrative resource should there not be a social and consuming change in a given context (Martínez Bataller, 2019). As we established before, media production and cultural products carry ideology within them and often do not challenge the hegemonic dominant social position; the stages of minority representation show the process of media accepting and normalizing social changes. The case of *Star Trek* for example, as Tumblr user T-Eyla (2013) explains, does not fall into the

queerbait category because it had no intention to appeal queer audiences, and if any romantic tension was to be found it is entirely accidental. Producers at the time did not know that such a market existed and may have not even realized what their characters looked like because the dominant social ideology was entirely heteronormative and patriarchal, meaning the idea of representing queerness was the furthest thing from their minds.

Seen as a form or stage of queer representation, queerbaiting is at its strongest from 2008 to 2015; this period saw an uprise of LGBT support both socially and legally that differentiates from the early stages of representation. This phenomenon can only exist should there be a big enough market of queer audiences to profit from (Martínez Bataller, 2019). Identifying a case of queerbaiting requires understanding common narratives in romance plots that would usually conclude in two characters getting involved romantically, such as gestures, conversations, symbolism, or situations that drive heterosexual pairings to become a couple. When applying the same romantic tropes to same-sex characters but never concluding it by turning a pair into a romantic couple, a homoerotic subtext is created and milked throughout a show or season in order to keep the queer audiences hooked. As Martinez Bataller (2019) explains, it generates false expectations to appeal to LGBT audiences but at the same time, it avoids any social responsibility of representing a minority.

3. Methodology

Queer representation has gone far in the last few years, but there have been many obstacles in the depiction and recognition of queerness on screen. The objective of this study is to construct an image of the development of queer representation in the media in the last decade, to do so a case study was conducted on eight relevant titles, they were selected in accordance to (a) their usage of queerbaiting tropes, (b) contains main characters who explicitly identify as LGBT, (c) was canceled regardless of their strong audience or (d) was successful and has a strong audience. Firstly, we must understand queerbaiting in action, the shows *Sherlock* and *Supernatural* were analyzed in context to audience reaction due to their influence in the creation of the term itself. Secondly, the shows *Sense8* and *First Kill* have been chosen due to their unexpected cancellation and the consequential audience reaction to the news; followed by *Killing Eve* and the audience's criticism of the final season. Lastly, three explicitly queer shows: *Young Royals*, *Heartstopper* and *Our Flag Means Death*; were chosen to highlight the achievements of queer representation in the media and the positive audience reaction. We are focusing on fictional television shows exclusively due to their connection with fandom

culture, and using the terms ‘queer’ and ‘LGBT’ interchangeably under the consideration that they are both terms used to refer to the group of people who do not identify as heterosexual or cis-gender.

3.1. Queerbaiting and fandom audiences in *Sherlock* and *Supernatural*

Starting with the most fan-acclaimed queerbaiting shows, the BBC adaptation of the famous detective *Sherlock* (2010-2017)¹ and the 15-season fantasy show *Supernatural* (2005-2020)². Their recognition and popularization were due to the all-time-high activity on the microblogging website Tumblr, where loyal fans of both shows would share their interpretations and insights of said television series as well as share other fan-related content ranging from fan-fiction to fan-made art pieces depicting the characters of the shows.

Sherlock was a modern adaptation of the famous detective, Sherlock Holmes, and it featured the characters in a 21st-century setting as they solved crimes. The show had incredibly short seasons, in comparison to other crime-drama shows at the time, and long waits between seasons; but that did not stop it from amassing a great following. From the start, the main characters Sherlock Holmes and John Watson become flatmates and collaborators, and within the pilot episode, a secondary character already assumes that they will not need separate rooms. The insinuations of their relationship being other than platonic continue throughout the show, where other characters continue to imply that Holmes does not have friends and therefore Watson’s connection to him must be of another nature: romantic. Outside of third-party interventions, the characters are portrayed as incredibly loyal and praiseworthy to one another. Holmes’s character, on the one hand, is always shown as apathetic, cold, and only interested in his work until Watson is threatened. In addition, Holmes’ is presented in a scene as uninterested in defining his sexuality to Watson because he is more interested in his work rather than human relationships, thus leaving fans a free reign to interpret his character as queer (Collier, 2015). Watson, however, is a character who often explains himself and Holmes’s relationship to not be misunderstood as being in a relationship with the man; in this sense, we can often see the show using homosexuality as a joke, leaning into the ‘nonsensical’ notion of said characters to be in a romantic relationship.

Later into the show, a new character joins the show: Mary, Watson’s wife. Their marriage is suddenly introduced in the show, and while the original novels did feature a married Watson,

¹ https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1475582/?ref_=nv_sr_srg_0_tt_8_nm_0_q_sherlock

² https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0460681/?ref_=nv_sr_srg_0_tt_8_nm_0_q_supernatural

within the context of this adaptation it takes a different meaning. Holmes immediately takes a dislike of Mary, an approach of Holmes' character that many members of the audience read as jealousy or possessiveness over Watson. On previous occasions, Holmes had attempted to interfere with Watson's dates for them to work on a case (Collier, 2015). These characterizations and situations within the series allowed fans to read into the possibility of queerness, thus the BBC adaptation gained traction inside fandom culture and the pair gained the nickname of Johnlock. As of 2014, the pair was the 2nd most posted-about in Tumblr Fandom statistics³ and the number 1 pair with the most slash fiction according to the fanfiction website Archive of Our Own⁴, with a total of 32.111 stories posted. This comes to show the boom in audience engagement with the content as fueled by the impression of queerness.

Simultaneously, in 2014, with the airing of their 9th season, *Supernatural* experienced a boom in audience due to fandom culture (Baker-Willow, 2014). *Supernatural* is a fantasy and action show following two brothers, Dean and Sam Winchester as they hunt and fight supernatural creatures. After seeing their worst viewership ratings during the 7th season, the 8th and 9th seasons implemented a new strategy: Castiel. This character became a regular during the 9th season and was very popular among fans because people had started to pair him with one of the main characters of the show, Dean Winchester. Shortly, the popular 'couple' nicknamed Destiel became one of the main interests of fans and revived their interest in the show. According to the Tumblr fandom statistics⁵, Destiel became the most posted-about couple on the site for the year 2014 and the 2nd most written slash-fiction in the website Archive of Our Own⁶, with a total of 28.851 stories posted. We must take into consideration that this was a period in time when a portion of the population was very invested in LGBT rights and support, and same-sex marriage was legalized the following year.

³ Fandom (2017). *Fandometrics In Depth: Shipping*. Tumblr. Retrieved January 19, 2024, from <https://fandom.tumblr.com/post/162441496429/fandometrics-in-depth-shipping>

⁴ centreoftheselights (2014). *AO3 Ship Stats 2014*. Archive of Our Own. Retrieved January 19, 2024, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/16939224/chapters/39802950>

⁵ Fandom (2017). *Fandometrics In Depth: Shipping*. Tumblr. Retrieved January 19, 2024, from <https://fandom.tumblr.com/post/162441496429/fandometrics-in-depth-shipping>

⁶ centreoftheselights (2014). *AO3 Ship Stats 2014*. Archive of Our Own. Retrieved January 19, 2024, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/16939224/chapters/39802950>

Fans of *Supernatural* read into the contents of the show and inferred an intimate relationship between Dean and Castiel through characterizations and events. In Collier's (2015) analysis of the show, she explains how their first meetings are always portrayed with a level of intensity and little personal space, paired with the fact that Castiel interacted mostly with Dean through personal visitations when he was alone or in the middle of the night, rather than collaborating with both brothers; this lead fans into reading a high sexual tension and intimacy between these characters. As the show progressed, some fans started to notice the similarities between the show's portrayal of the characters to the common structure of slash fiction (Collier, 2015). Many of their first interactions were intense and in close quarters, playing into Castiel's role as a savior and Dean's characterization of borderline toxic masculinity, and progressed into situations that often required them to work together and confide in one another; to the point Castiel, an angel, decides to defect from Heaven only to help Dean. There are many quotable moments but for the sake of brevity, we must point out the series finale. In the third to last episode of the 15th season, aired in November 2020, Castiel confessed romantic feelings towards Dean before being sucked into Hell in his last effort to save Dean. The latter does not respond in kind and is not seen grieving such a major character in the show, a character that has aided and fought alongside the brothers for multiple seasons, for the remaining episodes. *Supernatural* had not only played around the fans' interest in the couple for years but has also fallen into the '*Bury your gays*' category, completely undoing any attempt at redeeming themselves out of the queerbaiting image that they had built throughout the years.

The repetition of audiences interpreting these shows through a rainbow-tinted lens may not be a coincidence or a deliberate misreading, and as more and more fans resort to stories of their own making to satisfy their expectations, how many more shows will milk the fans' interest and engagement with the possibility of queerness. As Baker-Willow (2014) puts it "With the gap between canon and fandom output widening with every season, will that fanfic-oriented audience keep increasing? Or are we likely to reach a tipping point, where fans give up and begin to tune out?". Fandom culture propelled and maintained the interest in these shows in exchange for hoping to see their wishes come to reality as the times changed, only to be disappointed in the execution; unfortunately, queerbaiting would not be the only obstacle in queer representation.

3.2. Cancelled, revived, or buried: *First Kill*, *Sense8* and *Killing Eve* in the Russian roulette of queer media

GLAAD, a non-profit organization that has advocated for LGBT representation in the media since the 80s, has stated in recent findings the existence of an alarming trend of LGBT-positive series being canceled after only one or two seasons; they believe that the cause lies within the recent shift in television towards shorter seasons and the rapid consumption of entire shows, otherwise known as binge-watching, provided by streaming services and premium cable (GLAAD, 2023). In recent years many shows featuring queer storylines have been affected by this trend. Netflix's show *Sense8* (2015-2018)⁷ is a sci-fi series following eight individuals from around the world who are interconnected with one another and share all physical and emotional information, it was highly praised for its LGBT themes and for being, at the time, "the most progressive genre show in recent memory" (Ellis, 2018). Unfortunately, the show was almost cut short after two seasons due to high production costs; upon the news of cancelation, fans of the show amassed 523.000 signatures in a petition to demonstrate a substantial loyal audience to continue producing the show (McGuire, 2021). However, the streaming site did not provide another full season and instead produced a 2-hour-long finale to tie some loose ends within the very complex plot of the show. This can still be considered a partial win for the audience, regardless that it was a rushed ending for a beloved series.

Similarly, the teen show *First Kill* (2022)⁸ was canceled shortly after the airing of its only season. The series followed Juliette, a teenage vampire, and Calliope, a teenage monster hunter, and their star-crossed love. The show charmed the audience with its similarities to teen shows from the 2010s but with a queer twist, as Tumblr user Quercus-queer (2022) describes sarcastically the very reasons the show was enjoyable "[...] a complete lack of homophobia, monster hunting, shitty cgi, and cliché romantic tropes queer people never get to enjoy", not only did the show represent a comeback of clichés but in a queer way but also the strong black queer representation within the show was more than welcome. In another post, the same user cites the ways in which *First Kill* compares to the "shitty teen tv drama" genre and concludes that "this show lacks horrible stereotypes and is therefore a lesbian teen

⁷ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2431438/>

⁸ IMDb (2022) *First Kill*.

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13315156/?ref_=nv_sr_srsq_0_tt_8_nm_0_q_first%2520kill

drama made for the genuine campy fun of it”⁹. As campy and low-budget CGI as it was, *First Kill* remained in the global Top 10 shows on Netflix for weeks and reached over 90 million hours watched (Zornosa, 2022). News of cancelation did not sit well with queer audiences as they started to recall that this is not the first time Netflix cancels a queer show that features female romance after one season (see Appendix A), bringing up how other successful queer titles that feature male romance got renewed for more seasons with only half the amount of hours watched (Tassi, 2022). Some theorize that the low critics' score scared them off from continuing the story, but the platform has renewed shows with low rating scores before¹⁰. These instances of queer stories being cut short do not bode well for the representation of queerness on the small screen, especially since sites such as Netflix are not clear on viewership rates and are inconsistent with the standards for renewing shows based on it. *First Kill* fans responded to the news through Twitter outrage and various petitions¹¹ to revive the show, to no avail. Nevertheless, there are still examples of queer-positive shows being picked up by another production company or yielding to produce a rushed finale to tie loose ends, proving that enough audience engagement can make a difference; this is consistent with the political notion of audience participation, where more social campaigns are started to revive their favorite shows with various degrees of success.

There are also concerns rising within queer audiences of a discrepancy between male-centered and female-centered queer shows¹², where the latter seems to be more often canceled or poorly ended. As is the case with BBC America’s hit show *Killing Eve* (2018-2022)¹³ and the devastating return of the *Bury your gays* trope. The thriller show follows Eve who is an intelligence agent sent after Villanelle, an assassin. Fans highly praised the complexity of its female characters, with twisted morals and “as much of an asshole as their male counterparts” as Tumblr user @nickismyspiritanimal (2022) describes. The fourth, and final, season delivered the much-expected romance between both women as they finally embraced their feelings for one another; before ending the series with the death of Villanelle. Many fans on sites like Tumblr and Twitter (see Appendix B), voiced their disappointment at

⁹ Quercus-queer (2022) Talking more about *First Kill* and how the queerness is well written but the rest is “not”. Tumblr. <https://www.tumblr.com/quercus-queer/686742315268734976/talking-more-about-first-kill-and-how-the-e?source=share>

¹⁰ <https://screenrant.com/first-kill-cancellation-outraged-twitter-reactions/>

¹¹ <https://popculture.com/streaming/news/first-kill-cancellation-sparks-fan-petition-save-netflix-series/>

¹²

<https://www.tumblr.com/elainiisms/703560839879327744/warrior-nun-cancelled-first-kill-cancelled-paper?source=share>

¹³ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7016936/>

the obtuse and unoriginal ending, killing off a queer main character after they finally found happiness (Still, 2022).

3.3. Finding success in queer representation via Male-Male romances

It seems to be that queer representation fluctuates through the years but, through a compilation of GLAAD reporting numbers throughout 2010 to 2023 (see Appendix C), it is still on the rise. More television series that center on or feature queer storylines are being aired each year, yet many of them do not get past one or two seasons. GLAAD's "Where we are on TV" (2022) reports show that in the past five years, streaming services' original series have had more regular and recurring queer characters than primetime cable and scripted primetime broadcasted shows*, but the standards for production and treatment queer shows receive on their respecting platforms seems to differ.

Netflix's Swedish production *Young Royals* (2021-)¹⁴ follows the romance between Willhelm, a prince of Sweden, and Simon. Their story also features more political and dramatic themes, and it gained a lot of traction and excitement from audiences from all over the world through their "rare and carefully crafted" relationship (Bongiorno, 2021). The international success of this show came as a surprise and the production company renewed it for a second season after two months. Similarly, *Heartstopper* (2022-)¹⁵ is a coming-of-age romantic show adapted from a graphic novel series of the same name. Aired on Netflix, this teenage drama follows the lives of teen boys Nick and Charlie as they fall in love. The critically acclaimed show saw a successful debut and was immediately renewed for two more seasons shortly after. It quickly became a fan-favorite among teens and young adults who saw themselves represented in the story, and the series was branded a must-watch among queer audiences with its inclusion of multiple queer identities.

HBO Max has been a platform with a colorful catalog of queer shows, some queer audiences even describe it as a "breath of fresh air" against Netflix's tendency to cut their queer stories short (Karam, 2022). Nevertheless, HBO Max's original series *Our Flag Means Death* (2022-2023)¹⁶ had to rough time to finish the story. This is a historical fiction comedy based on famous pirates Blackbeard and Stede Bonnet, who existed in real life but with a twist: they fall in love. The story also features a myriad of racial and sexual identities, but in contrast to

¹⁴ https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14664414/?ref_=nv_sr_srgs_0_tt_2_nm_6_q_young%2520roy

¹⁵ https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10638036/?ref_=nv_sr_srgs_0_tt_8_nm_0_q_heartsto

¹⁶ https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11000902/?ref_=nv_sr_srgs_0_tt_1_nm_0_q_our%2520flag%2520means

the previous examples, it centers on middle-aged characters and the possibility of starting anew regardless of age. The comedy saw a slow yet steady demand upon airing the first season¹⁷, but the production company left fans on the line by not confirming a renewal nor canceling it. Eventually, in what some people might call a “performative and more than a little bit condescending act of allyship”; MAX announced that they would be continuing with the show on the first day of pride month (Shaefer, 2024). The creators received a substantial budget reduction that moved them to changes within filming sites and season length. Furthermore, the second season ended the story on a good note as the creators predicted the unlikeliness of a third season, yet they left some room to continue the story if possible; unfortunately, the show was officially canceled in 2024.

4. Conclusions, recommendations, and limitations

Unlike cable and broadcast television shows, streaming services have made faster results within the context of queer representation, which has in the last eight years surpassed the two in the number of queer characters. The production of shows featuring queer characters has become more common, yet many titles are canceled one or two seasons in; this trend is not specific to queer shows but rather a consequence of the changes in media consumption brought by the accelerating access to television shows via streaming services. However, the inconsistency in which some shows qualify for renewal and others not can be a sign of a double standard within queer representation itself, where male romances are more often on the winning side of it; furthermore, audiences have noticed the lack of queer female-centered shows and the higher risk of cancellation within this niche. The male-centered production of media and its success can also result from slash fiction popularity, which has mostly been centered on male romances since its conception. This disparity in queer representation by gender ensures that the queer community as a whole does not move towards the respected stage of minority representation on TV.

The rise in ethnically diverse casts, both within secondary as well as main characters, shows a break in the hegemonic white and male gay representation often found in the early 2000s and 90s. The broad reach of different fiction genres also allows for queer representation to expand beyond its restricted conception of traditional family values, allowing queer storylines to break the confinement of archetypes and attempt to break stereotypes. On the other hand, queerness has been utilized as a tool to enhance audiences’ corporate participation by

¹⁷ <https://www.businessinsider.com/our-flag-means-death-biggest-new-series-right-now-2022-3?amp>

attracting interest through the promise of queer representation and maintaining a level of engagement by not confirming it or limiting it on-screen. Queerbaiting can be seen as an audience participation strategy but also as part of ideology reproduction, where queerness is punished through death, as seen in the “Bury your gays” trope, or used as a humorous situation and nonsensical possibility. This last attempt at belittling queerness was met with a self-conscious audience who began constructing their own meaning, understanding it through slash fiction and turning to fan-made creations to find validation in their interpretations, and even created its own terminology to describe this new strategy within television media. In addition, audience participation in its political conception is on the rise as fanbases have begun to initiate social campaigns to revive their favorite shows; the actual success of these campaigns differs but the fact that social media has been able to facilitate exerting social pressure upon company productions proves the shifting power relations within media.

This case study focused on fictional television shows and omitted other forms of entertainment, therefore it is recommended to continue analyzing queer representation in other forms of media such as reality television and film, as well as expanding the geographical origin of analyzed titles. Moreover, racial characteristics were not specified within queer representation, there are still many challenges in depicting queer racial minorities, and the selected titles were produced and aired primarily in Western countries; the question as to how queer representation is portrayed in other regions of the world remains.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Social Media posts about First Kill cancellation

Figure A1

Twitter user @slayerangel78 criticizing Netflix for canceling shows after one season



Recovered from <https://x.com/slaserangel78/status/1554638959866683394?s=20>

Figure A2

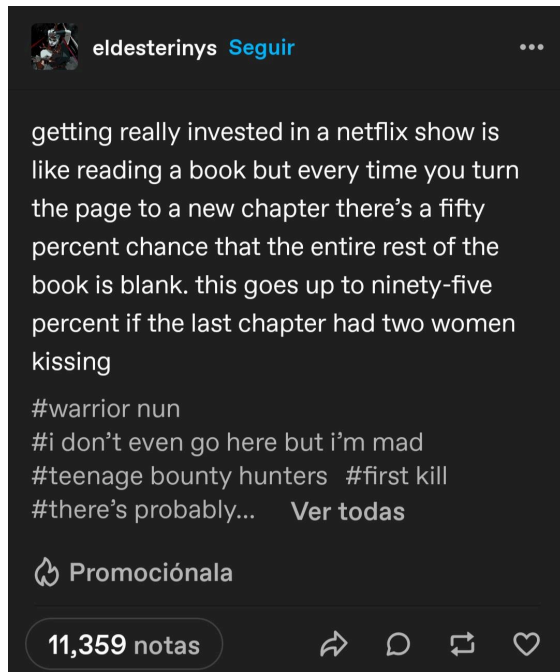
Twitter User @korysverse criticizing Netflix for canceling First Kill after one season



Recovered from <https://twitter.com/korysverse/status/1554634550227210242>

Figure A3

Tumblr user Eldesterinys criticizing Netflix for canceling shows depicting queer women



Note. The tags below mention First Kill and other titles

Recovered from

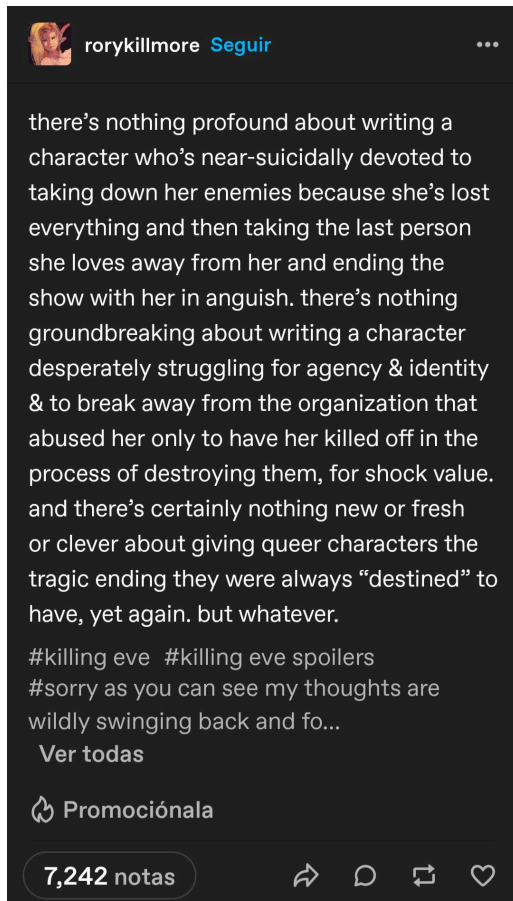
<https://www.tumblr.com/eldesterinys/703570894260420608/getting-really-invested-in-a-netflix-show-is-like>

Appendix B

Social Media posts criticizing Killing Eve season finale

Figure B1

Tumblr user rorykillmore criticizing the writing in the Killing Eve episode finale



Recovered from:

<https://www.tumblr.com/rorykillmore/681136000732479488/theres-nothing-profound-about-writing-a-character?source=share>

Figure B2

Twitter user @LorStone criticizing the Killing Eve season finale

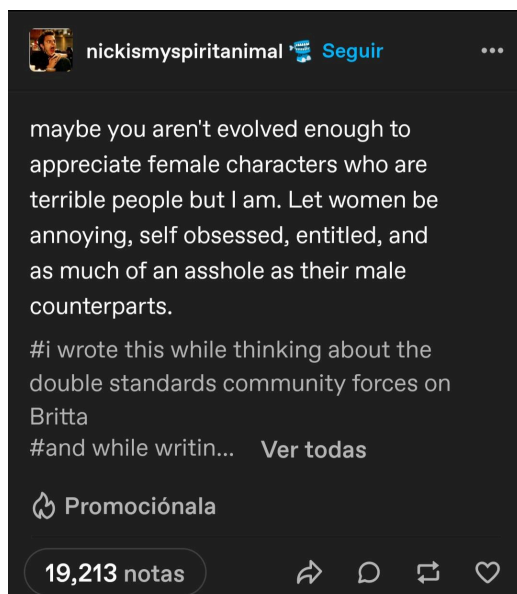


Recovered From:

<https://twitter.com/LorStone/status/1513616641313189892?s=20&t=ydeS6s9kLtzz6hg5UMWLgw>

Figure B3

Tumblr user nickismyspiritanimal comments on the characterization of women in fiction



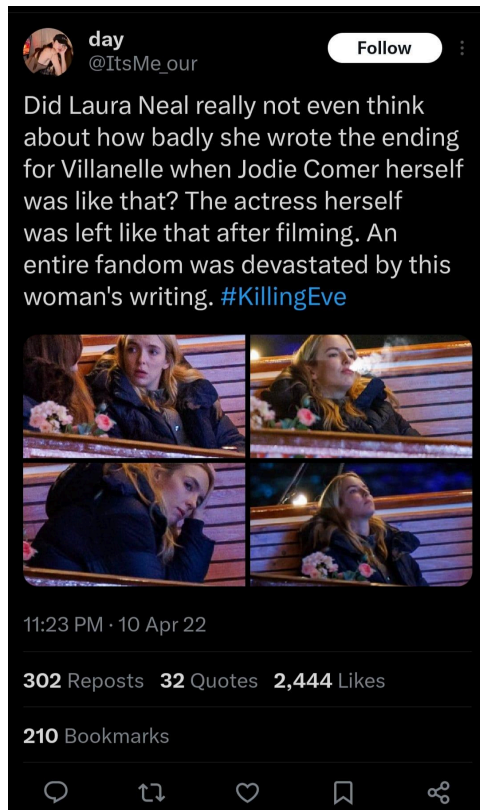
Note. The tags below list Killing Eve as a source of inspiration for the post

Recovered from

<https://www.tumblr.com/nickismyspiritanimal/685458477586513920/maybe-you-arent-evolved-enough-to-appreciate?source=share>

Figure B4

Twitter user @ItsMe_our criticizing TV writer Laura Neal for the Killing Eve season finale



Recovered from https://twitter.com/ItsMe_our/status/1513266430216531971

Appendix C

Compiled data from GLAAD's "Where we are on TV" report from 2010-2023

Table C1

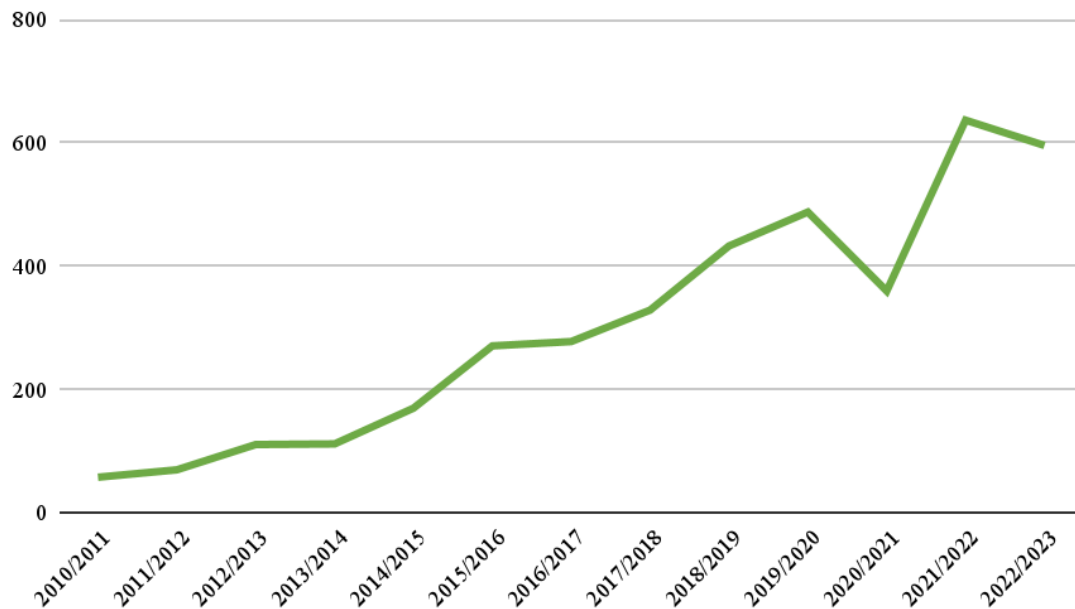
Reported numbers of series regulars and recurring characters identifying as LGBT per network and year

Year	Total	Series Regulars			Recurring Characters		
		Scripted primetime broadcast	Primetime scripted cable	Streaming services	Scripted primetime broadcast	Primetime scripted cable	Streaming services
2010/2011	58	23	35	-	-	-	-
2011/2012	70	19	25	-	-	26	-
2012/2013	111	31	35	-	19	26	-
2013/2014	112	26	42	-	20	24	-
2014/2015	170	32	64	-	33	41	-
2015/2016	271	35	84	43	35	58	16
2016/2017	278	43	92	45	28	50	20
2017/2018	329	58	103	51	28	70	19
2018/2019	433	75	120	75	38	88	37
2019/2020	488	90	121	109	30	94	44
2020/2021	360	70	81	95	31	37	46
2021/2022	637	92	87	245	49	51	113
2022/2023	596	70	86	239	31	53	117

Recovered From <https://glaad.org/whereweareontv22/>, <https://glaad.org/whereweareontv21/>,
<https://glaad.org/whereweareontv20/>, <https://glaad.org/whereweareontv19/>,
<https://glaad.org/whereweareontv18/>, <https://glaad.org/whereweareontv17/>,
<https://glaad.org/publications/whereweareontv16/>,
<https://glaad.org/publications/whereweareontv15/>,
<https://glaad.org/publications/whereweareontv14/>, <https://glaad.org/whereweareontv13/>,
<https://glaad.org/publications/whereweareontv11/>, <https://glaad.org/publications/tvreport10/>

Figure C2

Number of LGBT regular and recurring characters per report season



Recovered From <https://glaad.org/whereweareontv22/>, <https://glaad.org/whereweareontv21/>,
<https://glaad.org/whereweareontv20/>, <https://glaad.org/whereweareontv19/>,
<https://glaad.org/whereweareontv18/>, <https://glaad.org/whereweareontv17/>,
<https://glaad.org/publications/whereweareontv16/>,
<https://glaad.org/publications/whereweareontv15/>,
<https://glaad.org/publications/whereweareontv14/>, <https://glaad.org/whereweareontv13/>,
<https://glaad.org/publications/whereweareontv11/>, <https://glaad.org/publications/tvreport10/>