



# critical media project

## Topic Overview: LGBTQ

### have you ever wondered...

...why there aren't more gay, lesbian, or bisexual characters on television or in movies?

...whether gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters are portrayed differently than their straight counterparts?

...why stories about gays, lesbians, and bisexuals tend to revolve exclusively around their sexuality and sexual orientation?

### key concepts

- Sexuality (or sexual orientation) refers broadly to an individual's physical and/or emotional attraction to a person of the same or opposite sex. Sexual orientation is interpersonal.
- LGBTQ, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), has become the common shorthand to inclusively reference this diverse set of sexuality and gender-based identities and communities.
- Historically, many societies have been intolerant of homosexual and bisexual individuals, or anyone who does not adhere to heterosexist norms. Media has played a role in both perpetuating and resisting this state of affairs.
- There has been an increase in LGBTQ representation and visibility in the media since the late 1990s, but there are still very few prominent LGBT characters in the mainstream media.

### keywords

sexual orientation, gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, queer, questioning, transgender, fluid, invisibility, homophobia, heteronormative, heterosexist

### the big picture

Media creates meanings about sexuality (or sexual orientation), and plays an important role in the way we understand the role sexuality plays in our identities, our history, our social institutions, and our everyday lives.

Sexuality (or sexual orientation) refers broadly to an individual's physical and/or emotional attraction to a person of the same or opposite sex, and is typically broken into identity categories. These categories include gay and lesbian (those attracted to the same sex), heterosexual (those attracted to the opposite sex), and bisexual (those attracted to both sexes). LGBTQ, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), has become the common shorthand to inclusively reference this diverse set of sexuality and gender-based identities and communities.

When we discuss sexual orientation, it's important to note that we're not talking about someone's sex (male, female, intersex) or gender (masculine, feminine, transgender, non-binary) specifically. In many instances, however, sexual orientation, sex, and gender get conflated and confused. The terms transgender and queer also complicate the picture, because they do not refer to sexual orientation, but instead are used as umbrella terms. Transgender describes individuals whose gender identity does not match their sex (e.g. a female who identifies as masculine or as a man). Queer (which originally had derogatory connotations) refers loosely to all the non-heterosexual groups listed above (LGBT). The term is also used to underscore the fact that gender and sexual orientation are fluid and should not be rigidly categorized. Echoing this sentiment about fluidity, the "Q" in LGBTQ further can indicate a "questioning" or uncertainty about one's gender, sexuality, or sexual orientation.

Historically, many societies have been intolerant of individuals who do not adhere to heterosexual norms. LGBT individuals have been persecuted as criminals or labeled mentally ill simply because they were "different"; they have been (and still are in many cases) classified as different, abnormal, or wrong. The bias, fear, and hatred of LGBTQ individuals (also called homophobia) largely stems from culturally constructed ideas of what is "normal." These ideas often reflect assumptions and biases about what is morally "right" and a desire to uphold the values (or ideologies) associated with the traditional nuclear family.

Beliefs, social policies, laws and even media representations that work from the assumption that straight is normal, "right," or the way things should be are often called heterosexist or heteronormative. These terms help to explain why individuals who do not fit the norm (i.e. who are not straight or heterosexual) may be marginalized, invisible, or rejected altogether.

The historical prevalence of homophobia and heterosexist norms has informed the way we see and understand LGBTQ individuals in a simplistic binary in relation to their straight counterparts. The binary positions "straight" as normal and right, while relegating LGBTQ to abnormal and wrong. Historically, the straight category has been

valued over LGBTQ, yet this does not mean that straight individuals are (or should be) superior to LGBTQ individuals.

Organizations and grassroots movements have attempted to address this lopsided value system since at least the 1960s, and have worked to establish LGBTQ rights in social, political, and economic spheres. Specifically, these groups have challenged homophobic and heterosexist norms and the resultant discrimination against LGBTQ individuals. The 1969 Stonewall Riots are seen by many as a foundational moment in the history of LGBTQ civil rights in America. Paralleling other civil rights movements among African Americans and feminists as well as anti-Vietnam protests during the same period, the Stonewall Riots called attention to the regular targeting and raiding of popular gay establishments by New York City police. The riots became a symbolic rallying cry for the acceptance of openly gay individuals. They also inspired a burgeoning gay liberation movement, which continues to tackle change at both a grassroots as well as legislative level.

Legal battles continue to challenge discriminatory treatment and policies impacting LGBT individuals in an attempt to secure equitable treatment. The workplace. The military. Marriage. Adoptions. AIDS. Hate speech and hate crimes. All have been the target of legislative change.

### **sexuality in everyday life**

In addition to the national and legislative contexts, we can also think about the way sexual orientation comes up in our everyday lives. Was there a time when sexual orientation played a prominent role in your life (whether something happened to you or you observed it)?

Depending on your own sexual orientation, where you grew up, and what kind of people you've encountered, you will have your own experience and idea of what sexuality means.

For some, sexuality can play a very prominent role in everyday life. You may have felt isolated and alone, or been the only one of your sexual orientation in the room. You may have been afraid to tell friends and family that you are LGBTQ. You may have been called a name, been given a look, or treated differently than your straight peers. People may assume you like certain music or style simply because of your sexuality. You may have been the victim of assault, harassment, or prejudice.

It's also important to remember the role heterosexist and heteronormative thinking can play in the lives of LGBTQ individuals. While not necessarily manifest in overt acts of discrimination, such thinking can nonetheless powerfully model an adherence to the status quo. A law that recognizes or favors heterosexual married couples over LGBT

couples, for example, could be called heterosexist or heteronormative. Similarly, movies and TV shows with predominantly straight characters could reflect heterosexist or heteronormative patterns in media representation. If someone asks a boy in high school whether he has any girlfriends yet, this simple question also reveals a heterosexist or heteronormative assumption on the part of the person asking the question. When friends use the expression “that’s so gay” as a critique or a put down, they are not necessarily thinking about the heteronormative connotations of this common phrase.

In most cases, you may not consciously enact a heteronormative position; It’s simply what you’ve always known. It also may mean you’re not accustomed to thinking about your identity Race and ethnicity can also play a more subtle role in your everyday life, not overtly impacting your freedoms or opportunities. You may have felt isolated or alone, or been the only one of your race and ethnicity in the room. You may not see people who look like you prominently or accurately represented in media, in stories, in school curriculum. You may have been complimented on how articulate or professional you are or praised as a credit to your race. You may be admired for being “exotic” or people may assume you like certain music or food simply because of your race or ethnicity. These small, common everyday acts (whether intentional or unintentional) are often called “microaggressions.”

### **why it all matters... food for thought**

In 1997, comedian and television star Ellen DeGeneres famously “came out” (revealed she was gay) on the cover of Time magazine. Two weeks later, the character she played on the sitcom “Ellen” also came out. This was a watershed moment in the context of gay rights and media visibility; however, it did not come without controversy. In fact, by most accounts, DeGeneres’s career took a sharp downturn for a few years after her admission—one that she has since recovered from.

While you may not remember Ellen’s coming out, you can probably think of other examples in which you’ve seen LGBTQ individuals represented in the media. Think of Glee, Modern Family, Orange is the New Black, Shameless or 2016’s Moonlight. Many of the messages that we receive about sexual orientation and individuals who identify as LGBTQ come to us through the media. There has been an increase in LGBTQ representation in the media since the late 1990s in film and television; however, as the advocacy organization GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) contends in its annual report on television, there is still a dearth of LGBT characters on network and cable television.

It's important to consider the number of LGBT characters in the media, but also how they are represented. When we see the same representations over and over, we start to internalize them and take them for granted. They become natural. We might accept these representations and think, "That's just the way things are."

Asking questions about media representations (and the people and industries behind them) can help us think critically about the media. As you look through the media examples on this site, use them along with this overview as building blocks to dig deeper into this facet of identity and ask questions...we might start by asking:

- How are LGBTQ individuals represented in the media? What do they look like? How do they speak? What kind of activities do they engage in?
- What specific images and words contribute to our understanding of what it means to be LGBTQ?
- What impact do LGBTQ representations have on the opportunities and possibilities for LGBTQ-identified individuals in their personal and professional lives?

### side note

In 2012, the California, the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful ([FAIR](#)) [Education Act](#) amended the education code to require schools to integrate factual information about social movements, current events and history of people with disabilities and LGBT people into existing social studies lessons. It also prevents the State Board of Education from adopting instructional materials that discriminate.

Many professional organizations, including the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) have created guidelines designed to help support and affirm LGBTQ youth.