A Tool Pointed at Both Ends: Queer Representation in Horror TV and Its Impacts on Perception of Identity and Community

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Abstract

Fictional portrayals of queer characters have been shown to influence public perception of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning/queer (LGBQ) community. Accurate (e.g., non-caricatured) representation of LGBQ characters is important, because of the power that the media have in influencing public opinion. Here I hypothesized that the sexual orientation of fictional characters would influence *social comparison* (how individuals see themselves compared to others) and general perception of the character. To test this hypothesis, I had participants read one of two descriptions of a character (described as either straight or gay) from queer horror television, answer several demographic questions, and then complete a 74-item Social Comparison Survey. Then, they were asked to explain in about five words what constituted positive representation. Results showed that there was no significant difference between the general perception of the queer character and that of the straight character nor any significant difference between the type of social comparison experienced. I speculate that the results of this study indicate potential progress in today's young population regarding the perception of queer characters.

Keywords: Horror, queer representation, social comparison, identity, community

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The horror genre and queerness have been historically intertwined with the queer monster trope dating back to the early 19th century (Benshoff, 1997). Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) is an early example of how otherness (i.e. the state of being excluded from mainstream society on the basis of some individual characteristic) is demonized and punished, which can be considered an analog to the queer experience. In recent years, this relationship has become more explicit with the more palpable representations of queer characters in modern horror media. This study aimed to investigate this relationship.

This study collected participant data on certain moderator variables, that could influence the effect of the independent variable, such as gender, sexuality, familiarity with the queer population and with the genre genre. Participants were then presented with one of two character descriptions, or vignettes, and then asked to complete a 74-item Social Comparison Study to determine type of social comparison and general perception of the given character. Finally, participants were asked an additional research question: what makes representation positive?

The following literature review serves to contextualize the effects of queer horror on social comparison and self-concept. It examines five subtopics: the psychology behind horror, the history and qualities of queer horror, queer horror television and its features, social comparison in relation to fictional narratives and characters, and a brief review of self-concept studies. Because of the rich history between queerness and horror, understanding the effects of this relationship is fundamental to the understanding of the importance of positive representation.

The Psychology Behind Horror

Horror as a genre is as old as storytelling itself. One of the biggest questions surrounding horror, and its effect on communities, is why we consume it. If fear is considered an emotion to be avoided, why do humans seek to scare themselves? One theory posits horror as a mode of overcoming adverse reactions to threatful situations through a detached and safe experience of such situations (Clasen et al., 2020). Clasen et al. (2020) conducted an online survey of genre preference as a function of personality traits and supernatural beliefs. They found that the desire for stimulation is a predictor of horror media consumption. Factors such as education level and age also positively correlated with more consumption of horror media. Clasen at al.'s research suggests that horror media consumption functions as a learning experience that prepares one to cope when faced with aversive stimuli in the real world. That is, horror media serves as a safe environment to experience and adapt to perceived danger.

Several traits are correlated with the enjoyment of and preference for horror media, including sensation seeking, empathy levels, and personality (Martin, 2019). Sensation seeking is the act of seeking out new, complex, salient experiences and the acceptance of various risks for the sake of experiencing these sensations (Zuckerman, 2015). It is generally accepted that tehre are two forms of empathy: cognitive empathy (to what extent an individual can recognize the emotions of others) and affective empathy (the capacity to experience the emotions of others). The influence of empathy on horror enjoyment is a subject of academic contention. Tamborini et al. (1990) distributed a questionnaire assessing level of empathy to 95 undergraduate students. Later, these participants were shown graphic horror scenes and tested for physiologic response. Greater empathy predicted more sensitivity to others' suffering. This decreased the likelihood that one would consume and enjoy traditional horror media in which suffering is a staple. More recent research has contrasted this low-empathy theory. Scrivner (2024) assessed the empathy

level of 244 Americans and asked them to rate their enjoyment of several subgenres of horror. Scrivner found that those who enjoyed horror actually displayed higher levels of empathy and low levels of coldheartedness—the lack of compassion for others. Empathy was measured using the Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (Reniers et al., 2011). Coldheartedness was measured using the Psychopathic Personality Inventory short-form (Lilienfeld & Hess, 2001).

Clasen et al. (2020) also found that enjoyment of horror varied with personality. They recruited 1,187 participants who were all assessed on their paranormal beliefs, sensation seeking, personality traits, and horror consumption habits and/or preferences. Greater extraversion had a significant positive correlation to horror media consumption, shared horror media exposure, shared enjoyment of horror media, and shared feelings of fright (i.e. how scared a participant is when viewing horror media with others). Greater agreeableness was also positively correlated with shared horror media exposure, shared enjoyment of horror media and susceptibility to fear evoked by horror media, while it is correlated negatively with shared feelings of fright.

Queer Horror

Otherness is a recurrent theme both in the queer experience and the horror genre as a whole. Otherness in this case refers to the state of being separate from the status quo as set by mainstream society. This connection between horror and the queer experience is embodied in what Benshoff (1997) referred to as the “Monster Queer” or the “Monster-as-metaphor”. The monster in classic horror is inherently an “other” and is thus a symbolic representation of the stigmatization and oppression faced by queer individuals throughout history (Marchini, 2023).

Another trope that befalls queerness in horror media throughout history is the “Bury Your Gays” trope. In this trope, if a queer person or relationship exists within a narrative, one or more

of them must die. These tragic ends to queer relationships and lives portray queerness as a short-lived mistake, doomed to failure and destined to tragedy. It is not likely that this trope is always an intentional sleight to queer individuals. Often, writers bury their gays as a ploy to evoke shock from an audience. Even when this is the case, however, the tragic deaths often contribute little to plot and ultimately send the wrong message, that queerness is a short-lived mistake doomed to tragedy (Marchini, 2023). Benshoff (2012) argues that monsters in American media have always been reflections of their given time period's ideals about, perception, and understanding of homosexuality.

Brintnall (2004) analyzed horror narratives from three eras of film, solidifying Benshoff's argument. Brintnall first examined *Frankenstein* (Whale, 1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935). In this examination, it was suggested that in *Frankenstein,* Frankenstein's monster served as the homosexual impediment to his creator's heterosexual marriage. Brintnall (2004) went on to analyze the film *The Haunting* (Wise, 1963) and found that the film characterizes lesbian desire as predatory, unnatural, and destructive. Brintnall's (2004) final analysis of *Scream* (Craven, 1996) noted that the film reinforces the Christian belief in the dangers posed by sex and sexuality i.e. the sexually active die and only the chaste survive. The two killers in the film share an implied homoerotic connection. The homosocial relationship is a platonic (non-sexual) connection between two men that the patriarchy tends to celebrate (Sedgwick, 1985). The homosexual is an erotic connection that is traditionally denounced by said patriarchy. The two killers in *Scream* enforce the visage of homosociality and disallude that of homosexuality through the involvement of the protagonist as well as her belated mother. Though the involvement of these women serves as a buffer for their evident homoerotic

connection, the presence of this implicit connection paired with their monstrous acts in turn frames homosexuality as monstrous.

Understanding the history and significance of this niche intersection is essential to the rationale of my study. Without this long-held connection, this study would not have taken place.

Queer Representation in Horror Television: Three Case Studies

To examine the effects of queer representation in horror television specifically, one must familiarize themself with the medium and its variants. The following section is a compilation of analyses of three different horror television series featuring queer characters.

What We Do in the Shadows

What We Do in the Shadows (Clement et al., 2019-2024) is a unique blend of horror and comedy with an abundance of queer representation that manages to remain palatable to the heteronormative audience. Though nearly every character on screen identifies as queer and queer dynamics and relationships are depicted, the show's more explicit displays of sex and romance remain almost exclusively heterosexual. While appeasing the heteronormativity of the television industry, it maintains its refreshing homonormativity

What We Do in the Shadows embraces the queer monster trope and subverts it. It follows four vampires and their human familiar in their mundane existence in the modern human world. The horror presents the audience with queer monsters and the comedy humanizes the stigmatized and challenges the monstrosity of queerness. Because the majority of the characters are queer in some fashion, queerness becomes the status quo. The four main vampires have a pansexual approach to romance and sex and their familiar, Guillermo (Harvey Guillen), comes out as gay in season four.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Buffy the Vampire Slayer holds a special place in queer media, as it contains one of the first lesbian kisses in television history, taking what was once a subtextual romance and transforming it into an explicit queer love story (Whedon et al., 1997–2003).

The kiss was shared between the show's primary lesbian couple, Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan) and Tara Maclay (Amber Benson). These two are widely considered one of the first positively represented lesbian couples in broadcast television. (Gold, n.d.)

Unfortunately, the series fell into the "Bury Your Gays" trap as Tara dies by gunshot shortly after a non-explicit lesbian sex scene. Tara's untimely death sends Willow on a crazed war path, enforcing another trope, the Psycho Lesbian. This trope features queer women as unstable killers and stalkers (Marchini, 2023).

Hannibal

Bryan Fuller's NBC series *Hannibal* serves as a prequel and addendum to Thomas Harris' popular book series revolving around one Hannibal Lecter. Harris' novels feature transphobic and homophobic undertones (Casey et al., 2015). Queer or questioning characters' identities are often equated with trauma, criminality, and sexual deviancy or even dismissed (Harris, 1999; Harris, 1991).

Fuller takes a different approach in the television series. From the very first episode, Hannibal Lecter (Mads Mikkelsen) attaches himself to FBI consultant Will Graham (Hugh Dancy). At first the relationship appears homosocial, but the line between the platonic and the romantic slowly blurs as Lecter's infatuation grows.

To place *Hannibal* in the discussion of queer horror's pitfalls, Marchini (2023) analyzes Lecter's place in the queer monster narrative as well as the series' eventual descent into the 'Bury Your Gays' trope.

Hannibal Lecter is an example of how the queer monster is replaced with a queer human, subverting the trope and revealing the potential for monstrosity in the human experience.

The series' end is another addition to the growing body of buried gays in media. Not able to live with or without him, Will pulls Hannibal with him over a cliff on which they stand, falling to their supposed deaths beneath a bluff on the Atlantic. Thus, their queer story comes to another tragic ending (Fuller et al., 2015).

Effects of Queer Representation

Positive representation of sexual minorities is a recent development (Żerebecki, 2021), therefore the investigation into how positive representation affects audiences is relatively new as well. Craig et al. (2015) explored queer representation in media as a means of resilience building. Resilience is defined as one's ability to persevere through and positively react to adversity or other negative experiences. People's interactions with the stimuli that they encounter are complex and function in both directions, positive and negative. Queer characters are often portrayed as unstable, vulnerable, and are more often than not victimized. Craig et al. (2015) argue that representation, when used appropriately, has the power to fuel positive identity development and self-perception. They interviewed LGBQ adults of ages 19 to 22 that actively consumed traditional offline media and new online media. Participants were asked open ended questions that detailed the participant's knowledge, perception of, and experience with how media and resilience act. An analysis of these responses determined four ways in which media contributes to resilience: escapism, empowerment, resistance, and community (Craig et al. 2015). Through escapism, LGBQ youth use media with positive queer representation as a way to separate themselves from other, stigmatizing queer media (Craig et al., 2015). This method of escapism, though avoidant, is a positive alternative to other, risky coping strategies like

substance abuse (SAMH, 2013). Positive story arcs that featured strong, capable LGBQ characters gave participants a bolstered sense of strength. On the other hand, negative representations encouraged queer youth to fight back, often using social media as a means to speak out against stigma. Finally, queer representation served to start a dialogue both online and in person. It is these conversations about real, relevant topics that develop communities that support each other.

Another study by Soto-Sanfiel et al. (2024) investigated the effects of stereotypes in media on homophobia. Stereotypes are simplified ideas and mental images that individuals use to easily process complex concepts in everyday life (Lippmann, 1922). Soto-Sanfiel et al. identified six forms of gay stereotypes. First, the "sissy" gay, characterized by flamboyance, emotionality, and femininity. Next, the "evil" gay is a villain or criminal. This stereotype inherently associates homosexuality with delinquency or immorality. There is the "traumatized" gay, who displays homosexuality as a life of suffering and angst. The "gay rapist" is predatory, pushy, and often pedophilic. The "promiscuous" gay is easy, overtly sexual, has diseases, and partakes in risky activities like drug abuse and prostitution. Finally, there is the "gay fashionista" who loves fashion and art and is tied only to traditionally feminine occupations.

Soto-Sanfiel at al. (2024) acknowledged the relationship between stereotypes in media and real-life experiences of audiences by engaging with a population familiar with the reality of the LGBQ community. In this study, 460 university students in Spain of varying sexuality were assessed on several dimensions. These included their level of homophobia, their level of contact with the gay population, their level of mediated contact (indirect contact through television, film, etc.), how realistic stimuli seemed to them, relatability of stimuli, enjoyment of stimuli, and whether they thought the stimuli were stereotypical. The stimuli were two scenes from Spanish

television for each of the above-listed gay stereotypes and two for a neutral representation. The college students tended to prefer neutral portrayals, which they perceived as more realistic (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2024). Relatability and enjoyment of each participant factored toward their perception of how similar and accurate these representations were. The findings also suggest that even in more homophobic populations, stereotypes are more often than not perceived to be less than accurate. This indicates that the audience member is an active agent in the recognition of stereotypes rather than a passive consumer. It was also found that direct interaction and experience with LGBQ people was a stronger predictor of attitudes toward them than mediated interaction through television.

In a third study, Dajches and Barbati (2024) investigated the effect of queer representation on the well-being and identity of queer individuals through the minority stress model. This model posits that social support and other coping mechanisms serve to alleviate stress in minority populations and considers queer representation to be one of these coping mechanisms. The study assessed participants' familiarity with queer television by dispersing a list of queer television shows (shows that feature at least one openly LGBQ character in the main cast), to all of which participants declared their consumption frequency (Dajches & Barbati, 2024). Young adults (ages 18-23) that identified as a sexual minority (gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.) were given a survey that measured the effectiveness of queer representation on TV as one of these coping mechanisms. It was found that exposure to queer representation did not function as a buffer between stress and mental health. Representation did, however, function as a positive contributor to identity affirmation and resilience to adversity in sexual minorities (Dajches & Barbati, 2024). This study did not take into account whether the representations observed were positive or negative.

None of the above studies examined specifically how queer representation functions as a contributor to social comparison or identity and none were genre-specific. Further, none of these studies examined what constitutes positive representation.

When examining the effects of queer representation as my study does, it is important to examine the many ways these effects manifest. The above-listed effects inform the hypotheses upon which my study was based.

Social comparison and Fictional Narratives/Characters

Social comparison theory captures the tendency of people to compare themselves as superior or inferior to those around them (Festinger, 1954). Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak (2019) explored how interaction with characters in a narrative influence the emotions associated with four categories of social comparison: upward assimilative, downward assimilative, upward contrastive, and downward contrastive. There are two dimensions to these categories. The direction refers to whether the person sees another as inferior (downward) or superior (upward) to themselves. The other dimension refers to whether the person sees another as similar to (assimilative) or significantly different from (contrastive) themselves (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2019). The two desirable outcomes were upward assimilative, or seeing the best in another and the potential of the self to become just as good, and downward contrastive, or seeing the worst in another and the severe separation of one's own qualities to those of the inferior other. The two undesirable outcomes were upward contrastive—seeing the best in another and feeling that one cannot ever compare—and downward assimilative—seeing the worst in another and associating oneself with these negative characteristics (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2019).

In Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak's (2019) study, 106 students of ages 18-49 years were first presented with a morality salience priming task to assess their general morality. This served as

the basis for the comparisons they would later make. They were placed in either a virtue condition in which they were asked to describe how they have recently upheld their own values or a vice condition in which they were asked to describe how they have acted contrary to their beliefs. Participants then read one of two versions of a 1300 word story: one in which the main character saves another or one in which the main character allows another to die. Participants were given a Likert scale on their social comparison-based emotions. These emotions indicated the category of social comparison that each participant displayed in reaction to a moral or immoral character.

Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak's (2019) first hypothesis was that people who exhibited more perceived morality would reflect more upward assimilative emotions which was not supported. Their second hypothesis was that a correlation between more salient vices and more downward contrastive emotions associated with immoral characters than with moral characters. They found that those exhibiting more salient vices felt much more contempt for immoral characters than those with salient virtues, partially supporting their second hypothesis. Their final hypothesis was that those with more salient vices would have stronger emotions associated with upward contrastive social comparison. These individuals did in fact show more envy toward moral characters, partially supporting the hypothesis. These results support the idea that perceived morality salience is negatively correlated with downward contrastive emotions toward immoral characters and negatively correlated with upward contrastive emotions toward moral characters.

Lewis & Weaver (2019) investigated the comparative influence of scripted television characters and reality television cast members on social comparison. They measured the emotional responses and enjoyment of 294 undergraduate students to one of eight programs featuring equally reality or scripted content, characters of low social class or high social class,

and lifestyles based in youth or family. They were given a questionnaire measuring their emotional responses and enjoyment.

Lewis and Weaver's (2019) hypothesis was that stronger emotions related to upward social comparison would be experienced in reaction to scripted characters compared to reality cast members. This hypothesis was supported by their results. Further, they found that types of social comparison are not mutually exclusive, that is, it is possible to feel different types of social comparison for the same character. They also discovered that social class of the character did not independently elicit upward social comparison-related emotions. Type of television, social class of characters and lifestyle of the characters all had a joint, significant interaction that predicted types of social comparison responses (Lewis & Weaver, 2019).

Both of these studies investigated the relationship between fictional characters and social comparison in depth, but neither were genre-specific nor did they examine how a population's social comparison emotions were related to their similarities with character identities. My study aimed to fill these gaps by specifically investigating characters in the horror genre as well as addressing proximity, how closely one relates to the character.

The relationship between fictional narratives/characters and social comparison is an essential piece of the present study. To understand how queer representation in media affects social comparison, it is essential to first understand if and how media itself can affect social comparison.

The Clark Doll Study: Modern Implications and Adaptation

In the Clark and Clark (1950) doll study, black children of ages 3-7 years were given two dolls, one white and one black. Then, the children were asked several questions about the dolls (e.g. "which doll is the nice/mean/good/bad/pretty/ugly doll?", "Which doll would you rather

play with?"). Black children showed more favorable attitudes toward the white doll than the black doll. Clark and Clark also found that social environments, like parental interactions, school environment, media exposure, etc., influenced self-concept. Self concept is the perception of the self both as an autonomous individual and a functional part of society.

Byrd et al. (2017) sought to replicate the doll study in a modern context. Fifty children under 11, most of whom were black (n=47), were presented with four dolls: one white with dark hair, one white with blonde hair, one with brown skin and one with black skin. The children were asked the same questions as the children in the original study.They found that children showed no preference for which doll was good or bad and they preferred the dolls that looked like them for "nice" and "pretty". Similar to the original findings, the dark-skin black doll was chosen more frequently for "mean" but not for "bad" or "ugly". These results suggest that though racial stigma still exists, as evidenced by the choice of "mean" for the dark-skin black doll, its effect appears not to be as all-encompassing as it once was.

These studies, though reflective of societal expectations, do little to investigate how representation affects attitudes toward minority groups. There has yet to be a study that seeks to adapt the Clark and Clark (1950) doll experiment into a modern, sexual minority-oriented investigation. My study aims to use the framework of these two studies to investigate not only social comparison, but also the effects of queer representation on perceptions of the queer community and, by association, self-concept.

Conclusions

Queer horror has a long, precedented history, dating back as early as the eighteenth century. Over time, many harmful queer tropes and stereotypes have been established that persist in the modern day (Marchini, 2023). Explicit queer representation is a recent development in

new media and has made a unique home in horror television, as exemplified by shows like *What We Do in the Shadows*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Hannibal* (Clement et al., 2019-2024; Whedon et al., 1997-2003; De Laurentiis et al., 2013-2015).

On an individual level, positive queer representation has been a means of escapism, empowerment, resistance, and community for queer youth (Craig et al., 2015). Positive representation of the LGBQ community also positively contributes to identity affirmation and resilience to adversity in sexual minorities (Dajches & Barbati, 2024). However, representation in new media has less of an effect on attitudes toward queer individuals than real-world interaction with the LGBQ community (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2024). Social comparison in relation to fictional characters has also been studied, showing that people with more salient vices felt much more contempt for immoral characters. This indicates more downward contrastive social comparison (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2019). Moreover, types of social comparison are not mutually exclusive; one can feel several types of social comparison toward the same character, highlighting the complexity of human emotion (Lewis & Weaver, 2019).

Finally, the Clark and Clark (1950) doll study allowed insight into the mind of young racial minorities. However, there has been little to no research expanding the breadth of the implications of this study, such as how other minorities see themselves and their community.

This study explored how queer representation, specifically in horror television, affects social comparison in the queer community. It was the comparative nature of Clark and Clark's (1950) investigation that inspired another aspect of this research: how straight representations and queer representations are perceived differently. Based on previous literature, my investigation was conducted under two hypotheses and an additional research question. The first hypothesis was that queer representation in horror was positively correlated with downward

contrastive social comparison. The second hypothesis was that queer characters in horror was perceived more negatively than their straight counterparts. This study's research question investigated what constitutes positive representation. This study aimed to uncover how queer portrayals in horror television—a genre with a long history in relation to queerness—affect the very people they seek to represent.

Methods and Measures

Study Design Overview

My study sought to fill the gap in literature regarding the effects of queer representation in horror on social comparison. Participants included 16 adults ages 18-30 who were fluent in written English. The study consisted first of 3 moderation measures, accounting for the participants' sexual orientation and gender; familiarity with the queer population; and familiarity with the queer horror genre. Participants read one of two descriptions of the same character, identical except for being defined as either queer or straight. Participants' social comparison and perception of the character were assessed using 20 questions comparing the participant to the character. The independent variable was the character's sexuality. The dependent variables were the direction of social comparison, upward or downward; the proximity of social comparison, assimilative or contrastive; and the general perception of the character, positive or negative. Finally, participants responded to an open-ended research question: What makes representation positive? Three independent sample t-tests were conducted to assess the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Three multiple linear regressions were conducted to consider the influence of the moderation variables on the dependent variables. A word cloud was generated to analyze what constitutes positive representation.

Participants

Participants consisted of 16 adults ages 18-30 recruited via fliers posted on Instagram and across the campus of the University of Texas at Austin from early September through late October of 2025. Participants were required to be fluent in written English and correctly answer 13 attention items.

Materials

Moderation measures

Sexual Orientation and Gender. The first moderation measure asked the participant what sexual orientation and gender they identify with (straight or queer; male, female, or non-binary). Participants were given the option not to disclose this information. This measure included questions 1 and 2 in Appendix A and served as a moderator variable with the potential to influence the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

Familiarity With The Queer Population. Participants' familiarity with the queer population was measured on a five-point Likert scale, asking for the frequency with which they engage with both queer people in the real world and queer people in media from "Never" to "Always". This measure was scored 1-5 and summed with higher scores representing more familiarity and lower scores representing less familiarity. These measures served as additional moderator variables and included questions 3 and 4 in Appendix A.

Familiarity With The Genre. Participants rated their familiarity with several queer horror television series on a scale of 0 – 6. Zero represented no familiarity and 6 represented having seen every episode. This measure included all of the items in Appendix B, for example, *What We Do In The Shadows*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Supernatural*. Responses were summed and categorized as low (0-24), moderate (25-48), and high (49-72) familiarity. This served as another moderator variable. This measure was derived from the "LGBQ+ Television Exposure" measure used by Dajches and Barbati (2024). This question is included in Appendix B.

Vignettes

Participants were randomly assigned to and presented with one of two vignettes. Both vignettes described the same character from horror television, Hannibal Lecter from *Hannibal*

(De Laurentiis, 2013-2015). The first vignette, the queer condition read as follows: "Character A is highly educated. He plays multiple instruments, he is an incredible cook, he loves the opera, appreciates history, and is well traveled and cultured. He is very well-endowed financially. He is very confident and knows his worth. He is obsessed with his boyfriend. He and his boyfriend have known each other for many years. Their conversations are long and philosophical and they genuinely enjoy each other's company. Their arguments are explosive and frequent, affecting everyone around them. They always come back to each other, even after the most extreme conflict. Character A has a troubled past, riddled with trauma and grief. He is in a position to help others, but abuses this position. He manipulates every situation to his benefit without regard to others' lives and well-being. He has little to no remorse and his only regrets arise when his actions negatively impact himself." The second vignette, Character B, was the exact same description as Character A except the love interest was referred to as a girlfriend rather than a boyfriend. Both vignettes can be found in Appendix C.

74-item Social Comparison Survey

This survey consisted of 74 items, given to a participant in a randomly generated order. 20 of these items, the Direction Items and Proximity Items, assessed the direction and proximity of social comparison felt toward the character. 41 of these items, the distractor items, were unrelated to my hypotheses. 13 of these items, the attention items, ensured that the participant was actively responding to the survey.

Direction Items. These consisted of 12 items. Of these items, 6 asked questions regarding the success, attractiveness, pleasantness, etc. of the character with which the participant was presented. The other 6 asked these same questions about the participant themself. These were designed to assess the direction of the participant's social comparison: upward, in

which the character was seen as superior, or downward, in which the character was seen as inferior. These included items such as “How successful is this character?”, “How successful are you?”, “How unpleasant is this character?”, and “How unpleasant are you?”. The Likert scales in each question were numbered 1-5 and were summed for the character as well as the participant. The negative qualities, indicated by (R), were reverse scored on a scale of 1-5. For example, question 1 in Appendix D asked how successful the character was on a scale of 1 - 5 (1 being not at all, 5 being extremely). Question 5, however, asked how unpleasant this character was. In this case, the scale would be reversed, a 5 indicating “not at all” and 1 indicating “extremely”. The maximum sum was 30, the minimum 6. The character sum was subtracted from the participant sum. If the resulting integer was positive, the direction was considered downward because the participant had rated the character lower than themself. If the resulting integer was negative, the direction was considered upward because the participant had rated the character lower than themself. Direction items included items 1 – 12 in Appendix D. The character direction items were also used to determine general perception of the character. The mean and median of the direction items sums were generated as were the standard deviation, standard error and range of these sums. These descriptive statistics were also generated for the character items themselves.

Proximity Items. Proximity items included items such as “How similar are you to this character in intelligence?” and “How similar to this character are you in arrogance?”. Proximity items included items 13 – 20 in Appendix D. For a given participant, that participant’s score on the proximity items was summed. Proximity items were scored on a scale of 1 to 4 (1= *Very different,* 4= *Very similar).* There were 8 proximity items. The mean and median of the proximity items sums were generated as were the standard deviation, standard error and range of these sums.

Distractor Items. These consisted of 41 items unrelated to my hypotheses. These asked questions like “How comfortable are your shoes?” and “Stairs or elevator?”. These items were not measured in any meaningful way and were meant to avoid the subject correctly guessing the hypotheses. These included items 21 - 41 in Appendix D.

Attention Items. These consisted of 13 multiple choice questions. The purpose of these items was to ensure the participant was alert and aware of what was being asked of them. Each question had an obvious correct answer that had a value of 1. If the participant answered all 13 of these correctly, they would attain a score of 13 and their responses to the first 20 items would be included in my analysis. One such question was “What color is the ocean?” with “Blue” being the obvious correct answer. These items included items 62 - 74 in Appendix D.

Qualitative Research Question

The qualitative aspect of this study was a single open-ended question for the participant: In 5 words, what makes representation positive? Participant responses were compiled into a corpus and converted into a word cloud via RStudio to identify prominent themes in positive representation.

Procedure

Participants were first briefed on what they were about to be asked to do in a Research Information Sheet linked in the Qualtrics survey. Their informed consent was attained in the form of a question in said survey which asked “Do you agree to be a part of the following survey?”. Those that selected “Yes, I agree” were directed to the next part of the survey in which they were presented with the three moderation measures. After completing the moderation items, one of the two character descriptions were displayed for them and remained throughout the entirety of the following Social Comparison survey. These 74 items were presented in a random

order. At the end of the survey, the subject was asked to describe what positive representation is using about 5 words.

Statistical Analysis

Comparisons across conditions were done with independent samples t-tests. T-tests were conducted using RStudio.

Power was not sufficient to accurately assess the effects of moderating variables, therefore no analysis was conducted to analyze these effects.

To analyze the qualitative data from my research question, I generated a word cloud using RStudio. Participants were asked to give about five words that make representation positive. The word cloud analyzed the prevalence of these words.

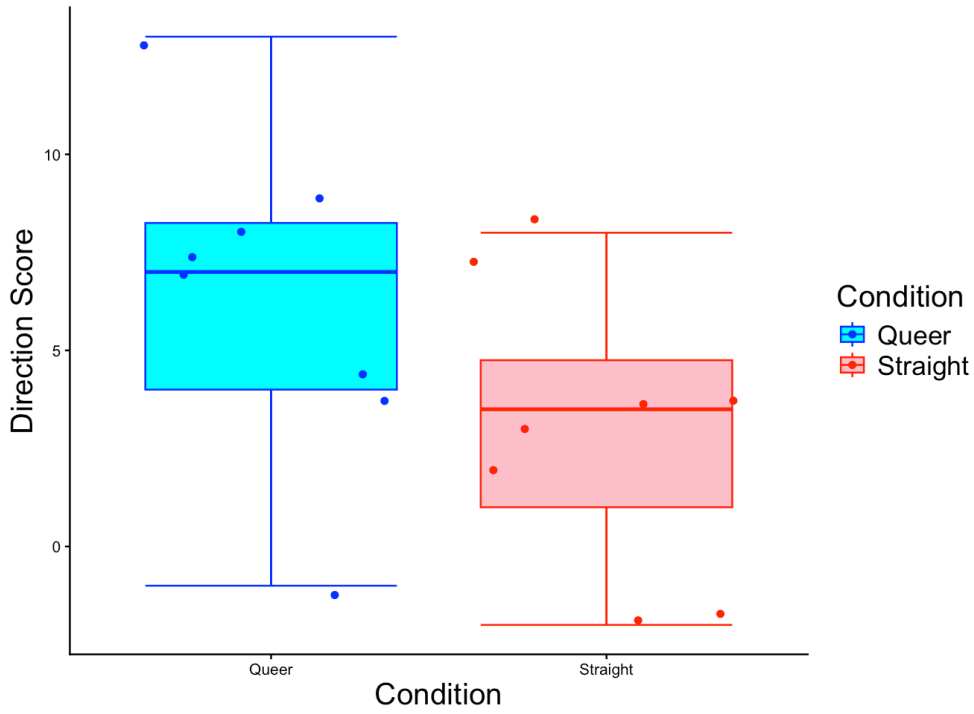
Results

Relationship between Condition and Direction, Proximity, and General Perception

The first independent samples t-test assessed the relationship between condition and direction of social comparison. The results failed to reach significance, $t(14)=1.7$, $p=0.1$. This indicated no real difference in direction of social comparison toward a character based on sexuality, contradicting my hypothesis that there would be a significant difference in direction of social comparison between the two conditions.

Figure 1

Direction Score per Condition

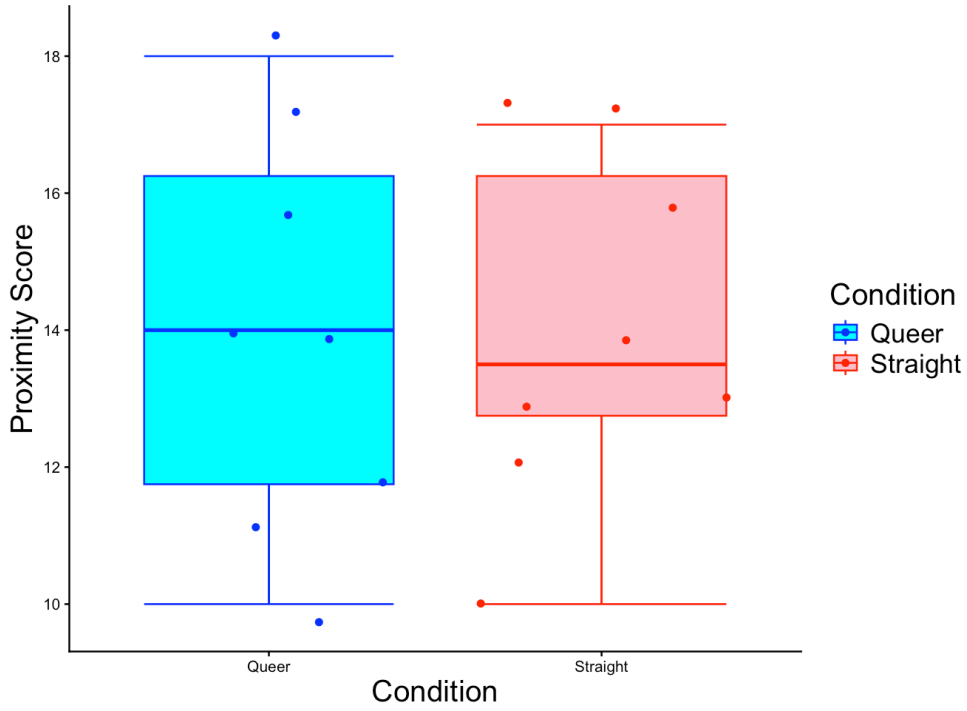


Note. This boxplot illustrates the medians, ranges, interquartile ranges, and standard errors of the direction scores per condition.

The second independent samples t-test assessed the relationship between condition and proximity of social comparison. The results failed to reach significance, $t(14)=0$, $p=1$. This result fully supported the null hypothesis that the means of the proximity of social comparison between the queer and straight conditions would have a true difference equal to zero.

Figure 2

Proximity Score per Condition

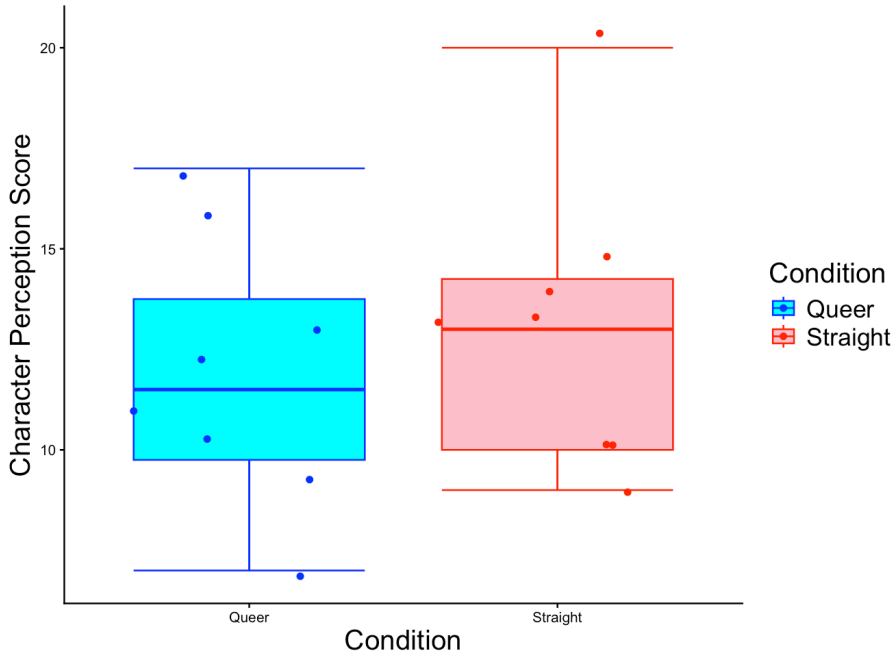


Note. This boxplot illustrates the medians, ranges, interquartile ranges, and standard errors of the proximity scores per condition.

The third independent samples t-test assessed the relationship between condition and general perception of the character. The results failed to reach significance as well, $t(14)=-0.6$, $p=0.5$. This result did not indicate that there was a significant difference between the general perception of the queer character versus the straight character.

Figure 3

Character Perception Score per Condition



Note. This boxplot illustrates the medians, ranges, interquartile ranges, and standard errors of the character perception scores per condition.

Descriptive statistics are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Direction Score Descriptive Statistics					
Condition	M	SD	Median	SE	Range
Queer	6.38	4.14	7	5	14
Straight	3	3.66	3.5	5	10
Proximity Score Descriptive Statistics					
Queer	14	2.88	14	5	8
Straight	14	2.51	13.5	5	7
Character Perception Score Descriptive Statistics					
Queer	11.9	3.4	11.5	5	17
Straight	13	3.55	13	5	20

Research Question: Positive Representation

The wordcloud generated in R revealed what participants considered to be essential qualities of positive representation. The larger the word, the more frequently the words were used in participant responses. The two most frequent words associated with positive representation were variations on the words “see” and “accurate”.

Figure 4

Word Cloud of Themes that Constitute Positive Representation

Discussion

Statistical analysis failed to reveal any significant difference in social comparison toward a character based upon their sexual orientation. Results also failed to reflect any difference in general perception of a character depending on sexual orientation.

Participants were too few to properly assess the potential effects of moderator variables such as participant gender, sexuality, and familiarity.

Solely based on the data collected, the absence of a significant difference between conditions may indicate a divergence from historical prejudice based on sexual orientation.

Based on responses to the independent research question, it seems that the most important qualities of positive representation to participants included authenticity, accuracy, and effort. The prevalence of the word “seen” or variations of it also implies the importance of how representation makes consumers of queer media feel. Further, this suggests that the idea of positive representation is a very subjective concept and depends heavily on individual perception of queer media.

This study initially received 44 responses, but only 16 responses answered all 13 attention items correctly. Future researchers recreating this study might consider informing participants of the presence and importance of attention items in an informed consent or research information sheet. Further, the researcher may consider including fewer distractor items to better maintain participant attention.

This minimal sample size severely limited the power of any effect or lack thereof. Part of the reason for this limited sample size was many participants’ incorrect answers to several of the attention items. This study originally had 44 responses but only 16 qualified for data analysis because of these incorrect answers. One recommendation for future iterations of this study is to

debrief participants about the presence of these attention items and to emphasize their importance to the use of their responses. Future studies should operate with a much larger sample size than this study was able to obtain and emphasize the importance of answering the attention items truthfully even if they seem silly.

This study also focused on adults ages 18-30, controlling for intergenerational influences. Future studies could investigate these potential influences by sampling other age groups. On the basis of historical and institutional prejudice, there is the potential for a greater difference in the dependent variables of this study depending on sexual orientation.

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Appendix A

Moderator Variables: Participant Identity and Familiarity with Population

Answer the following questions as honestly as you are able.

1. With which sexual label do you more closely identify?
    a. Straight
    b. Queer
    c. Prefer not to say
2. With which gender do you more closely identify?
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Non-binary/third gender
    d. Prefer not to say
3. How frequently do you interact with the queer community in person?
    a. Never
    b. Rarely
    c. Sometimes
    d. Often
    e. Always
4. How frequently do you interact with queer media?
    a. Never
    b. Rarely
    c. Sometimes
    d. Often

e. Always

Appendix B

Moderator Variables: Familiarity with Genre

Rate on a scale from 0 to 6 how familiar you are with each of the following programs (0 = *not at all*, 6 = *seen every episode*)

1. What We Do In The Shadows
2. Buffy the Vampire Slayer
3. Supernatural
4. Hannibal
5. Interview with the Vampire
6. American Horror Story
7. The Haunting of Bly Manor
8. Shadowhunters
9. True Blood
10. Chucky
11. Yellowjackets
12. Stranger Things

Appendix C

Vignettes

Character A

Character A is highly educated. He plays multiple instruments, he is an incredible cook, he loves the opera, appreciates history, and is well traveled and cultured. He is very well-endowed financially. He is very confident and knows his worth. He is obsessed with his boyfriend. He and his boyfriend have known each other for many years. Their conversations are long and philosophical and they genuinely enjoy each other's company. Their arguments are explosive and frequent, affecting everyone around them. They always come back to each other, even after the most extreme conflict. Character A has a troubled past, riddled with trauma and grief. He is in a position to help others, but abuses this position. He manipulates every situation to his benefit without regard to others' lives and well-being. He has little to no remorse and his only regrets arise when his actions negatively impact himself.

Character B

Character B is highly educated. He plays multiple instruments, he is an incredible cook, he loves the opera, appreciates history, and is well traveled and cultured. He is well-endowed financially. He is very confident and knows his worth. He is obsessed with his girlfriend. He and his girlfriend have known each other for many years. Their conversations are long and philosophical and they genuinely enjoy each other's company. Their arguments are explosive and frequent, affecting everyone around them. They always come back to each other, even after the most extreme conflict. He has a troubled past, riddled with trauma and grief. He is in a position to help others, but abuses this position. He manipulates every situation to his benefit without regard to

others' lives and well-being. He has little to no remorse and his only regrets arise when his actions negatively impact himself.

Appendix D

Social Comparison survey

Read the character description presented and answer the following questions as honestly as you can.

1. How successful is this character?
    a. Not at all
    b. Slightly
    c. Moderately
    d. Very
    e. Extremely
2. How successful are you?
    a. Not at all
    b. Slightly
    c. Moderately
    d. Very
    e. Extremely
3. How attractive is this character?
    a. Not at all
    b. Slightly
    c. Moderately
    d. Very
    e. Extremely
4. How attractive are you?

   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Moderately
   d. Very
   e. Extremely

5. How unpleasant is this character? (R)
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Moderately
   d. Very
   e. Extremely

6. How unpleasant are you?
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Moderately
   d. Very
   e. Extremely

7. How egotistical is this character? (R)
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Moderately
   d. Very
   e. Extremely

8. How egotistical are you?
    a. Not at all
    b. Slightly
    c. Moderately
    d. Very
    e. Extremely
9. How lovable is this character?
    a. Not at all
    b. Slightly
    c. Moderately
    d. Very
    e. Extremely
10. How lovable are you?
    a. Not at all
    b. Slightly
    c. Moderately
    d. Very
    e. Extremely
11. How much better is this character than other people?
    a. Not at all
    b. Slightly
    c. Moderately
    d. Very

e. Extremely

12. How much better are you than other people?

a. Not at all

b. Slightly

c. Moderately

d. Very

e. Extremely

13. How similar to this character are you in intelligence?

a. Very different

b. Somewhat different

c. Somewhat similar

d. Very similar

14. How similar to this character are you in attractiveness?

a. Very different

b. Somewhat different

c. Somewhat similar

d. Very similar

15. How similar to this character are you in competence?

a. Very different

b. Somewhat different

c. Somewhat similar

d. Very similar

16. How similar to this character are you in empathy?

a. Very different
b. Somewhat different
c. Somewhat similar
d. Very similar

17. How similar are you to this character in arrogance?

a. Very different
b. Somewhat different
c. Somewhat similar
d. Very similar

18. How similar are you to this character in unpleasantness?

a. Very different
b. Somewhat different
c. Somewhat similar
d. Very similar

19. How similar are you to this character in dishonesty?

a. Very different
b. Somewhat different
c. Somewhat similar
d. Very similar

20. How similar are you to this character in manipulativeness?

a. Very different
b. Somewhat different
c. Somewhat similar

d. Very similar

21. How happy do you feel right now?

a. Not at all

b. Slightly

c. Moderately

d. Very

e. Extremely

22. How anxious do you feel right now?

a. Not at all

b. Slightly

c. Moderately

d. Very

e. Extremely

23. How comfortable are your shoes?

a. Not at all

b. Slightly

c. Moderately

d. Very

e. Extremely

24. Coffee or tea?

a. Coffee

b. Tea

25. How much do you enjoy public transportation?

a. None at all

b. A little

c. A moderate amount

d. A lot

e. A great deal

26. Stairs or elevator?

a. Stairs

b. Elevator

27. How obsessive is your personality?

a. Not at all

b. Slightly

c. Moderately

d. Very

e. Extremely

28. How popular were you in high school?

a. Not at all

b. Slightly

c. Moderately

d. Very

e. Extremely

29. How many siblings do you have?

a. 0-1

b. 2-3

c. 4-5

d. 6+

30. Chicken or beef?

a. Chicken

b. Beef

31. Red or blue?

a. Red

b. Blue

32. Read a book or watch TV?

a. Book

b. TV

33. Dogs or cats?

a. Dogs

b. Cats

34. How often do you drink?

a. Never

b. Rarely

c. Sometimes

d. Often

e. Always

35. How did you hear about this study?

a. Flier

b. Reddit

c. A friend

d. Other

36. Are you closer to your mom or your dad?

a. Mom

b. Dad

c. Neither

37. How many of your grandparents are still alive?

a. 0

b. 1

c. 2

d. 3

e. 4

f. Don’t know

38. How do you like your steak?

a. Rare

b. Medium rare

c. Medium

d. Medium well

e. Well done

39. How often do you read?

a. Never

b. Rarely

c. Sometimes

d. Often

e. Always

40. Are you a night owl or an early bird?

a. Night owl

b. Early bird

c. Neither

41. How should chicken nuggets be cooked?

a. Microwave

b. Oven

42. Art or science?

a. Art

b. Science

43. Would you rather live in the city or the country?

a. City

b. Country

44. iPhone or Android?

a. iPhone

b. Android

45. Would you rather be famous or completely anonymous?

a. Famous

b. Anonymous

46. Team Edward or Team Jacob?

a. Team Edward

b. Team Jacob

47. How often do you curse?

a. Never

b. Rarely

c. Sometimes

d. Often

e. Always

48. Have you ever worn wigs?

a. Yes

b. No

49. Would you own a Cybertruck if someone offered to pay for it?

a. Yes

b. No

50. Reese's pieces or M&Ms?

a. Reese's pieces

b. M&Ms

51. Can you touch your elbow with your tongue?

a. Yes

b. No

52. Can you fold your tongue into a taco?

a. Yes

b. No

53. Do you prefer analog or digital clocks?

a. Analog

b. Digital

54. Have you ever met a celebrity?

a. Yes

b. No

55. How much do you dread public speaking?

a. None at all

b. A little

c. A moderate amount

d. A lot

e. A great deal

56. How much do you enjoy Red Lobster?

a. None at all

b. A little

c. A moderate amount

d. A lot

e. A great deal

57. How happy do manatees make you?

a. Not at all

b. Slightly

c. Moderately

d. Very

e. Extremely

58. Converse or Doc Martens?

    a. Converse

    b. Doc Martens

59. This character has a healthy relationship with their partner.

    a. Strongly disagree

    b. Somewhat disagree

    c. Neither agree nor disagree

    d. Somewhat agree

    e. Strongly agree

60. I would get along with this character

    a. Strongly disagree

    b. Somewhat disagree

    c. Neither agree nor disagree

    d. Somewhat agree

    e. Strongly agree

61. This character is…

    a. Queer

    b. Straight

62. What color is the ocean?

    a. Pink

    b. Red

    c. Yellow

    d. Blue

63. Who wrote *Romeo and Juliet*?

    a. Sabrina Carpenter

    b. William Shakespeare

    c. God

    d. George Washington

64. What unit of measurement is part of the metric system?

    a. Dollar

    b. Yen

    c. Meter

    d. Rupi

65. Coldest season?

    a. 1978

    b. 1452

    c. 2013

    d. Winter

66. Which of these is not a flower?

    a. Rose

    b. Lilac

    c. Tulip

    d. Piano

67. What planet are we on?

    a. Pluto

    b. Earth

c. A comet

d. The Sun

68. Fire is…

a. Sad

b. Green

c. A type of fish

d. Hot

69. A tomato is a…

a. Musical instrument

b. Brand of shoe

c. Fruit

d. Writing utensil

70. In British cars, the steering wheel is…

a. Not there

b. On the roof

c. On the right

71. How old do you have to be to drink alcohol in Europe?

a. 5

b. 18

c. 100

d. 65

72. Denmark is in…

a. Europe

b. My house

c. Antarctica

d. The sky

73. Which of these is not a soda?

a. Root beer

b. Coca-cola

c. Lava

d. Sprite

74. This character appreciates…

a. Matthew McConaughey

b. History

c. The color chartreuse

d. Spongebob