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### The New Homophobia: Quality of LGBTQ Representation in Streaming TV

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## Introduction

- Openly LGBTQ+ characters in TV have doubled since the legalization of gay marriage in 2015
- Representation matters**
  - LGBTQ individuals *are more likely to develop mental health disorders* compared to non-LGBTQ due to heightened experiences of prejudice, discrimination, concealment of identity, and internalized homophobia.
  - LGBTQ individuals also *specifically seek out media they identify with* to gain a sense of empowerment and community connection, as well as to help themselves cope with the discrimination and prejudice
- Queerbaiting** occurs when quality LGBTQ representation is promised (external and internal to the text), yet never realized due to being either 1) wholly subtextual, or 2) stereotypical.
  - The predominance of trauma-focused storylines and victimization imposes on LGBTQ viewers *feelings of hopelessness, unacceptance, and pessimism* over their standing in society and the possibility for future happiness
- Hypothesis:** Despite being touted as the first-pick of quality representation, LGBTQ shows still fall prey to harmful stereotypes and tropes that perpetuate negative presentations of queer individuals.

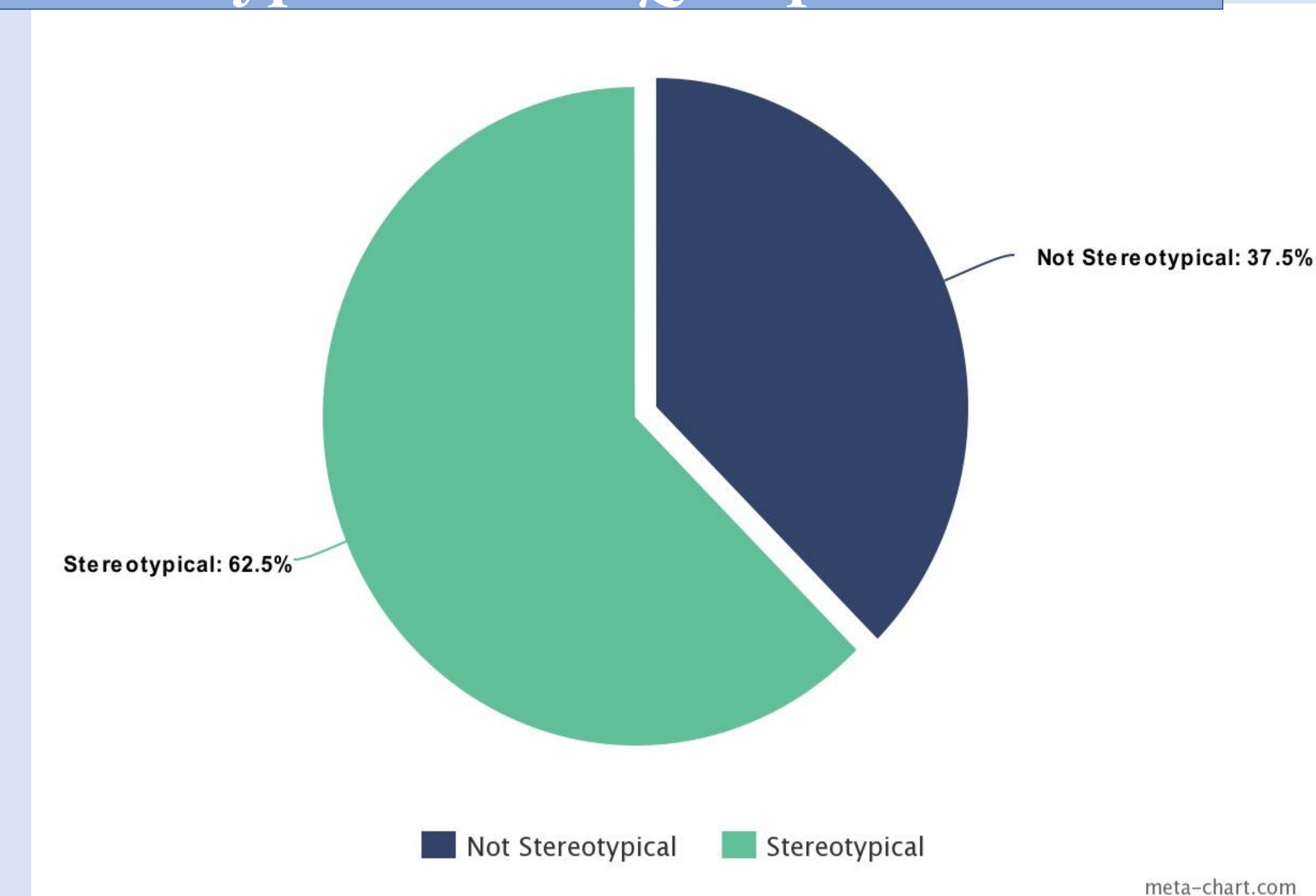
## Methods

- A pool of 46 TV shows from the LGBTQ category on Netflix were sorted into four different genres: *TV Drama, Sitcoms/TV Comedies, Crime/Thrillers, and Teen TV Shows*. Two shows were then randomly selected from each genre, **resulting in a final sample of 8 TV shows**. A single rater watched the first season of each show and evaluated the quality of LGBTQ representation according to the following scale.
- Vito Russo Test (Modified):** Each show must have...
  - At least *two* characters must be explicitly stated to be LGBTQ within the show
    - e.g. "As a gay man..." or "I'm trans" or "This is my wife"
    - e.g. "We're dating." or "This is my wife."
  - At least *one* of the two characters must *not* be solely or predominantly defined by their sexual/gender identity *or* be a stereotypical portrayal.
  - At least *two* identifiably queer characters must be tied to the plot such that their removal would have a significant effect.
- Harmful tropes and stereotypes were determined by comparing those commonly cited by LGBTQ individuals in two separate interview studies. Tropes included: *killing off queer characters, and comic relief characters*. Stereotypes included: *the struggle of being queer, or being hyper-promiscuous, a criminal/villain, and mentally or physically diseased/sick*

## Discussion

- Other shows with LGBTQ main characters on Netflix were not listed under the LGBTQ genre, implying that there is some level of worthiness required to do so. It begs the question, how are LGBTQ characters in these unlisted, "unworthy" shows portraying queer lives?
- The New Homophobia**
  - Improvements in legal and social equality have made blatant discrimination against LGBTQ people generally unacceptable; homophobia therefore has needed to shift to subtler methods.
  - This is seen in how queer life is increasingly portrayed through a heteronormative, cisgendered, white lens. For example, rhetoric aimed at attracting straight allies frame queer individuals as wanting to be "just like you," a two-person marriage with kids and a house with a white-picket fence. However, **this sentiment is essentially limiting, and dismissive of the inherent diversity of the LGBTQ community** which founded its identity on the rejection of social norms, which had long been used to ostracize and target them.
- Queerbaiting: Another Form of this New, Covert Homophobia**
  - Stereotypes portray LGBTQ characters as immoral or atypical within their own storylines, effectively positioning them as abnormal, or *other*, within a heteronormative society

## Percentage of TV Shows with Stereotypical LGBTQ Representation



## Results

- 100% (8) of the sample had 2+ identifiably LGBTQ characters
- 100% (8) had at least one identifiable LGBTQ character *not* predominantly defined by a stereotype
- 37.5% (3) had at least two LGBTQ characters tied to the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect on the storyline
- Of the 36 total LGBTQ characters, less than half (14) were significant to the plot
  - 50% (7) of the significant characters qualified as stereotypic portrayals
- 25% (2) of  $n = 8$  shows had no stereotypical LGBTQ character portrayals