

# Living in The Background: Analyzing the Representation of Marginalized Identities in Predominantly White TV Shows

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## Abstract

*In recent years, television producers and companies have strived to engage and promote content that is more inclusive and diverse, specifically focusing on promoting shows that feature a racially diverse lead cast. This study analyzed the representation of marginalized identities in predominately Caucasian TV shows during primetime. Through a quantitative content analysis, this study found that there was some growth in the number of racial minorities that were represented on sitcoms during primetime television. Although there has been a significant change in diversity in Hollywood, TV executives must make sure that their work is respectable and properly representative of these identities.*

## I. Introduction

Representation has always been a problem in Hollywood. Major companies have historically been led by white men who rarely sought the perspective of other identities. As America slowly began to appreciate and accept its diverse population, more people have become vocal about the lack of representation that they saw in movies and television. As Hollywood began to include black and brown faces on the silver screen, audiences were met with jarring misrepresentations and stereotypical characters that negatively reflected the identity of millions. Today, more communities are looking to be represented in media to better tell the story of America and the people who make the country so diverse.

Through visual media, our society can be shaped to believe certain narratives about communities, especially when those communities do not have the power to tell their own stories. Through media like television and movies, our world and culture has been influenced by the visions and creations of other people. Our cultural development has been highly dependent and reflective of these media forms to build our societal consciousness. Unfortunately, these art forms can contribute to misinformed opinions about certain identities. Has television responded to these critiques by properly and positively representing these identities during primetime viewership?

This study answered this question by replicating previous studies by Mastro and Greenberg (2000) as well as a study by Monk-Turner et al. (2010). This study particularly focused on the representation of racial minorities on sitcoms that aired during primetime on NBC, ABC and CBS. This study analyzed how some minority characters are depicted and if they were depicted with stereotypical characteristics.

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This study used a method of quantitative content analysis, following the method of Monk-Turner et al.'s (2010) study to find if there were any changes in how many minorities were depicted on television. This study analyzed three series from the 1996-1997 season and three series from the 2016-2017 season: two of each from NBC, ABC and CBS. Two random episodes were chosen from each of the show's respective seasons – one episode from the earlier part of the season and the other from the later part of the season. It is hypothesized that the overall representation of marginalized identities has increased however, there are still some remnants of stereotypical depictions that occur for the sake of comedy.

## II. Literature Review

Framing theory, introduced by communications and media scholar Robert Entman, has been used by communication scholars to examine the way media portrays misrepresented identities. Within television studies, researchers have found correlations between television representation of minorities and stereotypes (Park, Zhang & Holody, 2012). Scholars have also used the Agenda Setting theory to explain the negative impact of the media portrayals of marginalized groups.

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) write, "It [framing] is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). Scheufele (1999) references the writings of McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (1997) who propose that framing is not simply its own theory but that "framing is, in fact, an extension of agenda setting" (Scheufele, 1999, p. 103). Scheufele also explains some factors that influence the way media sources frame certain issues or people: "social norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, [...] and orientations of journalists" (Scheufele, 1999, p. 109). Although these indicators mainly focus on journalistic influences, the factors of "social norms and values" can relate to any type of media framing.

Ardèvol-Abreu (2015) writes that "the diversity of approaches to framing, [...] is possibly the only way to properly understand a phenomenon as complex as the effects of the media" (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015, p. 425). By looking at framing theory in relation to fiction television, it allows for researchers to find trends in the way predominately white television shows portray marginalized identities, more specifically racial minorities.

House (2017) references sociologist Joe Feagin's book *The White Racial Frame* and defines this term as "an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, [...] as well as... inclinations to discriminate" (House, 2017, p. 170). Media tropes like the "White Savior Complex" and "The Magical Negro" still permeate modern television. Modern television can still often operate from the perspective of white identities versus "others" House (2017) challenges this notion by wondering if society can be reframed from the white perspective to be more racially diverse and inclusive.

There has been an extensive amount of research on media portrayals of racial minorities on television. There has been a growing amount of television shows that feature racial minorities in the main cast, however, many of their character depictions are often one dimensional with little character development or depth. Punyanunt-Carter's research focused on African American portrayals on television and how negative portrayals can influence stereotypical opinions about African Americans in real life. African Americans typically in were occupational roles and not expected to be high achieving (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). This research found that these negative depictions of African Americans on television caused for viewers to believe that these instances were true for African Americans in real life.

Mastro has conducted multiple studies analyzing the way racial minorities are portrayed on television. Mastro and Greenberg (2000) analyzed primetime television during 1996, coding for racial minorities and their characteristics. They found that television portrayed Latinos in a negative light: "They were least articulate, had the heaviest accent, and were least spontaneous in their conversational interactions" (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000, p. 700). The same study found that African Americans were portrayed negatively as well: "They were judged as the laziest and the least respected; their dress was the most provocative and most disheveled" (p. 700).

Mastro and Greenberg's research was replicated a decade later by Monk-Turner et al. (2010), who found that overall representation of racial minorities had not changed drastically, with 74% of the characters being White. The study found that Latinos were more likely to be ridiculed, and that Latino and African American characters were likely to be depicted as immoral. While African Americans were on screen three

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times more often than Latinos, they were most often portrayed in minor roles (Monk-Turner et al., 2010).

One example of this phenomenon is *Friends*, which is notable for its lack of representation for characters that did not identify as straight, white, and skinny. Cobb (2018) references the show as a representation of “whiteness” by writing, “*Friends* keeps the ‘other’ at the edges by reinforcing the image of the six friends” (2018, p. 713). The series introduced Charlie in season 9 as a frequent character. Charlie is a high-achieving black woman, who in the end is not good enough for Ross, one of the main characters. Charlie is introduced in a predominately white space, and the writers are unable to give her the proper time to develop as a significant character in the show.

Alsultany (2013) explored the negative representation of Middle Eastern individuals, specifically after the events of 9/11. Hate crimes against the Middle Eastern community dramatically increased after these events, further instilling the entire community as the “presumed enemy” of the United States (Alsultany, 2013, p. 161-62). There are also tropes used to negatively depict Middle Easterners or those who appear Muslim. Similarly, other scholarship has examined Asian American and Pacific Islanders within American media. Often, these characters perpetuate “the model minority trope that typecasts AAPIs as highly educated, wealthy, and nerdy over-achievers [...] such as doctors and lawyers” (DuCros et al. 2018, p. 16). These types of depictions can be extremely damaging.

### **Research Questions**

This research will add to the scholarship on minority representation. The study will focus on three main questions in relation to representation in the entertainment industry:

RQ1: How did the portrayal of marginalized identities change during the 2016-2017 television season in comparison to the 1996-1997 season?

RQ2: What identities are portrayed most on mainstream television? What identities are portrayed least on mainstream television?

RQ3: What are some of the negative stereotypes that are still being used to portray marginalized identities?

This research is important because it provides a look into the entertainment industry and its relationship with racial equality. In today’s world, more people are seeing the advantages of positive portrayals in media concerning positive self-identity. Americans have seen many shows emerge that focus on marginalized communities and their stories in a positive light. However, when it comes to predominately white shows, it can still be difficult to find characters whose story arcs are not predominately focused on their race or “otherness” within the show. Studies have found that when people see themselves represented in media, they have a better outlook on their position in life. This is especially true for children who benefit from seeing their identities depicted on television, in movies, and in books. This research will hopefully uncover if the entertainment industry has moved forward in a positive direction.

## **III. Methods**

This research used quantitative content analysis to examine the changes in television representation of marginalized identities. The content analysis mirrored studies by Mastro and Greenberg (2000) and Monk-Turner et al. (2010) by analyzing the portrayal of racial minorities on primetime television. This research compared six shows, three from the 1996-1997 primetime season and three from the 2016-2017 primetime season.

The three series from the 1996-1997 season were *The Nanny*, *Roseanne*, and *Friends*. One episode from each series was chosen from the earlier part of the season, and a second episode from the later part of the season. These three series are still popular, especially *Friends*, which is hailed to be one of the most highly rated comedy shows ever. The episodes from *The Nanny* were “The Taxman Cometh” and “Kissing Cousins”; episodes from *Roseanne* were “Pampered To A Pulp” and “Roseanne-Feld”; and episodes from *Friends* were “The One With the Race Car Bed” and “The One with Ross’s Thing.”

For the 2016-2017 season, the series *Two Broke Girls*, *Modern Family*, and *Superstore* were chosen.

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These shows also have a large following, especially *Modern Family* which ran for 11 seasons, ending in 2020. The same process was used for this group by choosing one episode from the earlier part of the season and a second from the later part of the season. The episodes from *Two Broke Girl\$* were “And the Sophie Doll” and “And the Dad Day Afternoon”; episodes from *Modern Family* were “The Alliance” and “Pig Moon Rising”; and episodes from *Superstore* were “Black Friday” and “Spring Cleaning.”

The variables from Monk-Turner’s study were simplified for this research. This research recorded each character’s race from all 12 episodes. If race was undeterminable then that specific character would be counted as “unknown.” The study also coded for age, gender, and income level, which was determined based on the nature of the character’s job or from context clues in certain episodes. Children and teenagers were not included in this metric because they typically are not shown to have steady incomes or jobs. Also, this research recorded the character’s role prominence within the show. The three categories were Major Characters, who normally appeared in every episode and had a prominent role; Minor Characters, who were guest characters or characters that were not a part of the main cast but often had important roles in the show; and Background Characters, who were featured only for a scene of the show, had minor interaction with main characters, or were merely present in a scene.

## IV. Findings

Overall, 169 characters were recorded from all the shows that aired in 1996 and in 2016. Caucasian characters amounted for 74% (125) of all the characters (169) that were analyzed for this study. Asian characters accounted for 9% (16), African Americans accounted for 8% (14), Latinos accounted for 6% (11), and Middle Easterners accounted for 2% (3) of all characters coded. As Figure 1 indicates, there was an increase in the amount of non-Caucasian characters that were featured in the three series that aired in 2016, however, Caucasian identified characters are still the majority.

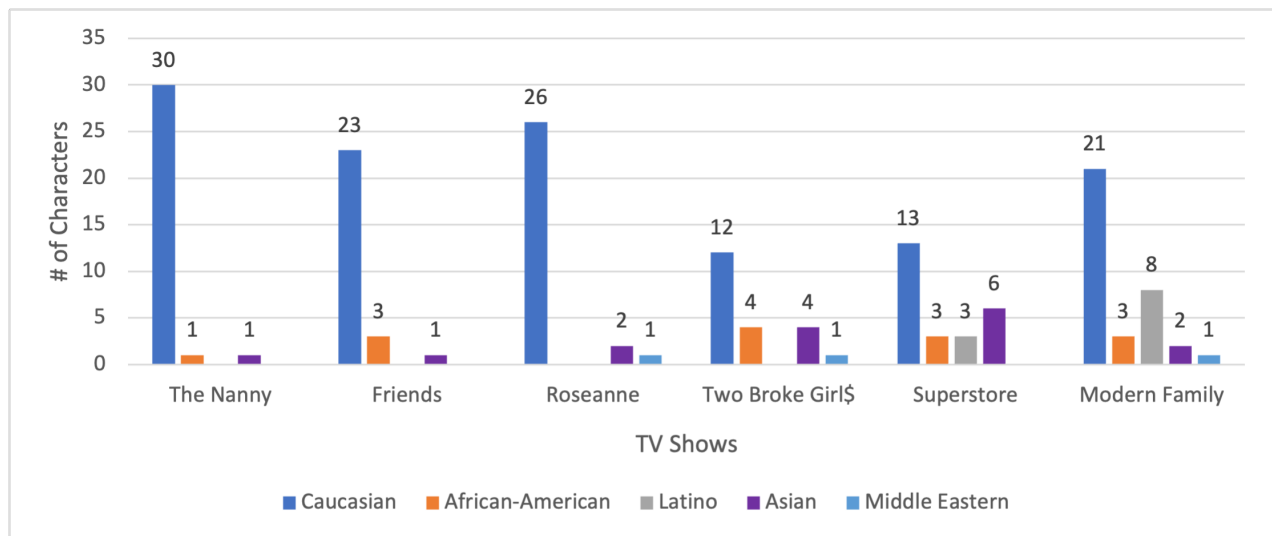


Figure 1: Chart of characters recorded

This study analyzed non-Caucasian characters representation within various age ranges. By analyzing these age ranges, this study looked to see if there were any trends in the way marginalized identities were portrayed on television and if age was a prominent factor. Caucasian characters were the most prominent for both shows that aired in 1996 and 2016, however there were many age ranges represented from all six shows. The most prominent relationship between age and race was Caucasians in their 30s, which amounted to 44% of all Caucasians recorded in 1996 and 40% of all characters (Figure 2). In 2016, Caucasians in their 40s were 17% of the sample, while Caucasians in their 30s amounted to 14%. The most common age for African American characters were those in their 30s, amounting to 6% of all the characters analyzed in 2016 (Figure 3). Latino characters within the age ranges of 10-20 and the 40s each amounted to 4%.

		1996-1997				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Ages	Less than 10	2	-	-	1	-
	10-20	6	-	-	-	-
	20s	5	1	-	2	-
	30s	35	1	-	-	1
	40s	12	1	-	1	-
	50+	19	1	-	-	-
Total		79	4	-	4	1

Figure 2: Table of 1996 characters' ages

		2016-2017				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Ages	Less than 10	1	1	2	-	-
	10-20	6	-	3	3	-
	20s	6	1	-	1	-
	30s	11	5	2	6	1
	40s	14	1	3	2	1
	50+	8	2	1	-	-
Total		46	10	11	12	2

Figure 3: Table of 2016 characters' ages

Economically, the most common relationship from the 1996 television shows was Caucasian middle-income characters (44), amounting to 60% of the sample. Only two Caucasian characters were coded to have a low-income level, amounting to 3% of the characters in 1996. Shows that aired in 2016 provided more diversity in what incomes were represented and which identities represented those incomes. The most common relationship were Caucasian middle-income characters (17), amounting to 31% of all 2016 characters. Asian American characters that were categorized as middle-income were the next most common relationship (11), amounting to 20%. In comparison to high-income Caucasian characters that amounted to 17% of the sample, African American and Latin American characters each amounted to 4% of 2016 characters.

In terms of gender and race for 1996, 49% were Caucasian men and 45% were Caucasian women (Table 4). There were no African American women represented in any of the shows that aired in 1996. There were four Asian characters that were depicted, with two being men and two being women. Middle Eastern characters only made up 1% of the total, with one character being identified as male.

		1996-1997				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Gender	Male	43	4	-	2	1
	Female	36	-	-	2	-
Total		79	4	-	4	1

Figure 4: Table of 1996 characters' gender identity

In 2016, Caucasian men accounted for 33% of all the characters, with Caucasian women accounting for 23% (Figure 5). African American men amounted for 11% of characters, in comparison with African American women who only were 1%. Latino men amounted to 7% of characters and Latin women amounted to 6%. Asian men and women had equal representation, each amounting to 7%.

		2016-2017				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Gender	Male	27	9	6	6	1
	Female	19	1	5	6	1
Total		46	10	11	12	2

Figure 5: Table of 2016 characters' gender identity

Figure 6 illustrates this study's findings for the role prominence of marginalized identities in shows that aired in 1996. Caucasian Major characters made up 38% of all characters recorded. Caucasian characters were the only racial identity that were categorized as major characters for shows that aired that season. Caucasian minor characters made up 39% of the sample, with African American minor characters amounting for 3% and Middle Eastern characters making up 1%.

		1996-1997				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Role Prominence	Major	33	-	-	-	-
	Minor	34	3	-	-	1
	Background	12	1	-	4	-
Total		79	4	-	4	1

Figure 6: Table of 1996 characters' role prominence

Figure 7 illustrates this study's findings for the role prominence of marginalized identities in shows that aired in 2016. More marginalized identities were represented in all three levels of role prominence, especially as major characters. Caucasian major characters amounted to 36% of all characters. Latin American major characters amounted to 10%, and Asian American major characters amounted to 9%, and African American major characters amounted to 5%. Caucasian background characters were 12% of the total, more than African American and Latino background characters combined.

		2016-2017				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Role Prominence	Major	29	4	8	7	-
	Minor	7	-	-	2	1
	Background	10	6	3	3	1
Total		46	10	11	12	2

Figure 7: Table of 2016 characters' role prominence

## V. Discussion

Overall, this study found that there are clear distinctions between the way marginalized identities were portrayed on television in 1996 in comparison to the way they were portrayed in 2016. This 20-year difference indicates how much society has changed in relation to racial minority representation and the actions made to include non-White characters. Although there was growth in the number of marginalized identities and demographics that were represented, there were still problematic instances of misrepresentation in reference to certain marginalized identities.

Of 88 characters analyzed from the 1996 content analysis, 79 were Caucasian. However, only 56% of the characters from the 2016 content analysis were Caucasian. This decrease of Caucasian representation showed that representation during primetime is becoming more diverse. This study shows a clear change in the number of marginalized identities that are represented on primetime television. This study also uncovered the lack of diversity that was present among three of the highest rated shows from 1996. It is unclear the degree to which this lack of diversity negatively impacted the way the international and domestic audiences view minorities. Although the 2016 content analysis showed that there was considerable growth in the number of non-Caucasian characters, America's past considering the lack of basic diversity must be addressed.

Overall, Caucasian characters in their 30s and 40s dominated the screen, amounting to most of the characters that were recorded. Although the shows that were analyzed did not include people from all different age ranges, there was still some diversity in a few of the shows selected for the content analysis. These shows all had different audience demographics that the show was catering to. For example, the show *Friends* was catered to a young adult audience which could explain why there were so few characters that were 40 and above. Conversely, *Modern Family* is a show that appeals to individuals of all ages.

African American women were only featured once in all six of the shows. The lack of representation of African American women is alarming since they are a major demographic in the United States. In shows that aired in 1996, there were no Latin Americans featured at all. The 2016 content analysis revealed more Latin American men and women on the screen, possibly addressing America's changing demographic. This study also found that Asian men and women were represented in more recent shows and a higher rate than before. Unfortunately, there were instances that these characters were depicted in ways that could be considered stereotypical.

The Role Prominence variable revealed important findings. In 1996, there were marginalized identities that were featured, however they were not in the forefront. For example, in the *Friends* episode "The One with the Race Car Bed," the main characters had a delivery and two African American men arrived to move the furniture into the apartment. To have African American characters portray service-level jobs – and no appearances in any other field during the episode – is damaging to the way that the audience could view minorities. Similarly, in the *Roseanne* episode "Pampered To A Pulp," two Asian women were depicted in a stereotypical way, overacting for comedic relief. In that same episode, a Middle Eastern man was depicted as a snake-charmer-like individual that made comedic faces while muttering a secret spell. These types of depictions can be exceptionally harmful to the communities that are being negatively depicted for the sake of a joke.

These misrepresentations were not only featured in the shows that aired in 1996. *Two Broke Girls* features an Asian man in the main cast that is also depicted in a stereotypical way. From his mannerisms to the extensive use of a stereotypical accent, this character's racial background was also used for comedic

relief. This was especially interesting, as today's culture has shifted away from the use of identity in a way that is offensive or that would be seen as the punchline of an unfunny joke. Although this Asian character was a part of the main cast, something that was not seen in the shows from 1996 that were analyzed, this character was still depicted stereotypically. This research found that there were still times when media will get representation wrong. The misuse of other races for comedic relief has its roots in racism. Even if marginalized identities are being brought the forefront of television casts, their identities and characters must be used in a way that is respectful.

## VI. Conclusion

This study focused on the representation of racial minorities on sitcoms that aired on primetime television. This study showed the changes in the number of marginalized identities that are represented, and which demographics are represented the most. There are still marginalized identities that are represented less often, and some that are still depicted through stereotypical and racist characterization. Although there has been a significant change in diversity in Hollywood, TV executives must make sure that their work is respectful and properly representative of these identities.

Some limitations to this study were that it looked at only a small sample of television episodes. There could possibly be other episodes that had more representation of marginalized identities within a particular season. Additionally, because this research did not code children for the income level variable, some of the totals did not match the overall total of all characters coded. Future research might build on this study by adding more shows and combining a qualitative content analysis with a quantitative analysis.

This type of research is important because it keeps an eye on the way America's media is portraying identities and communities. Television has a large amount of power, allowing thoughts, feelings, and views to be conveyed to millions of people worldwide. It is important that all identities and communities have proper representation on TV. Identity is a crucial part of personal self-actualization and developing one's own self-respect. This research was able to understand the demographics that are still not being highlighted on primetime television. As America continues to learn to embrace its diversity, it is time for television to do the same.

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