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Article in *Journal of Lesbian Studies* · October 2019

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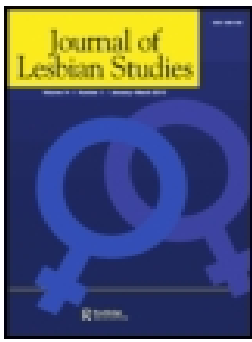
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To cite this article: Kandice M. Parker, Bidushy Sadika, Durr-e Sameen, Todd G. Morrison & Melanie A. Morrison (2019): Humanizing lesbian characters on television: Exploring their characterization and interpersonal relationships, Journal of Lesbian Studies

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1678935>



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Humanizing lesbian characters on television: Exploring their characterization and interpersonal relationships

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined representations of 39 lesbian characters' interpersonal relationships and characterological profiles in 20 "lesbian-centric" television shows from 2008 to 2018. Using a mixed-methods approach, the following variables were analyzed: the quality of lesbian characters' relationships with their parents, children, close friends, and romantic partners; their sense of acceptance from these relationships; their gender presentation and expression; the use of homonegative tropes in targeted programs; portrayals of sexual behaviors; and demographic characteristics. Results indicated that the majority of the lesbian characters were young, cisgender, white, middle-class, and portrayed within various homonegative tropes. Most of the lesbian characters shared positive relationships with their mothers, children, close friends, and romantic partners, but not with their fathers. Qualitative findings evidenced support for the quantitative analyses; however, they revealed that lesbian characters' friendships were not fully developed. The strengths and limitations of this study, and directions for future research are outlined.

KEYWORDS

Lesbians; television; interpersonal relationships; media; outness; homonegativity

In the 1970s, following a surge in gay pride movements (see Mazur, 2002), a number of television shows including *Prisoner: Cell Block H* (1979–1986) and *Ellen* (TV show; 1993–1998) depicted regular or recurring lesbian characters. While *Ellen* received accolades for its positive portrayal of a lesbian character, *Prisoner: Cell Block H* presented lesbian women as deviant who met a tragic end (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT] Fans Deserve Better, 2017). Today, the proportion and nature of lesbian representation remains inadequate. In 2015–2016, only 48 (2.5%) out of 1936 lead or recurring characters on television self-identified as lesbian or bisexual women (LGBT Fans Deserve Better®, 2016). Insufficient representation of lesbian characters on television contributes to prejudice and stereotypes against lesbian women (Garretson, 2015). Lesbian characters are often tied

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to clichéd storylines (i.e., homonegative tropes) that perpetuate discriminatory perceptions surrounding sexual minority persons (TV Tropes, n. d.). Though researchers have examined the characterization of lesbian women on television, researchers have paid scant attention to how lesbian characters' interpersonal relationships are being portrayed.

The present study aims to: 1) analyze the interpersonal relationships (i.e., parents and/or children, close friends, and romantic partners) of lesbian characters portrayed in lesbian-centric contemporary television shows; 2) assess whether these characters are shown being accepted and supported through their relationships; and 3) examine their characterization on television, including being portrayed within homonegative tropes.

Homonegative tropes

Homonegative tropes are plot devices used to reinforce prejudice toward sexual minority persons. These tropes become clichés when overused, fostering stereotypical depictions (TV Tropes, n. d.). Homonegative tropes dominate representation of lesbian women on television. The *evilness* and *death* tropes (based on the *dead lesbian syndrome*) emerged from criticism about television depictions of lesbian supporting characters as villainous or expendable (Guerrero-Pico, Establés, & Ventura, 2017). In 2016–2017, at least 12 recurring/regular sexual minority female television characters were killed off to develop a straight, cisgender character's storyline (Gays and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2016). The *evil lesbian trope* is emulated when lesbian characters are portrayed as villainous, manipulative, and emotionless. Thirty-four (8.7%) out of 391 lesbian characters aired in television programs from 1976 to 2017 were found to reinforce the *evil lesbian trope* (LGBT Fans Deserve Better®, 2017). As well, the *cheating* and *promiscuity* tropes are grounded on the *promiscuous queer trope*, which emphasizes lesbian women's inability to be emotionally intimate (Gilchrist & Reynolds, 2017). From 1976 to 2017, 11 (2.8%) out of 391 lesbian characters were portrayed using the *cheating* trope, whereas seven (1.8%) were depicted using the *promiscuity* trope (LGBT Fans Deserve Better®, 2017).

Exploring homonegative tropes is crucial, as LGB representation on television contributes to a sense of validity for sexual minority young adults. Baskin (2017) interviewed seven self-identified queer women and discovered that television allowed these women to contextualize and grasp their sexuality, and offered them a sense of community and solidarity. However, they expressed feeling disturbed, as queer portrayal on television was based on homonegative tropes (e.g., death), and in conformity to the perspectives of heterosexual audiences.

Portrayal of LGB characters

In a content analysis of media popular among LGB youth, Bond (2014) found portrayals of heterosexuality to be pervasive whereas LGB sexualities were underrepresented. Further, television programs depicted sexual conversations between LGB individuals, rather than sexual behaviors; heterosexuals were more likely to be shown engaging in sexual behaviors (Bond, 2014). Bond (2014) also noted that representations of LGB sexual instances more often involve adults and not adolescents or older adults.

Chavez (2015) analyzed the representation of sexuality, race, and gender in the first season of the television show, *Orange is the New Black* (2013). Chavez (2015) emphasized race as being portrayed from a white lens, as the leading character, Piper, was white, whose perspective dominated while narrating the stories of minority women. Concurrently, racial minority women were depicted oppressively. The *sexually deviant* lesbian trope was found in a hypersexual Latina character who used her sexuality to seduce correctional officers. Further, the lesbian characters were portrayed as having multiple romantic relationships simultaneously, reinforcing the *promiscuity* homonegative trope (see Gilchrist & Reynolds, 2017).

Portrayal of interpersonal relationships of lesbian characters

Few researchers offer a more granular look at the interpersonal dynamics of lesbian characters. To our knowledge, the few studies that have provided this level of detail examined depictions of sexual minority characters' relationships with their romantic partners. For instance, Vaughn (2017) investigated the first three seasons of *The Fosters* (2013), a family drama featuring a lesbian-identifying interracial couple. The author discovered that lesbian romance was portrayed similarly to the masculine-feminine depiction of heterosexual couples, with Stef (white) as the strict father figure, and Lena (Black) in the nurturing mother role.

Current study

While researchers have examined how lesbian women are portrayed as individual media personalities, few have investigated the depiction of lesbian characters' interpersonal relationships (i.e., parent-child, close friends, and romantic partners). Further, to date, no studies have quantitatively compared the portrayal of interpersonal relationships across multiple television shows with lesbian-identifying main protagonists.

Given the absence of relevant research on this topic, three broad research questions were generated: What is the relationship quality of lesbian characters with their family, close friends, and romantic partners? Are parents, children, and friends of lesbian characters supportive of their sexual

orientation? How are lesbian women characterized in contemporary television shows?

Based on previous research findings (e.g., Baskin, 2017; Bond, 2014; Chavez, 2015), two hypotheses were created: 1) The television shows will characterize lesbian women in ways designed to attract the attention of the hegemonic (i.e., white, heterosexual, and cisgender) audience and, thus, will portray young, white, and middle-class lesbian characters in accordance with homonegative tropes; and 2) The lesbian characters will have a healthy relationship with their romantic partners; however, they will be presented non-sexually to appease hegemonic audiences. No hypotheses were made for the portrayal of lesbian characters' relationships with their parents and/or children and close friends, given the lack of research literature on this topic.

Method

Sample

Twenty television programs from 2008 to 2018, with a maximum of five seasons, were analyzed (see Table 1). Programs were selected from a list of "lesbian-centric" shows provided by the LGBT Fans Deserve Better forum in an email conversation with the authors. The LGBT Fans Deserve Better is a nonprofit, international organization that aims to educate audiences about the harmful effects of negative lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ)+ media representation, and advocate for positive

Table 1. List of television shows, number of seasons and names of lesbian characters.

Television shows	Seasons (episodes)	Lesbian characters
American Horror Story	1 (11)	Ally Mayfair-Richards Ivy Mayfair-Richards
Charmed (Reboot)	1 (13)	Melanie Vera
Complications	1 (10)	Gretchen Polk
Everything Sucks!	1 (10)	Kate Messner
Imposters	2 (20)	Julia "Jules" Langmore
Marvel's Runaways	2 (23)	Karolina Dean
Masters of Sex	4 (46)	Betty DiMello
NCIS: New Orleans	5 (105)	Tammy Gregorio
One Big Happy	1 (6)	Lizzy Fisher
One Day at a Time	2 (26)	Elena Alvarez
One Mississippi	2 (12)	Tig Bavaro
Orphan Black	5 (50)	Cosima Niehaus
Sense8	2 (24)	Nomi Marks Amanita Caplan
Skins US	1 (10)	Tea Marvelli
Survivor's Remorse	4 (36)	Mary Charles "M-Chuck" Calloway
Take My Wife (Season 1)	1 (6)	Cameron Esposito
The Fosters	5 (104)	Rhea Butcher Lena Adams Foster Stef Adams Foster
The Good Fight	2 (23)	Maia Rindell
The Lizzie Borden Chronicles	1 (8)	Lizzie Borden
Underemployed	1 (12)	Sophia Swanson

depictions of LGBTQ persons (LGBT Fans Deserve Better®, 2019). The initial list included 35 television programs with 41 leading lesbian characters from 1976 to 2018. Television shows that aired from 2008 to 2018 were selected for the study.

Content analysis

A systematic mixed-methods approach to media content analysis was utilized (Neuendorf, 2017). This method allows for the measurement of a wide range of constructs and variables, while determining the complexities of the portrayals that would not be possible with a strict quantitative approach (Boyd-Barrett, Newbold, & Van den Bulck, 2002). Codebooks were created by the authors as a means of utilizing a mixed-methods approach, aiming to draw on semiotics (how meaning is created and communicated by the media; Boyd-Barrett et al., 2002). Past research successfully employed codebooks for collection and analysis of media data (e.g., Gilpatric, 2010; Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, & Tanner, 2003).

There were three codebooks in total, the first explored lesbian characters' relationships with their parents, children (if any), close friends, and romantic partners, and the other two examined lesbian women's characterological profiles (i.e., demographics and characterization within homonegative tropes) and gender identity/expression. Each codebook contained quantitative items derived from established self-report measures. Items were carefully reviewed to assure the suitability for inference from television narratives and contexts. Scale items irrelevant to the context of our study were discarded. Retained items were textually modified to suit the purposes of our study (see descriptions of measures below). Qualitative data (i.e., dialogs and/or description of scenes) were gathered to evidence and strengthen the validity of quantitative results. Neuendorf (2017) endorsed this mixed-method approach as a process of *triangulation*, defined as "testing for a hypothesized relationship among the same variables with a variety of methods" (p. 38). Neuendorf (2017) indicated that a human observer-coder is akin to a subjective self-report process, and that triangulation strengthens validity, as the strengths and weaknesses of multiple methods work to balance out each other.

Interrater reliability

Interrater reliability was assessed by comparing 2.5% of the ratings across three independent coders, and an additional 2.5% of the ratings across five independent coders. Evaluations of two of the 20 television series were compared, consisting of three main lesbian characters (two in *American Horror Story – Cult*, 2017; one in *Everything Sucks*, 2018). A total of 75

variables for *Everything Sucks* (2018) and 82 variables for *American Horror Story - Cult* (2017) were assessed. The percentage agreement was calculated for each lesbian character (Ellis & Morrison, 2005). For Kate (*Everything Sucks*, 2018), there was 80% agreement between five raters for the 75 variables coded. The 20% lack of agreement was attributable to one-point differences across the raters (e.g., some coders awarded a rating of 1 [strongly agree] and the remaining coders awarded a rating of 2 [agree]). Thus, all discrepancies reflected differences in degree rather than kind. For the 82 variables (*American Horror Story - Cult*, 2017) coded between three raters, there was 100% agreement for Ivy, and 98% agreement for Ally, with the 2% lack of agreement comprising one 2-point difference.

Codebook variables

The items of the codebook on interpersonal relationships were not applicable to all characters analyzed; for example, the items assessing lesbian characters' relationships with their children was only applicable to two programs that depicted lesbian couples as parents (*American Horror Story - Cult*, 2017 and *The Fosters*, 2013). For codebook scale items, authors determined scoring based on the frequency or absence of the behaviors as described in each item. For example, the item "the character feels free to talk with her friend about almost everything" was coded as "4" (agree) in the analysis of the television show *Everything Sucks* (2018) because the character did confide in her friend about her mother's death and her sexuality; it was not coded as a "5" (strongly agree) because she did not share certain details (i.e., romantic interests and intimate moments) with her friend. Qualitative examples for each relationship scale item worked to explain, and triangulate, each scoring.

Codebook #1. Interpersonal relationships

Perception of parental reciprocity scale – parental subscales (POPRS; Wintre, Yaffe, & Crowley, 1995)

The POPRS is a 43-item self-report measure used to examine individuals' relationships with their parents. Seventeen items examine relationship with a mother, and 17 assess relationship with a father. Given the intent of our study was to analyze representation of lesbian characters' relationships with each parent individually, the POPRS "general" items were discarded. The retained items were textually modified; for example, the phrase "the character tries to share her concerns" replaced "I try to share my concerns." The authors subjectively coded these items to analyze the television narratives of lesbian characters' parental relationships (see Neuendorf, 2017), using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). Subscale

scores can range from 17 to 85. Three items for each parent subscale were reverse-coded to ensure higher scores reflecting greater understanding.

Outness inventory – parents (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000)

The Outness Inventory (OI) is an 11-item measure examining identity and outness in lesbians and gay men. For the purpose of this study, the researchers utilized two items from this inventory, and, from their own perspectives, coded lesbian characters' level of outness to their parents about their sexual orientation status. A seven-point response format determined the degree to which parents are aware of the sexual identity of lesbian characters (1 = *definitely does NOT know...*; 7 = *definitely knows...*). Authors determined scoring based on the frequency or absence of discussions or mentions of character sexual orientation. For example, for the character Sophia in *Underemployed* (2012), her outness to her mother and father were both coded as "5" (person definitely knows about her sexual orientation status, but it is RARELY talked about), as in one scene, Sophia comes out to her parents as a lesbian, but the following scenes clearly depict both parents as uncomfortable with her sexuality (e.g., her father refers to her sexual orientation as a "little experiment").

Child-parent relationship scale-short form (CPRS-SF; Driscoll & Pianta, 2011)

The CPRS-SF is a 15-item measure that examines the relationship between parents and their children from the parents' perspectives. The measure includes two subscales: closeness (seven items) and conflict (eight items). This scale was employed to explore the relationship between lesbian-identifying mother characters and each of their children (in *The Fosters*, 2013, the lesbian couple had five children; relationships with each of their children were analyzed separately). The scale items were textually modified for applicability to the goals of this study. For instance, "If upset, the character's child will seek comfort from the character" replaced "if upset, my child will seek comfort from me." A five-point Likert scale was used (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*), with total scores ranging from 15 to 75. The conflict subscale was reverse-coded to ensure that higher scores reflected greater relationship quality.

Intimate friendship scale (IFS; Sharabany, 1994)

The IFS is a 32-item psychometric scale that examines how intimate individuals perceive their friendships to be. The measure consists of eight subscales: frankness and spontaneity, sensitivity and knowing, attachment, exclusiveness, giving and sharing, imposition, common activities, and trust and loyalty. In this study, the researchers employed this measure to assess

how lesbian characters felt about their closest friend. Although it originally consisted of 32 items examining adolescent friendships, only five of the subscales were used to ensure applicability for this study (four items each; 20 items in total). The items were textually altered to be applicable to the objectives of this study. For instance, the original item “I feel free to talk with my friend about everything” was exchanged with “The character feels free to talk with her friend about almost everything.” The coders used a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 5 = *Strongly Agree*). Subscale scores range from 4 to 20, with higher scores representing greater intimacy.

Relationship satisfaction subscale of lesbian relationship satisfaction (RSS-GLRSS; Belous & Wampler, 2016)

The RSS-GLRSS is a 24-item measure that explores individuals’ gay and lesbian romantic relationship satisfaction and social support. Sixteen items examine relationship satisfaction, and eight items focus on social support. For this study, only the relationship subscale was used to ascertain the relationship satisfaction between lesbian characters and their romantic partners. The items were textually edited for the purposes of this study. For instance, the item “The character and her partner shared the same values and goals in life” substituted “My partner and I shared the same values and goals in life.” A five-point Likert scale was used by the coders (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*); total scores range from 16 to 80. Six items from the scale were reverse-coded to ensure that higher scores reflect greater relationship satisfaction.

Interpersonal acceptance of lesbian characters’ sexual orientation status

A series of single-item questions gauged the level of acceptance received by lesbian characters in their interpersonal relationships with their parents, children (if any), and close friends: “How accepting of the character’s sexual orientation is her [mother/father/child/friend]?” A five-point Likert scale was employed for these questions (1 = *Not Sure*; 5 = *Accepting*). Total scores can range from 1 to 5, with higher scores denoting greater acceptance.

Codebook #2. Characterological profile of lesbian characters

Demographics

The coders analyzed lesbian characters’ demographic information by collecting the following data: age, gender, education, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES). The SES was determined utilizing three categories (1 = *Low*; 2 = *Medium*; 3 = *High*). The demographic data were gathered from the coders’ perspectives (see Neuendorf, 2017).

Characterization within homonegative tropes

Homonegative tropes in the television portrayal of lesbian women and their interpersonal relationships were examined utilizing four categories: death, evil, cheating, and promiscuity.

Portrayal of sexual behaviors

The researchers also determined how lesbian characters were portrayed in terms of their sexual behaviors, given the previous literature asserts that LGB characters tended to be depicted non-sexually (e.g., Bond, 2014). Sexual behaviors were examined using three categories: 1) explicit sex (i.e., oral sex, touching breasts or genitals, and vaginal penetration with fingers; Bailey, Farquhar, Owen, & Whittaker, 2003; Cohen & Byers, 2014); 2) soft sex (i.e., hugging or cuddling); and 3) no sexual behaviors.

Codebook #3. Gender presentation and expression of lesbian characters

Gender presentation (Walker, Golub, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2012)

The gender presentation of each lesbian character was coded using eight items: 1) Butch (i.e., “masculine” end of the gender spectrum); 2) Soft Butch (i.e., “masculine” end of gender spectrum with a few feminine qualities); 3) Butch/Femme (i.e., relatively equal masculine and feminine traits); 4) Femme (i.e., traditionally “feminine”); 5) High Femme (i.e., ultra-femininity); 6) Gender Fluid (i.e., a dynamic mix of two traditional genders); and 7) Agender or Nonbinary (i.e., not identifying as any gender).

Gender expression measure among sexual minority women (GEM-SMW; Lehavot, King, & Simoni, 2011)

The GEM-SMW consists of 15 items across three subscales: 1) appearance (seven items); 2) emotional expression (four items); and 3) gender roles (four items). The researchers employed this measure to examine the lesbian characters’ gender expression in television programs. The items were textually edited for the purposes of this study. For instance, the original item “I keep my hair in a style that is spiky or buzzed” was replaced with: “The character keeps her hair in a style that is spiky or buzzed.” The coders utilized a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). Total scores range from 15 to 75; greater scores depict more butch gender expression.

Results

All data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Version 25. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for codebook measures, as well as Cronbach’s alpha

Table 2. Scale descriptives of codebook measures.

Scale	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Midpoint	Possible range	Actual range	Alpha score (CI)
POPRS-M	47.62 (19.18)	34	17–85	25–79	.96 (.91–.98)
POPRS-F	42.64 (16.60)	34	17–85	24–77	.94 (.87–.98)
CPRS-SF-1	53.25 (10.72)	30	15–75	39–62	.82 (.39–.99)
CPRS-SF-2	49.00 (1.41)	30	15–75	48–50	
CPRS-SF-3	63.50 (.71)	30	15–75	63–64	
CPRS-SF-4	63.00 (2.83)	30	15–75	61–65	
CPRS-SF-5	59.00 (7.07)	30	15–75	54–64	
CPRS-SF-AVG	54.30 (10.60)	30	15–75	39–62	
IFS-1	70.86 (11.66)	40	20–100	52–94	.87 (.75–.95)
IFS-2	70.00 (16.37)	40	20–100	52–84	.95 (.80–.99)
IFS-AVG	70.29 (11.27)	40	20–100	52–90	
RSS-GLRSS	48.74 (15.95)	32	16–80	23–75	.94 (.88–.97)
GEM-SMW	40.38 (10.90)	30	15–75	20–66	.94 (.88–.97)

Note. N = number of lesbian characters (25 main leads, 14 supporting/guest appearance) and the first 12 scales are applicable for the leading lesbian characters; POPRS-M/F = Perceptions of Parental Reciprocity Scale (Mother & Father); CPRS-SF (1–5/AVG) = Child-Parent Relationship Scale (averaged over five children to one parent); IFS (1–2) = Intimate Friendship Scale (for two close/best friends separately, and on average); RSS-GLRSS = Relationship Satisfaction Subscale of Gay and Lesbian Relationship Satisfaction Scale; GEM-SMW = Gender Expression Measure for Sexual Minority Women. Scale score reliability for the rest of the child-parent scales was not measured; only one television program portrayed lesbian characters as mothers of more than one child.

coefficients for psychometric measures that required the computation of total scores. There were 39 self-identified lesbian characters: 25 (64.1%) as the leads, and 14 (35.9%) as the supporting/guest-appearance characters. The interpersonal relationships and characterological profiles of lead lesbian characters were analyzed. For supporting/guest-appearance lesbian characters, only characterological profile data were collected.

Interpersonal relationships of lesbian characters

Quantitative analyses

Table 3 presents the findings from one-sample t-tests that were calculated to examine the quality of lesbian characters' interpersonal relationships; their sense of acceptance from these relationships; and the characters' level of outness to their parents. Mean total scores for all measures concerning lesbian characters' relationship quality with their mothers, children, close friends, and romantic partners were significantly higher than the scale midpoints. Further, the mean scores for single-item questions on lesbian characters' sense of acceptance from their mothers, children, and close friends were significantly above the midpoint score. Conversely, the score for the measure on lesbian characters' relationship quality with, and sense of acceptance from, their fathers did not significantly differ from the scale midpoint. The mean scores measuring lesbian characters' outness to parents were significantly higher than midpoint scores.

Bivariate correlations were calculated to examine if the quality of lesbian characters' relationships was associated with these individuals' level of acceptance of the characters' sexual orientation. The lesbian characters' relationship

Table 3. One-sample t-tests for codebook variables.

Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>d</i>
POPRS-M	13	47.62	19.18	2.559*	12	.71
POPRS-F	11	42.64	16.60	1.725	10	.52
CPRS-SF-AVG	4	54.30	10.60	4.59*	3	2.29
IFS-AVG	14	70.29	11.27	10.056**	13	2.69
RSS-GLRSS	19	48.74	15.95	4.573**	18	1.05
ASO-M	13	3.46	1.81	2.91*	12	.81
ASO-F	11	2.85	1.72	1.77	10	.49
ASO-C	4	5	0.00			
ASO-FR	14	4.64	1.08	9.14**	13	2.44
OSOS-M	13	5.31	1.93	4.31**	12	1.20
OSOS-F	11	4.45	1.92	2.52*	10	.76
GEM-SMW	39	40.38	10.90	5.952**	38	.95

Note. *N* = number of lesbian characters (25 main leads, 14 supporting/guest appearance) and the first 12 scales are applicable for the leading lesbian characters; * indicates $p = .05$; ** indicates $p < .001$. POPRS-M/F = Perceptions of Parental Reciprocity Scale (Mother & Father); CPRS-SF-AVG = Child-Parent Relationship Scale (Short Form; averaged for five children); IFS-AVG = Intimate Friendship Scale (average for two friends); RSS-GLRSS = Relationship Satisfaction Subscale of Gay and Lesbian Relationship Satisfaction Scale; ASO-M = Acceptance of Sexual Orientation from Mother; ASO-F = Acceptance of Sexual Orientation from Father; ASO-C = Acceptance of Sexual Orientation from Children; ASO-FR = Acceptance of Sexual Orientation from Friends; OSOS-M & F = Outness about Sexual Orientation Status to Mother and Father; GEM-SMW = Gender Expression Measure for Sexual Minority Women.

quality with their mothers was positively correlated to the latter's acceptance of the characters' sexual orientation; $r(13) = .678$, $p = .011$; whether the characters were out about their sexual orientation to them, and if the topic of their sexual identity was openly discussed; $r(13) = .588$, $p = .034$. In contrast, the lesbian characters' relationship quality with their fathers did not significantly correlate to the fathers' acceptance of their sexuality; $r(11) = .203$, $p = .549$; and whether the characters were open about their sexual orientation to their fathers; $r(11) = -.017$, $p = .962$. No statistically significant correlation was discovered between lesbian characters' relationship quality with their close friends and whether their friends were accepting of the characters' sexual orientation; $r(13) = .40$, $p = .156$. The correlation between lesbian characters' relationship quality with their children and whether their children were supportive of their sexual orientation was not computed; the highest possible score was observed in all cases.

Qualitative analyses

Relationship with mother. Thirteen (52%) out of the 25 main lesbian characters had a mother, with whom they shared a strong relationship. For example, in *One Mississippi* (2015), Tig Bavaro is portrayed as having a healthy, close relationship with her mother (deceased); Tig tells her mother about being sexual assaulted and her mother offers emotional support and motivation: "What he did was terrible and I hate him for it, but you can do anything you want in your life..." (*One Mississippi*, 2015).

Relationship with father. Eleven (44%) out of the 25 main lesbian characters had a father. The lesbian characters' relationships with their fathers were

often based on distrust, disappointment, and emotional distance. For example, in *One Day at a Time* (2017), the lesbian character confronts her father for his rejection of her sexuality: “Whatever, dude. I’m moving on with my life ... I’m just really bummed out for you.” Further, in *One Mississippi* (2015), Tig mentions her traumatic past to her father, Bill, who says: “I can’t believe it. You’re bringing up *that* again?” Tig replies: “*That?* The fact that I was molested by a creepy old man my entire childhood?,” Bill argues: “It’s been over 30 years ... when are you going to let go of that?”

Relationship with children. Only four (16%) out of the 25 main lesbian characters were depicted as mothers themselves. The characters’ relationships with their children were based on mutual love and respect. In *The Fosters* (2013), the lesbian couple, Stef and Lena, are atheists and reluctantly agree to let their adoptive daughter, Mariana, be baptized. However, Mariana refuses baptism after talking to the priest: “I am not gonna stand there and say that I believe in a church that thinks my moms are sinners just for being gay” (*The Fosters*, 2013). Further, Stef and Lena are portrayed as authoritative parents, who value their adolescent children’s privacy and freedom while instilling good values and knowledge. For instance, Stef discusses condom use and safe sex practices with her son Brandon.

Relationship with close friend. Fourteen (56%) out of the 25 main lesbian characters had a positive relationship with close friends. *One Big Happy*’s (2015) lesbian character, Lizzy, is depicted as accepting her straight best friend’s love interest after being, at first, jealous: “It’s just been the two of us for so long ... You deserve to be happy” (*One Big Happy*, 2015).

Relationship with romantic partner. Nineteen (76%) of the 25 main lesbian characters had a romantic partner. Many of these relationships were portrayed as healthy and supportive. For example, the lesbian character, Betty, in *Masters of Sex* (2013), and her partner, Helen, work together to start a family in the 1960s, regardless of societal stigma. Helen says: “... I want a baby so bad ...” Betty is supportive: “You’re not alone ... no one’s gonna hand over a baby to a couple of middle-aged dykes ... maybe it’s just something I’ve got to do on my own” (*Masters of Sex*, 2013).

Characterological profile and gender identity/expression of lesbian characters

Table 4 indicates the demographics of the lesbian characters that were analyzed in this study. Seventy-two percent ($n = 28$) of all lesbian characters

Table 4. Demographic of the lesbian characters.

	<i>N</i>	%
Character status		
Main/lead	25	64.1
Supporting/guest	14	35.9
Gender		
Woman	37	94.9
MtF transgender	1	2.6
Agender or non-binary	1	2.6
Highest level of education		
Junior high school	5	12.8
High school	5	12.8
Diploma or college	4	10.3
Undergraduate degree	5	12.8
Master's degree	5	12.8
Professional designation	1	2.6
Ethnicity		
Black	2	5.1
East Asian	1	2.6
West Asian	1	2.6
Latin American	4	10.3
White or Caucasian	28	71.8
Mixed origin	3	7.7
Socioeconomic status		
Low	7	17.9
Medium	17	43.9
High	11	28.2
Gender presentation		
Butch	2	5.1
Soft Butch	6	15.4
Butch/Femme	12	30.8
Femme	10	25.6
High Femme	8	20.5
Agender or non-binary	1	2.6

Note. *N* = number of lesbian characters (39).

self-identified as white and belonged to varying educational backgrounds (e.g., high school, undergraduate or master's degree [12.8% each]). The researchers coded most lesbian characters as cisgender women (94.9%), based on the normalization of heterosexuality and gender binary system (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009), as these norms likely influence the perspectives of audiences. Only two characters (5%) from *Sense8* (2015) and *One Day at a Time* (2017) explicitly self-identified as transgender woman and agender/non-binary, respectively. Further, the coders identified most of the lesbian characters' social status as middle class (43.9%), based on their professions (e.g., in *The Fosters*, 2013, Lena and Stef are school principal and police officer, respectively, who often discuss financial difficulties). The age of lesbian characters was coded from 15 to 60 years old ($M = 28$; $SD = 9.07$).

Most lesbian characters presented as butch/femme (30.8%) or femme (25.6%). A one-sample t-test, using the scale midpoint for comparison, determined that, overall, the lesbian characters presented alongside the "butch" spectrum (see Table 4). Twelve (30.8%) were depicted as "cheating"; 18 (46.2%) as promiscuous ($n = 9$, 23.1%) or evil ($n = 9$, 23.1%); and five (12.8%) were killed off. Twenty (51.3%) lesbian characters engaged in "soft"

sexual behaviors (e.g., cuddling); 12 (30.8%) were portrayed non-sexually; and seven (17.9%) were shown in explicit sexual scenes (e.g., engaging in oral sex).

Discussion

Results indicated that lesbian characters on television are scripted in a manner palatable to hegemonic sexualities and gender identities and, thus, support hypothesis 1. Popular television endorses young, cisgender, working-class, and often white, lesbian identities. Consistent with Baskin (2017), we found dismal representation of ethnically diverse lesbian characters; only eight (20.5%) of 39 lesbian characters self-identified as nonwhite. Homonegative tropes dominate these portrayals, which is detrimental to audiences' perceptions of sexual- and gender-diverse identities and the LGB audiences' sexual identity development (e.g., Baskin, 2017).

The second hypothesis was partially supported. Quantitative findings indicated that most of the lesbian characters were depicted in positive romantic relationships. However, a quarter of these relationships were jeopardized by infidelity tropes. For instance, in *American Horror Story – Cult* (2017), Ivy cheats with her son's caretaker because of her resentment toward her wife for being their son's biological/birth mother. Further, more than half of the lesbian characters are rarely portrayed sexually (e.g., Bond, 2014). For example, while the main lesbian couple in *The Fosters* (2013) kiss and cuddle, they are not depicted in explicit sexual scenes. Contrarily, explicit sexual activities involving their heterosexual teenage children are frequently portrayed.

Lesbian characters were shown to have positive relationships with their mothers; this was associated with high levels of acceptance and openness about their daughter's sexuality. Contrarily, lesbian characters did not have a positive relationship with their fathers, as the latter was typecast as distant. The portrayal of maternal nurturance and acceptance, as well as paternal detachment and dismissal, serve to reinforce traditionally feminine and masculine roles. These depictions are consistent with psychological research indicating that lesbian women are more likely to have infrequent contact and less emotional connection with their fathers than their mothers (Hank & Salzburger, 2015). Only two programs depicted lesbian characters as mothers. The absence of lesbian mothers on television underscores the lack of diversity in the representation of lesbian women who choose to become mothers. Further, friendships involving lesbian characters were seldom portrayed in a multifaceted, meaningful ways; quality of friendships were not associated with acceptance of the sexuality of lesbian characters. For example, the lesbian character, Sophia, in *Underemployed* (2012) was self-centered and insensitive in her friendships; however, her friends were very accepting of her sexuality.

Findings of this study align with previous work calling for reform in queer representation on television. Evans' (2007) qualitative research involving media analysts asserts that representation of gay and lesbian characters is problematic as they are often used for comic relief (e.g., *Will and Grace*, 1998), or are portrayed in less-than-flattering ways (e.g., drug-addicted). Realistic portrayals, inclusive of lesbian women of color, lesbians with supportive/loving fathers, and lesbians in committed/monogamous romantic relationships could augment acceptance of queer identities that do not appease hegemonic sexual and gender norms.

Limitations and future directions

In this study, psychometrically sound self-report measures were adapted. The scale items were textually modified to align with the context of our study, and in ways to examine the characters' relationships from *our* subjectivities (see Neuendorf, 2017). Future researchers could create psychometric measures intended exclusively for media content analyses of sexual minority characters.

The current study did not examine lesbian characters' relationships with their siblings. Yet, 11 (44%) out of 25 leading lesbian characters were shown to have close relationships with siblings. The dynamics of these relationships may be explored in future research. Specifically, it would be interesting to observe whether lesbian characters' relationships with their siblings helped them to buffer the negative impact of their distanced relationships with their fathers, as observed in this study.

Television shows with more than five seasons from the initial list (e.g., *Pretty Little Liars*, 2010) were not analyzed due to time constraints and our inclusion criteria. Future researchers should explore the representation of lesbian women on long-running television series, as in these shows, leading lesbian characters and their relationships may be more developed.

While conducting the study, the researchers observed factually incorrect information about lesbian sexuality being promoted in television programs. For instance, in *One Day at a Time* (2017), a mother is worried about her lesbian daughter's sexual irresponsibility and is comforted by a friend who is a lesbian: "...when you're a lesbian... You don't need a condom, you don't need the pill... There's hardly any risk physically." We did not explore this phenomenon. Examining misinformation about lesbian sexuality and how this is consumed by television audiences constitutes an important direction for future inquiry.

Conclusion

The present study is the first attempt to analyze multiple "lesbian-centric" television shows in terms of individual and relational dynamics. The study

highlights the nuances in the portrayal of lesbian characters' interpersonal relationships through qualitative analyses, while also assessing these relationships through psychometrically sound measures. Scale items were textually modified to suit the context of this study and used by multiple coders to assure the validity of our findings. In doing so, we were able to assess whether television representation of lesbian characters' interpersonal relationships was humanized and relatable, as this is critical to shaping social attitudes toward lesbian women. Prejudicial portrayals of lesbians dominate contemporary television portrayals, such as homonegative tropes, a lack of diversity, muted sexualities, and damaged relationships with fathers. Studies that critique such media portrayals may be critical to shaping future depictions of queer characters which are free of heteronormative hegemonies.

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