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Media Representations of LGBT People

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Media Representations of LGBT People

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the
Department of Psychology

By
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Under the mentorship of Dr. Amy Hackney

Abstract

LGBT people of color (POC) and White LGBT people have different experiences when it comes
to accepting their sexuality and coming out experience, thus affecting their mental health and
interactions with the community. The coming out process is a step towards a healthier and
happier life, revealing an internal acceptance of oneself while expressing the desire to be open to
others. However, LGBT people consider coming out a stressful and emotionally daunting
process due to the uncertainty of responses from family, friends, and classmates (Charbonnier &
Graziani, 2016). Media representations of LGBT interactions may also influence feelings about
the coming out process and affect state levels of anxiety and depression. LGBT participants were
randomly assigned to view two videos depicting a positive or negative interaction between
LGBT POC or White LGBT people. We predicted that LGBT POC would report higher levels of
state anxiety and state depression, lower comfort levels, and decreased outness than White
LGBT people. Results showed that LGBT POC reported lower outness scores than White LGBT
people. Results also showed that participants reported increased feelings of state anxiety and
depression after watching the negative media representation of LGBT interactions; however, this
finding may be due to an order effect rather than an effect of the valence of the media content.
The results highlight the continued need to study the factors that affect mental well-being and the
coming out process in LGBT POC and White LGBT people.

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Introduction

The rise of the LGBT community in the 1960s led to current generations being raised in more accepting environments. However, the concept of 'the closet' and the uncertainty of acceptance amongst family, friends, and coworkers, has caused LGBT people to conceal their identities until they are ready to 'come out.' With the changes one undergoes during puberty, the emergence of sexuality is related to fear, anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation for LGBT youth. These effects manifest due to numerous factors such as gender roles, the coming out process, and environmental/familial factors. All of these may relate to an LGBT person hiding, repressing, or even rejecting their identity in order to fulfill the social norms set by peers or to remain safe in dangerous situations. Even within the LGBT community, there are varying degrees of acceptance and safety in social settings. The present research causally examines the effects of watching media representations of LGBT interactions on feelings of state anxiety, state depression, and comfort levels in LGBT POC and White LGBT people in order to better understand the social environmental factors that may affect the coming out process and mental well-being.

Many studies have been conducted on the severity of mental health issues amongst both heterosexual and LGBT samples. However, there are several limitations that follow research involving the LGBT community, such as the focus of only one specific mental disorder in the research and the difficulty of examining a community of people when not everyone is represented in a study due to small sample sizes. LGB individuals have a higher prevalence for mental illnesses compared to heterosexuals but this increased prevalence is associated with stigmas, stress, and discrimination (Meyer, 2013).Thus, studying mental health among LGBT people is important due to the fact that the current body of existing research does not address

associated factors such as familial factors and the coming out process. It is also important to note

that a meta-analysis was conducted on this research and found more usable information in

unpublished studies (e.g., dissertations) than in published journal articles (Bartos, Berger, &

Hegarty, 2014). In this same analysis, researchers discovered that unpublished research utilized

more rigorous designs that yielded more analyses than published research. Augmenting the fact

that published research already lacks representative information about mental health in LGBT

populations, these revealing findings of unpublished research emphasize the necessity for more

studies about sexual prejudice and an even closer review of research involving this population,

published or not.

LGBT POC and White LGBT People

An overview of existing literature reveals a stark difference in mental health between

POC and White people, but a deeper analysis is required in order to examine and understand the

nature of these differences. One can easily appoint the social strains of discrimination, violence,

racism, homophobia, and sexual stigmas as the factors that harm minority groups and can lead to

negative mental health issues for those populations. When conducting research and measuring

mental disorders, researchers primarily use the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

Disorders (DSM) and the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI 18) in order to ensure a valid measure

of symptoms reported by the participants. In one study that tested the frequency of mental

disorders in racial and ethnic minority LGBT youth compared to White youth, the researchers

discovered that minority participants were significantly more likely to be diagnosed with conduct

disorder, but measured nearly the same with White participants on internalizing disorders

(Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010). The measures used not only offer clear explanations of

the types of mental disorders and the symptoms for each but also the criteria participants need to

meet in order to be successfully diagnosed. This particular study strengthens the validity of the

tools because it shows that not all LGBT people share the same experiences, thus affecting rates

of mental disorders, and also provides insight on specific disorders that a certain subgroup (racial

and ethnic minority participants) might be more prone to.

Environmental Factors that Affect LGBT Mental Health

A major focus in LGBT mental health research is the difference between LGBT

discrimination versus race-related discrimination and the related outcomes on the wellbeing of

these people. This topic has been recently studied due to the lack of information specifically

addressing the factors that negatively affect the mental health of LGBT youth populations.

Researchers inspecting the mental health and rates of suicidal ideation in LGBT POC used the

Daily Life Experience scale (DLE), which allowed participants to self-report the frequency of

racial incidents (Sutter & Perrin, 2016). This same study reported using the Heterosexist

Harassment, Rejection, and Discrimination Scale (HHRDS) which measures the rates at which

sexual and gender minorities address or report harassment, rejection, or discrimination within the

past several months (Sutter et al., 2016). Sutter's study showed that LGBTQ-based

discrimination had a significant indirect effect on suicidal ideation among LGBTQ POC.

However, an analysis of intersecting identities (racism and discrimination) is needed in order to

fully understand the extent of mental health issues for sexual minorities.

Rickard and Yancey (2018) used four scales in their study, which aimed to analyze the

psychosocial risk factors and differences in rural and non-rural sexual minorities, and each scale

measured different stressors in the LGBT community; the Identification and Involvement with

the Gay Community Scale (IGCS), the Measure of Gay-Related Stressors (MOGS), the Outness

Inventory (OI), and the Social Provisions Scale. These scales can yield results representing

participants' involvement/identification in the LGBT community, frequency of stressors (i.e., reactions to coming out), openness of sexuality, and self-worth both in and out of the community (Rickard et al., 2018). As predicted, results showed a significant difference in rural and non-rural participants, in which sexual minorities in rural areas reported feeling less comfort in outness, higher frequency of victimization and discrimination, lower involvement in the community, and less perceived social support. These findings inform the current study by adding that important factors to the LGBT community such as outness, social support, and daily interactions with peers, friends, and family, are important to the mental development of this community and a lack of these factors (and many more) can negatively impact the mental health of LGBT people.

While it is important to include all age groups, the most prominent group to be measured in LGBT mental health research is college students. In one study, researchers discovered that LGBT college students did not have any differences in physical exercise or academics, but were more likely to have anxiety and depression as well as a higher chance of being overweight when compared to heterosexual college students (Grant, Odlaug, Derbyshire, Schreiber, Lust, & Christenson, 2013). Although it is known that the college experience is difficult as well as physically and mentally taxing, these negative associations can be significantly more prominent for LGBT students due to the potential lack of resources, social support, and LGBT community presence on campus. The nationwide inadequacy of mental health resources, especially on college/university campuses, fails to reach the thousands of college students struggling with mental illness and has still yet to provide proper assessment and treatment of these illnesses for LGBT students.

Although LGBT college students experience more intensive degrees of discrimination, prejudice, and rejection compared to heterosexual students, this social group is more likely to

become resilient to those negative factors over time. In a qualitative study conducted to analyze how life histories of Black gay men helped them navigate through negative social and political environments, results revealed that there are five different factors that Black gay men go through in order to find acceptance (Bartone et al., 2017). The factors were linked to identity formation and included: "racial shelving (bracketing race in majority Black environments to contend with sexual identity issues), thick skin (increasing ability to face and conquer challenges based on negotiations of past challenges), self-determination (taking the initiative to seek information and relationships to learn about sexual identity), defying/transcending stereotypes (refusing to conform to dominant narratives about Black gay males), and experiential evolution (understanding that experience translates into growth and self-affirmation)" (Bartone et al., 2017). Therefore, being exposed to negative racial or LGBT interactions can build up resilience which can be beneficial in processing those same interactions, handling future interactions, and maintaining one's emotional wellbeing.

The Coming Out Process

An important factor that is beneficial to LGBT people but can also place them in harm's way is the coming out process. This personal growth is a major stepping stone towards a happier life, as coming out represents an internal acceptance of oneself and the desire to express themselves freely in the open (Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016). In Charbonnier's study, participants were asked about their most stressful experience regarding their sexuality and nearly all participants indicated that they have had several coming-out experiences that have been stressful, nearly two per participant. The study concluded that LGBT people are more prepared to deal with stressful coming out experiences since they have to come out to everyone they meet.

Along with this, they are more equipped to emotionally handle rejection from the revealing of their sexuality due to the fact that it is a much more provoked situation.

Media Representations of LGBT Interactions

The Internet and the media have allowed for people to join and interact with their communities on a global scale, providing easier access for people to learn about their identity and connect with similar others. As technology advances, so does the media in the ways it presents itself to different groups of people, such as social media being accessible to younger generations and television introducing more serious topics to younger audiences. For the LGBT community, online media presence plays a large part in how the community interacts. YouTube provides a large platform for people to upload videos and can provide people with access to LGBT content creators (Green, Bobrowicz, & Ang, 2015). For example, in a study conducted by Green and et al., 151 YouTube videos containing content about youtubers personal experiences of coming out, dealing with homophobic bullying, and self-disclosing sexual identities were collected in order to analyze the presence of the LGBT community online on a prominent issue such as bullying. The results revealed that people openly disclosed their sexuality and personal negative experiences more freely in a non-anonymous way in order to connect with, become friends, and communicate with other LGBT people online.

Although the advancement of the media has expanded to allow people access to various sources of content, the content itself has not changed much. LGBTQ people in the media continue to be represented in negative or stereotypical depictions such as comic relief, villains or criminals, mentally or physically ill, and victims of violence (McInroy & Craig, 2017). In their study, McInroy and Craig utilized grounded theory to investigate the experiences of media representation by young LGBT people as well as the impact of those representations on the same

population. They conducted interviews with LGBTQ emerging adults and representations of and impacts of the media and found that LGBTQ emerging adults engage in various forms of media but still find negative and one-dimensional depictions of their community. This results in LGBTQ emerging adults seeking new information and support through the internet and various other social media platforms. Adolescents engage with media to learn more about sex, sexual identity, and connect with others like them as a form of socialization (Drushel, 2018). Therefore, media representations of sexual minority groups can provide viewers with information about their own sexual identity and provide examples of how LGBT people are perceived and treated in society.

Study Overview and Hypotheses

The current study aimed to assess LGBT participant reactions and emotional states after watching LGBT-race related content. Our goals included: 1) evaluating participant sexual identity outness, 2) measuring state anxiety and state depression after watching LGBT media representations, and 3) analyzing participant responses to questions about their own sexual identity disclosure in relation to the videos watched. Participants were instructed to complete the Outness inventory and then were randomly assigned to watch two videos. They were then instructed to answer several open response questions about their willingness to share their sexuality with those depicted in the videos and they completed state measures of anxiety and depression. We hypothesized that LGBT POC participants would indicate higher levels of state anxiety and state depression compared to the White LGBT participants. We also hypothesized that LGBT POC participants would indicate lower comfort levels and decreased outness scores compared to White LGBT participants.

Methodology

Participants

Participants consisted of college students from universities and colleges across the United States. Participants were recruited through an email link sent to their college/university LGBT organization and an online link posted to several social media sites. Participants completed the survey on Qualtrics using any computer in any location of their choosing. The study had a total of 39 participants but 11 did not finish the survey. This resulted in a final N of 28 participants. The remaining sample had an average age of 20.52 ($SD = 2.28$), that ranged from 18 to 30 years. ($M_{age} = 20.52$, $SD_{age} = 2.28$, n = 28). The racial percentages for the sample were 47.4% White, 13.2% Black or African American, 7.9% multiracial, 2.6% Hispanic or Latino, 2.6% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2.6% other.

Materials

Youtube Videos. There are four Youtube videos in the experiment and participants were randomly assigned to watch two of them. The videos were taken from popular television and movie media. Two of the videos are short clips from the film *Moonlight* (Dir. Barry Jenkins, 2016) which follows the life of a young Black man as he navigates both the real world and his internal emotions regarding his sexuality. The third video is a clip from the film *Call Me By Your Name* (Dir. Luca Guadagnino, 2017) and takes place in 1983 Italy, where a young boy falls in love with a male grad student visiting the country. The last video is taken from the critically acclaimed HBO show *Euphoria* (Dir. Sam Levinson, began airing in 2019) and depicts the lives of multiple high school students encountering problems related to sexuality, drugs, and life.

The video conditions are defined by the labels 'positive' and 'negative' because they portray interactions between LGBT people that can be seen as loving, supportive, aggressive or even violent. The videos taken from *Moonlight* portray both conditions, with the positive video depicting a kiss between the two Black male leads and the negative video showing the main character as a young boy being beaten in the schoolyard and called homophobic slurs. The positive video from the film *Call Me By Your Name* shows a scene where the two White main characters share an intimate kiss while walking through the streets at night. On the other hand, the negative video taken from *Euphoria* shows one of the White main characters being harassed and threatened by another White character because of their sexuality. The videos were chosen because they specifically showed positive and negative interactions between two Black characters and two White characters. This was done in hopes that participants would reveal the extent to which they were comfortable watching LGBT interactions in the media and based on the negative interactions, which one would make them feel the most uncomfortable or unsafe if they were put in those same situations as they were depicted. Videos portraying interactions across race were difficult to find and were not used because we did not want to portray certain racial groups as being inherently homophobic or make participants feel targeted based on the portrayals.

State Anxiety and State Depression Subscales. State Anxiety and State Depression subscales were used to measure the current emotional state of participants after they watched each survey video. State Anxiety and State Depression are both subscales of the State-Trait Personality Inventory (STPI, Spielberger, 1995). The STPI is a questionnaire that measures the emotional state of participants, specifically transitory and dispositional anger, depression, curiosity, and anxiety. It contains eight 10-item subscales, ranging from state and trait anxiety to

state and trait depression, which participants rated on a four-point intensity scale. A sample item

is "I feel sad." The Cronbach's Alpha for state anxiety and state depression was 0.88 and 0.83,

respectively.

Outness Inventory. The Outness Inventory (OI, Mohr & Fassinger, 2000) is a scale that

measures the degree to which LGB individuals are open about their sexuality. The OI contains an

11-item scale that analyzes participant outness in terms of relationships, different life domains,

and overall outness. Mohr and Fassinger (2000) conducted a large research experiment using the

Outness Inventory which provided validity and reliability for the scale. A sample item is "1 =

Person definitely does not know my sexuality." Cronbach's Alpha for the current study was 0.84.

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants completed an Outness Inventory scale

which asked several questions pertaining to their comfort being out to different people in their

lives. Participants were then randomly assigned to watch one of the short media clips depicting

either a positive or negative Black or White interaction. Once the first video was done,

participants were instructed to answer several state questions, as well as three open-response

questions pertaining to both outness and the video. Then, participants moved onto their second

video, which was the direct opposite condition than the first video they watched (e.g. if the first

video was Black Positive, then the second video was White Negative). After participants

watched the second video, they answered the same state questions and three open-response

questions. Then they were instructed to answer several trait questions before being debriefed on

the survey.

Results

Due to the small sample size and the limited number of POC, our hypothesis on the interaction between participant race and LGBT videos on state anxiety and depression could not be assessed. Instead, we tested the overall effects of watching LGBT interactions in the media on state anxiety and depression, across participant race.

State Anxiety

Data from the effects of videos on state anxiety were analyzed in SPSS using a 2 (Video Condition: Black Positive and White Negative vs. White Positive and Black Negative) x 2 (Time: State Anxiety One vs. State Anxiety Two) mixed subjects ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor. There was a significant main effect of time, $F(1, 27) = 25.42$, $p < .001$, as well as a significant interaction between the time and video condition, $F(1, 27) = 4.55$, $p = .04$.

In order to understand the direction of this significant interaction between the two conditions, simple effects analyses were conducted for each video condition. The analyses showed that participants had lower state anxiety after watching the White Positive video at time one ($M = 2.24$, $SD = .64$, N = 11) compared to their state anxiety levels after watching the Black Negative video at time two ($M = 2.51$, $SD = .64$, N= 11), $F(1, 10) = 6.45$, $p < .01$.

Along with this, analyses also showed that participants had lower state anxiety after watching the Black Positive video at time one ($M = 2.03$, $SD = .48$, N = 18) compared to when they watched the White Negative video at time two ($M = 2.69$, $SD = .64$, N = 18), $F(1, 17) = 26.57$, $p < .01$.

We also conducted an independent samples t-test to compare the state anxiety at time one for participants who watched the Black Positive video ($M = 2.14$, $SD = .69$) and for participants who watched the White Positive video ($M = 2.14$, $SD = .52$), $t(32) = -.02$, $p = .98$. We found similar levels of state anxiety for both positive videos. Similarly, there were no significant differences between participants who watched the Black Negative video at time two ($M = 2.67$, $SD = .63$) and the White Negative video at time two ($M = 2.51$, $SD = .64$), $t(31) = -.72$, $p = .48$.

State Depression

Data from the effects of videos on state depression were analyzed in SPSS using a 2 (Video Condition: Black Positive and White Negative vs. White Positive and Black Negative) x 2 (Time: State Depression One vs. State Depression Two) mixed subjects ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor. The results revealed a significant main effect of time, $F(1, 25) = 9.72$, $p = .005$.

In order to understand the direction of this significant interaction between each condition, simple effects analyses were conducted for each video condition. The analyses showed that participants had similar levels of state depression after watching the White Positive video at time one ($M = 2.41$, $SD = .79$, N = 11) and after watching the Black Negative video at time two ($M = 2.41$, $SD = .82$, N = 11), $F(1, 10) = 0.0$, $p = 1.00$. They also showed that participants had lower state depression after watching the Black Positive video at time one ($M = 2.12$, $SD = .55$, N = 16) compared to when they watched the White Negative video at time two ($M = 2.77$, $SD = .58$, N = 16), $F(1, 15) = 20.12$, $p < .01$.

We also conducted an independent samples t-test to compare the state depression at time one for participants who wanted the Black Positive video ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .79$) and for participants who watched the White Positive video ($M = 2.14$, $SD = .53$), $t(30) = .61$, $p = .54$. We

found similar levels of state depression at time one for both positive videos. Similarly, there were

no significant differences between participants who watched the White Negative video at time

two ($M = 2.39$, $SD = .80$) and the Black Negative video at time two ($M = 2.73$, $SD = .55$), $t(31) =$

-1.42, $p = .17$.

Outness

Data were also collected from the Outness Scale (OI) and analyzed in SPSS using an

independent samples t-test. The results revealed that White LGBT participants ($M = 5.35$, $SD =$

1.24) were higher in outness levels compared to LGBT POC ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.93$) participants,

$t(27) = 2.05$, $p = .05$.

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Discussion

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Our hypothesis that LGBT POC state scores of anxiety and depression would be higher

than White LGBT state scores of anxiety and depression after watching videos of negative and

positive LGBT interactions could not be assessed. We did not have enough participants to

analyze whether there were any relations of participant race with state anxiety or state

depression. However, state anxiety, which was measured with the State-Trait Personality

Inventory (STPI), was increased for all participants after watching their second video. Results

also showed that there were no differences between watching the Black Positive and White

Positive videos. Similarly, there were no differences in state anxiety between watching the Black

Negative and White Negative videos. For state depression, participants who were in the Black

Positive and White Negative condition had increased state depression scores after watching their

second video. Results also showed that there were no differences between watching the Black

Positive and White Positive videos. Along with this, there were no differences in state depression

between watching the Black Negative and White Negative videos.

Participant state scores showed that there was a change in anxiety and depression after watching the videos. Increased anxiety for participants who watched their second video could be from being shown interactions that are specifically LGBT, which could potentially affect some people due to the prevalence of negative LGBT interactions depicted in the media. Although there were no differences between both conditions, participants had increased state depression in the Black Positive and White Negative condition which could mean that participants were affected by the nature of the interaction or by how negative the videos were. The White Negative video was quite aggressive in the way the characters interacted and this could have increased state depression levels among participants who have been in similar situations or seen situations similar to the one depicted.

Our hypothesis also stated that LGBT POC would have lower comfort levels and decreased outness compared to White LGBT people, which was supported by the data. Results revealed that White LGBT participants had higher levels in outness compared to LGBT POC participants. Participants in the Black Positive and White Negative condition showed indication that they were aware of the rampant homophobia present in the Black community and this was a major factor in their decision to not come out. Along with this, several participants said that they would rather come out in the White Negative video than the Black Positive video specifically because of the lack of LGBT acceptance within the Black community. For participants in the White Positive and Black Negative condition, responses showed an emphasis on surrounding themselves with supportive friends and people as well as more likely to come out in the Black Negative video if they had a strong support system.

Limitations

There were two limitations of our research design that limits the interpretations that can be drawn from the results. The first limitation is that we cannot tell whether the increased state anxiety from time one to time two is due to the negative interaction depicted in the second video, or, is simply due to the accumulated effects of time. Similarly, we cannot tell whether the increased state depression from time one to time two is due to the negative interaction depicted in the second video, or, is simply due to the accumulated effects of time. The second limitation concerns the sample characteristics. Although we attempted to recruit participants from LGBT college campus clubs from across the United States, only 39 participants engaged with the survey request, and of these, only 28 participants provided valid data. Because of this, we did not have enough participants to accurately test all hypotheses. Participants were also not evenly distributed because of the small sample size and so, the Black Positive and White Negative condition had 12 participants while the White Positive and Black Negative condition had 16 participants. Additionally, nearly half of the participants were White, while Black, Multiracial, Hispanic or Latino, and Asian or Pacific Islander made up small percentages of our sample. This prevented us from being able to analyze any real effects from watching the videos.

Another limitation was the lack of positive media representation of LGBT POC. Media depicting White LGBT people tends to show more positive interactions while Black LGBT depictions are more negative. Hence the reason why both Black positive and negative videos were taken from *Moonlight* while the White Positive and Negative videos were taken from *Euphoria* and *Call Me By Your Name*. Depiction of positive and negative LGBT people can greatly affect the attitude of oneself about their sexuality as well as the attitudes of people outside of the community.

Future Research

Although the limitations prevented us from finding any conclusive results, the potential

of this area of research is great. Future research should dive deeper into existing research,

specifically revolving around LGBT mental health, Black communities, intersecting identities,

and resiliency. Along with this, research should also focus on ecological models of development

to understand the relationship of one's levels of environment and their sexual identity. The

current study's strengths were apparent in the effective design of showing participants positive

and negative race-related LGBT videos, and future studies should build upon that method.

Several changes that could be made to our methodology that would increase external validity and

statistical power are as follows: 1) recruiting participants from a diverse LGBT-populated

community in order to raise the likelihood of obtaining a higher percentage of LGBT POC

participants, and 2) adding more video conditions that depict other various racial groups to

obtain more in-depth responses; Furthermore, future research should consider measuring

participants resilience levels against negative social and political factors in order to assess

differences in participant attitudes towards the video conditions. Future research should also

analyze critical race theory when comparing the POC populations to White participants.

Implications and Conclusions

Future research in this area is vital to the overall improvement in the wellbeing of the

LGBT community. It has only been six years since gay marriage was legalized in the United

States and there are still many social and political barriers that must be taken down in order to

continue healing the community, especially after the aftermath of the AIDs pandemic within the

last forty years. Social institutions such as gender roles and family structures continue to

ostracize LGBT people from feeling part of society. Along with this, social attitudes within

communities, such as the Black community, make it especially difficult to exist as an LGBT

person. We found that LGBT POC had lower levels of outness compared to LGBT White people. Black gay men may struggle to balance the constricting views of toxic hypermasculinity within the Black community along with racism and limiting perceptions of identity within the LGBT community. The rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) over the last few years has also called attention to Black and POC issues within several communities, especially the LGBT community. The social and political climate is a great motivator to conduct research that specifically analyzes and addresses racial and mental health differences within the LGBT community and between other racial groups as well. Our research highlights the continued need to assess the impacts of media representations of LGBT interactions on the coming out process and levels of anxiety and depression in LGBT POC and LGBT White people.

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