

Abstract

This paper addresses transgender identity and the portrayal of the transgender community in the media, specifically on TV. By analyzing the television series *Transparent* and collecting audience data through focus group interviews, this paper highlights the effectiveness of its message and the need for more transgender stories to be told. The focus group discussion revealed that although the show is a step in the right direction, there is still a great amount of work to be done before the transgender community is accurately portrayed on TV and more visible in mainstream media. Finally, the paper highlights what can be done to move the representation of the transgender community forward in order to foster more tolerance and intercultural communication with the rest of society.



Highlights from Focus Group Data

One of the participants in the focus group identified Maura's transition as "much more subtle" than typical representations of male-to-female (MTF) transgender characters. The participants agreed that MTF transgender characters are normally highly feminized and reduced to a caricature, rather than portraying a real person.

The participants in the focus group agreed that the visibility of the transgender community within our society was minimal at best; three out of the four participants placed the level of visibility at "0."

After learning that Soloway, the creator of the show, employed transgender consultants and writers in order to add truth to the narrative, one of the focus group participants applauded her efforts by stating, "...she knows she cannot bring that experience to the table, and she does not want to tell stories that are not hers to tell."

One of the participants noted that her added effort in consulting the transgender perspective throughout the process was an effective way in working against one's own "internalized transphobia."

Literature Review

Cavalcante (2013) writes, "transgender characters are overrepresented as victims, as casualties of violence, discrimination, and murder..." (p. 88).

Sneed (2014) states, "...often, the only time an ally or cisgender person will have interaction with a trans person in life will be through the television..." (p. 2).

Brodesser-Akner (2014) writes, "We all struggle to become comfortable in the skin we were born into; we all try to uncover an identity beneath what was assigned to us at birth. That, above all else, is what Soloway's show is about" (p. 8).

GLAAD (2015) describes a recent rise in acceptance of the transgender community, stating "Rising visibility, unprecedented advocacy, and changing public opinion are working to provide transgender people greater legal protections than ever before" (p. 1).

Kohli (2014) writes, "Amazon and Netflix need to set themselves apart from traditional media and prove their worth as original content providers, and the way to do this is through framings that are new" (p. 3).

Of the 70 LGBT characters on five broadcast networks, none are transgender.

Of the 142 LGBT characters on cable primetime scripted series, 3 (2%) are transgender, though they are only recurring roles, and one will not return following her death.

Of the 59 LGBT characters on streaming original series, 4 (7%) are transgender.

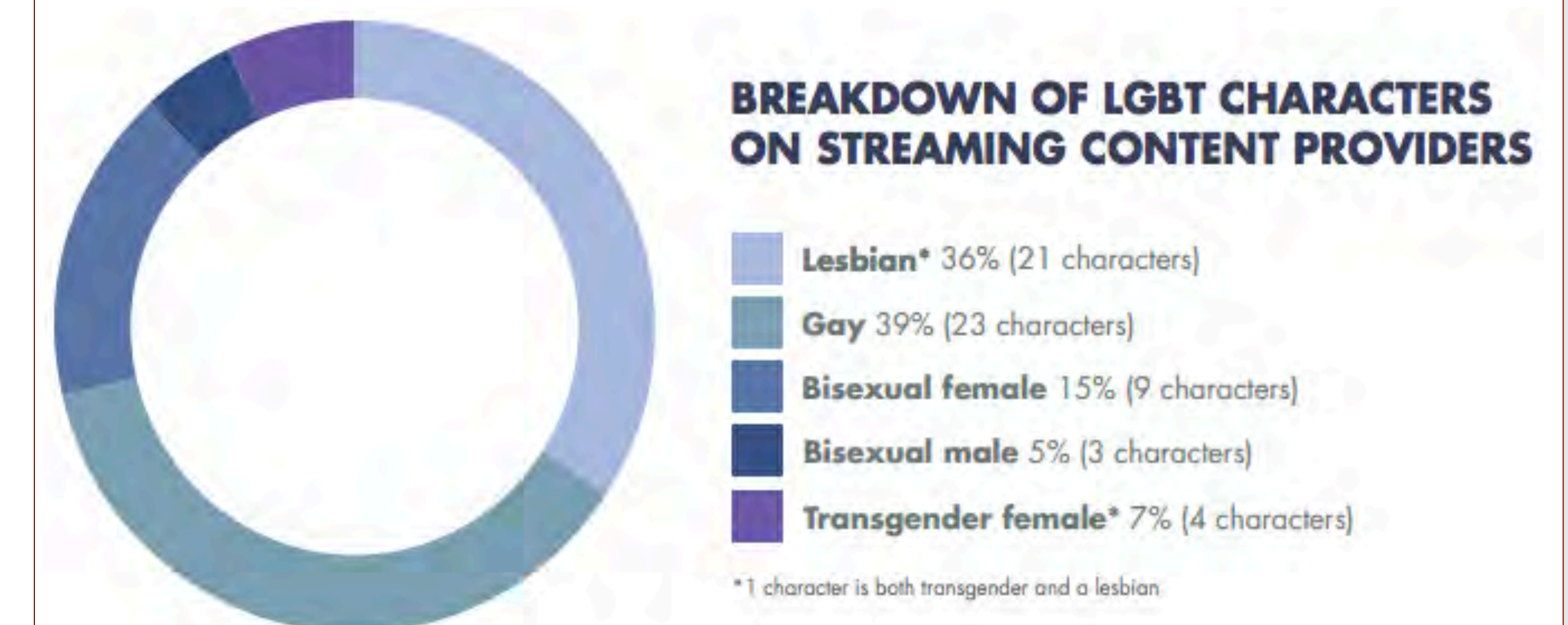
Analyzing *Transparent*

Within the first few minutes of the pilot episode of *Transparent*, it is clear to the audience just how gendered familial relationships are, as the pronouns used to describe such relationships are gender limited by nature.

The pilot shows each of the three adult children going about their day. Each character refers to their father as "Dad," and "Daddy," on multiple occasions throughout the opening scenes; showing the audience how familial relationships and gender are subtly linked in our minds.

After a family member comes out as transgender and begins their transition, the family unit goes through a transition of their own to redefine their relationships with one another based upon the new gender of their relative.

The person they knew their whole life as "dad" or as "mom," no longer looks like "dad" or "mom" which is where a great deal of confusion and struggle for many people arises.



Taken from GLAAD

Methods

- A textual analysis of five episodes of the first season of the Amazon series *Transparent*.
- Focus group comprising of four female Ramapo College students who actively use online streaming services.
- 50 surveys distributed online to Ramapo College students from a wide range of disciplines.

Taken from GLAAD

Conclusions

- Filmmakers need to cast more transgender actors rather than relying on cisgender actors to play the part.
- Storylines involving transgender characters need to become more multi-dimensional.
- More representation of transgender youth in the media.
- There will be more opportunity than ever before for transgender writers and producers to tell their stories.
- Being the first online TV show to win a major award in the best series category, *Transparent* has shown both the entertainment industry and audiences that online streaming is a worthy competitor of broadcast and cable television.