DISABLED U.S. AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS OF REPRESENTATION ON SCREEN

CENTER FOR SCHOLARS & STORYTELLERS

UCLA

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RespectAbility

respect ability

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The Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS) positively impacts the lives of youth by bridging the gap between scholarly research and media creation. Our primary aim is to support content creators who are working towards changing entrenched cultural narratives around the key issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, mental health, and inequality. CSS is based at UCLA's Psychology Department and collaborates with more than 50 academics from across the globe. You can learn more about our work at **scholarsandstorytellers.com.**

Project Description

The Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS), based in the Psychology Department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) sought to examine the needs and opinions of **disabled individuals** in terms of media representation.

THE GOAL of this investigation was to examine disabled audience demands for diverse, authentic, and inclusive media content and whether this varied meaningfully by gender, sexual orientation, or race/ethnicity.

Survey data was collected on a nationally reflective sample of U.S. adults (n = 1,051; Age Range = 18-54 years), and of that sample a subset (n = 268) reported having a disability. Statistical analyses were then run on the subset sample of individuals who self-identified as having a disability to address three main research questions. Percentage values followed by an asterisk (*) denote statistical significance meaning that it is unlikely that this finding occurred due to random chance.

We worked with the advocacy nonprofit organization **RespectAbility** after data analysis to ensure greater impact for this study. More information on the methodology can be found on page 9.

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A Note from RespectAbility

While entertainment professionals across all platforms are increasingly working to become more inclusive of all underrepresented communities, many often forget to include the disability community in those conversations. However, opening the umbrella for the one-in-five people in the U.S. with a disability is the right thing to do, as well as economically smart, given the fact that according to Nielsen Research, consumers with disabilities represent a $1 billion market segment. When you include their families, friends and associates, that total expands to more than $1 trillion.

Additionally, according to GLAAD, just 3.5% of characters in broadcast scripted series had disabilities in the 2020-2021 season. Furthermore, actors without disabilities play the majority of all characters with disabilities on-screen. The representation that does exist is misleading. Almost all portrayals of people with disabilities in the media are white, but disability impacts all. Disabled people come from all communities – including Black, AAPI, Hispanic/Latinx, Indigenous, LGBTQ+ and other underrepresented communities.

The success of films like CODA, Peanut Butter Falcon, Black Panther, Wonder Woman, Crazy Rich Asians and Coco prove that diversity wins at the end of the day, yet even still there is room for more intersectional representation in these success stories. As proven in the findings of this study, audiences are ready and waiting for more quality content that they feel accurately represents themselves and the nuances of their life experiences.

It is not only important to increase the representation but also to ensure that the narrative is good. It's not enough to just be included – we have to be included in an authentic way, telling diverse, complex stories of the disability experience, and avoid falling into the trap of inspiration porn, which assumes that anyone with a disability must have it so much worse, and uses people with disabilities to make nondisabled people feel good about themselves.

RespectAbility's Entertainment & News Media Team:
Lauren Appelbaum, Tatiana Lee, Vanni Le, and Lesley Hennen

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Led by diverse people with disabilities, RespectAbility's Entertainment and News Media Team partners with studios, production companies, writers' rooms and news organizations to create equitable and accessible opportunities to increase the number of people with lived disability experience throughout the creative and news media industries. We have conducted trainings for and consulted on projects with A&E, Bunim-Murray Productions, CAA, NBCUniversal, Netflix, Sony Pictures Entertainment, ViacomCBS, The Walt Disney Company, WarnerMedia and others. These initiatives, including our award-winning Lab, increase diverse and authentic representation of disabled people on screen, leading to systemic change in how society views and values people with disabilities. This, in turn, will help enable people with disabilities to receive the education, jobs, access, and opportunities they need to be as independent as possible.

Definitions

DISABLED/DISABILITY: According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, an individual with a disability is a person who (1) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more "major life activities," (2) has a record of such an impairment, or (3) is regarded as having such an impairment. (Source: ADA.gov)

DIVERSE REPRESENTATION: On-screen representation of individuals and storylines that corresponds to the lived experiences of groups marginalized on the basis of racial, ethnic, gender, disability, or sexual preference affiliation.

IDENTITY: Facets that make up a person's background such as gender, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, etc.

TV/MEDIA: Shows watched on broadcast, cable, or streaming platforms (e.g. NBC, STARZ, HBO, Disney+, Netflix, etc.).

RACIAL/ETHNIC MINORITIES: Respondents who identified as Black, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), Hispanic/Latinx, Middle Eastern/ North African (MENA), Multiethnic, Indigenous American, and Other (non-White and non-Caucasian).

WOMEN: Inclusive of respondents who identified as cisgender women and transgender women.

MEN: Inclusive of respondents who identified as cisgender men and transgender men.

OTHER GENDER: Inclusive of respondents who identified as non-binary, gender fluid, and who preferred not to say.

SEXUAL MINORITIES: Those who identified as anything other than heterosexual or straight (i.e., gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.).

QUALITY OF DIVERSE MEDIA: The accuracy of TV-content representation of diverse identities.

QUANTITY OF DIVERSE MEDIA: The amount of TV-content representation of diverse identities.

Some racial/ ethnic groups had very small sample sizes (n<10) and thus the respondents were too few to be statistically significant. For larger groups, when applicable (e.g. Black, AAPI, Hispanic/Latinx), we listed percentage values followed by an asterisk (*) to denote statistical significance, meaning that it is unlikely that this finding occurred due to random chance.

Main Findings

1.

Women with a disability feel notably *less well-represented* than men with a disability.

- Among those with one or more disabilities, the majority of men (76.7%) feel well-represented compared to a minority of women (41.6%).

2.

Women with a disability reported feeling as though their representation has *stayed the same* while men with a disability reported feeling as though representation of their identity *has increased* in the past 1-2 years.

- 53.9% of women who have one or more disabilities reported that their on-screen representation has stayed the same in the last 1-2 years while 63.6% of men who have one or more disabilities reported their on-screen representation has increased in the last 1-2 years.

3.

Women with a disability reported wanting better *quality* representation while men reported wanting more *quantity* in terms of representation.

- 68% of women who have one or more disabilities reported wanting better quality representation while 65.4% of men reported wanting more quantity representation.

> *In my opinion, TV/Media could do a MUCH better job at representing neurodivergence, mental illness, and disability WITHOUT over exaggerating and stereotyping the way we behave or function. I also believe that [if] you truly want to represent people from a marginalized group you need to hire someone FROM that specific group. Not just pay some actor that isn't affected by these things to play pretend with our reality.*
> - Female survey participant, 19 years old

FINDING #1:
FINDING #1:
Accurate Media Representation

Research Question: "Do you feel as though the facets of your identity that matter most to you are accurately represented in the TV and media that you consume on a regular basis?"
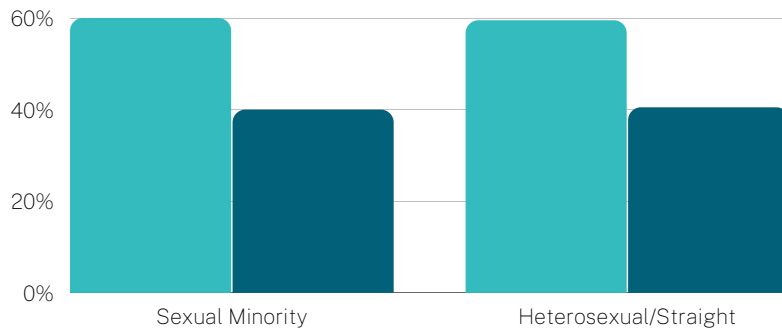
While the overall sample shows that the majority of the disabled sample feels well-represented on screen, findings parsed by gender show that men seem to be driving this result while **only 41.6% of women reported feeling well-represented on screen**.

■ Well-represented   **■ Not well-represented**

Overall Disabled Sample
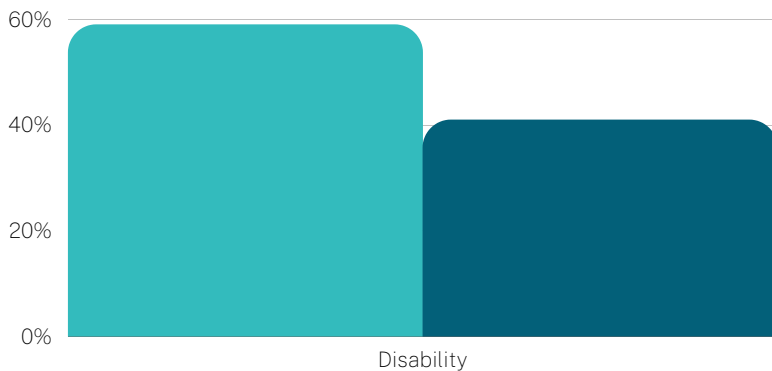
59%* of those with one or more disabilities feel as though their identity is well-represented in the media content that they consume regularly.

Race/Ethnicity Breakdown

60% of Black, 57.1% of AAPI, 51.2% of Latinx/Hispanic, 0% of MENA, 40% of Multi-Ethnic, 0% of Indigenous American, 63.1% of White/Caucasian, and 0% of those who identified as other ethnicities with one or more disabilities reported feeling well-represented.
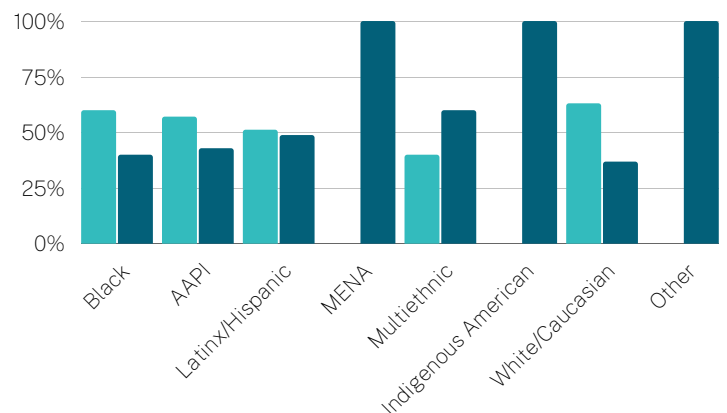
Sexual Orientation Breakdown

60% sexual minorities and 59.5% of heterosexual/straight individual with one or more disabilities reported feeling well-represented.
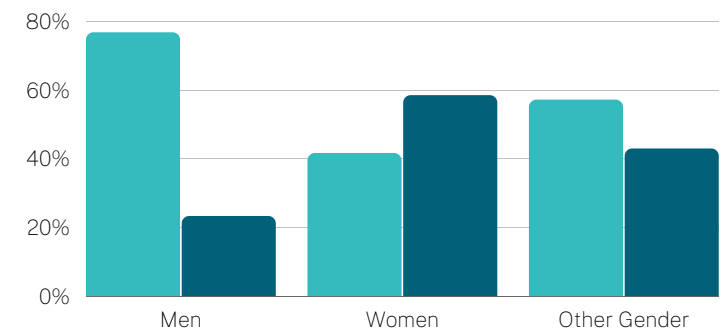
Gender Breakdown

76.7%* of men who have one or more disabilities reported feeling well-represented compared to 41.6% of women and 57.1% of other genders.

"It is not enough to just include a disabled character. We want to see intentional fully-fleshed-out disabled characters that are loving, learning, and earning."

- **Vanni Le**, DEI Advocate with ADHD and dyscalculia; Entertainment Outreach Program Manager at RespectAbility

On-Screen Representation Over Time

Research Question: "Do you feel as though accurate representation of your identity on TV and in the media has increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the past 1-2 years?"

Disabled women in particular feel as though their on-screen representation has remained unchanged over the past 1-2 years.
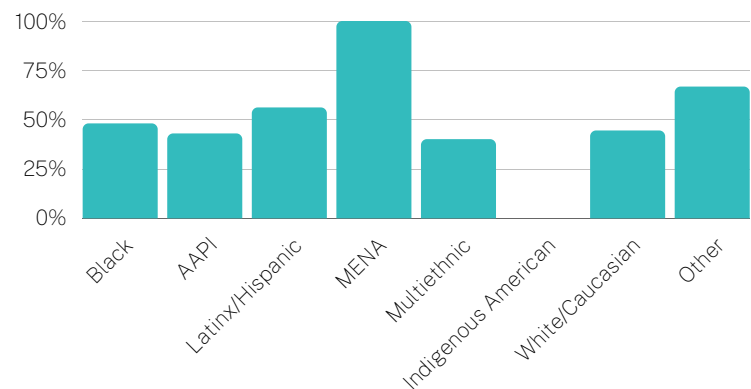
Stayed the same

Overall Disabled Sample

47%* of those who have one or more disabilities reported their on-screen representation has stayed the same.

Race/Ethnicity Breakdown

48% of Black, 42.9% of AAPI, 56.1% of Latinx/Hispanic, 100% of MENA, 40% of Multi-Ethnic, 0% of Indigenous American, 44.4% of White/Caucasian, and 66.7% of those who identified as other ethnicities with one or more disabilities reported it has stayed the same.
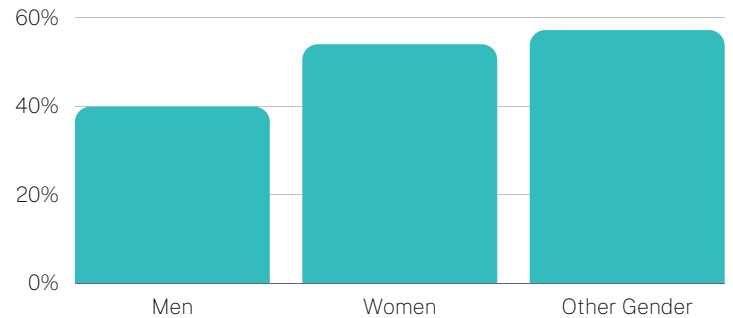
Sexual Orientation Breakdown

41.3% of sexual minorities and 49.2% of straight/heterosexual individuals who have one or more disabilities reported it has stayed the same.

Gender Breakdown

39.8% of men, 53.9%* of women, and 57.1% of other genders who have one or more disabilities reported it has stayed the same.

"We are starting to see an uptick in the representation of disabled people, but we are still lacking in intersectional representation. People with disabilities are diverse and part of all communities including all races, sexual orientations and gender identities, faiths and other backgrounds. We need to see our stories reflected accurately on screen as well."

- **Tatiana Lee**, Actor, model, inclusion activist with Spina Bifida; Senior Associate of Entertainment Media at RespectAbility

Quality vs. Quantity of Diverse Media Representation

Research Question: "Which do you value more: the amount (quantity) of TV content that represents your identity or the manner in which (quality) TV content represents your identity?"

Disabled audiences are calling for better quality representation on screen - women especially felt this way. By contrast, disabled men, other genders, and sexual minorities are calling for more quantity of representation.

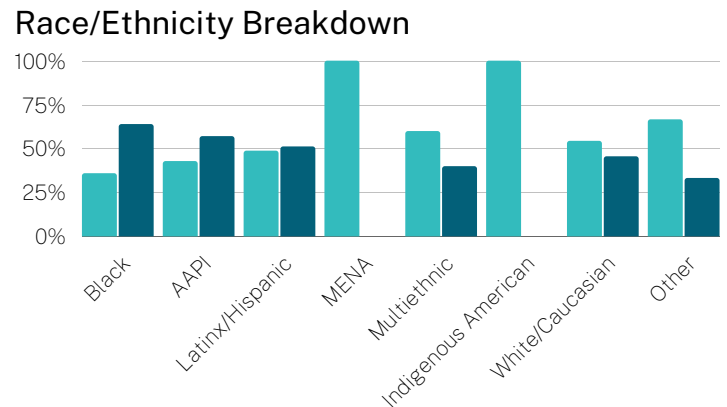## Overall Disabled Sample
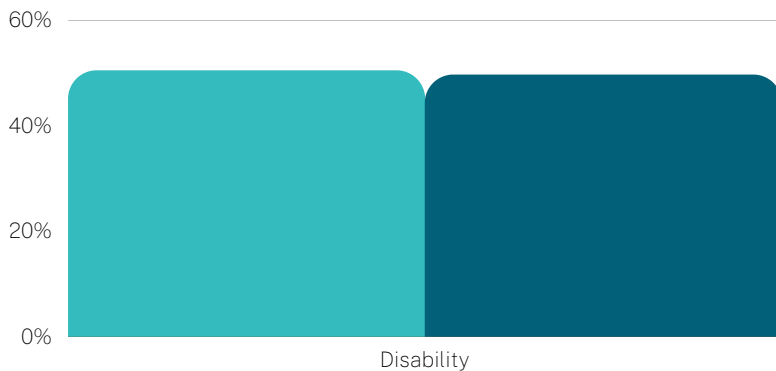
Quality **Quantity**

50.4% of respondents with one or more disabilities said that they wanted content of greater quality representative of their identities over quantity (49.6%).

Race/Ethnicity Breakdown

36% of Black, 42.9% of AAPI, 48.8% of Latinx/Hispanic, 100% of MENA, 60% of Multi-Ethnic, 100% of Indigenous American, 54.4% of White/Caucasian, and 66.7% of those who identified as other ethnicities with one or more disabilities said quality was more important to them while 64% of Black, 57.1% of AAPI, 51.2% of Latinx/Hispanic, 0% of MENA, 40% of Multi-Ethnic, 0% of Indigenous American, 45.6% of White/Caucasian, and 33.3% of those who identified as other ethnicities with one or more disabilities said quantity was more important to them.

Sexual Orientation Breakdown

44% of sexual minorities and 52.8% of straight/heterosexual individuals who have one or more disabilities said quality was more important to them; 56% of sexual minorities and 47.2% of straight/heterosexual individuals who identified with one or more disabilities disability said quantity was more important to them.

Gender Breakdown
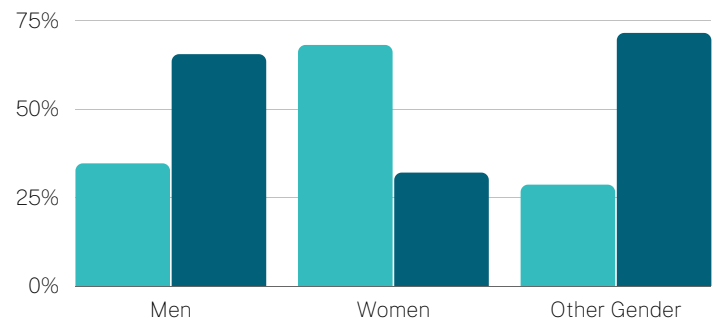
68%* of women who have one or more disabilities reported wanting more quality while 65.4%* of men and 71.4% of other genders who have one or more disabilities reported wanting more quantity.

"It's great that people in the industry are becoming eager to tell more disabled stories, but it must be in a way that is true and authentic to the lived experience of what it means to be disabled. That is why it is so important to hire disabled people to be involved in all parts of the storytelling process."
- Lesley Hennen, Writer & Producer with bilateral clubfoot; Entertainment & News Media Associate at RespectAbility

Conclusion

This data exploration yielded important insights about how audiences who identify as disabled feel in terms of their on screen depiction.

Notable findings highlight that women feel less well-represented than men, and that women feel as though accurate representation of their identity has not changed in the past 1-2 years. **Disabled individuals want higher quality content representative of their identities.**

> *We want to see authentic, intersectional, and inclusive disabled stories that show what disabled people can do. These should be created by and with people with disabilities leading the conversation.*
> - Lauren Appelbaum,
> Disability Inclusion & Accessibility Consultant with Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy (RSD); VP of Communications and Entertainment & News Media at RespectAbility

As seen from these results, there is a clear lack of women with various intersectional disabled identities feeling they are either underrepresented or misrepresented on-screen. The film and TV industry continues to perpetuate unachievable ideals of perfectionism in women, which ultimately affects the way that women experience society in real life. To combat these harmful and false narratives, content creators and other decision-makers in the industry should work towards shattering these high expectations that often impact the perception of disabled women as "less than." By striving to include more women from all intersectional underrepresented identities in the creation process of the stories that are being told, both in front of and behind the camera, the industry can lead this change towards more inclusive storytelling for all.

RespectAbility's Entertainment & News Media Team:
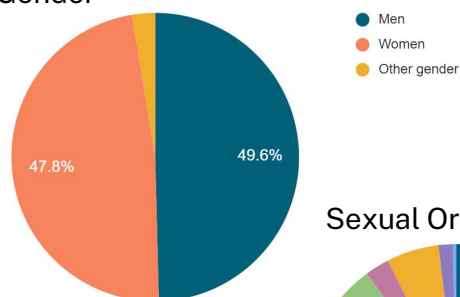**Lauren Appelbaum, Tatiana Lee, Vanni Le, and Lesley Hennen**

Sample:

CSS utilized a research panel from Qualtrics, an online survey data-collection platform, to sample a large and nationally reflective group of adults in the United States. Information about this overall sample can be found here (see "Give the People What They Want"). Responses were collected from 1,051 adults (Average Age = 35 years old; Age Range = 18–54 years old), and the sample was fairly representative of race/ethnicity, gender identity, and geographic location within the United States.
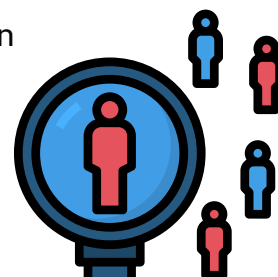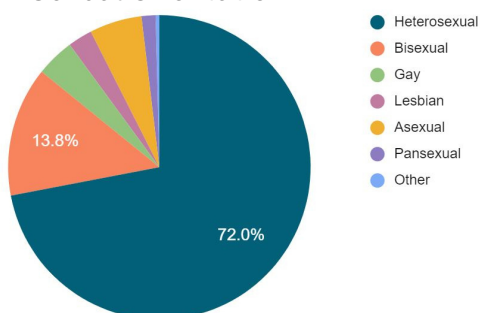
Within the overall sample, a subsample of 286 individuals (25.5%) identified as being disabled and the numbers we present throughout the report are based on this sample. Men were slightly overrepresented (49.6%),[1] followed by women (47.8%) with other gender minorities such as transgender men, transgender women, nonbinary, and gender fluid respondents comprising the remaining 2.6%. The sample contained individuals who identified as Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) (2.2%),[2] Blacks (18.7%), Hispanic/Latinx (15.3%), Indigenous American (.4%), Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) (.4%), Multiethnic (1.9%), Other (1.1%), and White/Caucasian (59.7%). Respondents were from the Midwest (20.5%), Northeast (19.4%), South (39.6%), and West (20.5%). The majority of the respondents identified as heterosexual or straight (72%),[3] with the minority reflecting other sexual orientations such as bisexual (13.8%), asexual (5.6%), gay (4.1%), lesbian (2.6%), pansexual (1.5%), and other (.4%).
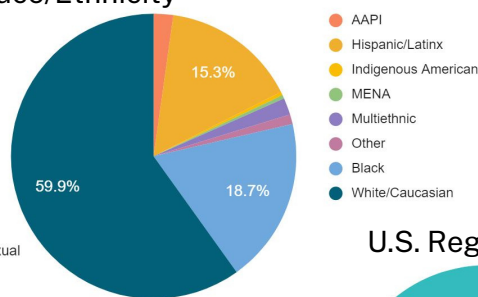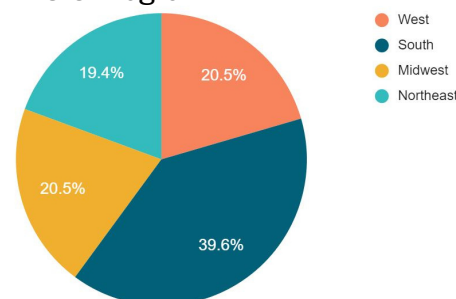
Disabled Sample

Gender — Men 49.6%, Women 47.8%, Other gender

Race/Ethnicity — AAPI, Hispanic/Latinx 15.3%, Indigenous American, MENA, Multiethnic, Other, Black 18.7%, White/Caucasian 59.9%

Sexual Orientation — Heterosexual 72.0%, Bisexual 13.8%, Gay, Lesbian, Asexual, Pansexual, Other

U.S. Region — West 20.5%, South 39.6%, Midwest 20.5%, Northeast 19.4%

1 Cisgender Man n = 128, Cisgender Woman n = 127, Genderfluid n = 1, Nonbinary n = 2, Prefer not to say n = 4, Transgender Man n = 5, Transgender Woman n = 1.
2 AAPI n = 7, Black n = 50, Hispanic/Latinx n = 41, Indigenous American n = 1, MENA n = 1, Multiethnic n = 5, other n = 3, White/Caucasian n = 160.
3 Asexual n = 15, Bisexual n = 37, Gay n = 11, Heterosexual or Straight n = 193, Lesbian n = 7, Pansexual n = 4, Prefer not to say n = 1.

Materials:

Survey questions were designed and programmed by CSS ahead of data collection on Qualtrics. A research panel with preset U.S. quotas for gender, ethnic background, and region was obtained via online data collection. Respondents were presented questions and responded online through Qualtrics. We focused on three main research questions that were presented to participants:

1. Do you feel as though the facets of your identity that matter most to you are accurately represented in the TV and media that you consume on a regular basis?
2. Do you feel as though accurate representation of your identity on TV and in the media has increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the past 1-2 years?
3. Which do you value more: the amount (quantity) of TV content that represents your identity or the manner in which (quality) TV content represents your identity?

Data Analysis:

Since the aim was to examine how respondents' identities (i.e., disability) related to the questions listed above, data were analyzed by computing Chi-Squared statistics that allow for the comparison of variables that are defined by categories. As such, Chi-Squared statistics allowed us to measure whether those who identified as disabled responded differently to the research questions in a statistically meaningful way. Specifically, Chi-Squared statistics were run to examine gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation differences in response to the research questions. Prior to analysis, data were checked and cleaned for any nonsensical responses and were subsequently coded to enable statistical analysis. Analyses were conducted in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 25 (SPSS V25).

Limitations:

The data cannot explain causal relationships between the identity variables and the research questions, thus results should be interpreted with caution to this fact. Instead, the data suggest that facets of diverse representation in TV/media differ in meaningful ways for certain identities which may importantly inform future avenues of research in this area.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to RespectAbility for their incredible passion and support in helping us launch this report.

To the Center for Scholars & Storytellers Lab, an amazing group of people who care deeply about the work we do — your feedback has been invaluable.

To Stephanie Rivas-Lara, without whom the design of this report could not have happened, we are always grateful for your hardwork.

To STARZ and their #TakeTheLead Initiative, thank you for funding the original study from which this data collection is based on and keeping diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront of what you do.

And to the survey respondents, we thank you for using your voice and for shedding light on the important work ahead.

Thank You!

To find out more about the work that The Center for Scholars & Storytellers is doing around diversity and inclusion, please visit **www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/representation-diversity-inclusion**.

To download our Authentic Inclusive Representation (AIR) report, visit **www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/air**.

For insights on how you can improve Authentic Inclusive Representation for Race in content, download our tip sheet at **https://www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/air-tip-sheet-form**.

For more information on RespectAbility, visit **https://www.respectability.org**.

For more information about the methods or details about this study, please contact us at **info@scholarsandstorytellers.com**.