LGBT+ REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA

Opinions on representation from the LGBT+ and ally community

FOREWORD

Authentic representation is important.

Not only is there a large bank of research and evidence to support this, but I know it from personal experience. Eight years ago I created the OUTstanding LGBT+ Role Model Lists which were published in the FT. These Lists showcased and celebrated LGBT+ business leaders and at the time there was nothing else much like it in the media or in business. The only visible LGBT+ people who could be seen succeeding in their careers were in the arts, or fashion. They were not visible in the corporate world and thus being successful in business while also being out looked to many aspiring LGBT+ professionals like an impossible conflict.

Over the years of publishing our OUTstanding LGBT+ Role Model Lists I have heard so many personal stories on the impact seeing proud LGBT+ role models succeeding across industries and from many different walks of life has made. It has shown what is possible while remaining true to your authentic self and educated those who are not LGBT+ that real and diverse LGBT+ people exist and that we don't fit into one specific mould or stereotype.

When it comes LGBT+ representation in media, the results in this report suggest that LGBT+ people currently do not see enough of themselves on screen. This doesn't just mean they don't see enough LGBT+ people represented but that the depictions of LGBT+ people tend towards being narrow, unrealistic, and more negative than positive.

To pre-empt the usual counter argument, this doesn't mean that every LGBT+ person depicted in the media has to be positioned as a positive role model. Some LGBT+ people will appear as bad people, but some should also be appearing as good people. They will appear as people who have frivolous relationships but should also be appearing as people in happy and committed partnerships. They will be depicted as designers or artists, but should also be lawyers, shop assistants, and software developers. The fact that a character is bisexual, or trans, or gender fluid might be key to the plot or the news story, but perhaps sometimes it shouldn't be and they just simply are.

The media industry has the power to build and reinforce negative stereotypes and this is something that all diverse and minority communities have had to deal with for decades. However, as we move to a society which prides itself on being fair and equal, it is time to recognise the power and responsibility those within the media also have to dismantle them. I hope that the results of this survey, which points towards the impact negative media representation can have on LGBT+ people in real life, will act as part of the catalyst for change.

Suki Sandhu OBE
Founder and CEO, Audeliss & INvolve

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

INvolve distributed a survey to its network in October 2021 to collect opinions from the LGBT+ and ally community on the depictions of LGBT+ individuals within the media.

This survey coincided with the topic of LGBT+ representation on television being in the UK news following a walkout by Netflix employees over transphobic content within a comedy special by Dave Chappelle, and an investigation by the BBC on the influence of LGBTQ+ charity Stonewall on public bodies including Ofcom and the BBC itself.

No one would dispute that the number of out LGBT+ individuals featured on television, whether real or fictionalised, has increased over the past 5 years. The focus of the survey therefore was to collect opinions from those with a connection to the LGBT+ community as to whether this shift had resulted in a fair representation and depiction of LGBT+ people within the media, or whether the media remained a space where the LGBT+ community (or parts of the community) were significantly underrepresented or misrepresented.

Beyond this, the survey also sought opinions on whether the depiction of LGBT+ people in the media has real-world effects in terms of how LGBT+ people feel they are perceived in everyday life; including amongst family, friends and work colleagues.

It is important to acknowledge that the approach to this research and the sample size used excludes this report from being considered a comprehensive examination of the complex issue of LGBT+ representation in the media. However, the many opinions raised in this report from across a broad spectrum of the LGBT+ community does allow it to provide a compelling addition to the debate around LGBT+ representation on television and the effect that depictions within the media, including news and press, may have on the lives of LGBT+ individuals.
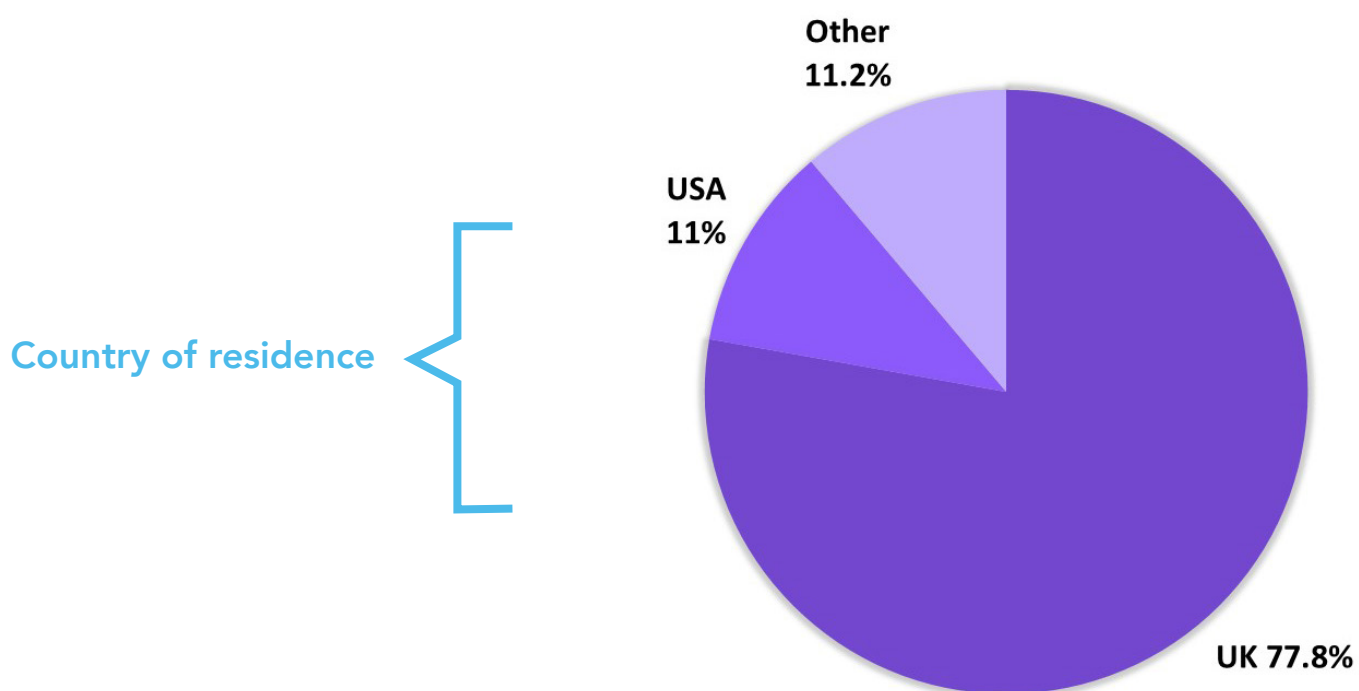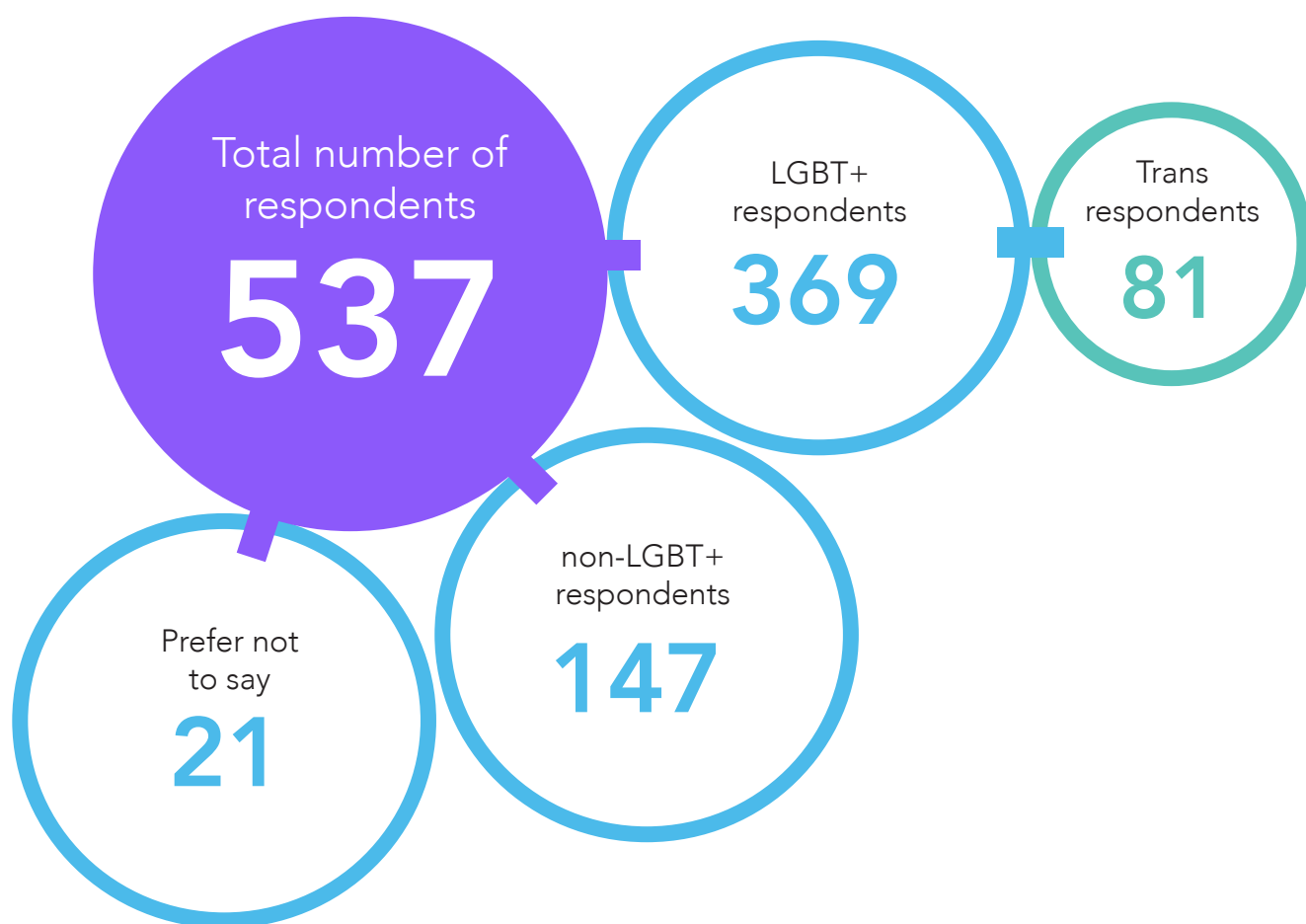
ABOUT INVOLVE

INvolve is a consultancy and global network championing diversity and inclusion in business. Through the delivery of training, events, programs, thought leadership and advisory solutions,
INvolve helps firms drive cultural change and create inclusive workplaces where any individual can succeed.

We also publish annual Role Model Lists supported by Yahoo Finance, recognizing and celebrating business leaders and future leaders who are breaking down barriers at work and inspiring the next generation of diverse talent.
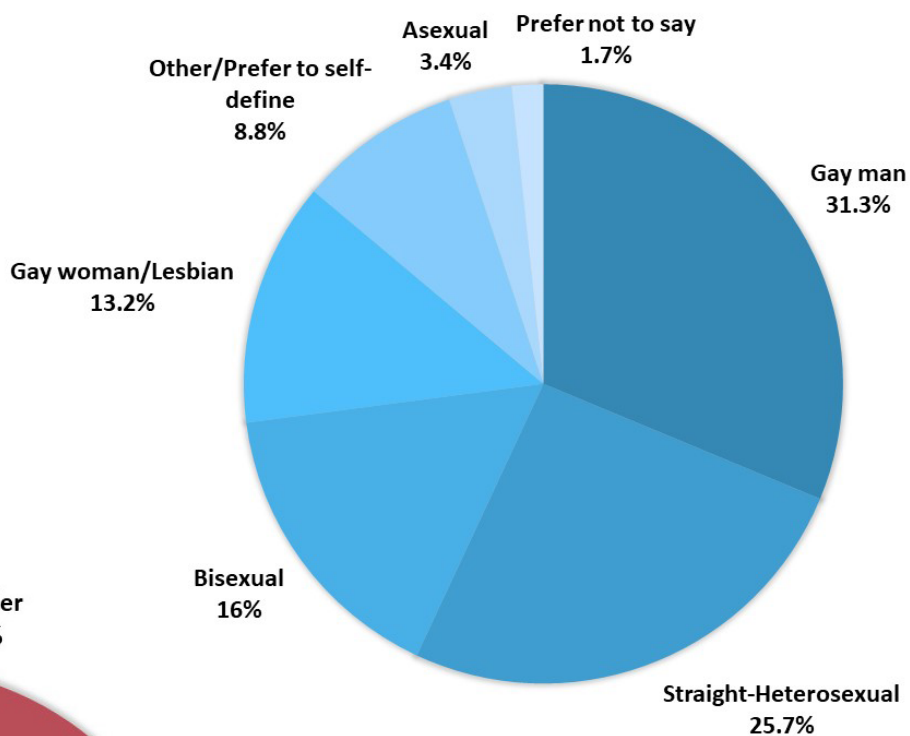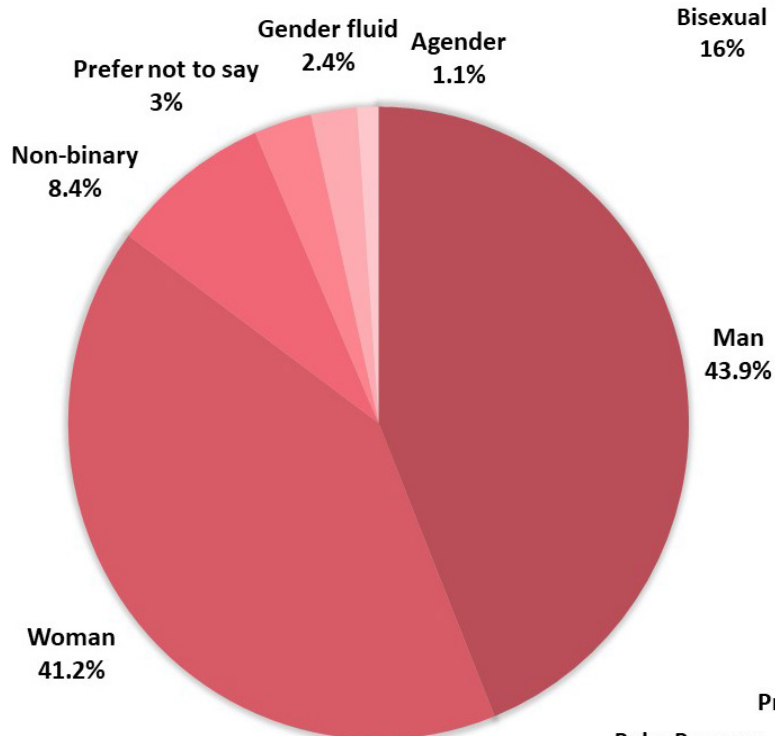
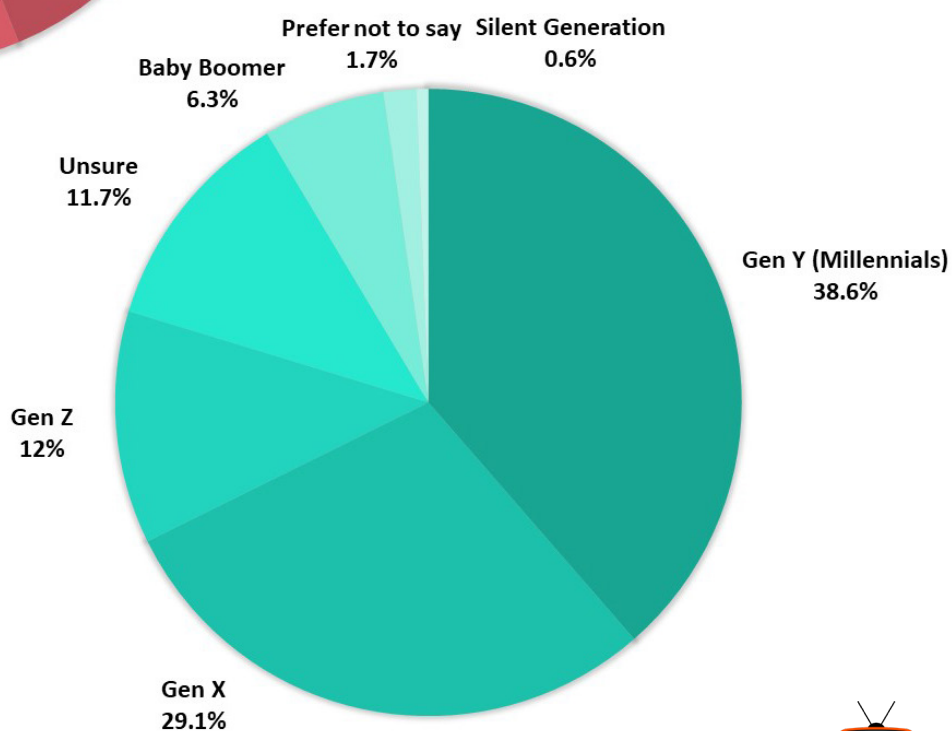www.involvepeople.org

WHO PARTICIPATED?

Total number of respondents
537

LGBT+ respondents
369

Trans respondents
81

Prefer not to say
21

non-LGBT+ respondents
147

Country of residence

Other 11.2%

USA 11%

UK 77.8%

Sexual orientation

- Gay man 31.3%
- Straight-Heterosexual 25.7%
- Bisexual 16%
- Gay woman/Lesbian 13.2%
- Other/Prefer to self-define 8.8%
- Asexual 3.4%
- Prefer not to say 1.7%

Gender identity

- Man 43.9%
- Woman 41.2%
- Non-binary 8.4%
- Prefer not to say 3%
- Gender fluid 2.4%
- Agender 1.1%

Generation

- Gen Y (Millennials) 38.6%
- Gen X 29.1%
- Gen Z 12%
- Unsure 11.7%
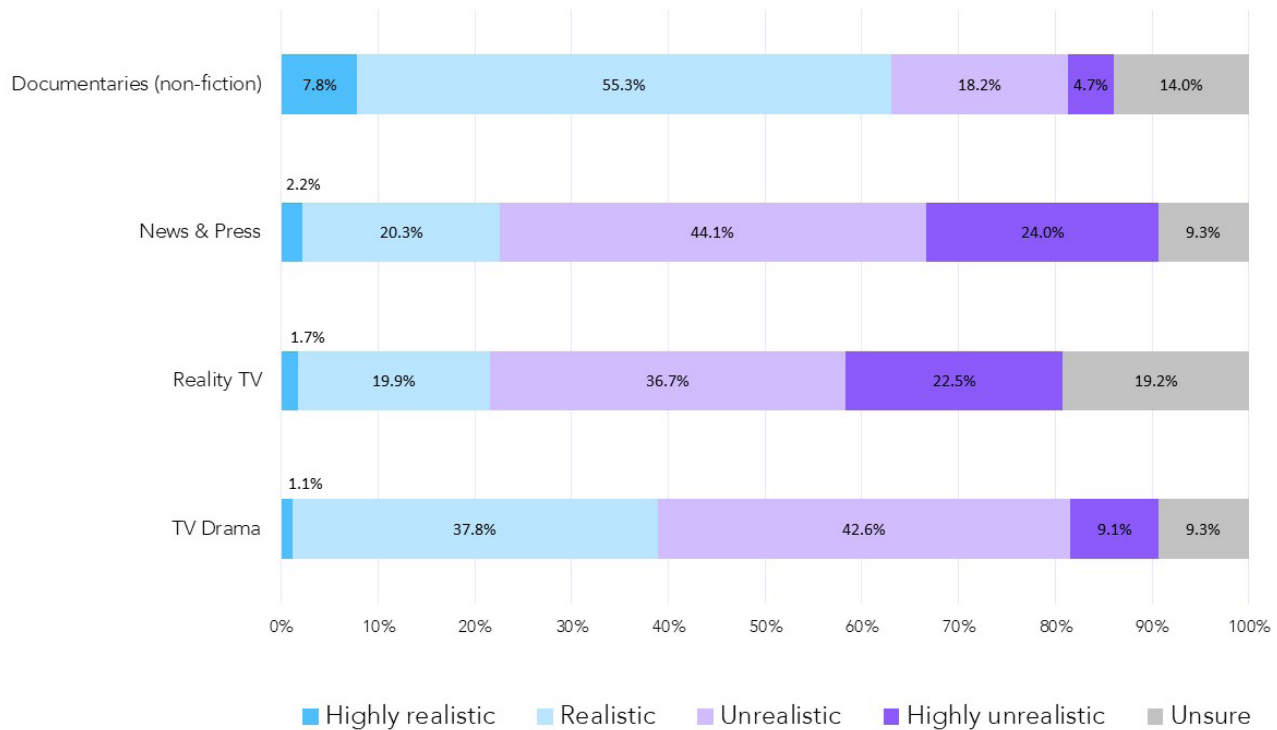- Baby Boomer 6.3%
- Prefer not to say 1.7%
- Silent Generation 0.6%

REPRESENTATION OF THE LGBT+ COMMUNITY IN THE MEDIA

In general, how realistic, or unrealistic do you feel the representation of the LGBT+ community are in the following media?

Media	Highly realistic	Realistic	Unrealistic	Highly unrealistic	Unsure
Documentaries (non-fiction)	7.8%	55.3%	18.2%	4.7%	14.0%
News & Press	2.2%	20.3%	44.1%	24.0%	9.3%
Reality TV	1.7%	19.9%	36.7%	22.5%	19.2%
TV Drama	1.1%	37.8%	42.6%	9.1%	9.3%

Looking at results for all respondents across 4 different types of media, only non-fiction documentaries were considered to have a realistic representation of the LGBT+ community. All others had a majority of respondents who considered representation to be unrealistic.

Unrealistic LGBT+ representation in the news

Notable was that despite being a non-fiction format, the news and press was considered to have the most unrealistic representation of the LGBT+ community with a clear majority of respondents (68%) saying representation was either unrealistic or highly unrealistic. For comparison, TV Drama which is based on fiction, was considered to be substantially more realistic in its representation than the news and press.

LGBT+ respondents were far more likely to consider representation to be unrealistic when compared to non-LGBT+ ally respondents; perhaps attributable to their lived experiences of being LGBT+. This difference is again most clearly seen within the news and press, where 73% of LGBT+ respondents consider the representation of the LGBT+ community to be unrealistic or highly unrealistic. This compares to 56% for non-LGBT+ ally respondents.

One cause for this substantial difference is the opinion of respondents who identify as trans; 90% of whom considered representation of the LGBT+ community in the news and press to be unrealistic.

The following example comments made by respondents summarise some of the key reasons given as to why representation of the LGBT+ community was considered by a majority of respondents to be unrealistic.

"Even when there are authentic LGBTQ+ experiences portrayed they're usually portrayed by straight/cis actors or sanitised for 'family' audiences."

"I think the biggest problem is that only a specific type of LGBTQ+ individual is represented (e.g. sexualised lesbian, hypersexual gay man) and their entire plot line/angle is their sexuality/orientation rather than normal storylines that happen to include LGBTQ+"
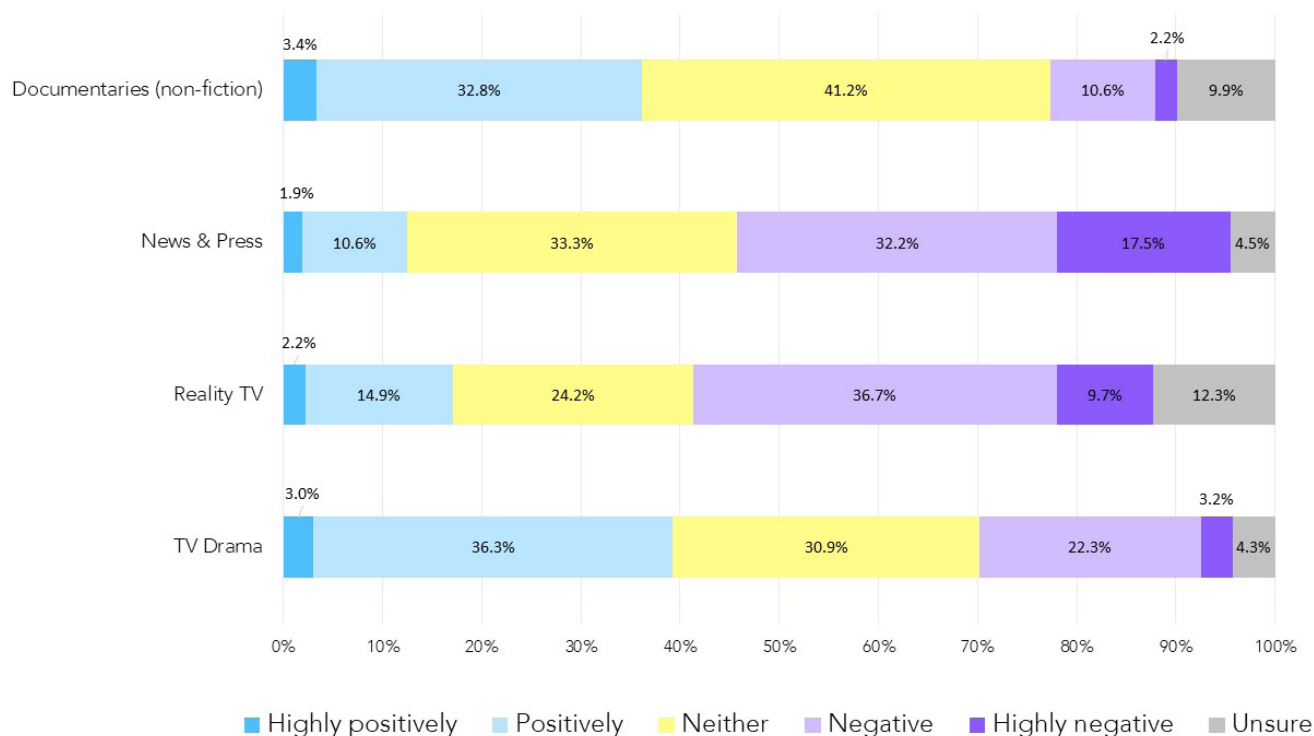
"LGBT+ representation seems anecdotally to be increasing, but the typical characterisation in fictional, factional and news meda rarely reflects my LGBT+ experience."

"mostly rating unrealistic due to over reliance on tired tropes, disingenuous reporting and a conspicuous absence."

EXAMPLE COMMENTS

On average, how positively do you think individuals who are LGBT+ are represented in the following media?
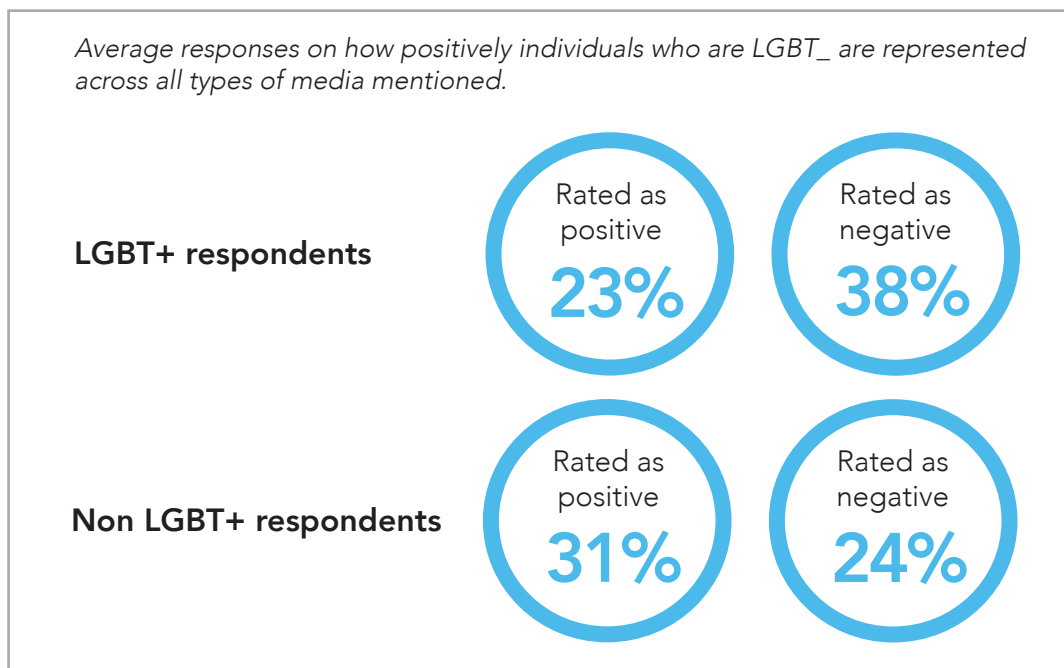
	Highly positively	Positively	Neither	Negative	Highly negative	Unsure
Documentaries (non-fiction)	3.4%	32.8%	41.2%	10.6%	2.2%	9.9%
News & Press	1.9%	10.6%	33.3%	32.2%	17.5%	4.5%
Reality TV	2.2%	14.9%	24.2%	36.7%	9.7%	12.3%
TV Drama	3.0%	36.3%	30.9%	22.3%	3.2%	4.3%

■ Highly positively   ■ Positively   ■ Neither   ■ Negative   ■ Highly negative   ■ Unsure

Areas of positive representation

While there is strong agreement that a considerable amount of the representation of the LGBT+ community on television is unrealistic, this doesn't mean that the LGBT+ community are not represented positively in some cases. In fact, within both TV Drama and Documentaries (the two areas of media where respondents think LGBT+ representation is most realistic), more individuals consider representation to be positive than negative.

Only 25% of respondents say that on average representation within TV Dramas is negative or highly negative, and only 13% say the same for Documentaries.

Areas of negative representation

Those who are LGBT+ are more likely to say that representation across media is negative than those who are not.

Average responses on how positively individuals who are LGBT_ are represented across all types of media mentioned.

LGBT+ respondents

Rated as positive
23%

Rated as negative
38%

Non LGBT+ respondents

Rated as positive
31%

Rated as negative
24%

This becomes especially clear when looking at the two areas of media where representation was perceived to be the most negative.

Over half of LGBT+ respondents thought that representation on Reality TV (51%) and in News & Press (57%) was negative or highly negative, while much smaller numbers (14% and 10% respectively) thought it was positive.

"The LGBT+ community are often portrayed as outsiders or oddities, and not just as a part of the general community."

"Concerned that certain tropes are presented which subconsciously reinforce and perpetuate negative connotations / associations and LGBTQ+ stereotypes."
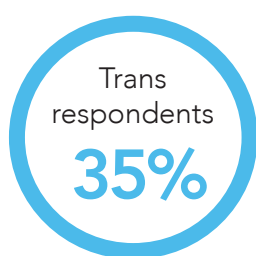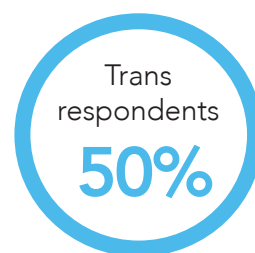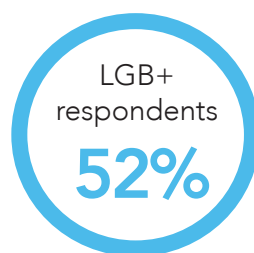
EXAMPLE COMMENTS

Respondents who identify as trans were slightly more likely than other LGBT+ respondents to say that LGBT+ representation was negative across the different types of media. The clear exception which stands out was the news and press where responses from those identifying as trans were far more negative. Three quarters stated that representation of the LGBT+ community in news and press was either negative or highly negative – with the majority of these respondents saying highly negative.

Percentage of respondents who stated that representation was negative or highly negative split by LGB+ respondents (excluding Trans) and respondents who identified as Trans.
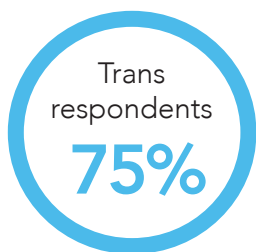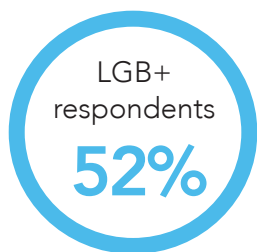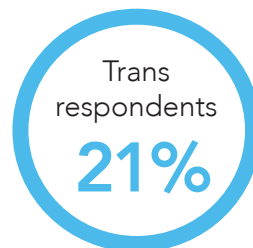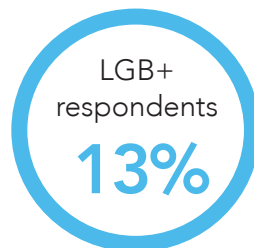
TV Drama

LGB+ respondents
28%

Trans respondents
35%

Reality TV

LGB+ respondents
52%

Trans respondents
50%

News & Press

LGB+ respondents
52%

Trans respondents
75%

Documentaries

LGB+ respondents
13%

Trans respondents
21%
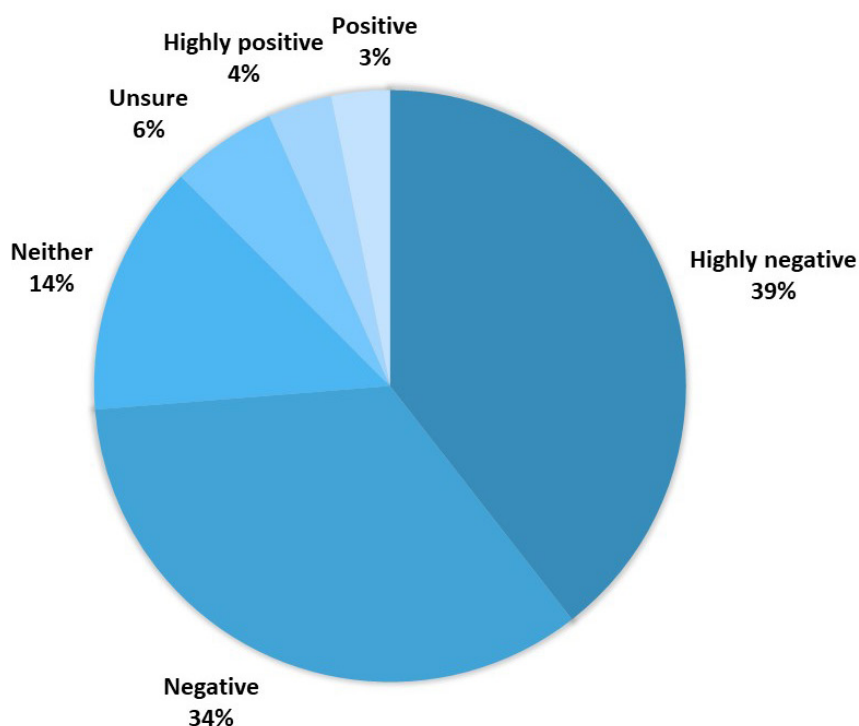
Negative representation of the trans community

In general, how positive or negative do you feel depictions of the Trans community are in the news and press?

Highly positive 4%
Positive 3%
Unsure 6%
Neither 14%
Highly negative 39%
Negative 34%

It is not only those who identify as trans who believe that depictions of the trans community in the news and press is negative. Almost three quarters (74%) of all respondents including both LGBT+ and non-LGBT+ individuals say that depictions of the Trans community in the news and press have been negative or highly negative; with the biggest percentage saying highly negative. This increases to 77% for respondents living in the UK.

"generally the media reports on LGBT+ issues, and trans issues specifically, in a so-called 'neutral way' but that in reality it's giving credence to exclusionary and discriminatory views."

"It is really rare to see respectful and thoughtful news that use the right pronouns and expressions to refer to the trans community."

"Cannot recall positive coverage."

"The relative absence of trans voices as their interests are dissected by others reflects poorly on broadcast editors."

"There seems to be a very real anti-trans attitude in the press and media."

EXAMPLE COMMENTS

LEVELS OF REPRESENTATION

Although visible representation of the LGBT+ community has risen in recent years, this does not mean that all parts of the LGBT+ community are represented equally. The vast majority (86%) of respondents stated that specific parts of the LGBT+ community were under-represented.

Which parts of the LGBT+ community do you consider to be under-represented?
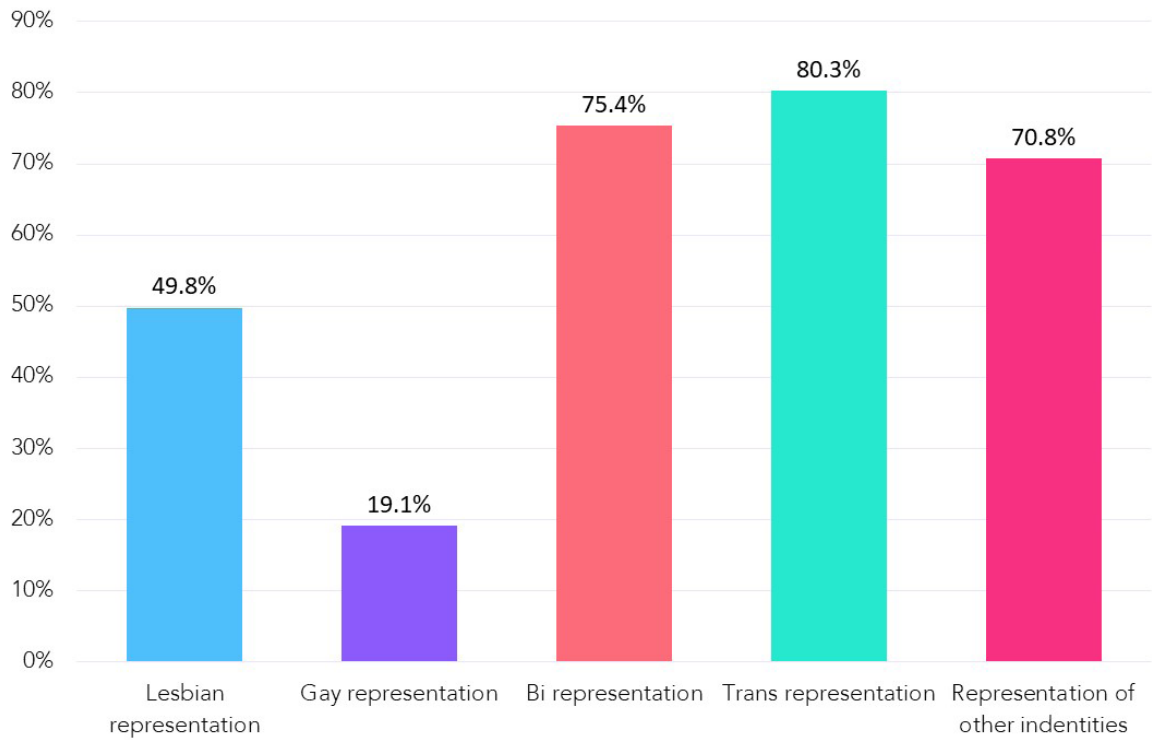
Under-representation of diverse LGBT+ identities

When asked which specific parts of the community were under-represented, respondents consider Gay individuals to be much less under-represented than other LGBT+ individuals. This is despite marginally more Gay individuals completing the survey than any other part of the LGBT+ community.

"The representation of the LGBT+ community is very much white lesbian or white gay men – and very often using the typical stereotypes."

"pretty much only white, cis gay men are afforded mainstream representation."

"All communities are under represented, but of those who get the most attention are cis, white gay men."

"LGBT+ characters do not represent the full diversity of the LGBT+ community, often focusing on the 'G' sector of the community. Even within this there is not much diversity."

EXAMPLE COMMENTS

While half of those who answered considered Lesbians to be under-represented in the media, there is a clear belief that individuals outside of the L and G are the most under-represented.

"Bi and Trans identities are extremely underrepresented, as are multiple aspects of diverse identities"

"Particularly trans men / trans-masculine people, nonbinary folks, disabled and chronically ill LGBT+ people, trans people of colour."

EXAMPLE COMMENTS

Only a third of respondents (34%) believe that any parts of the LGBT+ community are over-represented in the media. Of those, 71% believed that it was Gay individuals who were over-represented.

This small set of results clearly points to a difference in perceived levels of representation between those who are gay, and other parts of the LGBT+ community.

HOW THE MEDIA AFFECTS PERCEPTIONS OF LGBT+ INDIVIDUALS

The results of this survey clearly establish, albeit with some exceptions, that respondents do not generally consider media representation of the LGBT+ community to be realistic. Across the different areas of media mentioned in the survey, respondents are also more likely to consider representation to be negative rather than positive; especially if they are LGBT+ themselves.

The question then arises as to what impact, if any, this may have on the lived experiences of those who are a part of the LGBT+ community.

To help answer this question, we asked LGBT+ respondents whether they personally believed that representation of the LGBT+ community in the media affected the way they were perceived. 82% of LGBT+ respondents said it did in at least one part of their life.
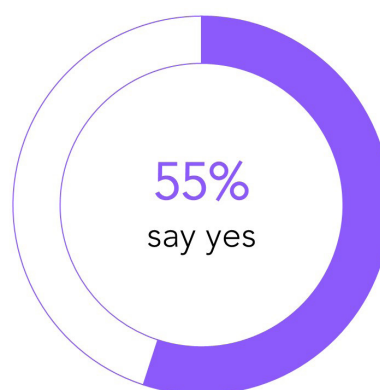
Do you believe that representation of the LGBT+ community in the media affects the way you are perceived:
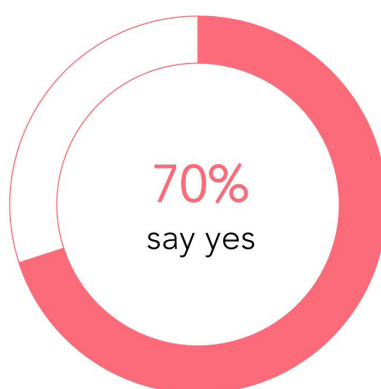
(LGBT+ respondents only)

Within your family

61%
say yes
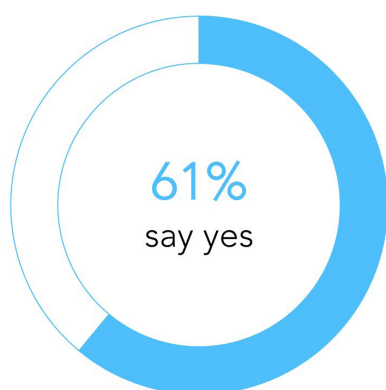
Within your social circle

55%
say yes

Within your workplace

70%
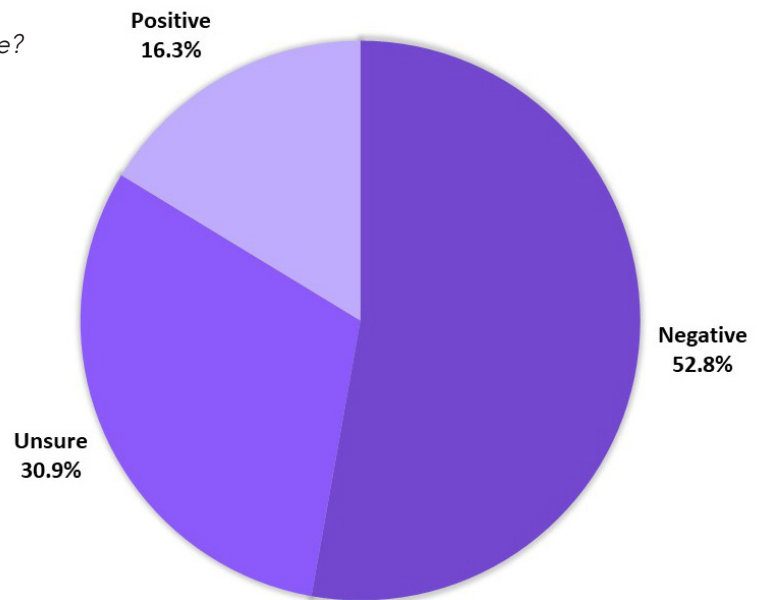say yes

Overall, do you think this is positive or negative?

(LGBT+ respondents only)

For the vast majority of LGBT+ survey respondents there is a relationship between media representation of the community, and the way that they themselves are perceived by the people they know. This points to the power that media representation may have in affecting the lived experiences of LGBT+ individuals; especially with regards to the news and press which is arguably the most pervasive type of media covered in the survey and, according to respondents, has both the most unrealistic and most negative representations of the LGBT+ community.

Of those who said that representation of the LGBT+ community in the media affected the way they were perceived, over half (53%) believed that this was negative and only 16% positive.

"Within the workplace, I have less influence on the perceptions of people around me than the media does. Therefore, if media perception of the LGBT+ community is negative, it makes my task of being out in the workplace more difficult as I need to tackle the task of changing that perception."

"I'm out to many people within my workplace, but others have made it clear that the extent to which they value my opinion on LGBT+ issues is conditional on the fact that they've assumed I'm straight! …I see this as a direct consequence of how so much of the media we consume still paints LGBT+ people as 'other' in some way, even if it's not an especially negative way."

"I spend so much of my life correcting perceptions of the LGBT+ community, especially [the trans community] this year, and it is sometimes hard to pace the amount of reality you have to bring to people whose views are skewed by misinformation and increasingly it seems disinformation."

EXAMPLE COMMENTS

RELATIONSHIP TO DISCRIMINATION

The results show that the majority of LGBT+ respondents believe that the media has an effect on how they are perceived by others, with most believing overall that this is negative. While this may not necessarily mean that LGBT+ individuals have faced negative behaviour or discrimination as a result, over half of all LGBT+ respondents believe that they have. This rises to 73% for respondents who identify as trans.
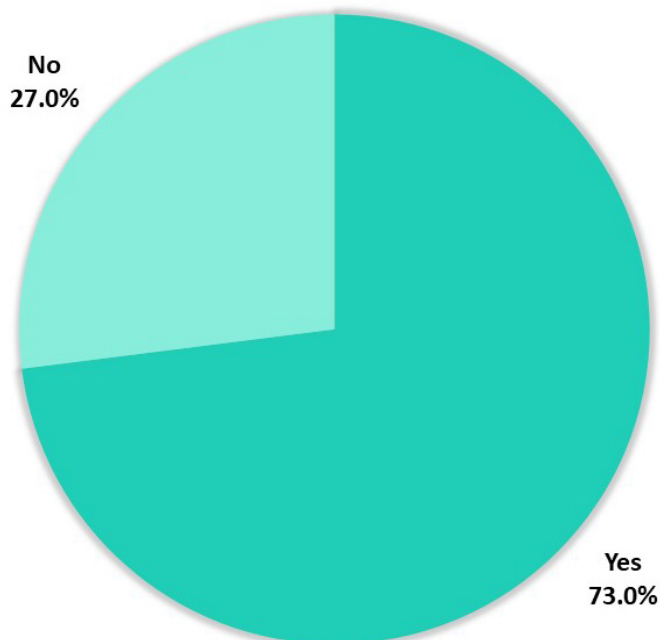
Have you faced any negative behaviour or discrimination which you believe is connected to portrayals of LGBT+ people in the media?

(LGBT+ respondents only)

No 47.1%

Yes 52.9%

Have you witnessed any negative behaviour or discrimination which you believe is connected to portrayals of LGBT+ people in the media?

(LGBT+ respondents only)

No 27.0%

Yes 73.0%

While 50% of LGBT+ respondents have faced negative behaviour or discrimination, almost three quarters (73%) have witnessed negative behaviour or discrimination against others which they believe is connected to portrayals of LGBT+ people in the media.

"I have witnessed both verbal abuse and violence."

"A lot of transphobia can be linked to bad representation with many representations showing trans people as violent and mentally ill - they also shame heterosexual men for finding trans women attractive"

"I believe that much transphobia is caused by the press and media representation and negative reporting."

"I have witnessed negative behaviour towards every part of the community unfortunately due to portrayals in the media/TV."

"This is constant. If people say they haven't witnessed it, it's only because it's so endemic."

EXAMPLE COMMENTS

It is not only those respondents who are LGBT+ who have witnessed this connection. 50% of non-LGBT+ respondents also say they have witnessed negative behaviour or discrimination towards LGBT+ people which they believe is connected to portrayals of LGBT+ people in the media.

CONCLUSION

The survey behind this report was completed by a diverse cross-section of identities from across the LGBT+ community as well as by non-LGBT+ allies, and had a high level of agreement surrounding many of the key findings.

Firstly, a clear majority of respondents believe that representation of the LGBT+ community in the media is unrealistic, and across the types of media included, is generally more negative than it is positive. This is especially true when it comes to the news and press, which was found to have both the most unrealistic representations of the LGBT+ community and also the most negative.

When considering representation of the trans community specifically in the news and press, there is a clear consensus (74%) amongst respondents that this is negative or highly negative with many comments referencing the prevalence of bias against the trans community and transphobic content within the mainstream media.

Secondly, a significant majority of LGBT+ respondents believe that media portrayals of the LGBT+ community have had a negative effect on how they are themselves perceived within their family, social circle or workplace. This finding points towards the power the media may have in forming people's opinions about those within the LGBT+ community and how these opinions may be formed from media representation that the LGBT+ community see as both unrealistic and negative.

Lastly, that respondents in this survey believe that there is a connection between portrayals of the LGBT+ community in the media and negative behaviour or discrimination that they may have faced themselves or witnessed happening to other LGBT+ people. This further points to the potential negative impact that media representation of the LGBT+ community has on the lived experiences of those who are LGBT+.

Over recent years there has been an emphasis placed on increasing representation of the LGBT+ community on screen and in the media more generally. Having been visibly absent or overlooked for so long, it can feel like positive progress just to see any form of LGBT+ representation appear on screen. However the results from this research suggests that only increasing representation (especially if focused on just a limited part of the LGBT+ community) is not enough and could potentially be damaging to the perceptions and understanding of the LGBT+ community if unrealistic and negative representations become more commonplace.

Therefore alongside the drive for increased representation in the media, it would also appear necessary to ensure that a greater emphasis is placed on the nature of representation; ensuring that portrayals of the LGBT+ community become more realistic to the lived experience of LGBT+ individuals and crucially more representative of the diversity which exists within LGBT+ identities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are different ways in which the issue and effects of inaccurate and negative representations of LGBT+ people within the media as highlighted in this report can be tackled. This includes actions which can be taken by media organisations, by media consumers, and by allies to the LGBT+ community.

Based on their experience of supporting organisations in creating more inclusive workplaces as well as educating leaders and other individuals on how to be more effective LGBT+ allies, INvolve would highlight the following key recommendations for action.

- Ensure that LGBT+ people are involved in the creation and production of media which portrays them. Accurate and positive portrayals rely on understanding true-to-life experiences of LGBT+ individuals. Increasing diverse LGBT+ representation behind the camera will ensure that a narrow diversity of LGBT+ individuals are not relied on to tell the stories or correct inaccuracies for a very broad range of LGBT+ experiences.

- As an individual, be mindful that many representations of LGBT+ people in the media are inaccurate and biased towards negative portrayals. Educate yourself beyond the news and press which, according to this report, can be a source of the most unrealistic and harmful portrayals of LGBT+ people. Engage with media which offers more accurate portrayals such as documentary or film and TV series, alongside non-fiction books and biographies or autobiographies concerning LGBT+ people and issues. Also look for media which is made or written by a diversity of LGBT+ people.

- As an ally, put in the work to combat harmful stereotypes and misinformation where you encounter it. Complaints can be made to Ofcom for misleading and harmful media. You can also use your voice within your immediate circles to speak out against misinformation and damaging portrayals of LGBT+ people. As reflected in some of the comments within this report, LGBT+ people have to do this everyday and it can be tiring and difficult.

- Within your organisation, examine how LGBT+ people are portrayed. Are all or parts of the LGBT+ community visibly absent from communications, events, and speaking engagements? Does your organisation only engage about LGBT+ issues when it is Pride month? Engage with leaders, your team, and if your organisation has one, your LGBT+ employee network, to find out how you can get involved and help educate others and increase representation.

For more information on how INvolve can help drive diversity and inclusion at your organisation, or support the development of your LGBT+ network, please get in touch at **info@involvepeople.org**

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the inclusion people