ABSTRACT
An investigation on how queer representation in mass media impacts the attitudes of queer and cisgender/heterosexual children on queer individuals.

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Recently, there has been increasing representation of LGBTQIA characters in mass media (Note: LGBTQIA stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Transgender, Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual. This is group is highly diverse and each subgroup faces unique challenges with regards to stereotyping and discrimination. For simplicity, LGBTQIA will be referred to as queer for the rest of this paper. It is necessary to acknowledge this group is by no means homogeneous. Also, it is important to note the word queer was a pejorative term towards LGBTQIA individuals for decades. The community has begun to reclaim this word and are reframing it in a positive manner). The media monitoring organization Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) reported in “Where We Are on TV Report: 2005 - 2006 Season,” that by their estimates queer characters represented less than 2% of all characters on broadcast networks (GLAAD Media Institute, 2018). As of the 2019-2020 television season 10.2% of all regular characters on primetime scripted broadcast shows were queer: the highest number found since the report began (GLAAD Media Institute, 2019).

This is significant because queer representation in traditional media often relies on outdated stereotypes, homophobia as a joke, or ignores queer subgroups. The default portrayals of queer characters have traditionally been defined solely by their sexual orientation, lacking character development, objects of ridicule, or the punchline of jokes (Media Smarts, 2014). Overall, queer representation in mass media has become more positive. However, old stereotypes persist. Despite increased representation, in GLAAD’s “Accelerating Acceptance 2019” Executive Summery, the group found a decrease in people’s comfort levels with queer people in personal situations, as well
as an increase in queer individuals reporting discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity. What was interesting was the decrease of comfort levels in people ages 18-34 (see Figure 1 below) (GLAAD Media Institute, 2019).
Figure 1 details the results of GLAAD’s 2019 “Accelerating Acceptance” survey showing an increase in discomfort with queer people has slowed for the general population but has increased with younger people, especially young males. In the past, this age group was considered Allies, being comfortable with queer individuals in virtually all situations. These results indicate this age group has moved to Detached Supporters whose comfort is varied depending on the situation. Note that support for queer rights remains strong (GLAAD Media Institute, 2019, p. 2).
It is currently unknown why there has been a decrease in comfort with queer individuals amongst younger people. This phenomenon seems especially confusing given the vast majority of respondents indicated strong support for equal rights. With higher visibility in mass media, the assumption is discomfort would lessen. It is generally accepted that positive exposure to marginalized groups tends to lead to greater acceptance over time. Mass media plays a significant role in shaping societal perceptions and current queer representation is shifting individual attitudes (Comer, Bower, & Sparkman, 2015). This representation must impact queer individuals, especially queer youth, in negative ways. Synthesizing these ideas leads to the question: How does the representation of queer characters, or lack thereof, in mass media impact both queer and cisgender/heterosexual children and emerging adults’ attitudes towards queer individuals? This question might be able to fill a gap in knowledge on this issue stemming from an area of neglected research. It is believed current mass media queer representation perpetuates social stigma against queer individuals, leading to real-world consequences for this community, while newer affirming representation can positively affect both queer and cisgender/heterosexual youth.
When it comes to queer representation in mass media, the issues are more complicated than stereotypes alone. In order to explore the potential effects of queer representation on the attitudes of youth, multiple opinions must be explored. Listed below are four distinct but interrelated perspectives on how mass media could influence the opinions of young people on queer individuals.

- **Position 1**: Children and young adult media should be devoid of representations of sexuality of any type, either heterosexual or queer. Since heterosexuality isn’t explicitly portrayed in children’s programming, then queer representation should not be either.

- **Position 2**: Queer representation in mass media can be puzzling to young people, making them question their sexuality or gender expression. Young people are highly influenced by the media they consume. To avoid confusion, queer representation in mass media should be eliminated.

- **Position 3**: The typical manner in which traditional media has portrayed queer characters is not particularly helpful with regards to the well-being of queer youth and reinforces stereotyping in cisgender/heterosexual youth.

- **Position 4**: There is increasing queer representation in mass media, including content aimed at younger audiences. Since this is a new phenomenon, no one is certain of the impact it will have on younger audiences’ attitudes towards the queer community.
The methodology used to address these positions was a literature review for each position utilizing academic, peer-reviewed journal articles, and books whenever possible. It must be acknowledged some groups cited in this review cannot be considered scientifically or academically credible. Ultimately, it was decided they are credible sources of their own policy positions and should be included.
Position 1 suggests mass media targeted for young audiences should be devoid of queer representation because it suggests sexual content. It is widely assumed children’s media is completely free of sexual content in any form (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). However, according to the work of Kenney, Martin, and Kazyak, representations of sexuality in children’s programming is pervasive and mostly heteronormative. Kenney focused on live action children’s television shows with TV-Y or TV-G ratings. Martin and Kazyak studied G rated films form 1990-2005, all grossing 100 million dollars or more.

Kenney discovered out of all of the television the episodes reviewed two thirds (14 out of 21) primarily focused on themes pertaining to heterosexual romantic relationships. 38% had an emphasis of obtaining a heterosexual romantic partner, and the social importance of having one. All of these episodes enforced the idea that one can find happiness by finding a heterosexual romantic partner, which implicitly states the inverse when it comes to a same sex partner or a cross-sexual one (Kenney, 2013). Television is far more pervasive in day to day life than other media, making it important to analyze the hetero-romantic content present in programming children see every day (Kenney, 2013).

Martin and Kazyak analyzed 20 children’s movies for elements of hetero-romantic plots and overt displays of heterosexuality in the forms of sexiness of characters and ogling women’s bodies. Aspects which were analyzed were “story lines, images, scenes, songs, or dialogue that depicted anything about sexuality, including depictions of bodies, kissing, jokes, romance, weddings, dating, love, where babies come from, and pregnancy,” (Martin & Kazyak, 2009, pp.
321-323). All of them except for two had references hetero-romantic story lines, nine had these relationships as the major plot focus, with the remaining nine containing them as minor plots. Eight had mentions of character’s sexiness and ten featured scenes where males were ogling women’s bodies, (see Table 1 below) (Martin & Kazyak, 2009).

Table 1 shows the results of Martin’s and Kazyak’s analysis of the top 20 children’s films from the years 1990-2005. As it can be seen virtually all of the movies had depictions of heteronormativity in the form of prominent hetero-romantic plots. What is more interesting, is the explicit displays of heterosexuality in terms of sexiness and ogling women (Martin & Kazyak, 2009, p. 322).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Produced By</th>
<th>Hetero-Romantic Story Line</th>
<th>Heterosexuality</th>
<th>Ogling of Women's Bodies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Any Reference</td>
<td>Major Plot</td>
<td>Minor Plot</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chicken Little</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Polar Express</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Castle Rock</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding Nemo</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Disney/Pixar</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>The Santa Clause 2</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monsters, Inc.</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Disney/Pixar</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>The Princess Diaries</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chicken Run</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Dreamworks</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>Tarzan</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Toy Story 2</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Disney/Pixar</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A Bug's Life</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Disney/Pixar</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mulan</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<td>The Rugrats Movie</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Nickelodeon</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>101 Dalmatians</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>The Hunchback of Notre Dame</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toy Story</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Disney/Pixar</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pocahontas</td>
<td>1995/2005</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Lion King</td>
<td>1994/2002</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Aladdin</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beauty and the Beast</td>
<td>1991/2002</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Little Mermaid</td>
<td>1989/1997</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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Position 2 tends to get a lot of media attention, due to the large social media presence of the groups who espouse it. Littman performed an exploratory study on how parents in online forums reported rapid onset of gender dysphoria in their adolescent children who belonged to peer groups including transgender individuals. Parents claimed this coincided with increased social media use before their teenager’s announcement of transgender identity. The purpose of Littman’s study was to collect parent’s perspectives, experiences, and observations in order to develop hypotheses as to the sudden expression of gender dysphoria (Littman, 2018).

Littman explored if queer representation in mass media is an imitable behavior, using a 90-question survey of multiple choice and open-ended questions. The survey was placed on websites where parents had reported rapid onset of gender dysphoria in their teenagers. A total of 256 responses were analyzed. The parents reported 62.5% of their teenagers were diagnosed with a mental health disorder prior to onset. Only 36.8% of all cases parents described their teenagers having peer groups with a majority of transgender individuals. Some relational aspects studied were decline in mental health (47.2%), parent-child relationships (57.3%), distancing from non-transgender friends (25.0%), and isolating from family members (49.4%) (Littman, 2018).

Littman developed a few hypotheses to explain the results: the possibility of a new subcategory of gender dysphoria, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and the possibility of social media influences. The last being of particular relevance as it appears to validate position 2. The group One Million Moms fully believes queer representation will lead to imitation of behavior in children and young adults. The Active Campaigns section of their website contains 21 media productions they are attempting to have removed or boycotted; ten of these are being campaigned against due to queer representation. The group has successfully influenced media companies to
change or remove content with queer representation (One Million Moms, 2020). Most recently, the Hallmark Channel removed an advertisement for the wedding company Zola, featuring a lesbian couple. The other ads from the same company featuring heterosexual couples were still allowed to air. Hallmark quickly reversed its position and reinstated the ad after a public outcry (Rozsa, 2019). It is questionable if One Million Moms has as much influence as they claim, but they are able to influence the behavior of media companies.
Position 3 asks how traditional queer representation in mass media affects the well-being of queer youth. Two studies were evaluated in this emerging area of research. Comer, Bower, and Sparkman explored popular cultures’ impact on society’s view on the queer community through video representations. McInroy and Craig studied how young people are impacted by the consumption of the queer messages delivered in traditional and online media.

Comer et al. had a small group of college students (seven total) watch a slideshow with facts on the queer community and a video with representations of queer characters on television. The participants answered questions about personal impact and the accuracy of queer representation they were shown. Students reported the media portrayed queer individuals in negative ways, due to the absence of transgender and bisexual characters, unrealistic relationships, and casual homophobia. This indicates from participants’ perspectives, current queer media representation is still largely negative (Comer, Bower, & Sparkman, 2015).

McInroy and Craig specifically recruited queer individuals for their study (19 total), asked how they perceive queer representation in mass media, and how it affects them personally. The participants revealed current portrayal of queer people is one-dimensional, stereotypical, and ignores most queer subgroups. The authors believe current representation limits participants perceptions of possible future trajectories, and offers few opportunities for critique by queer young adults. Interestingly enough, social media was found to have more affirming representation than traditional media; offering more spaces for discussion and creativity in content production (McInroy & Craig, 2017).
Position 4 admits since positive queer representation in mass media is new, no one really knows the impact it has on young people. However, it would be expected that increased constructive exposure would lead to greater acceptance over time. The research Gillig and Murphy performed wanted to explore the reactions and opinions from viewing affirming queer representation for perhaps the first time.

The authors created an online quasi experiment which included 469 participants, ages 13-21, who watched a media portrayal of two 13-year-old gay male characters. The participants filled out a questionnaire which measured attitudes towards queer people and issues, identification with the main characters, prior exposure, emotional response, religious affiliation, gender identity, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Gillig and Murphy found that “for the LGBTQ youth, the story evoked hope and fostered positive attitudes; however, it tended to produce a boomerang effect among heterosexual/cisgender youth, eliciting the emotion of disgust and leading to significantly more negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues,” (Gillig & Murphy, 2016, p. 3828). The self-identified gender of the participant was the main factor in emotional response and identification with the characters (See Figures 2 and 3 below) (Gillig & Murphy, 2016).
Figure 2 shows the reported attitudes towards queer individuals and issues after watching the video, compared with a control group who did not watch the video. A 1 on this scale represents a more negative attitude and 5 a more positive one. These results indicate that affirming queer representation in media has an encouraging effect on queer youth, but the opposite effect on cisgender/heterosexual youth. It is believed depictions of characters which involve gender nonconformity and physical affection might be the cause of discomfort in cisgender/heterosexual youth (Gillig & Murphy, 2016, p. 3841 3842).
Figure 3 depicts how the groups identified with the main characters, Jude and Connor with 1 being very little identification and 10 being highly identified. As it can be seen, queer youth across all groups identified with both characters significantly more than their cisgender/heterosexual counterparts. This suggests queer youth saw themselves reflected in the characters and their story (Gillig & Murphy, 2016, pp. 3842-3843).
Synthesizing the research from all four positions, it is possible to determine the broader social implications on queer representation in mass media. However, before this can be addressed the implications of the research from each position must be explored individually.

The results of the two studies reviewed are evidence that position 1 is untrue and cannot be used as a justification for excluding queer representation from children’s media. Children’s programing, both television and films, have explicit heteronormative representation. Believing children’s programing is devoid of all sexual representation is a taken-for-granted assumption which goes unnoticed since heteronormativity is the default. The small amount of queer representation in children’s media gains so much attention is because it is noticeable given the default of heteronormativity. These studies do agree with positions 2 and 3 but arrive at entirely different conclusion. Children are influenced by the messages they receive from the mass media, but the media is full of heteronormative romantic relationships. This messaging erases the possibility of queer relationships, and it socializes queer children that desiring a different type of relationship is not normal. This kind of normalization of heterosexuality as the desirable default has significant negative implications on the mental health of queer children.

While Littman’s research seems to be evidence for position 2 and One Million Mom’s ideas, the editors at PLOS ONE issued a formal statement on the study. Most notably it stated that psychological distress is not central to new gender incongruity. It offered plausible explanations for the anxiety experienced by the parents, and stated gender variability is not the same as being transgender. Most notably, it called out transphobia as being prevalent and has negative impacts
on parents, children, and society (Costa, 2019). Still, the study concludes media can have an impact on youth’s perceptions, just as the studies in positions 1 and 3 did. However, the idea that sexual orientation and transgender identity being caused by mass media and peer pressure is an unwarranted inference attempting to justify a previously dominant ideology, which has lessened in influence over time. One Million Moms attempts of using selection of their ideal heteronormative couples and omission of queer ones, does not erase real queer individuals, but it does change the perspectives of viewing audiences. This can have real world consequences.

The research for position 3 seems to validate the idea that current queer representation in mass media has an overall negative impact on queer individuals. Both studies agreed there was a lack of representation overall, and what was shown was often negative. For the vast history of mass media, negative queer representation has been the norm and stands in stark contrast to the real-life experiences of queer people. This indicates there is a real-world — media-world gap which has gone unnoticed by the general population. This appears to be a neglected area of study which deserves attention. The authors of both cited papers admitted their studies were very small and work more as a starting point for further inquiry. There is an important contrast between the two studies: while they both showed traditional media has mostly negative queer representation, online media offers far more supportive representations.

As for the study for position 4, the authors noted the video the participants watched was most likely their first exposure towards queer representation. Given the ages of the participants, they probably have a well-developed concept of societal norms from media already and gay representation fell outside of those norms. The prominent terms identified such as hope, disgust, and negative attitudes are all polysemic: each identified from the same media therefore, multiple
interpretations of queer media exist. How young people reacted is dependent on their interpretive framework of life and social experience. Still, their results indicate the positive effects on queer youth were far greater than the negative results reported by the heterosexual group (Gillig & Murphy, 2016). However, the idea of children seeing queer representation, and therefore queer people as a societal norm is exactly what proponents of position 2 are afraid of. They see this as a threat to their ideology of what the media should look like. This study agrees with the studies from the previous three positions in that watching queer themes in media affects attitudes towards the community.

Mental health issues differ for queer people compared to cisgender/heterosexual individuals in a myriad of different ways: including higher than average reporting of depression, anxiety, violence, and suicide attempts. The stigma the community faces is caused by the persistent stigma against having a queer identity in Western Culture (see Figure 4 below) (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). Since queer representation in mass media is still overwhelmingly negative, the stereotypes reinforce a sense of otherness to the general population. This normalization of the otherness of queer people starts in childhood, due to the media which they consume. The positive effects of affirming queer media are greater than the negative ones overall, and it is believed over time the negative effects will diminish in the cisgender/heterosexual population. While currently affirming queer representation has mixed results, evidence indicates greater representation in mass media will have a favorable effect on all individuals going forward.
Figure 4 shows the average number of anxious and depressed days experienced by heterosexuals and queer subgroups. Both emotions are significantly higher for the queer subgroups except for anxiety in gays and lesbians. This figure also shows suicidal thoughts is significantly higher in queer subgroups. These results are important since the queer community is a small population (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). Note: These statistics result from a study performed by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health in conjunction with the APA, but report on the incidence of mental health struggles of the queer community on a national level.
A RAINBOW ACROSS THE AIRWAVES

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Queer representation in media impacts real people. The old stereotypes which reinforced public perceptions of the queer community still linger. Since mass media is a socializing agent which shapes societal norms, media companies have a responsibility to increase positive queer representations. This can be achieved by ensuring representations are accurate, inclusive, diverse, and fair across all forms of mass media. To this end, GLAAD has a dedicated staff who advocate to and consult with media executives and content creators to include diverse queer characters and voices. This effort is attempting to generate conversations about queer individuals and issues amongst family, friends, and even coworkers (GLAAD Media Institute, 2020).

To further the goals of affirming and inclusive queer representation in mass media, GLAAD produces two annual reports. The first, mentioned earlier, is the “Where We Are on TV,” the second is the “Studio Responsibility Index.” This second report maps the quality of queer representation in the media produced by seven major movie studios along with several of their subsidiaries. The report serves as a map for these studios to increase positive queer representation in their movies. GLAAD reviews all of the movies produced by the major studios assessing the quantity, diversity, and quality of queer representation then assigns the studio a grade ranging from excellent to failing. (see Figure 5 below) (GLAAD Media Institute, 2019).
Figure 5 shows the results from the 2019 “Studio Responsibility Index.” The movies from each studio were analyzed for total number of queer inclusive films, as well as how queer characters are portrayed when present. As it can be seen from the seven major movie studios, most are lacking in affirming queer representation (GLAAD Media Institute, 2019, p. 3).
Unlike film, television has seen dramatic increases in affirming queer representation in both broadcast and streaming services and especially children’s programing. Just a sampling of children’s shows which have prominent queer characters and storylines are: *Steven Universe* and *Clarence* on Cartoon Network, *The Legend of Korra* and *The Loud House* on Nickelodeon, as well as *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* on Netflix. This list is by no means exhaustive and does not include queer representation in primetime television series which has also seen large increases. The reason for highlighting children’s programming is because queer and heterosexual youth stand to benefit the most from viewing affirming queer content from mass media. It is believed if they see affirming queer representation as a societal norm, then they could also perceive the queer community within the societal norm leading to greater acceptance. This could result in increased mental health and lower discrimination for the queer community as a whole.

Traditionally speaking, large mass media companies are not receptive to appeals to change their behaviors simply because it is the right thing to do. However, they have been responsive to changes in consumer demand and negative public perceptions. An excellent example of this was given in position 3. The Hallmark Channel dropped an advertisement when they received complaints from One Million Moms, only to reverse their position and reinstate the ad when the negative backlash of its removal was greater than the initial protest. The outpouring of queer ally support generated enough negative press to get the company to change its behavior. As it was shown in Figure 5, film studios are not keeping pace with television in terms of the amount and quality of queer representation. Since their movies make billions in revenue from global distribution, it is unlikely studios will change their behaviors without external financial pressure.
The Hallmark Channel example provides a possible pathway forward in how this might be done. Up until this point, calls for more affirming inclusion in film by queer individuals have largely gone ignored. This could be due to the small size of this population. If a boycott was started by the community alone, it would have an insignificant impact on studios’ revenue. However, if allies were made more aware of studios’ intentional omissions and negative queer portrayal, then there might be enough combined voices to make a difference.

This could be achieved with wider distribution of the findings of GLAAD’s “Studio Responsibility Index” to the general public; starting with circulating press releases of the report to queer and ally news organizations, especially those with heavy online presence. It is not enough to simply present the index’s conclusions. It must be framed that movie studios are intentionally disregarding the idea of including queer characters and avoiding taking steps to make what little representation there is more affirming. This should be presented though the lens of ignoring the equality of the queer community. Once enough online dialogue is generated about this issue, there is a greater likelihood that larger news organizations will report on the topic. Large for-profit news companies are typically very careful in how they will present a story. They are far more concerned with the possibility of losing viewership, and therefore advertising revenue. However, if the call for greater inclusion is the dominant voice in the online discussion, then news companies will see it as a story with public support. This could lessen their concern over the story being considered controversial. Once there is enough negative press on how queer characters are omitted or stereotypically portrayed in films, movie studios may perceive that their current behaviors are hurting the profitability of their products. If they believe their bottom line is at risk, they will begin the process of creating more inclusive and affirming queer content.
It is true a cisgender/heterosexuality identity is the prevalent one in the general population. This means most individuals, including media executives and content creators, are often not aware of the impacts that negative representation has on the queer community. The default of heteronormativity creates an insular environment where queer perspectives are omitted simply because they cannot be heard. Still, television has shown that affirming queer representation is marketable content. While the film industry has been slow to adapt to this idea, given enough pressure and time, it is likely to follow suit. Mass media companies are often of the position that they are not in business to promote specific ideologies, but they must realize their products have harmful real-world effects on the mental and physical health of a marginalized group. The fix for this is simple: create more affirming queer media and distribute it to the general population. The positive benefits of positive queer representation in mass media for all members of society are a call to action for media companies to increase accurate, diverse, and affirming queer content in all categories of mass media for all age groups.


