Analysis of Representations of African Americans in Non-linear Streaming Media Content

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Abstract

Nonlinear distribution methods have changed the way that media content is consumed, with viewers now able to watch entire series in a few sittings. To develop a better understanding of how African Americans are portrayed on nonlinear distribution platforms, a content analysis was performed on the top five shows from Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime. Findings suggest that online streaming platforms offer more diversity than traditional television, although underrepresentation and misrepresentation remain major issues in this space.

I. Introduction

"Unarmed Black Teen Shot in the Chest in Front of His Mother;" "NYPD Slays Unarmed Black Teen;" and "Missouri Police Shooting of Unarmed Black Teen Sparks Days of Protest." Headlines like these have become common in the last five years. These headlines may be dismissed as isolated incidents as people scroll across television screens, but the list is much longer: Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Jordan Davis, Kendrec McDade, Timothy Stansbury Jr., Sean Bell, Orlando Barlow, Aaron Campbell, Steven Washington, Ronald Madison, James Brissette, Ezell Ford, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, John Crawford, and Travares McGill. Each name represents an African American killed by police, security guards, or neighborhood watchmen around the country. Together, they are evidence of a culture that systematically devalues the lives of African Americans. The loss of these lives has awakened protesters around the country. Communities are demanding accountability, politicians are advocating gun reform, and citizens are crying out against militarization of local police forces. However, there is a larger problem that is not being addressed, representation issues of African Americans.

At first glance it may be difficult to see a connection between representation issues and police brutality. However, research illustrates a large relationship between media portrayals and individual attitudes. In 1976, communications researcher Gerbner conducted a large-scale research project titled "The Cultural Indicators Project." The project was commissioned by The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence to analyze the effects of television violence on audiences. The study led to cultivation theory, which primarily states, "The more time people spend living in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed on television" (Gerbner & Gross, 2002).

When the initial Cultural Indicators Project was completed in the late 1970s, people understood that television was becoming a central part of American culture (Gerbner & Gross, 2002). Since then, television has become more central to American culture and cultures around the world. According to the Nielsen Corporation, Americans watch over 250 billion hours of television annually and over 96% of households in America have at least one television (Nielsen, 2016).

These facts become problematic when partnered with research about portrayals of African Americans on television. A 2000 study found that African Americans were portrayed negatively more than any other ethnicities in prime-time television. If cultivation theory states that television portrayals have a profound effect on an individual's perceptions of the world, and existing research shows that African Americans are portrayed negatively, the result would undoubtedly be widespread negative perceptions of African Americans (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000).

While traditional television that prior studies have focused on is certainly still a cultural phenomenon, the emergence of the fourth screen on mobile platforms has created a media landscape where non-linear distribution methods are able to thrive. Because they are new, little research has been done on the content being distributed on these platforms. This paper used cultivation theory to analyze the portrayals of African Americans in nonlinear distribution platforms and get a comprehensive view of the representation issues in a modern context.

II. Literature Review

To understand the problems with portrayals of Blacks, the literature review focused on cultivation theory, issues of misrepresentation and underrepresentation, historical portrayals of Blacks and stereotypes, and the shifted media landscape that has been shaped by the mobile device screen, often called the fourth screen.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory posits that since television occupies a central role in American culture, it is more influential than other forms of media. It posits that television shapes people's attitudes and beliefs rather than directly affecting behavior (Gerbner & Gross, 2002).

Cultivation theory generally uses qualitative and/or quantitative content analysis. Early studies through the Cultural Indicators Project created coding parameters that classified characters as good or bad. As more studies were completed, coding parameters became more refined. By 1996, cultivation experiments had adopted methods to examine character's tone and the characteristics of the programming itself. In a similar way, this study created quantitative coding parameters based on properties of the examined programming.

The effects of cultivation theory vary with individuals. The difference in the degree of cultivation among many television viewers is called the cultivation differential (Gerbner & Gross, 2002). The cultivation differential is caused by a variety of factors that can affect an individual's cultivation, such as the amount of television that is watched. Individuals who watch large amounts of television are referred to as heavy viewers, while individuals who watch limited amounts of television are referred to as light viewers. According to the theory, heavy viewers are influenced more than light viewers.

Another factor is the environment of individuals. People who live in more dangerous neighborhoods are more susceptible to portrayals of violent acts. Gender was also determined to be a factor, due to the portrayals of women as victims; they were more likely to embrace beliefs pertaining to violence (Gerbner & Gross, 2002). Due to the opportunities for information exchanges in conversations after group viewings, individuals in group viewings have lower chances of cultivation than those who watch content alone. Age is also a factor. Young children who lack the ability to fully comprehend what is going on are less likely to be subject to cultivation. Finally, individuals' level of familiarity with the situation portrayed affects their chance of cultivation. Individuals who did not have personal experience with the portrayed realities were more likely to experience cultivation because they relied on television to inform them.

A majority of the factors referenced in cultivation differential were developed because opponents of the theory felt it did not take into account the many variables that could affect a person being cultivated.

Gerbner asserts that while these variables do play a part in a person's likelihood to experience cultivation, the amount of television a person watches is the most important factor (Gerbner & Gross, 1972).

Representation in Depth

The idea of representation is not a recent creation. Both Plato and Aristotle believed that one of mankind's distinguishing traits is its ability to create representations (Nehamas, 2012). While their understanding of representation was rooted in language and literature, they believed that representation has a direct relation to the culture and society that created them. When talking about media, Beach (2016) defines representation as "the ways in which the media portray particular groups, communities, experiences, ideas, or topics from a particular ideological or value perspective." For example, the 2014 film *American Sniper* that depicts a conflict between American soldiers and foreign enemies was criticized for its poor representation of foreigners, because it humanized the American soldiers who acted in the majority of movies killing people, and offered no redeeming qualities for their opposition.

Media misrepresentation is the product of society. The media content created in one culture inevitably bears the values of that culture. For example, media programs produced in the 1940s and 1950s, such as *Amos and Andy*, were strongly rooted in racist stereotypes of the era, and sexist stereotypes were found in content produced in the American Temperance Era.

When representation has negative ramifications, it generally occurs in two ways, misrepresentation and underrepresentation. Misrepresentation occurs when groups, communities, and ideas are wrongly portrayed. When certain groups and communities are systematically excluded from representations, media underrepresentation occurs. Many minority groups suffer from representation issues; however, the African American community has a unique history with representation.

Representation of African Americans

African Americans have a relationship to American history that cannot be replicated by any other minority groups. The reality of slavery and the Jim Crow Era that followed placed the African American community subject to misrepresentation in mainstream American culture even before the modern idea of media started.

For decades, African Americans have been depicted negatively in popular media (Drummond, 1990). African American men have been stereotyped as violent and impulsive sexual predators (Watson, 2009). African Americans were portrayed negatively not only in reality TV and scripted television shows, but in news outlets as well. They were more consistently shown as being poorly dressed and being restrained by figures of authority (Entman, 1992). Overall, media outlets created a narrative that portrayed African Americans as lazy, violent individuals who were prone to crime (Entman, 1990). Despite the inaccuracies of these stereotypes, prolonged exposure to them can create an environment that perpetuates them (Entman & Gross, 2008). Media misrepresentation has been shown to cause cultural stigma, and capable of causing members of stereotyped groups to model behavior that did not originally exist (Dong & Murrillo, 2007). These beliefs are even more significant in areas where direct interaction with African Americans is lacking (Fujioka, 1999).

Negative representations of African Americans have been used as the foundation for a variety of stereotypes about African American people.

African American Stereotypes

The Mammy stereotype is the description of a Black woman who works as a nanny or housekeeper (West, 1995). One of the earliest depictions of the mammy stereotype comes from the 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* It is rooted in the real-life experiences of female slaves who were domestic workers in White households, where they cooked, cleaned, and were responsible for taking care of the master's children. Generally the mammy was portrayed as an old, overweight, dark-skinned woman. As time passed, the mammy stereotype evolved. In 1889, Aunt Jemima was a clear depiction of the mammy image. The television sitcoms *Maude*, *That's my Mama, Gimme a Break*, and *What's Happening* continued to use this archetype.

The Mandingo stereotype is based on rhetoric used during slavery asserting that Black men were primitive and hypersexual. The rhetoric that characterized Black men as brute was used even after the emancipation of slaves to further separate Blacks from Whites, and to discourage mixed race relationships. Positioning Black men as sex-crazed fiends made it easier to enforce accusations of rape and murder,

contributing a rise in lynchings. The Mandingo stereotype exists in modern day media in the form of thugs, gangsters, or other Black male characters who lack empathy, and only show a penchant for violence and sexual activity.

The independent Black woman, an archetypal type of Black woman, has been depicted as being narcissistic and emasculating to men in her life (Harris, 2015). This stereotype is closely related to the angry Black woman stereotype. Rather than responding to unfair treatment in anger, however, the independent Black woman behaves selfishly to serve her own personal interest and creates a reality where she does not need anyone to provide for her because she provides for herself. Ultimately, the idea of "a strong independent black woman who don't need no man" is prevalent in modern media content.

The Jezebel stereotype presents Black women as sexually promiscuous seductresses (Mitchell & Herring, 1998). In many ways, this stereotype was meant to be the antithesis of the submissive and pure elements associated with the ideal Victorian woman. The insatiable sexual appetite of the Jezebel was used as justification for sexual assault of African American women throughout slavery and the Reconstruction Era.

The Drug User/Dealer stereotype emerges from media reporting tactics used during the War on Drugs (Wise, 2001). Under President Richard Nixon, the War on Drugs disproportionately targeted African Americans, and was used to disrupt Black communities and Black community groups, such as the Black Panthers. This stereotype found its life originally via news broadcasts, where African Americans were disproportionately shown being arrested.

The Financially Needy stereotype is also referred to as the welfare queen stereotype. Studies show that media portrayals of poverty lead to a dramatic overestimation of African Americans living under the poverty line (Levin, 2013).

The Magical Negro stereotype is a supporting stock character in American films. It references a Black character, usually male, who comes to the aid of a White film protagonist (Kempley, 2003). The Magical Negro usually has some form of special social understanding or power.

The Angry Black Woman stereotype is derivative of the Sapphire stereotype. In the 1930's radio show *Amos'n'Andy,* there was a character named Sapphire who was known for nagging and emasculating her husband.

The Athlete stereotype is a derivative of the Mandingo stereotype. Rather than focusing on the Black man's enhanced sexual appetite, the focus is placed on his advanced physical attributes. Once again, the Black man is depicted like an animal to give credence to ideas of him having superhuman ability. This includes stereotypes of Black men running fast or being strong.

The Rapper/Dancer stereotype portrays African Americans as being automatically endowed with the ability to dance or rap. Because the majority of the performers in the rap industry are Black, shows like *Soul Train* showcases the rhythmic abilities of some Blacks and uses true events to extrapolate a false reality.

Criminality has always been an element in misrepresentation of the Black community. Historically, criminality was one of the excuses for why slaves should be kept by their masters. Historic precedence for demonizing Blacks and calling them immoral, along with disproportionate coverage of news stories with Black perpetrators, creates a culture where Blacks are stereotyped as criminals regardless of wrongdoing.

Though language itself is a social construct that is constantly evolving, Blacks are consistently stereotyped as being unable to speak proper English, and instead reverting to ghetto slang. This stereotype relies on the idea that slang is an indication of a lack of intelligence rather than the employment of culturally bound colloquialisms. It also fails to take into account that African American vernacular English is a recognized dialect with a complete set of linguistic rules as mainstream English.

The Effects of Misrepresentation

Research shows that the distorted portrayals of African Americans found in the media cause general antagonism toward African American males, lack of identification, or sympathy with African Americans, and exaggerated views related to criminality and violence in the African American community (Kang, 2005; Ramasubramanian, 2011; Entman & Gross, 2008). Phelps et al. (2000) found, regardless of conscious reports about racial attitudes, Whites were shown to have increased activity in the regions of their brain associated with experiencing fear when they saw unfamiliar African Americans. One study found that United States citizens

support harsher laws if those laws are designed to imprison more African Americans (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014).

These negative effects translate into institutional consequences (Dong & Murrillo, 2007). Media misrepresentation has been linked to African Americans receiving less attention from doctors, harsher sentencing by judges (Rachlinski, Johnson, Wistrich, & Guthrie, 2009), lower likelihood of being hired for a job or admitted to school, shorter life expectancy (Entman, 2006), lower odds of getting loans, and higher likelihood of being shot by police (Greenwald, Oakes, & Hoffman, 2003).

These portrayals also cause African Americans to have reduced self-esteem (Tan & Tan, 1979), low expectations for themselves (Martin, 2008), and implicit bias against members of their own race (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). It has also been proven to increase domestic abuse rates of African American women, and cause African American men to underachieve on standardized tests and in job interviews (Schmader et al., 2008).

Communications researchers Mastro and Greenberg (2000) suggested that immediate work be undertaken in order to address representation issues. However, according to a replication of that study performed 10 years later, African Americans are still being misrepresented and negatively stereotyped in the same ways (Turner, et.al, 2010).

The Emergence of the Fourth Screen

Cultivation theory posits that television is central to American culture. This was true during the 1970s when the theory was created, and in the present, too. However, in the last decade, the media landscape has shifted to accommodate the fourth screen. The television was considered the second screen when it was introduced, with its predecessor, the silver screen being referred to as the first screen. After personal computers became accessible to most consumers, they were referred to as the third screen. Now an increasing number of people access media content through the fourth screen, which refers to any form of mobile device capable of accessing media content. The term could refer to smartphones, net books, tablets, mini-tablets, smart watches, and even augmented reality devices, such as Google Glass. The fourth screen revolutionized the media industry because it made non-linear content distribution more conveniently accessible. Generally, television served as the primary source for most media content being produced, and aside from on-demand services or DVDs, consumers would have to cross their fingers and hope they'd catch their favorite show through television. However, when technology enabled people to access media content on their own schedule, distribution methods began to accommodate that shift. The first Apple iPhone was released in the same year that Netflix began streaming.

Once streaming platforms started to gain momentum, media content began to be consumed liked never before through computers and mobile devices. Popular TV shows, such as *Seinfeld*, *Southpark*, and *Scrubs*, which consisted of hundreds of episodes that aired over the course of decades, were now capable of being watched completely over the course of a few weeks. In addition to the new distribution of branded properties, websites like *YouTube*, *Vimeo*, and *NewGrounds* made it possible for both amateur and independent professional content creators to amass large audiences. Pieces of media content such as Psy's "Gangnam Style" and Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up" were given a life mostly on the fourth screen that far exceeded what they would have experienced on any other platform.

Nonlinear distribution methods have changed the way that media content is consumed. Rather than tuning into the television for a few hours a day, viewers are now able to watch entire shows in one sitting if they choose to. This new culture of "binge" watching has created a phenomenon similar to the heavy viewers that Gerbner asserted were most vulnerable to cultivation.

III. Methods

Sample Selection

Due to their majority market share, Netflix, Hulu Plus, and Amazon Prime were the streaming platforms that were selected for this study. For each platform, the top five most popular live actions, scripted series were analyzed. Amazon Prime and Hulu Plus both had programming that was referenced as their most

popular content on their website and in their marketing materials. However, Netflix's most popular content was not consistent throughout their promotional materials. Instead of using Netflix statistics, this study relied on third party research by the marketing firm, RBC Capital Markets, when it determined top five series. At the end, the following shows were selected:

Table 1: Selected programming for analysis

Streaming platform	Most popular programming
Netflix	*Narcos, The Walking Dead, Orange is the New Black, Friends, Breaking Bad*
Hulu Plus	*Seinfeld, Brooklyn Nine Nine, The Mindy Project, Empire, Law and Order SVU*
Amazon Prime	The Man in the High Castle, Downton Abbey, Vikings, Red Oaks, Hand of God

For each of the 15 series, four episodes were analyzed: the beginning of the series, the most recently released episode of the series, and two randomly selected episodes. These episodes were selected based on the belief that analyzing the first aired episode, and most recent episodes of the show would allow the majority of the main cast to be shown, and two randomly selected episodes would allow for any extras or side characters to make appearances. The selection process lead to 60 episodes (See Appendix I).

Stereotype Parameters

The content analysis focused on identifying stereotypical portrayals based on the writings of multiple media professionals as shown below:

1) Mammy/Servant: An obese, dark-skinned woman with broad features who worked in the master's house, often serving as nanny, housekeeper, and cook (West, 1995).
2) Mandingo/Savage   Hyper-sexual Black man with an insatiable appetite for White women (Malebranche, 1997).
3) Independent Black Woman: A Black woman who is selfish and emasculating toward men in her life.
4) Jezebel: A seductive, manipulative, Black woman unable to control her sexual drives (Mitchell & Herring, 1998).
5) Drug User/Drug Dealer: A portrayal where a Black character is shown to be a drug user or salesperson.
6) Financially Needy: A portrayal where a Black character is depicted as not having the financial means to take care of themselves.
7) Magical Negro: A portrayal where a Black character serves as the solution to a White protagonist's problems.
8) Angry Black Woman: A portrayal used where a Black woman is aggressive and emasculating.
9) Athlete: A portrayal where a Black character inexplicably has athletic and sports skills, and endeavors to be famous doing so.
10) Rapper/Dancer: A portrayal where a Black character inexplicably has skills in rap or dance, and endeavors to be famous doing so.
11) Criminal: A portrayal where a Black character has committed a crime or broken the law.
12) Ghetto/Inarticulate: A portrayal where Black characters speak with slang and can't express themselves.

For each episode, the following questions were asked: its diversity in terms of composition of actors;

show title and episode; episode length; streaming platform; writers of color; executive producers of color; The number of Black writers; the number of characters in the main cast; the number of Black characters in the main cast; the presence of any stereotypes.

If the last question above, the presence of any stereotypes, was answered yes, then a second set of questions about the portrayal of all stereotypical characters in each episode were asked:

- "What is the character's name?
- How much is the character featured?
- Is the character of darker or lighter skin tone?
- What stereotypes were present?
- How were they presented?
- Notable quotes?

IV. Findings

The study found that streaming content in general suffered from the same misrepresentation of traditional television shows. Among 60 episodes examined, 32 (53.3%) were considered racially diverse because multiple races were represented among featured characters in its main cast, 49 (81.7%) had no writers of color, and 57 (95.0%) had no executive producers of color.

Of the content analyzed, 42 (70.0%) of the episodes contained no stereotypes. But this was possible because of lack of Black actors in the cast: 37 (61.7%) featured no Black people in their main cast, even though 57(95%) featured four or more characters as main casts.

When the author analyzed the remaining 18 episodes that contained stereotypes, they had 106 characters in total, including main ones. Among them, 44 characters (41.5%) were not of the stereotypical types, followed by 13 (12.3%) for Ghetto/Inarticulate; 12 for Criminal; 11 for Angry Black Woman, etc. (Refer to *Figure 1.*)
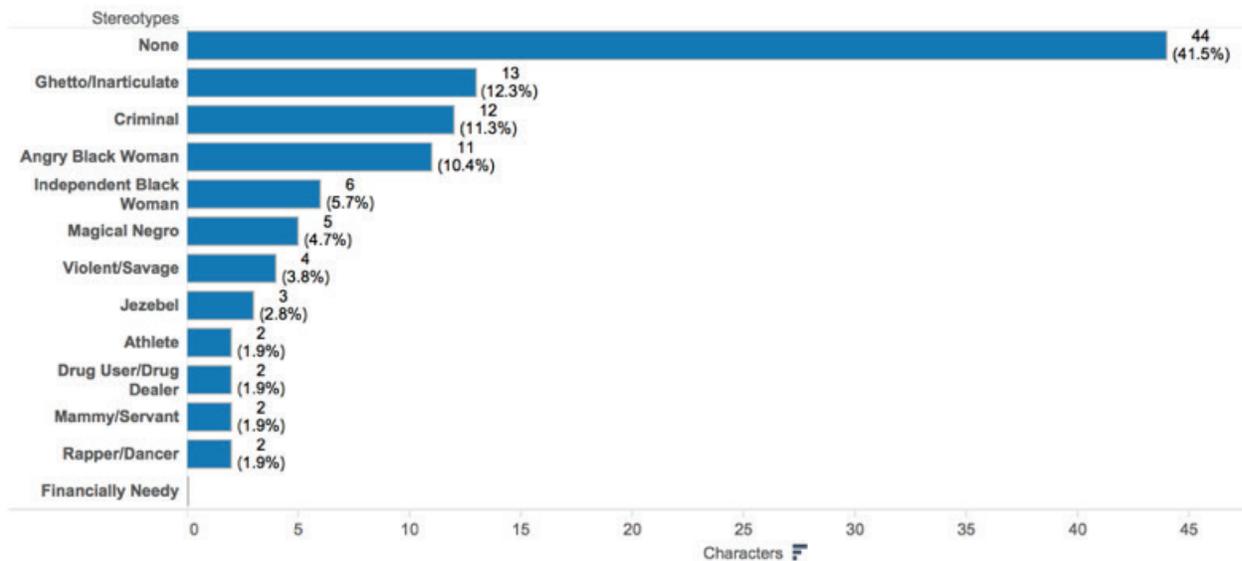

Figure 1. The pattern of stereotypes

Underrepresentation

The lack of writers and executive producers of color, in conjunction with the lack of Black characters, demonstrates that nonlinear distribution platforms suffer from issues of misrepresentation, but that there is also an issue of underrepresentation. The lack of Black characters, writers, and executive producers indicates that this underrepresentation is an issue that spans the entire content creation process.

The reasons for representation issues in the nonlinear space are unclear. One may hypothesize that since the majority of the content shown on these platforms was originally created for traditional television, representation problems still thrive in this space because it reuses dated content. This is supported by the fact that the majority of the shows analyzed were originally aired on television.

V. Discussion and Conclusions

Nonlinear streaming platforms are distinctly different from traditional television because of the viewing dynamics associated with them. When cultivation theory was originally introduced, a cultivation indicator showed that individuals consumed large amounts of media, but their choices for media content were restricted to the media offered on television broadcasts. However, nonlinear streaming platforms not only allow consumers to select their programming at their own leisure, but also insulate themselves with content that aligns perfectly with their beliefs.

In this content analysis, the stereotypes like ghetto/inarticulate, criminal, and angry Black woman were most frequently observed. As discussed earlier, these stereotypes are rooted in discriminatory practices. While it is already observed that repeated exposure to these stereotypes has negative ramifications, nonlinear streaming platforms have the capability of increasing these effects due to their availability and the advent of binge watching. When George Zimmerman killed Trayvon Martin in 2012, the 911 call featured him uttering the phrases, "This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something." In 2014 when Ferguson protestors attempted to perform nonviolent protests, police officers arrived in riot gear, and used tear gas to disperse the crowd. While nonlinear streaming platforms do not cause these problematic beliefs, they possess the unparalleled ability to present media consumers with content that might lead to misconceptions of Blacks. This fact should be considered during the content creation process.

The Need for Proper Representation

An undeniable truth made clear by this study is the need for more accurate and nuanced portrayals of African Americans in the media. This necessity for increased representation applies not only to on-screen roles, but also all links in the media content creation chain. It can be argued that adding more African American producers and writers will decrease negative representations, due to their knowledge of the true breadth of the Black experience.

The stereotypes that were coded for this study were rooted in the literature. Misrepresentation of African Americans is so widespread that it has been observed for decades with little work completed to combat it. More than just stereotypes, these portrayals serve as a box that African Americans are expected to fit in. Terms like Mammy, Mandingo, Independent Black Woman, Jezebel, Drug User, Financially Needy, Magical Negro, Angry Black Woman, Athlete, Rapper, Criminal, and Ghetto represent current iterations of a long line of discriminatory social systems that predates nonlinear streaming platforms. While these forms of discrimination existed earlier, and still do in the era of nonlinear streaming platforms, cultivation theory can be used to reverse these stereotypes, and create a new norm that thrives on the principle of inclusivity rather than discrimination.

New Media, New Opportunities

New media undoubtedly offers an opportunity for independent content creators. Rather than relying on major studios or corporate entities, sites such as YouTube and Vimeo now offer an enticing avenue for building audiences. They have created an opportunity for some of the highest quality independent content, with web series like *The Guild* and *Video Game High School* being purchased by larger companies. New media's capability to empower content producers provides an opportunity to create more positive representations in media content. Organizations, such as Weird Enough Productions, Kweli TV, and Black and Sexy TV, have taken advantage of this shift to create content geared to remedy representation issues.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix: Episodes selected from 15 series for this study

Series	Episodes #
Seinfeld	1,22,173, 180
Law and Order SVU	1, 22, 93, 375
Brooklyn Nine Nine	1, 14, 51, 52
The Mindy Project	1, 6, 48, 78
Empire	1, 9, 15, 22
The Man in the High Castle	1, 2, 7, 10
Downton Abbey	1, 35, 40, 51
Vikings	1, 12,25, 29
Red Oaks	1, 2, 8, 10
Hand of God	1, 3, 4, 10
Narcos	1, 2, 8, 10
The Walking Dead	1, 19, 21, 67
Orange is the New Black	1, 12, 17, 52
Friends	1, 72, 163, 236
Breaking Bad	1, 58, 59, 69