Diversity and Representation in the Media

Tupou Ulufonua

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Pose is an FX TV show set in New York during the 1980s and 1990s that shows the diverse LGBTQ+ ballroom culture and the community it revolves around. LGBTQ+ history often suffers from erasure and falsehoods, but TV shows (like *Pose)* help to highlight and empower people in these marginalized communities. However, some communities (like the Polynesian community) still lack representation in modern media, which leaves their existence either unnoticed or convoluted. Accurate media representation is an important topic to address because misconceptions about communities can arise when there are inaccurate media depictions of them. This essay will address the importance of raising visibility and debunking stereotypes in the media with examples from my own experiences and those shown in the show *Pose*. Although there is still a lack of diversity in the media and it still negatively impacts people today, the growth of diversity in the media within the last decade has positively impacted others by improving the visibility of marginalized communities and discrediting stereotypes.

A lack of representation in the media can inhibit one's self-confidence. For instance, a person's self-confidence can diminish from being held to unrealistic standards created by media portrayals. Prominent examples of Polynesian actors would be Dywane Johnson, Keanu Reeves, and Jason Mamoa. Although all three men are adorned for their exceptional physiques and witty humor, these three men also create high standards for other Polynesians. These high standards can be harmful as they can make other Polynesians doubt their self-worth if they cannot live up to them. From my personal experiences, I have felt that I needed to push myself to be funnier to make up for not being very fit or conventionally attractive. I thought if I were humorous like my Polynesian counterparts on the screen, I would benefit from it. This was a stereotype, but instead of avoiding it, I wanted to pursue it and embody the stereotype to be better perceived by my peers. Regardless, I ended up masking a big part of my personality to make up for the fact that I could not meet an unrealistic standard. Even though I did not need to compare myself to these figures in the media, seeing the praise they received for their qualities made me want to mimic them to get the same results.

In another instance, a person's self-confidence can dwindle from being deprived of diverse role models to look up to. I am Polynesian, so my racial representation in the media includes the actors I listed earlier (Dywane Johnson, Keanu Reeves, and Jason Mamoa). These actors are good role models, but very few famous Polynesian stars in the media are beyond the common figure of being tall and fit. I realized this when I was a kid, when the only prominent Polynesian figure in the media was Dywane Johnson. I liked that someone of the same ethnicity as me was on the big screen. He became my star of reference whenever someone did not know what a Polynesian was until I was made fun of for not being as tall or fit as him. I was confused why my peers thought all Polynesians were tall and fit, but then I realized it was because I was the only Polynesian they had seen that did not look like Dywane Johnson. Underrepresenting a community in the media can lead to its members being chained to generalizations like this, but showing how diverse a community is can help end it.

Pose diversifies the screen by broadening people's perspectives on the LGBTQ+ community through breaking stereotypes—like that the LGBTQ+ community is one big happy

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family who shares the same political beliefs. For example, *Pose* breaks the stereotype that gay people cannot be transphobic. In this series, transgender characters face discrimination from the gay community as they are thrown out of gay bars and even lose their jobs due to their gender identity being outed by their gay peers. Transphobia can exist in any community, including the queer community, regardless of the members' sexual, gender, or associates' identity. People may think that these identity traits exempt queer people from transphobia, but these traits only contribute to their identity, not their attitudes to their trans peers. Bringing attention to this matter in the media helps to emphasize that although some people are associated with the transgender community, that does not mean transphobia ceases to exist among those people. In addition, *Pose* breaks another stereotype that members of the LGBTQ+ community all hold the same political beliefs. Conflict arises in the series when some queer characters attend a protest for HIV prevention awareness while others do not because they doubt the impact it could have. The characters get into a debate about whether or not government intervention will help resolve the AIDS epidemic. This conflict is important because it shows that people's sexual/gender identities and political beliefs do not always correlate. As a person's sexual/gender identity does not predetermine their attitudes to trans people, the same applies to a person's political standings. Addressing assumptions like those stated earlier helps break down what is fact or fiction within the queer community. Broadcasting these issues also helps to spark conversations faster and widens others' (queer or not queer) understanding of the complexities among the LGBTQ+ community.

  Pose also improves the queer community's visibility in the media by providing a point of view of the realities that queer people faced during the peak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 80s and 90s. This p.o.v. acts as a window narrative to distinguish misinformation from facts about HIV/AIDS and gay/trans people. Firstly, one myth is that HIV/AIDS is a death sentence. *Pose* has multiple characters who live years after testing positive with the help of taking medication to maintain a healthy immune system. Writing HIV-positive characters (even casting an HIV-positive actor) helps HIV-positive people feel seen and feel that their status is not lethal. Another myth about HIV/AIDS is that HIV-positive people cannot live happy, fulfilling lives. In the show, HIV-positive characters are shown to have successful careers (in dance and nursing) and romantic relationships but also help their peers navigate their lives with their positive status. Living with HIV is often depicted in a negative light in the media, where a positive status will shelve dreams and goals. Here, *Pose* showing HIV-positive characters living happy lives helps to debunk this myth and bring positive representation to HIV-positive people in real life. This viral disease has multiple stigmas attached to it, and most of those stigmas revolve around myths, but destigmatizing this disease helps instill the fact that HIV-positive people can still live their lives.

  The lack of diversity in the media and its harmful effects are still apparent in the media, but with the recent uptake of window narratives about marginalized communities, there has been a boost for diversity in the media. My own experiences with underrepresentation and examples from the window narrative *Pose* helped explain why stereotypes are unjust and why broadening the perspectives of others is crucial. When I was growing up, I did not see someone like me. I did not see a queer, Polynesian, woman who struggles with mental health problems. I did not feel like I belonged in America or that I could call myself American because people like me were not written or cast in Disney Channel or Nickelodeon programs. However, when I got older, I started to see that there could be queer, people of color, and women that deal with mental health problems on the big screen. I was excited! Until I saw how poorly all of the communities I belonged to were being portrayed. These portrayals played on dated perceptions of each

community and made me feel that I could belong in America as long as I put up with these stereotypes. It is important to talk about what studios and creators are doing to diversify our screens and make sure that this is not another Hollywood trend. The US population continues to increase and diversify with multiple races and cultures; these individuals need to see (now and in the future) on social media, film, or any other media platforms that they can have accurate portrayals of themselves and feel like they belong in the States.