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Successful Minority Representations on TV Count: A Quantitative Content Analysis Approach

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies provide critical analyses of TV minority representations but only few examine successful portrayals. Moreover, there is no consensus on what makes a given depiction successful and how to measure it. Bringing insights from representation studies and media psychology, we propose that successful representations showcase minorities in a way which may foster audience engagement with characters and improve their diversity attitudes. In the current project, we developed a quantitative content analysis codebook with the following representation strategies: portrayal of minority experiences, recognizable representation, attractive representation, psychological depth, stereotypical representation, and friendly interactions. We demonstrate our approach by analyzing the portrayal of non-heterosexual and Black characters in *Sex Education*. We coded all the scenes with Eric, Adam, and Jackson from the first season of the TV show. Results indicate that these characters are predominantly shown as recognizable to viewers and in friendly interactions with other people. Moreover, they are depicted with attractive personality traits, and indicators of psychological depth. They also undergo various minority experiences. Some stereotypes about gay men are shown but anti-Black stereotypes are rare. In the results' discussion, we suggest different ways of using our codebook in future studies.

KEYWORDS

Media psychology; minority representation; gay representation; black representation; quantitative content analysis

The number of TV characters representing different ethnic and sexual identities increased in the past decades (GLAAD, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Yet, scholars continue to critique these depictions. For instance, Avila-Saavedra (2009) laments that so-called queer TV does not highlight queer culture. Additionally, Martens and Póvoa (2017) argue that Shonda Rhimes's series do not portray struggles with anti-black racism. Others try to provide general guidelines for evaluating underprivileged characters'

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representations. Already in 1985, Alice Bechdel proposed that there should be at least two women in a movie, who talk with each other about something unrelated to men (Berman, 2016). Nowadays, this approach is called Bechdel test. GLAAD proposed a similar litmus test for LGBTQ characters (Berman, 2016). According to the standard called Vito Russo test, at least one character should identify as LGBTQ person but have qualities unrelated to their sexual or gender identity and their role should be critical for the plot. Still, there is not enough in-depth, systematic knowledge on what a successful minority representation constitutes and how to portray minority characters that attract different audience members.

Methodological choices in representation studies can explain why there is little scholarly consensus on the specific aspects of successful minority portrayals. A bulk of research follows qualitative approaches, which give excellent tools for an in-depth analysis of individual media content pieces. Nonetheless, such methods do not easily allow for providing generalizable recommendations on minority portrayals across different TV shows. Admittedly, some research employs a more prescriptive approach to representation. For example, Capuzza and Spencer (2017) recommend an inclusion of narratives that show transgender people actively resisting transphobia. Similarly, Avila-Saavedra (2009) suggests that LGBTQ characters who are not white and gay should be televised more often. Furthermore, Mittell (2015, pp. 132–142) argues that the presence of characters who develop and grow over time defines contemporary high-quality TV shows. Accordingly, qualitative research can be used to develop recommendations for better minority portrayals. Nonetheless, to do so effectively, a literature review gathering different critiques of existing minority portrayals is needed.

Positive audience engagement with minority characters can be another hallmark of a successful ethnic and sexual minorities' depiction. Thus, we draw on studies in media psychology that offer valuable insights on how audiences receive and process entertainment content. Konijn and Hoorn (2005) demonstrated that appreciation of characters depends on various psychological processes experienced by the viewers. In turn, these processes can be linked to different ways of portraying media characters. For instance, strong parasocial relationships (i.e., one-sided relationships experienced by viewers toward media personas) contribute to the enjoyment of TV content (Baldwin & Raney, 2021). Media psychology research identified different types of content that can help viewers develop parasocial interactions. According to Tukachinsky et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis, such engagement happens when characters have an attractive personality and show similarities to audience members. A media psychology approach, while relatively uncommon in representation studies, can be useful for conceptualizing successful minority portrayals.

Besides entertaining viewers, successful minority character representations can play a role in improving diversity attitudes. Previous research shows that exposure to certain minority depictions can contribute to prejudice reduction (Banas et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2022; Żerebecki et al., 2021). For these effects to take place, audiences need to engage with characters positively (Wong et al., 2022). Moreover, characters should be shown in ways that defy negative stereotypes and that can teach audiences how to develop friendly interactions with diverse others (Żerebecki et al., 2021). In sum, our definition of successful minority representations relies on three criteria. First, such portrayals follow recommendations derived from various in-depth studies of individual minority portrayals; second, they are likely to trigger audience engagement; and third, they can improve viewers' diversity attitudes.

The present study has two goals. First, we aim to create a quantitative content analysis codebook to assess minority representation. Our approach synthesizes insights from media psychology and representation studies to propose a set of criteria that other scholars can use in further analyses. In this study, we analyze the representation of gay and Black men. Still, the identified representation strategies can be extended to other minorities as well. We elaborate on this point in the discussion section. Importantly, we focus on multiple narrative strategies that we identified as successful, and thus go beyond merely counting LGBTQ characters in TV shows, which can be reductive and does not suffice to establish whether the shows are LGBTQ-friendly (Vanlee et al., 2020, p. 20). We acknowledge that different audience members can have vastly different interpretations of scenes with minority members, which might lead to different understandings of success in representation. Still, we propose a common framework that can help other scholars analyze and compare depictions of marginalized people in different entertainment media pieces.

Our second aim is to demonstrate how to use our codebook to assess minority representation. Thus, we conducted a short study of minority representation in the first season of *Sex Education*. To ensure validity of the analysis, we study three male characters that are either non-heterosexual, Black, or both.

Minorities on TV

In the following section, we examine the state-of-the-art research on the onscreen representation of gay men, and the state-of-the-art research on Black men's representation. This review allows us to establish both the critiqued and praised narrative features in the existing TV depictions. Subsequently, we discuss media psychology literature to identify minority representation strategies that could enhance audience engagement and improve diversity attitudes.

Gay men onscreen

Historically, the representation of non-heterosexual people has been laden with negative stereotypes that still can be encountered presently. Such depictions include: flamboyant gay male best friends, muscular “beefcake” gay men, emotionless butch lesbians, and queer psychopaths (Chatterjee, 2016). A small turn in American representation of gay men took place in the 1970s when straight-acting gay characters were portrayed in a more likable manner (Stone, 2020). These early narratives focused on coming out to straight friends and seeking their approval. Such trends continued until the 1990s (Schulz, 2005). Finally, in recent years, stories that do not focus exclusively on the characters’ sexuality started emerging (Stone, 2020).

Since the visibility of gay men increased on television, two important tropes can be discerned: *representation of gay uniqueness* and *representation of gay sameness*. Gay uniqueness refers to challenges to assumptions about socially-accepted behaviors from men and women, in other words, heteronormativity. In general, studies remain critical of gay representation as being too complacent with social expectations (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Dhaenens, 2012, 2013). For instance, Avila-Saavedra (2009) points out how, in *Will & Grace*, Grace is shown to be the most important relationship in the life of Will, despite him having a boyfriend. In a similar vein, Dhaenens (2012) notices that David and Keith’s relationship in *Six Feet Under* follows a standard domestic trajectory of a middle-class heterosexual marriage. While there is a scope for improvement in representation, TV has some good examples of challenges to heteronormativity. Characters such as Lafayette from *True Blood* and Kurt from *Glee* are credited with being defiantly flamboyant in their expression of gayness (Boyer, 2011; Dhaenens, 2013). Despite facing discrimination, they stand up for themselves, challenge their bullies, and continue to be themselves, thus disregarding social pressures to conform. Even the previously mentioned David and Keith ridicule their performance of domestic roles and enjoy intimacy with a third partner, thus, breaking the heteronormative ideal (Dhaenens, 2012). In other words, the unique experiences of gay people are sometimes showcased onscreen.

Representation of gay sameness refers to similarity to other people. Vanlee et al. (2018, p. 8) used the term *queer sameness* to describe the portrayals of ordinary gay characters on Flemish television. Such characters are not successful urbanites but rather common citizens from different social classes who live in smaller places. The authors argue that same-sex attraction can be shown as equivalent to different-sex attraction. For instance, in a TV show *W817* gay character Steve never formally comes out. Still, he joins his female friends in rating men’s attractiveness, which makes his sexuality ordinary (Vanlee et al., 2018). Vanlee et al. (2018) also praised the show for focusing on same-sex couples’ intimacy and closeness rather than on their presumed difference from

other romantic relationships. Importantly, Flanders, a Northern region of Belgium, has a relatively long history of LGBTQ acceptance. The Flemish public broadcaster's mandate is to represent all citizens of Flanders and their diversity (Vanlee et al., 2018). Still, similar representations exist in other countries as well. For example, Irish TV featured some unremarked gay identities (Kerrigan & Vanlee, 2020; Kerrigan, 2021). In *Striking Out* the main character Ray is being driven to court by his apparent friend Steve. At the end of the scene, without any remarks, Steve kisses Ray. The show later reveals them to be boyfriends, however, their identities are not marked as special (Kerrigan, 2021). Finally, such depictions can also be found in the United States. In *Moesha*, Omar, one of the first Black teenage gay characters on TV, never formally comes out (Martin, 2015).

In sum, gay men's representation on TV has undergone tremendous changes. Scholars point out the need to show unique experiences of gay men more often. These could include challenges to heteronormativity. Other research shows that gay characters can be portrayed as ordinary. Such representation could be desirable because it normalizes homosexuality.

Black men onscreen

The history of the representation of Black people on Western television is comparable to the representation of gay people. However, changes in African American representation started much earlier. Already in the 1970s and 1980s scholars discussed the developments in Black people's representation (Raley & Lucas, 2006). Clark (1969 as cited in Raley & Lucas, 2006, p. 23) identified the following stages for TV portrayals: *non-representation, ridicule, regulation* (i.e., only certain socially acceptable portrayals are allowed), and *respect*. Analogically, Berry (1980 as cited in Raley & Lucas, 2006, p. 23) argued that the representation of African Americans started with *the stereotypic age*, then entered *the new awareness age*, and finally went into *the stabilization: the settled phase*. First, the media portrayed all Black people with negative stereotypes. Thereafter, they were given smaller supporting roles but were shown mostly positively. Only the last stage ushered in more realistic representations. For instance, the 1960s *Star Trek's* multiracial cast can be seen as a positive change in the new awareness age (Raley & Lucas, 2006). Recently, Tukachinsky et al. (2015) argued that ethnic minorities in the US are still portrayed stereotypically at times but there are more realistic and positive portrayals present as well.

A comprehensive review of the portrayal of Black people in American media is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we refer the interested readers to *Scripting the black masculine body* (Jackson, 2006). The book offers a historically-informed analysis of the stereotypical and racist portrayals of African American men dating back to minstrel theater productions and

including the early 21st century. Unfortunately, contemporary TV series repeat some of the same problems. For instance, in *Parenthood*, Alex a Black man in a relationship with a white woman, exhibits many negative stereotypes including violence, alcoholism, and hypersexualization (Castle Bell & Harris, 2017). The authors posit that this portrayal can reaffirm existing negative beliefs about Black people in the United States.

Recently, attention to the successful portrayals of Black people is increasing. Stamps (2021) discussed different TV shows, which stand out with realistic, positive, and non-stereotypical representations. Randall Pearson from *This is Us* is portrayed as a sensitive and vulnerable father. Similarly, Titus Andronicus from *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* is hard-working, but also boisterous and fully accepting of his queerness. Notably, though, while these characters are positive, they are not perfect and still experience difficulties. Such realistic representation is also featured in *Empire*, where Andre Lyon, enjoys professional success but suffers from depression at the same time (Smith-Frigerio, 2018).

There are certain analogies between contemporary representations of gay and Black men. Specifically, Black representation also embraces depictions of *cultural uniqueness* and *representations of similarity* to other members of society. Cultural uniqueness pertains to both positive experiences as well as social discrimination due to race. Ruiz and Cirugeda (2019) praised the representation in *Black-ish* for its celebration of Blackness. For instance, Dre, one of the main characters, often exalts typical Black American cuisine, calling it “soulicious.” The show also discusses the game of dozens, a banter-like, lighthearted insult exchange, popular among African Americans. Another example of cultural specificity is concerning the struggles of being Black. The movie *Fruitvale Station* portrays the last 24 hours of Oscar Grant III’s life before police killed him (Stamps, 2019). In contrast, the representation of Black people in *How to Get Away with Murder* is criticized for not showing the real problems of Black Americans (Martens & Póvoa, 2017). Arguably, the series do not show structural racism or present Black characters as culturally specific.

The other thread in Black people’s representation pertains to the similarity to others. The previously mentioned Dre from *Black-ish* enjoys working in an office with white colleagues but demands respect for his culture, i.e., he educates white colleagues on abusing black vernacular at work (Ruiz & Cirugeda, 2019). In this way, he can be seen as equivalent in merit but culturally distinct from the rest of society. Similarly, the Black characters in Shonda Rhimes’s series are often well-educated, and relatively well-off, similar to the white characters on the shows. For instance, *How to Get Away with Murder* has multiple Black law students at an elite university (Martens & Póvoa, 2017). The main character of the show is a Black female lawyer and professor. While showing characters

only as successful could lead to misrepresentation of the daily struggles of being African American, the depictions of affluent, integrated minority members could help viewers to see them as equivalent members of society.

In short, the representation of Black people underwent major developments, similar to gay representation. While high-quality representations start to become more common, scholars point out that Black characters are often portrayed without sufficient coverage of structural racism and cultural specificity. Still, some depictions manage to portray Black people as both culturally distinct but equal in merit and complexity to white characters.

Intersectionality of sexuality and race

Importantly, the representation of characters who are both gay and Black produces specific challenges. The intersectional perspective stresses that marginalized identities overlap and create unique experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Eguchi et al. (2014) analyze how *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom* deals with intersectionality. The movie follows a group of gay and Black friends, focusing on their celebrations of Noah's marriage to Wade. The narrative tries to highlight the cultural specificity of both identities. For instance, the title of the movie connects the LGBTQ struggle for marriage equality to civil rights. Jumping the broom was a declaration of marriage practiced among the enslaved people in the United States due to a lack of other legal ceremonies. Moreover, the movie shows different reactions to the marriage, including the religious mother of Wade who reluctantly accepts her son despite some reservations. Additionally, the plot shows different Black gay men including those who are adoptive parents, non-monogamous, or closeted hip-hop artists. Such attention to the unique experiences was largely lacking in the analyses of the previously mentioned characters like Lafayette from *True Blood*, Gus from *Moesha*, or Titus from *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*.

Developing the codebook

Based on the preceding discussion of gay and Black men representation, two major tropes come forth: uniqueness and sameness. Below, we connect those themes to existing media psychology literature (for instance, Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; National Research Group, 2020; Tukachinsky et al., 2020), and argue that they are desirable. We respectively call these strategies: representation of minority experiences, and representation of characters as recognizable. These two codes check whether, on the one hand, minority characters are represented with specific experiences that resonate with minority viewers, and, on the other hand, are shown in ways that majority viewers can find familiar and reminiscent of their own lives.

Besides the previous tropes, we identified four other representation strategies based on literature reviews on diversity attitudes and media (Banas et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2022; Žerebecki et al., 2021), media engagement meta-analyses (Tukachinsky et al., 2020), and other empirical and theoretical studies (Bandura, 2009; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Mittell, 2015). These are attractive representation, representation of psychological depth, counter-stereotypical representation, and representation of friendly interactions with majority members. While individual audience members may react differently to such narrative strategies, the cited media psychology literature suggests that exposure to such depictions is associated with engagement with minority characters and diversity attitude improvement. Below we discuss all six codes in detail.

Representation of minority experiences

A common critique of the minority representation is that TV portrayals do not include the actual minority experiences. For instance, Black characters rarely struggle with structural racism (Martens & Póvoa, 2017). Similarly, gay characters are often straight-acting and rarely express their romantic or sexual attraction (Avila-Saavedra, 2009). A successful minority portrayal reflects the authentic experiences of the represented communities. For example, Black characters can be shown with their own cultural heritage, facing specific struggles with racism, while gay characters could be shown challenging heteronormative standards of behavior. Portraying the uniqueness of the represented groups could help minority viewers enjoy these depictions (National Research Group, 2020). Moreover, non-minority viewers could find these depictions interesting because they can learn from them (Žerebecki et al., *in press*). Thus, content analyses could check whether TV shows contain situations that other minority members could find themselves in. In this research, for gay characters, the subcodes are used to check for the presence of a) challenges to heteronormative social expectations, b) portrayal of dating or romantic situations, c) growing self-acceptance as gay, d) coming out to friends and family, and e) challenges to social integration due to being gay. For Black characters, the subcodes check for the presence of a) Black cultural heritage, and b) challenges to social integration due to being Black.

Representation of characters as recognizable

One of the most important predictors of engagement with media characters is the perceived similarity between the character and the viewer (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Tukachinsky et al., 2020; Žerebecki et al., 2021). However, minority members, at first glance, could appear very different from majority members because of physical differences or specific life situations (Žerebecki et al., 2021). Therefore, we decided to use the term recognizable rather than similar. By recognizable representation, we mean a representation that evokes

a sense of familiarity despite some apparent differences like skin color or sexual orientation. It is hard to list all the different situations that could evoke a sense of recognizability. However, following discussions about queer sameness and unremarked gay identities (Kerrigan & Vanlee, 2020; Kerrigan, 2021; Vanlee et al., 2018), we argue that ordinary, daily experiences could help see minority characters as equivalent to others. In this research, we evaluate each scene based on whether it contains a gay or Black character in a situation or an emotional state that is an ordinary, daily occurrence encountered by many other people.

Attractive representation

Tukachinsky et al. (2020) in a meta-analysis identified social attractiveness as one of the media engagement predictors. Moreover, existing literature reviews stress that diversity attitude improvement happens when audiences engage with characters positively (Banas et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2022; Żerebecki et al., 2021). In their seminal piece, Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) gathered research spanning 30 years and identified admirable personality aspects of media characters. We use these traits as dimensions of attractive representation. The significant predictors included being smart, successful, physically attractive, violent, and admired. The study also checked the effect of being funny as a character trait but found no significant correlation. Still, we decided to include it in our codebook because it could be an attractive representation strategy. Moreover, we decided not to use violent as a characteristic because it is socially undesirable, even though it could be attractive to young adults. Similarly, we have decided to skip physical attractiveness as this might be a highly subjective opinion of whether a given character looks attractive. According to a study on teenage audience content selection, viewers like friendly characters who treat others well and resilient characters who do not give up when faced with adversity (Żerebecki et al., *in press*). Ethnic and sexual minority characters that exhibit these traits could be more attractive and likeable to audience members. Furthermore, we decided to check for the presence of the opposites of the attractive traits, assuming that those could result in lower character engagement or even in viewers disliking the character. Moreover, the inclusion of these traits allows us to assess whether minority characters are shown with mostly positive or negative traits or with a balance of both the attribute types. Thus, each scene in a TV show is assessed on whether the minority character is shown behaving in a way that suggests being a) smart and stupid, b) successful and unsuccessful, c) funny and serious (i.e., stern), d) admired and unpopular, e) friendly and mean, and lastly f) resilient and defeated.

Representation of psychological depth

Besides attractive personalities, successful contemporary television series often have well-developed characters, which means that their actions and thoughts

are understandable to the viewers (Mittell, 2015, pp. 132–142). Such characters show signs of personal growth. Similar conclusions about characterization were reached in a study on favorite fictional TV personas (Żerebecki et al., *in press*). Based on interviews with young TV viewers, the authors established that characters who overcome struggles, deliberate over decisions, and whose actions are logical are sought after more often. Characters could be made understandable through flashbacks of their past or through the development of story arcs. Scholars examining gay and Black representation praised psychologically deep characters and depictions of experiences beyond being minorities (Smith-Frigerio, 2018; Stamps, 2021; Vanlee et al., 2018). To achieve this portrayal, black and gay characters should be seen in various life scenarios, experiencing challenging situations that make them grow. Therefore, in this research, each scene with a minority character in a TV series is checked for the presence of a) character's struggle with a life event, which results in them being pensive or deliberating about a course of action, b) character's talking about their past or showing a flashback explaining character's past, and c) growth of a character based on past events in the TV show.

Counter-stereotypical representation

Contemporary minority representation still suffers from negative stereotypes (Castle Bell & Harris, 2017; Chatterjee, 2016; Jackson, 2006). However, introducing characters that defy negative stereotypes can improve audiences' diversity attitudes (for a review see Żerebecki et al., 2021). Hence, it is important to show minority members who have counter-stereotypical traits. For instance, LGBTQ characters should not be shown exclusively as victims of oppression (Dhaenens, 2012; Vanlee et al., 2018). Similarly, Black characters should not be shown as violent, emotionally detached, or hypersexualized (Castle Bell & Harris, 2017; Smith-Frigerio, 2018; Stamps, 2021). In fact, *Sex Education* was praised for defying stereotypes (Bernstein, 2019). Thus, to facilitate the coding process, rather than checking for counter-stereotypical representations, we check each scene for the presence of stereotypical traits using various subcodes. We focus on the following negative stereotypes about gay men: a) being a victim of oppression, b) acting effeminate, and the following stereotypes about Black men: c) acting violent, d) acting emotionally detached, and e) acting hypersexualized.

Friendly interactions with majority members

The final representation strategy in the codebook is derived from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2009), which argues that audiences can learn new behaviors from TV. Viewers exposed to audiovisual narratives with positive interactions between minority and majority members show prejudice reduction (Banas et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2022; Żerebecki et al., 2021). The effect happens because audiences learn the positive

interactions and thus decrease anxiety about real-life contacts. While previously mentioned studies were critical of gay people having mostly straight friends or Black people having too many friendly or romantic relationships with white people (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Martens & Póvoa, 2017), such representations could teach majority audiences about friendly contact with minorities. Thus, in our analysis, every scene with a minority character is coded for a) signs of positive interactions with other characters, and b) signs of negative interactions with other characters. In this way, we observe all interactions a given character experiences and evaluate whether it is more likely for majority viewers to learn to be friendly or unfriendly to minority members.

The presented codes offer a comprehensive list of representational strategies that we defined as successful. These tropes are also supported by existing critiques of the representation of gay men and Black men. Identifying such strategies in TV shows could help to establish whether the TV show offers a fair representation of minorities but also whether the show has the potential to make viewers more open to the represented minorities.

Methods

This project applied quantitative content analysis, which is far less common than a qualitative methodology (Vanlee et al., 2020). Our approach relies on quantifying the potential of an analyzed TV show to engage audiences and improve their diversity attitudes on ethnic and sexual minorities. According to media psychology theories, it is the frequency of exposure to given content that predicts effects among audience members (Žerebecki et al., 2021). We demonstrate how to use our codebook to assess minority representation by studying *Sex Education*.

Choice of sex education

We chose to analyze the show *Sex Education* due to its popularity and diverse cast (Rotten Tomatoes, n.d.). Moreover, the series has been praised for the portrayal of diverse characters (Newman-Bremang, 2021), which makes it an appropriate case for examining the validity of our codebook. We study three characters, namely, Eric, Jackson, and Adam because they appear in almost every episode of season 1 and have significant storylines. Furthermore, this choice allows us to study the representation strategies of ethnic and sexual minorities. We decided to focus on male characters only to allow a valid comparison between characters. Importantly, the choice of Adam as a representative sexual minority member has to be justified. In the first episodes, he is shown to be heterosexual but then, toward the end of the first season, he develops a romantic attraction to Eric.

Coding procedure

We analyzed all the scenes where characters such as Eric, Jackson, and Adam were visible or spoken about in the first season of *Sex Education*, which consisted of 8 episodes of roughly 50 minutes. The coding unit was an individual scene, defined as an interaction between the same characters that take place in one setting (which could also be multiple but spatially connected locations). In case a coded character left the interaction, or the interaction changed in setting or topic, we counted these as separate scenes to capture detailed insights on minority representation. We identified 111 scenes with Eric, 66 scenes with Adam, and 81 scenes with Jackson. Every episode from season 1 directly showed or spoke about each character, with the exception of episode 5 where Adam was not depicted. Different episodes focused on different characters. For instance, at most, Eric had 22 scenes in episode 2, Adam had 18 scenes in episode 1, and Jackson had 16 scenes in episode 7.

All the scenes with a coded character were assigned individual scores for separate subcodes. These scores were either 1, indicating the presence of the coded narrative strategy, or 0, indicating the absence of the narrative strategy. When coding attractive representation, we also used a score -1 , which indicated the opposite of the coded trait. Lastly, the codebook also included space for qualitative observations about significant scenes, for instance, we noted the first time Eric was in a Black church after a homophobic attack.

During the coding training, two independent coders evaluated several episodes of *Sex Education* to build the coding instructions. First, one episode from the second season was coded and the results were discussed between the coders. Second, three first episodes from the first season were coded and the results of two different coders were compared. All the disagreements were discussed until the coders reached a consensus so that the coding of the first three episodes of season 1 could be used in further analysis. Each training session resulted in updates to the coding instructions. For instance, we specified that the subcode funny of attractive representation refers only to situations when the character tries to be funny, rather than when the viewer might laugh at the character's faulty behavior. Detailed coding instructions are available in the supplementary materials.

Reliability analysis

Two independent coders analyzed the fourth episode of the first season to establish reliability measures. There were no discussions between coders about the results or particular storylines. We examined scenes with Eric and Jackson to establish an agreement for codes applicable only to Black people, i.e., Black cultural heritage, challenges to social integration due to being Black (minority experiences), being violent, emotionally detached, and hyper-sexualized

(stereotypical representation). We studied scenes with Eric and Adam to establish an agreement for the codes applicable only to sexual minorities, i.e., remaining minority experiences, and stereotypes. The other codes were evaluated based on the scenes with all the characters because they were applicable to all three of them.

We calculated the percent agreement between the coders, which can be found in [Table 1](#). In our study, percent agreement is a better indicator of reliability because Cohen's Kappa or Krippendorff's Alpha are overly sensitive to uneven distribution of scores, which results in paradoxically low values of these indicators (Gwet, 2008, 2011). For instance, for being a victim of oppression subcode, coders reached an agreement of 90.8% (see [Table 1](#)) but the Cohen Kappa's value was $-.05$. The level of agreement found was generally above 80.0%. Only subcodes from attractive representation such as being successful/unsuccessful, funny/serious (stern), friendly/mean, and the subcode effeminate from stereotypical representation reached a lower agreement between 70.0% and 80.0%. This could be explained by the fact that these categories are latent constructs that are dependent on personal interpretations of given scenes. Notably, Neuendorf (2002) recommends lower thresholds for reliability indicators when applied to latent constructs, which include all

Table 1. Percent agreement in coding for two independent coders and the number of analyzed scenes.

Main codes and subcodes	%Agreement	Number of analyzed scenes
Representation of minority experience		
Challenges to heteronormativity	100.0%	22
Romantic situations	100.0%	22
Self-acceptance as a gay	100.0%	22
Coming out	100.0%	22
Challenges to social integration due to being gay	90.9%	22
Black cultural heritage	96.9%	32
Challenges to social integration due to being Black	96.9%	32
Representation of characters as recognizable	86.8%	38
Attractive/Unattractive representation		
Smart/stupid	81.6%	38
Successful/unsuccessful (struggling)	76.3%	38
Funny/serious (stern)	76.3%	38
Admired/unpopular	86.8%	38
Friendly/mean	71.1%	38
Resilient/defeated	81.6%	38
Representation of psychological depth		
Character's struggle	89.5%	38
Character's past	100.0%	38
Growth based on past events	92.1%	38
Stereotypical representation		
Victim of oppression due to sexuality	90.9%	22
Effeminate	77.3%	22
Violent	100.0%	32
Emotional detachment	100.0%	32
Hyper-sexualization	96.9%	32
Representation of interactions with majority members		
Friendly interactions	97.4%	38
Unfriendly interactions	97.4%	38

analyzed codes in this research. Still, all our codes reached an acceptable reliability level above 70.0% (Neuendorf, 2002).

Results

We present the detailed results of our analysis in Table 2. Each code and subcode were found at least once, except for the subcode representation of the character's past under psychological depth. In the sections that follow next, we discuss each code along with qualitative observations. However, first, we briefly describe each character's story arc to set the context for the detailed

Table 2. The number of instances each code has occurred in scenes showing different characters and the percentage of all the scenes with a given character where each code has occurred.

	Eric (111 scenes in total)		Adam (66 scenes in total)		Jackson (81 scenes in total)	
	No of scenes	% of scenes	No of scenes	% of scenes	No of scenes	% of scenes
Representation of minority experiences						
Challenges to heteronormativity	47	42.3%	0	0.0%	-	-
Romantic situations	5	4.5%	2	3.0%	-	-
Self-acceptance as a gay	6	5.4%	0	0.0%	-	-
Coming out	1	0.9%	0	0.0%	-	-
Challenges to social integration due to being gay	26	23.4%	0	0.0%	-	-
Black cultural heritage	14	12.6%	-	-	0	0.0%
Challenges to social integration due to being Black	5	4.5%	-	-	0	0.0%
Representation of characters as recognizable	75	67.6%	36	54.5%	75	92.6%
Attractive representation						
Smart	6	5.4%	0	0.0%	4	4.9%
Successful	4	3.6%	5	7.6%	28	34.6%
Funny	15	13.5%	1	1.5%	4	4.9%
Admired	1	0.9%	4	6.1%	12	14.8%
Friendly	44	39.6%	1	1.5%	24	29.6%
Resilient	21	18.9%	1	1.5%	5	6.2%
Unattractive representation						
Stupid	2	1.8%	14	21.2%	0	0.0%
Unsuccessful (struggling)	26	23.4%	27	40.9%	7	8.6%
Serious (stern)	0	0.0%	2	3.0%	1	1.2%
Unpopular	15	13.5%	8	12.1%	0	0.0%
Mean	2	1.8%	21	31.8%	0	0.0%
Defeated	2	1.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Representation of psychological depth						
Character's struggle	24	21.6%	17	25.8%	13	16.0%
Character's past	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Growth based on past events	5	4.5%	2	3.0%	5	6.2%
Stereotypical representation						
Victim of oppression due to sexuality	15	13.5%	0	0.0%	-	-
Effeminate	52	46.8%	0	0.0%	-	-
Violent	3	2.7%	-	-	0	0.0%
Emotional detachment	0	0.0%	-	-	1	1.2%
Hyper-sexualization	4	3.6%	-	-	0	0.0%
Representation of interactions with majority members						
Friendly interactions	63	56.8%	14	21.2%	54	66.7%
Unfriendly interactions	23	20.7%	12	18.2%	0	0.0%

analysis of the counted narrative strategies. Eric, who is gay and Black, is also best friends with the main character of the TV show, Otis. Eric's storyline in season 1 centers on his unabashed expression of sexuality, which causes a conflict with his father and some other schoolmates. Through the season, he grows to be more independent from Otis. Adam, who is white and first presented as heterosexual, appears less frequently in *Sex Education*, he is initially portrayed as an antagonist who bullies Eric. Simultaneously, Adam struggles to relate to his father, the authoritarian school headmaster. In the last episode, in an expected turn of events, Adam begins to develop a romantic attraction to Eric. Lastly, Jackson, a Black straight man, is the school president. He lives with his two mothers, one of whom is white and one of whom is Black. His storyline revolves around dealing with parental expectations concerning sports performance. He also navigates a relationship with his love interest, Maeve.

Representation of minority experiences

In terms of representation of minority experiences, only Eric showcases a plethora of situations related to being gay and Black, while Adam or Jackson have them very rarely (2 scenes for Adam) or never (0 scenes for Jackson). For instance, in multiple scenes (i.e., 47 cases) Eric challenges heteronormativity by, among other things, wearing lavish feminine outfits and glittery make-up. He also talks about his attraction to men with his friends without a shred of shame. Furthermore, the show contains multiple instances (i.e., 26 scenes) of challenges to social integration due to being gay such as being called homophobic slurs, facing parental disapproval, or even physical violence. Still, these situations only occur to Eric. A scene where two men physically assault him is an example of an intersectional experience. The effeminate gender expression, sexual orientation, and race produce a uniquely challenging situation for Eric. The magnitude of violence he experienced was a result of his overlapping identities. Such depiction reflects an original formulation of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). In general, the show manages to showcase both the positive and negative experiences of being gay, but these plot points are brought together in a single character.

In contrast to the representation of gay experiences, Black minority experiences were found much less often. Black cultural heritage was shown in 14 scenes and challenges to social integration due to being Black were shown in 5 scenes. Notably, Eric discusses a Black Jesus portrait with his friend Lily. Another way in which Black cultural heritage is incorporated happens during church scenes, where Eric's Black community welcomes him and helps him regain a sense of confidence after the physical assault. It is noteworthy that Eric shows another instance of intersectionality between race and gender when he wears a feminine outfit with an ethnic head wrap to prom. This situation

shows that overlapping identities can produce positive experiences. Intersectionality that does not focus solely on oppression occurred in earlier TV productions as well (Eguchi et al., 2014). In comparison to Eric, Jackson never clearly shows a Black cultural heritage or experiences any explicit challenges to social integration due to his race.

Recognizability

Both Eric and Jackson are portrayed as recognizable in a vast majority of their scenes (respectively 67.6% and 92.6% of cases). They are shown in ordinary situations that do not stress their presumed difference due to sexuality or race. Eric and Jackson have experiences typical of the lives of teenagers, including school interactions with peers during and in-between classes, conversations with parents, and parties with friends, among others. Interestingly, Eric is recognizable less often than Jackson, possibly because of his double minority status as both gay and Black. Some of the scenes focused more on showcasing Eric's sexual and ethnic identity as described by the code on representation of minority experiences. This finding underscores the importance of intersectionality, which argues that overlapping marginalized identities can produce unique experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). The scenes pertaining to Adam scored considerably lower on recognizability (i.e., 54.5% of all his scenes). This could be explained by his bullying behaviors. Bullying is socially unacceptable, thus, we did not count it as recognizable because it is unlikely that viewers would see themselves in such negative actions. Still, all three characters were generally depicted without stressing their difference from other teenagers.

Attractive representation

Both Eric and Jackson are shown with attractive personality traits. Eric behaves in a friendly and funny way in multiple scenes (i.e., 44 and 15 cases, respectively) where he interacts with his friends Otis, Maeve, or Lily. He is also shown to be resilient in 21 scenes; he does not pay much attention to being bullied or unpopular, and acts with confidence despite these challenges. Similarly, Jackson displays mostly positive traits as well. There are plenty of scenes where the entire school cheers his leadership or athletic abilities, which establish him as both admired and successful (shown in 12 scenes and 28 scenes, respectively). In his relationship with Maeve, Jackson appears friendly. He tries to learn about his partner and checks in on her frequently. In contrast, Adam exhibits mostly negative traits. His poor school performance is shown often. He struggles a lot due to a strained relationship with his father. Besides, he bullies Eric, which establishes him as a mean character (i.e., in 21 scenes). In a very poignant moment, Eric asks Adam whether his vicious demeanor stems from the fear of his father. Notably, Eric also exhibits some negative traits such

as being unpopular or unsuccessful, however, these appear less often than positive traits.

Psychological depth

All the characters demonstrate signs of the inner life and thus, psychological depth. For example, Eric reacts emotionally to fights with his best friend Otis or tense interactions with his father. Adam is oftentimes visibly shaken when his father berates him, and Jackson's personal success is nuanced by his struggles with stress and pressure to perform well. In total, Eric shows inner life in 24 scenes, Adam in 17 scenes, and Jackson in 13 scenes. Moreover, all the characters show some sort of growth and development due to past actions. Eric apologizes for his brief violent outburst to his schoolmate Anwar, Adam decides to confront his anxiety about being popular, and Jackson genuinely tries to learn and improve himself to get attention from Maeve. The representation of psychological depth is remarkable for Adam specifically. Without his personal struggles, Adam would likely appear to be a shallow villain-like character. In sum, Eric experiences growth in 5 scenes, Adam in 2 scenes, and Jackson in 5 scenes. Noticeably, characters' past was never shown for any of the studied characters.

Stereotypes

Sex Education does not rely too heavily on stereotypical representation. Still, Eric is shown with some stereotypical behaviors. In almost half of the scenes (i.e., 52 scenes) he wears feminine clothing or speaks and behaves in an effeminate way. Similarly, he is sometimes (i.e., in 15 scenes) represented as a victim of oppression, facing his father's disapproval, physical violence, or homophobic school bullying. Adam provides a contrast to Eric in this regard. While his sexuality is only hinted at toward the end of the season, he is shown to be very different and much more masculine than Eric, hence there are virtually no stereotypical representations of Adam. In this sense, the show does not imply that all non-heterosexual men express themselves in the same way. As for stereotypes of Black men, these are pretty rare in the show. Jackson displays one instance of emotional detachment when he refuses to speak to his moms after running away from home. Likewise, Eric resorts to physical violence in one episode and there are moments where he is hypersexualized, i.e., talking about sex at length or showing how to perform fellatio. Still, such representation could be justifiable in a show, which focuses on teenagers' lives and their sexual development.

Friendly interactions

Lastly, all the characters are depicted in multiple friendly interactions. Eric and Jackson experienced them in 56.8% and 66.7% of scenes, respectively. Adam

experienced those in 21.2% of scenes. These encounters are school interactions with friends or positive interactions with family members. In contrast, the unfriendly interactions happened much less often, at least for Eric and Jackson (20.7% and 0.0% respectively). Interestingly, Eric's primary bully was Adam, who was treated in an unfriendly manner by friends or family in 18.2% of scenes. Adam experienced unfriendly treatment mostly from his dad who reprimands him for his school troubles.

Discussion

Our goal in this project was twofold: to develop a quantitative analysis codebook that checks minority representation and to demonstrate its use. Below, we reflect on our analysis, the results, and the use of our codebook. We close the article by discussing limitations, suggestions for future research, and final conclusions.

In this study, we used the codebook to shed light on the differences between characters. Notably, neither Adam nor Jackson showcase minority experiences, only Eric undergoes them often. In the case of Adam, this depiction is understandable as him being attracted to men is a plot twist at the end of season 1. Therefore, his lack of other gay experiences indicates that non-heterosexual men are diverse as a group and may express their sexuality differently at different points in life. However, the fact that Jackson does not show any specific minority experiences is more worrisome. This finding echoes earlier critiques of Black representation that strips the people of their cultural heritage or inadequately portrays the daily experiences of being Black (Martens & Póvoa, 2017). Still, Jackson's lack of culturally specific experiences may connect to his high score on recognizable portrayal. Jackson, while being Black and adopted by two mothers, is still shown as an ordinary teenager. Thus, in a way, his life could be recognizable, i.e., evoke a sense of familiarity among many viewers. The lack of unique minority experiences for a character is problematic when the character is the only representative of their group. In *Sex Education*, Eric presents some Black cultural heritage. Therefore, Jackson does not bear the burden of representing the entire community. Instead, with two different, recurring Black characters, *Sex Education* signals diversity of life experiences among Black people.

Importantly, the results of our study suggest that some successful minority representations exist, which contrasts with the results of the earlier critiques. We found multiple representations of queer and some representations of Black cultural experiences, which goes against earlier findings that demonstrate the sparseness of such specific depictions (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Martens & Póvoa, 2017). Moreover, the characters were portrayed in ordinary ways, which could make them recognizable, i.e., familiar, to audience members. We also found them to be portrayed attractively, with psychological depth,

without negative stereotypes, and in friendly interactions with others. Potentially, these depictions could help audiences to engage with minority characters (Banas et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2022; Żerebecki et al., 2021). Furthermore, exposure to these depictions, and resulting character engagement, could also result in prejudice reduction toward gay and Black people (Żerebecki et al., 2021).

Our codebook can be used to study different minority members. Codes like portrayals of characters as recognizable, attractive, psychologically deep, and experiencing friendly interactions could be found among different ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities, as well as people with various disabilities. We fine-tuned the subcodes of representation of minority experiences and stereotypical representations to reflect specific experiences of Black and gay people. Still, these codes can be adjusted to include experiences and stereotypes concerning different marginalized groups. Other possible uses of the codebook include comparisons of the portrayal of a minority group between different TV shows, or a longitudinal comparison of character portrayal across different seasons of the same TV show. Such approaches could enable an assessment of whether the popularity of a given TV content is associated with scores on successful representation. Moreover, future projects could weigh the scores on minority representation by multiplying them by the length of a scene with a given code. This method could approximate in more detail the potential of media content to engage audiences, because it evaluates how long audiences are exposed to specific character depictions.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This research was not free of limitations. First, we coded latent constructs, which could be challenging to identify unequivocally due to different interpretations of depicted scenes. To tackle this problem, the detailed descriptions for the codebook were developed in iterative rounds. Still, our reliability values for some attractive representation traits and for being effeminate reached the lowest level of coder agreement between 70.0% and 80.0%. These scores indicate that, potentially, viewers, just like coders, might interpret characters' behavior differently and assign different personality traits to them. Therefore, content creators that want their shows to potentially improve the diversity attitudes of all the audience members should also include other representation strategies such as friendly interactions, recognizable representation, minority experiences, and psychological depth.

Second, the ability to discern particular minority experiences could differ between different coders because of their backgrounds. In the present research, the two coders identified as white, gay men, and they prepared for the research by engaging with literature on gay and Black men representation. It is possible that the coders who are not members of the Black community are not able to

discern all the challenges to social integration due to being Black or identify all instances of Black cultural heritage. Furthermore, their individual walks of life may have led them to define certain concepts such as being effeminate in different ways. Future research could address this limitation by ensuring diversity among coders. It is possible that richer insights about representation (i.e., details that could be overlooked by a non-minority coder) can be achieved when the coder and the character share an aspect of the studied identity.

Third, our analysis focused on three recurring male characters who play a significant role in the first season of *Sex Education*. Thus, we have omitted some of the main characters and other background characters that could be important for positive diversity attitudes development. Perhaps positive diversity attitudes of the characters from social majorities or frequent representation of minority characters as background characters could also play a role in viewers' social beliefs formation.

The fourth limitation of our study is that we focused on diversity attitudes toward specifically Black and non-heterosexual men. Still, TV representations of lesbians, bisexual and asexual people, or transgender individuals are also lacking (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Parker et al., 2020). Future research could apply our codebook to representations of these sexual minority members. Moreover, our codebook could be used to analyze representations of Black women, other ethnic minorities and religious minorities, and people with various disabilities.

Fifth and last, our codebook was developed based on a literature review of minority representation strategies and media psychology studies. More research is needed to confirm that the narrative strategies we have studied are also noticed by the viewers. For instance, more research could study how the audiences respond to the portrayals of the opposites of the attractive personality traits (stupid, unsuccessful, serious (i.e., stern), unpopular, mean, and defeated), and whether these depictions result in audiences disliking the character or simply not engaging with the character. Future studies could interview audience members about their experiences of watching and engaging with a TV show and base the interview guide on our codebook to see whether the included categories are also important for the viewers. Still, there is a possibility that media influences rely on representation strategies that are not consciously processed by the audience members. To fully establish whether our narrative strategies improve diversity attitudes, future research can employ an audience reception approach and check in a longitudinal design whether exposure to these narrative strategies predicts positive diversity attitudes.

Conclusions

Despite its limitation, our research bears academic and social relevance. Media researchers can use our codebook to evaluate minority

representation across different content pieces. Moreover, platform and content curators could follow our approach to identify TV shows with the potential to improve audiences' diversity attitudes. Positive minority representations on television are very important not only for represented minorities but also for majority audiences that can learn more openness and reduce their prejudicial attitudes against others. Lastly, we hope that recommendations for minority representations may inspire future content creators in writing more varied scripts for diverse characters.

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