

Striking the Right Pose

Successful Representations of Transgender Women of Color

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Samenvatting

Mediarepresentatie – en onderzoek naar de mediarepresentatie – van transgender individuen is schaars. Deze studie gaat over twee karakters in de veelgeprezen serie *Pose*. De karakters worden aan de hand van een recent geïntroduceerd coderingsschema vergeleken. De resultaten laten zien dat de karakters van Blanca en Elektra allebei psychologische diepgang hebben, maar dat hun persoonlijkheden en ervaringen uniek zijn. Blanca wordt gekenmerkt door haar goedheid, transfobische discriminatie en worsteling voor acceptatie. Elektra wordt gekenmerkt door haar succes en vijandelijkheid richting anderen. Haar ervaringen zijn veelal gelinkt aan haar medische transitie en zijn meer intiem van toon. Door meerdere transgender karakters in een serie te integreren, hebben de schrijvers kunnen zorgen voor een meer diverse representatie. Een oversimplificatie van transgenderervaringen wordt daarmee vermeden.

Abstract*Striking the Right Pose: Successful Representations of Transgender Women of Color*

Media portrayals, and research into the portrayals, of transgender people tend to be rare. This study focuses on the highly appraised and critically acclaimed TV series *Pose*. We compare two main characters using a recently introduced quantitative coding framework. The findings show that Blanca and Elektra are similar in the portrayal of their psychological depth and resilience in the face of challenges, but contrast in personality traits and experiences. Blanca's main trait is her kindness, and she is shown experiencing transphobic discrimination and struggling to be treated better by society. In contrast, Elektra's main traits are her success and her hostility towards others. Her experiences are tied to her medical transition process and thus provide a more intimate tone. As our findings exemplify, by choosing to feature multiple minority characters side by side, show writers can avoid putting the burden of representation on one character as well as an oversimplification of minorities' experiences.

Keywords: transgender representation – television – quantitative content analysis – media psychology -psychological depth

Introduction

Media portrayals of transgender people have historically been laden with negative stereotypes (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014) or simply lacking altogether (Cavalcante, 2018). While the discrimination faced by real-life transgender people persists, their visibility and acceptance slowly increase (James et al., 2016). Similarly, some TV depictions without negative stereotypes also emerge. The show *Pose*, which follows members of the LGBTQ community in 1980s New York City, has been praised by critics and audiences alike. Transgender reviewers laud *Pose* for its diverse representation and showing transgender characters beyond their marginalized status and as friendly people in various ordinary life situations (Styles, 2019).

Although academic critiques of minority representations abound, what constitutes a positive minority representation is less clear (Vanlee et al., 2020). One approach to successful minority portrayals draws on research from representation studies and media psychology (Žerebecki et al., 2023). Research has shown that audience involvement and media enjoyment and effects depend on the portrayal of characters in audiovisual narratives, for

instance, viewers are likely to develop friendly bonds with characters who are similar to them and who have attractive personalities (for a review, see Żerebecki et al., 2021). Recently, such insights were synthesized to propose that successful minority representations address scholarly critiques of the contemporary minority portrayals, and contain tropes that have been associated with audience engagement and diversity attitude improvement (Żerebecki et al., 2023). While individual viewers might have different interpretations and reactions to such minority portrayals, it is still useful to systematically count the occurrence of these depictions, and thus, approximate the potential to promote audience engagement. Żerebecki et al. (2023) developed a quantitative codebook that measures the occurrence of minority representation strategies that they classified as successful.

In this study, we apply the framework to two characters from Season 1 of *Pose*, namely Blanca and Elektra. We have focused on them because they are the series' main protagonists, resulting in them getting the most screentime, being present in (almost) every single episode of Season 1, and having extensive storylines. Furthermore, a persistent issue in minority representation is that TV series and films often include a single character from a given minority, ultimately burdening one character to represent an entire group. This strategy oversimplifies the diversity of life experiences. By analyzing two characters, we can assess whether show writers managed to convey a rich image of the transgender community. The first character we analyze is Blanca, a transgender Latina woman. Blanca has grown up in the local ballroom culture: a community composed of houses in which found families live together and compete in the balls. These balls involve showcasing thematic outfits while posing and dancing to music. Blanca is focused on creating her own house and helping others in need. She is the adoptive daughter of the second character we analyze, Elektra, who is a Black transgender woman. The two have contrasting values: Elektra's priority is to continue her long-standing success at the balls, and she sees the members of her house as tools to achieve this. While the characters, initially, seem starkly different, we provide a detailed comparative analysis to assess their representation.

Theoretical framework

Our theoretical framework draws on Żerebecki et al.'s (2023) article that identified six successful minority representation strategies including *Attractive representation*, *Representation of psychological depth*, *Representation of minority experiences*, *Counter-stereotypical representations*, *Friendly interactions with others*, and *Recognizable representation*. We applied two

codes without modifications: *Attractive representation* captures whether the minority character has generally attractive or unattractive personality traits. We included both negative and positive aspects to see the prevalent personality traits that viewers were exposed to. *Representation of psychological depth* encompasses the portrayal of a character's inner struggles and their personal growth over time. We adapted the remaining four codes to suit the analysis of transgender characters. To make the codes relevant for our analysis, we first review the state-of-the-art literature on the representation of transgender people. Below, in separate sections for every representation strategy, we describe the adaptations along with proposed subcodes.

Transgender experiences

The first code we adjusted is the *Representation of minority experiences*. Zerebecki et al. (2023) argue that positive minority representation should reflect the lived reality of the represented group, including depictions of culturally specific situations as well as challenges that minorities face. They propose several subcodes representing different experiences, which were relevant in our study. One retained subcode captures the portrayal of *Romantic situations*. The other subcodes we retained address the role of culture and daily struggles. The first subcode is about the character's engagement with their *Cultural heritage* (in this case, Black and Latinx). Two more retained subcodes describe having trouble with social integration due to identity. One addresses *Challenges to social integration due to being transgender*, while the other addresses *Challenges to social integration due to being Black/Latinx*. These subcodes capture the unique experiences of transgender people of color, which have been previously silenced (Glover, 2016; LeMaster & Tristiano Jr, 2021; Skidmore, 2011).

Furthermore, being a victim of hate crime and transphobic discrimination is a commonly criticized stereotype in media representations of transgender people (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). However, there is a "paradox" between the need to represent real experiences that transgender individuals undergo and the danger of casting transgender people as perpetual victims (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Capuzza and Spencer (2017) acknowledge that while they critiqued the lack of representation of transphobic hate crimes in their sample, they would also have critiqued a stereotypical representation of abuse. In this project, we approach the representation of discrimination as a possible *Minority experience*, because it is important that audiences may learn about real-life struggles of transgender people.

Additionally, we incorporate several new subcodes to capture experiences that are common to transgender women. The first of these codes is the

Representation of family and friend relationships. Transgender audiences want to see more sensitive representations of their family relationships as these can serve as a source of guidance (Cavalcante, 2018), and as an opportunity to foster empathy amongst cisgender audiences (Boyd & Bereiter, 2017). Only 60% of respondents to the U.S. Transgender Survey reported that their family was supportive of their identity, while 10% experienced transphobic violence from a family member (James et al., 2016). Possibly, showing positive experiences onscreen can help audiences emulate those behaviors in real life (Żerebecki et al., 2021).

The second subcode we added is the *Representation of the character's relationship to their body*. Earlier, critiqued representations of transgender people sensationalized and objectified transgender bodies (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014; McLaren et al., 2021). However, navigating the relationship to one's physical body is an important transgender experience. McInroy and Craig's (2015) LGBTQ interviewees praised transgender characters who were portrayed as "complex individuals rather than focusing on their transgender identification" (McInroy & Craig, 2015, p. 612). McLaren et al. (2021) note that Aaron from *The Fosters* stands out for not being immediately outed as transgender: his gender identity is only revealed once the viewer has gotten to know him (McLaren et al., 2021). The key seems to be representing the way a transgender person agentively relates to their body without sensationalizing it.

We also incorporated a third subcode, *Engaging in wrong body discourse*, which concerns transgender bodies in a very specific way. In the wrong body model, the transgender person is born "trapped in the wrong body" and must overcome this (Bettcher, 2014, p. 401). This equates being transgender to medically transitioning (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Wrong body discourse positions only those who have changed their body as 'legitimate' transgender people, excluding nonbinary people and those without access to transition (Bettcher, 2014). Vanlee et al. (2020) argue that this discourse makes transgenderism comprehensible to cis-gender audiences. With this subcode, we focus on how the characters discuss their bodies as somehow wrong and in need of transitioning.

The fourth subcode we included is the *Representation of challenging gender essentialism*. By their very existence, transgender people demonstrate the performative nature of gender (Keegan, 2020). Simultaneously, however, they often assert their identities within the discrete categories of the heteronormative binary, which Glover (2016) argues may also be a form of striving for inclusion. Furthermore, while some transgender individuals undergo a full medical transition to achieve a normative gendered appearance, others

choose to have only some changes or none at all (Mocarski et al., 2019). This subcode thus focuses on moments in which characters assert their identities as women despite their physical appearance or assigned gender.

Connected to the above is our fifth and final subcode, the *Representation of challenging the gender binary*. While transgender representation is sparse, nonbinary or genderqueer representation is almost completely absent (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; McLaren et al., 2021). Nearly all media representations show transgender individuals identifying as either men or women (Mocarski et al., 2019). In fact, Vanlee et al. (2020) argue that media representations of transgender people reinforce the gender binary. Thus, with this code we address whether there are instances in which the characters verbally criticize the gender binary or identify as nonbinary themselves.

Counter-stereotypical representation

With the code *Counter-stereotypical representation*, Żerebecki et al. (2023) highlight the importance of characters who challenge negative stereotypes. Historically, minority characters were shown in a standardized, in other words stereotypical, way that stressed their incompetence and difference from ordinary people (Żerebecki et al., 2023). Such portrayal could reinforce existing negative attitudes towards real-life minority members (Żerebecki et al., 2021). Since *Pose* has been praised for its character portrayal, we developed subcodes that check for the presence—or better yet, the absence—of negative stereotypes. The first subcode addresses the *Portrayal of ridicule*. Earlier portrayals of transgender characters tended to aim for strong emotional reactions from the audience: either amusement or revulsion (Lester, 2015). Such characters are often targets of pity or laughter (Serano, 2007). Transgender audiences have lamented this type of humor in media (Mocarski et al., 2019). Finally, one late-1900s trope intended as humorous was the ‘transgender surprise,’ in which a cisgender character has a romantic involvement with a transgender character whose ‘true’ gender is later revealed (Cavalcante, 2018).

The *Portrayal of mental instability*, the second subcode we added, addresses the stereotypical portrayal of transgender characters as eccentric or mentally unwell. Transgender people have historically been portrayed as existing on the fringes of society (Cavalcante, 2018). This trope peaked with the portrayal of transgender characters who were psychopathic, such as the murderers in films like *Psycho* and *Homicidal* (Cavalcante, 2018).

Another stereotype concerns *Portrayal of bodily exposure*. In Capuzza and Spencer’s (2017) sample, six out of nine shows that featured transgender characters and aired between 2008 and 2014 discussed medical transition. In

their analysis of *Orange is the New Black* and *The Fosters*, McLaren et al. (2021) highlight numerous scenes where a transgender character's body is revealed without consent, such as in public bathrooms. The moment of revelation of the 'true' gender in the 'transgender surprise' trope mentioned above is also related to a preoccupation with transgender bodies (Cavalcante, 2018).

Interactions with others

The fifth code, *Friendly interactions with majority members*, assesses whether the character is shown as treated in a friendly or unfriendly manner by majority characters. Possibly, the majority audience can imitate these interactions in their own lives. To analyze *Pose*, which mostly features interactions within the LGBTQ community, we adjusted this code to *Friendly interactions with cisgender/White people*. Transgender people of color often experience racism and transphobia from more privileged members of the LGBTQ community, who are relatively less marginalized (Cyrus, 2017; Parmenter et al., 2021). Therefore, we try to capture the unique situations of transgender women of color within the LGBTQ community.

Recognizability

The final code from Żerebecki et al. (2023), *Representation of characters as recognizable*, concerns the possible sense of familiarity between majority audiences and minority characters. This is based on whether the character is featured in ordinary life experiences. This aspect of relatability and banality is particularly important for transgender representation because transgender people have typically been represented as too unconventional to live in normative social structures (Cavalcante, 2018). Even some transgender characters who are well fleshed-out are represented as futuristic and irrelevant to a viewer's everyday life (Gentleman, 2019). The coding instructions for this representation strategy were inductively developed based on Season 1 of *Pose*. Because Blanca is an adult woman living in New York in the 1980s, and she is engaged in parenting young people, the following list of recognizable situations was created: situations in the workplace; interacting with friends and the wider social circle; navigating family life, such as parenthood; and city situations, like traffic or living in a small apartment.

Method

We applied the modified coding framework to Season 1 of *Pose*. Detailed coding instructions are available in the appendix. The sample consisted of

eight episodes of about one hour each. Every scene where Blanca or Elektra are present or spoken about was taken as one coding unit and included in the analysis. We regard a scene as one interaction between characters taking place in one setting, following Żerebecki et al.'s (2023) definition. Blanca is featured in 138 scenes in Season 1, while Elektra is featured in 84 scenes. Because one round of coding was done for each character, the scenes in which both characters appear were coded twice, once focusing on Blanca and once on Elektra. We scored every scene according to the subcodes of each representation strategy. When the strategy was present in the scene, the scene was coded with a 1; when it was absent, it was coded with a 0. For *Attractive representation*, the score -1 was used to indicate the reverse of each trait (for instance, stupid instead of smart). We made qualitative observations of moments that did not fit into the codebook but did seem significant or related to the literature.

To ensure the reliability of our findings, we have double-coded every scene with either Blanca or Elektra from the first episode of the show (i.e., roughly 20% of all the analyzed scenes, namely 46 out of 222). Some of our codes were rare, which means that despite a high coding agreement, paradoxically low values of Cohen's kappa or Krippendorff's alpha could occur (Gwet, 2008). Thus, we decided to report percent agreement as an indicator of reliability (see Table B1). Our agreement scores ranged between 77.8% and 100%, which indicated acceptable reliability (Neuendorf, 2002). Unsurprisingly, we reached the lowest agreement for subcodes pertaining to attractive representation and recognizability. These codes are latent constructs that depend most strongly on the coder's interpretation of the scene. In general, our percent agreement levels were in line with the original reliability values established in Żerebecki et al. (2023).

Results

To contextualize the results, we first sketch each character's storyline in Season 1. At the start of the season, Blanca belongs to Elektra's house; Elektra is her adoptive mother. After her HIV diagnosis, Blanca decides to make a positive impact and starts a new house, angering Elektra. As housemates, Blanca recruits vulnerable young adults who have nowhere else to go. In contrast, Elektra's house is composed of members who are more experienced with the competitive balls. As the two houses face off in the balls, the competition between them flares, especially on Elektra's part. Outside the balls, Blanca faces various instances of transphobia, from strangers and from

Table 1. Percentage of All the Scenes with Blanca or Elektra Where Each Code Has Occurred

	Blanca (138 scenes in total)	Elektra (84 scenes in total)
Representation of minority experiences		
Friend and family relationships	6.5%	6.0%
Relationship to body	2.9%	22.6%
Challenging gender binary	0.0%	1.2%
Challenging gender essentialism	8.7%	15.5%
Wrong body discourse	0.0%	3.6%
Romantic situations	4.3%	6.0%
Challenges to social integration due to being transgender	18.8%	7.1%
Latinx / Black cultural heritage	7.2%	0.0%
Challenges to social integration due to being Latinx / Black	2.9%	2.4%
Representation of characters as recognizable		
Attractive representation		
Smart	11.6%	6.0%
Successful	10.9%	37.0%
Funny	9.4%	1.2%
Admired	9.4%	28.6%
Friendly	45.7%	19.0%
Resilient	21.0%	16.7%
Unattractive representation		
Stupid	0.0%	0.0%
Unsuccessful (struggling)	10.9%	13.1%
Serious (stern)	6.5%	0.0%
Unpopular	10.1%	8.3%
Mean	2.9%	27.4%
Defeated	7.2%	6.0%
Representation of psychological depth		
Character's struggle with an event, which shows inner life	29.7%	22.6%
Character's past	12.3%	14.3%
Growth based on past events	1.4%	9.5%
Stereotypical representation		
Portrayal of being mentally unstable	0.0%	1.2%
Portrayal of ridicule	0.0%	0.0%
Portrayal of bodily exposure	0.0%	9.5%
Representation of interactions with cisgender / White characters		
Friendly interactions	35.5%	16.7%
Unfriendly interactions	8.0%	2.4%

her family. She tries to protest discrimination to no avail, and eventually dedicates herself fully to parenting. In the meantime, Elektra, despite her lover and sponsor's wishes, undergoes a surgical genital reconstruction. Even though she is happy with the results, she lacks income without her sponsor's support and faces eviction. Her house children, who also depended on her income, reject her. She lives on the street until Blanca, putting aside their quarrels, takes her in. The season concludes with the highly competitive Snow Ball. Elektra's ex-children have formed a threatening new house, but with Elektra's expert help, Blanca and her house are victorious. Below we elaborate on each of the identified codes. Table 1 contains the frequencies on how often each code occurred within the scenes of each character.

(Un)attractive representation

Our results indicate clear differences between Blanca and Elektra, starting with the *Attractive representation* code. Blanca's most important attractive trait is her *Friendliness* towards her family and friends. This subcode encompasses being supportive and caring of others and is present in 45.7% of Blanca's scenes. Qualitative observations highlighted that Blanca's kindness also stands out in its intensity. For instance, in Episode 2 Blanca finds a homeless young man, Damon, and unquestioningly offers him a meal. In stark contrast, Elektra is portrayed as *Mean* in 27.4% of her scenes. She frequently insults others, even members of her house, and her verbal attacks are disparaging. For instance, when Blanca leaves her house, an enraged Elektra tells her that she will never be successful because she cannot pass as a woman, calling her a "beast" (Murphy et al., 2018). It is only later in the season, learning from Blanca, that Elektra has moments of being *Friendly* (19.0% of scenes) – although her instances of cruelty continue through to the final episode.

In terms of attractive traits, Elektra is most frequently shown as *Successful* (37.0% of scenes) and *Admired* (28.6% of scenes). These results are linked to her position as a celebrated ball competitor and the respected leader of a prestigious house. She is almost always judged the most glamorous competitor and has countless trophies under her belt. Elektra's success contrasts with Blanca's frequent portrayal as *Struggling* (10.9%) and *Unpopular* (10.1%), as she deals with the fallout of quitting her house and trying to found a new one. The contrast between the characters' personality traits means that *Pose* diversifies its transgender representation and ways in which audiences can relate to characters. Blanca's warmth and kindness could be likable. Despite Elektra's contemptuous behavior, she is shown with high status and power. The viewer, like Elektra's spectators at the balls, may feel

awe-struck. While morally good characters like Blanca are easily likeable, morally ambiguous characters such as Elektra also engage the audience: viewers can be fascinated by them (Schlütz, 2016).

Beyond the characters' differences, one similarity is that both Blanca and Elektra are frequently portrayed as *Resilient*, in 21.0% and 16.7% of their scenes, respectively. Blanca struggles to create her own house, but the setbacks do not discourage her. As stated, Elektra is portrayed as powerful, but she is also shown losing status and *Struggling* in 13.1% of her scenes, for instance when she becomes homeless. This plotline allows the creators to showcase her resilience. This result is important considering the critiques that have been levied against representations which cast transgender women of color as victims to violence, exclusion, or their own supposed confusion (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Both portrayals attribute agency to the characters, also casting them in a positive light to the majority audience.

Minority experiences

Blanca and Elektra go through different experiences as transgender women of color. Blanca faces many *Challenges to social integration*, mainly in relation to her gender identity (18.8% of scenes) but also in relation to being non-White (2.9% of scenes). For instance, she is removed from a gay bar by the manager, who explicitly lampoons her gender expression and race. Blanca also negatively experiences *Friend and family relationships* (6.5% of scenes), especially in Episode 5 when she briefly meets her transphobic biological family again. Another important subcode in Blanca's case is *Challenging gender essentialism* (8.7% of scenes). She reaffirms her identity when she is misgendered and discusses not being accepted as a woman.

Elektra's portrayal involves a different set of experiences typical to transgender women of color. Her most portrayed situations are tied to her *Relationship to her body* (22.6% of scenes). She often explains to others why she wants surgery, or she studies herself in the mirror. She also *Challenges gender essentialism* in 15.5% of her scenes, nearly twice as much as Blanca. This is mainly due to her conversations about wanting surgery. Closely linked to this is the fact that Elektra does at times engage in *Wrong body discourse* (albeit in only 3.6% of her scenes), in comparison to Blanca who never does. This occurs in moments when she implies that she needs surgery to become a complete woman.

One more notable difference between the characters is that while Elektra's *Cultural heritage* as a Black person is never present, Blanca's heritage as a Latina is portrayed in 7.2% of her scenes. Overall, Elektra's portrayal features more personal experiences as a transgender woman of color, especially as

related to her gender expression and body. In contrast, these themes are far less present in Blanca's portrayal. Her character's experiences reflect a more social dimension of being a transgender woman of color, addressing the discrimination she encounters and how she must navigate relationships with unaccepting family and friends. These portrayals reflect a wide range of experiences that transgender people face as described in the past research (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Cavalcante, 2018; Mocarski et al., 2019; Vanlee et al., 2020). Through Blanca and Elektra's different experiences, *Pose* stresses a diversity within the group, which has often been oversimplified in past portrayals (Billard et al., 2020).

Interactions with more privileged characters

The results from the *Interactions with more privileged characters* code tell the same story as those from *Minority experiences*; the social struggles are emphasized more in Blanca's portrayal, while Elektra's storyline is more private and tied to her struggle for agency over her body. When looking at the total amount of interactions with White or cisgender characters, Blanca interacts with more privileged characters over twice as much as Elektra does (43.5% of scenes vs. 19.1% of scenes). Most of Elektra's friendly interactions (16.7% of scenes) involve her lover and her sponsor, who treats her well until he finds out that she transitioned and then rejects her. In contrast, Blanca's interactions with more privileged characters are central to her storyline. Many of her friendly interactions (35.5% of scenes) take place with gay or bisexual cisgender men of color within the ballroom community, such as her close friend Pray Tell and her adoptive children Damon, Ricky, and Lil Papi. These characters treat Blanca with respect and affection. Interestingly, in one scene Damon initially treats Blanca as different due to her being transgender. Later, he seems to change his mind and apologizes to Blanca for his previous behavior. This is one example of how interactions between Blanca and cisgender characters model positive ways of treating transgender people without constructing an image of every interaction as perfect.

Blanca also has interactions where more privileged characters treat her disrespectfully in 8.0% of her scenes. Although they are much less frequent than the friendly interactions, qualitative observations show that these negative interactions are framed as significant. For instance, Blanca's experience with being excluded at a gay bar motivates her to protest, and she repeatedly emphasizes that she wants to protect her children from this discrimination. She is also shown being called slurs by her biological brother, and this is contrasted with the love and acceptance she experiences with her chosen family. Prejudice is thus central to Blanca's story, while it

is a background theme for Elektra. This contrast reinforces the sense of diversity in their experiences.

Psychological depth & Recognizability

Despite their differences, Blanca and Elektra are similar in the portrayal of their *Psychological depth*. Across the three subcodes, Blanca is shown with psychological depth in 34.7% of her scenes, while Elektra is shown with it in 29.8% of her scenes. It is immensely significant that both characters, despite their contrasting personalities and experiences, are shown as psychologically complex in about one third of their scenes. Furthermore, Blanca is represented as *Recognizable* in 30.4% percent of her scenes. Her recognizability is linked to her role as a mother: She is shown preparing meals, cleaning, discussing family rules, and comforting her adoptive children when they are distressed. Other instances where Blanca is recognizable feature her friendship with Pray Tell, which follows familiar patterns: they confide in each other about their careers, romantic lives, and future plans. The fact that friendship and family life could seem banal is what makes Blanca's portrayal recognizable. This is particularly important for a transgender character, considering that transgender people have previously been represented as incapable of fitting into society (Cavalcante, 2018; Lester, 2015). Seeing a transgender character experience these mundane aspects of life can make the viewer perceive them as resembling themselves, which is important for engaging with the character positively (Žerebecki et al., 2021). Therefore, Blanca's recognizability as a mother and friend positions her as a character that many viewers could connect to.

Elektra is considerably different from Blanca in terms of recognizability. She was coded as such in only three of her scenes (3.6%): when she is in a waiting room at the doctor's office, when she applies for a job in a restaurant, and when she gushes about her favorite musician. The rest of her scenes are more specific to transgender experiences; she mostly features in the spaces of the ballroom community and her sponsor's hotel room. Just as Blanca is made closer to the audience through her recognizability, this implies that Elektra's portrayal can make it harder for the audiences to connect to her.

Counter-stereotypical representation

Finally, the three stereotypes identified in the literature—mental instability, ridicule, and bodily exposure—were not present in any of Blanca's scenes. This finding is unsurprising, considering that *Pose* has received significant praise from audiences, including transgender viewers, for its sensitive and authentic portrayal (Poniewozik, 2018; Styles, 2019).

However, Elektra has two scenes where we coded her as mentally unstable: one where she shatters an entire table's worth of dishes in her rage, and another where her gossiping children call her crazy. Furthermore, Elektra's body is exposed in 9.5% of her scenes. Although she exposes herself consensually, we noted in qualitative observations that these scenes involve her lover, who is also her financial provider, or her work as a stripper. Considering the tendency for transgender people to be fetishized and reduced to their bodies (McLaren et al., 2021; Skidmore, 2011), it is worth questioning if her body is being displayed in a positive and empowering context. A similar tension was identified by Masanet et al. (2022) in their analysis of Jules from *Euphoria*, a transgender girl who is portrayed "as an object of fetishistic desire" but also "of loving value" (p. 150). Like Jules', Elektra's storyline hinges on her escaping the spaces where she is marginalized to reach those where she is loved. Ultimately, *Pose* does not exclude fetishism, but still constructs Elektra as possessing both agency and value.

Conclusions

As our findings on transgender characters exemplify, by choosing to feature multiple minority characters side by side, show writers can avoid putting the burden of representation on one character as well as an oversimplification of a minority's experience. We have elaborated on what a positive media representation of transgender women of color can look like, thus avoiding the academic tendency to focus on critical analyses. We identified multiple strategies that show Blanca and Elektra as complex, likable people. Furthermore, we have shown that the combined presence of two transgender characters nuances the portrayal of the entire group, stressing that while shared experiences occur, each person has an individual walk of life. Blanca and Elektra have vastly different experiences—which when combined in one series—offer a more detailed look into the real-life richness of experiences of transgender people. Their contrasting personality traits offer viewers different ways of appreciating them. Meanwhile, their shared psychological complexity and resilience could invite the audiences to understand transgender people more.

Finally, our study can also help other researchers apply this framework to other cases of minority representation, such as characters with a

certain racial or ethnic identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or disability. While the *(Un)attractive representation* and *Psychological depth* codes remain unchanged, the *Minority Experiences* and *Stereotypical representation* codes require extensive adaptation based on literature, and the *Recognizability* and *Interactions with more privileged characters* codes needed adjustments based on the plots of the TV series in question.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several limitations. First, none of the authors identifies as a transgender person of color. We, thus, may have missed references or nuances related to unique experiences of transgender people of color. Still, our framework approaches minority representation from the perspective of non-minority viewers who are exposed to representation strategies that may have a potential to engage them and improve their diversity attitudes. Moreover, our literature review includes articles that analyze representation using intersectional lenses bringing together the experiences of people of color and LGBTQ individuals (Glover, 2016; LeMaster & Tristiano Jr, 2021) or study the transgender (Mocarski et al., 2019) and LGBTQ audiences (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Future research may try to include coders from diverse backgrounds to ensure the inclusion of various perspectives on minority representation.

A second limitation is that we analyze only two characters. *Pose* is known for having an ensemble cast with many different transgender characters. Analyzing all of the speaking transgender characters in *Pose* together, or all of the minority characters from another series, could provide a truly complete overview of how minority groups are presented to the audience. This is one potential strength of the quantitative content analysis framework, as it could be used in future studies to perform broad analyses that compile data on many different characters.

Despite its limitations, this article has implications for the writing of minority characters in future TV shows. We conclude by recommending TV and content producers to include multiple, diverse minority characters in their TV series. Our analysis demonstrated that it is possible to write two main characters from social minorities with distinct experiences, interactions, and personality traits, but still present them as complex and fascinating individuals that may be likable to various audience members.

Appendix A

Table A1. Coding Instructions for the Analyzed Narrative Strategies

Main codes and subcodes	Detailed description
Representation of minority experience	
Friend and family relationships	The scene shows a character dealing with the impact of their being transgender on their relationships with friends or family members. This could involve anticipating or responding to a friend or family member's reaction to an aspect of their identity or transition process. The interactions could consist of a) introducing new information or behavior, b) discussing future intentions in relation to their identification, or c) explaining their feelings and identity. The interactions can be positive or negative overall, as long as the character is shown navigating these situations.
Relationship to body	The scene shows a character engaging in their personal relationship with their body. The character could be relating to their body in an a) physical way, such as using clothing, makeup, or surgery to change their appearance. The scene could also show the character relating to their body in terms of b) their thoughts and feelings, such as when they implicitly or explicitly express satisfaction or self-acceptance toward their body.
Wrong body discourse	The scene involves a character making some description of their pre-transition body, or another character's pre-transition body, as less-than or wrong. This could involve a character describing themselves or another character as having been born, or being trapped, in the wrong body. Alternatively, the character could describe a body as having been fixed or having become real through the process of physical transition.
Challenging gender binary	The scene shows a character expressing challenges to the heteronormative gender binary. This could involve a) using nonbinary pronouns, b) performing their gender as nonbinary, c) making a correction when they are misgendered, and d) being critical of a transition process.
Challenging gender essentialism	The scene shows a character expressing challenges to an essentialized understanding of gender as equivalent to biological sex. This may involve a) explicitly affirming their gender, verbally or through marked behaviors, b) openly talking about being transgender, and c) explicitly challenging gender essentialism, through conversation, political action, or social activism.
Romantic situations	The scene shows an actual interaction of the minority character with a romantic interest person. The interaction should show or suggest an intention of a) flirting, b) dating, or c) having sex with another person.

Challenges to social integration due to being transgender	The scene shows the character experiencing transphobic discrimination. This could include a) not being able or free to express themselves as transgender, b) being called transphobic slurs, c) being a target of transphobic violence, or d) not receiving equal treatment or access due to being transgender. The experience does not have to be shown directly onscreen, it could be discussed or acknowledged by a character in a conversation.
Black / Latinx cultural heritage	The scene shows a character participating in Black or Latinx cultural heritage. This could include culture from the Black or Latinx populations in the USA such as a) music, b) food, c) cultural practices, or d) the Spanish language (in the case of Latinx heritage).
Challenges to social integration due to being Black / Latinx	The scene shows the character experiencing some racist discrimination. This could include a) treatment different than the treatment of White people, b) racial profiling, c) being called racial slurs, or d) experiencing any other discrimination due to skin color.
Representation of characters as recognizable	The scene shows a character in situations common to the lives of the majority of New Yorkers (i.e., White, straight adults). These could include a) situations in the workplace, b) interacting with their friends and wider social circle, c) navigating family life, such as parenthood, or d) city situations like traffic or living in a small apartment. The situation does not have to be exactly the same as the experiences of every person but should give certain similar emotional reactions in analogical situations. It is possible that a character is made recognizable when others talk about him. The code is not applicable when the situation is strange or rare, or the behavior of the character is strongly socially undesirable.
Attractive representation / Unattractive representation*	
Smart/ stupid	The scene shows a character being smart. This could include a) being knowledgeable, b) having a good idea or c) proposing a solution to a problem. Score (-1) if the scene shows a character being or acting stupid. This could include a) behaving in a stupid way, b) behaving in an uncultured way, c) showing incompetence. It does not include the character goofing around with friends.
Successful/ unsuccessful (struggling)	The scene shows a character with some form of success. This could be a) social, b) career-related, or c) personal success. Score (-1) if the scene shows a character experiencing failure or struggles in life. These could be a) personal, social, or career failures or adverse experiences, or b) the character being mistreated. This code could be linked with being resilient and unpopular, the characters should be preoccupied with being unsuccessful for it to apply.

<p>Funny/ serious (stern)</p>	<p>The scene shows a character being funny. This could include a) telling a joke, or b) saying something intended as funny that triggers laughter or smiles at least. This code only applies when the viewer laughs with the character, not at the character. The code is not applicable if the viewer laughs at the character's incompetence, silliness, or faults.</p> <p>Score (-1) if the scene shows a character being serious, insipid, stern, having no sense of humor. This could include showing no emotions in a situation that could trigger emotions.</p>
<p>Admired/ unpopular</p>	<p>The scene shows a character being popular. This could include a) acknowledging being popular among peers, b) being treated as popular by peers through e.g., cheering, or c) being called popular or admirable by others.</p> <p>Score (-1) if the scene shows a character being unpopular. This could include a) being treated as a social outcast, b) the character showing or talking about not having friends, or c) acknowledging or implying being unpopular among peers. This code could be connected with struggles to social integrations due to being transgender or Latinx or being unsuccessful.</p>
<p>Friendly/ mean</p>	<p>The scene shows a character being friendly, as in caring. This could include a) showing concern about another person, b) asking about another person's life, or c) offering support to another person. This code could be related to friendly interactions with a cisgender person if there are any listed signs of being friendly.</p> <p>Score (-1) if the scene shows a character being mean. This could include a) mistreating other people, bullying others, b) making a mean or hurtful comment, or c) being aggressive towards someone else.</p>
<p>Resilient/ defeated</p>	<p>The scene shows a character being resilient. This could include a) showing a straight face in face of adversity/challenge, b) not dwelling on a misfortune, c) trying to solve the situation in a desirable way, or d) going with life without worrying after an adverse situation. This code could be related to challenges to social integration due to being transgender or Latinx, or being unsuccessful.</p> <p>Score (-1) if the scene shows a character being defeated. This could include a) displaying signs of huge distress after an adverse/ challenging situation, or b) worrying and dwelling about their misfortune.</p>
<p>Representation of psychological depth*</p> <p>Character's struggle with an event, which shows inner life</p>	<p>The scene shows a character with signs of inner life as a result of facing adversity. These could include a) a close-up of a pensive face, b) a shot of a character showing some distress, or c) a character thinking or talking about a situation that triggered an emotional reaction or made the character think about their life and decisions. This code could be linked to being unsuccessful but has to show signs of thinking/processing/grappling/being occupied with the distressing situation.</p>

Character's past	The scene shows a character talking about their past or a flashback of a past, which gives psychological depth to the character. These could include a) explaining or implying why the character behaves in a certain way in the present moment, b) when the character directly explains their motivation based on past events, c) a flashback or voice over explaining past or present behavior, or d) other people mentioning the character's past to inform their present behavior.
Growth based on past events	The scene shows a character exhibiting growth, that is a positive/ desirable change in behavior as a result of a situation, experience, or conversation with another character. This could include a) direct portrayal of a changed behavior, or b) character talking about a change from the past.
Stereotypical representation	
Mentally unstable	The scene shows a character exhibiting signs of mental instability. This could include a) being confused or indecisive, rather than certain, about their gender, b) being diagnosed with a mental illness, or c) without a diagnosis, exhibiting behaviors broadly interpretable as crazy, weird, or psychopathic.
Ridicule	The character's only purpose in the scene is to add a comic effect. This might manifest as a) their transgender identity and original sex being revealed as a humorous plot twist, or b) in a romantic context, them serving as a 'surprise' for an unaware cisgender person. In any case, their transgenderism must be used as a shock factor, adding a sense of scandal and humor to the scene.
Bodily exposure	The scene shows the character's body being revealed, often without consent, and hinting at their biological sex. The portrayal of their body, in terms of the shot and ambiance of the scene, might be pornographic or Orientalist.
Representation of interactions with cisgender and / or White people	
Friendly interactions	The scene shows a character experiencing at least one friendly interaction. This could include a) conversations or interactions with known friends or family if there are no signs of discomfort or distress, b) other person showing support, care, interest in the character, or c) the coded character being treated well. This could be linked to being friendly, if the character is friendly to the other person as well, or it is an interaction with a known friend.
Unfriendly interactions	The scene shows a character experiencing at least one unfriendly, mean, abusive interaction. This could include a) being discriminated, b) being bullied, or c) getting a mean comment. Importantly, this code is about how the character is treated and not how the character treats the other person. The code is not applicable if the interaction is neutral or if the other person did not want to be mean to the character; or if the character is treated in a justifiably harsh way.

* These codes are adapted from Zerebecki et al.'s (2023) framework without modification.

Appendix B

Table B1. Intercoder-reliability

Main codes and subcodes	Percent agreement
Representation of minority experiences	
Friend and family relationships	100%
Relationship to body	97.2%
Challenging gender binary	100%
Challenging gender essentialism	94.4%
Wrong body discourse	100%
Romantic situations	100%
Challenges to social integration due to being transgender	94.4%
Latinx / Black cultural heritage	100%
Challenges to social integration due to being Latinx / Black	100%
Representation of characters as recognizable	80.6%
Attractive representation	
Smart/ Stupid	77.8%
Successful/ Unsuccessful (struggling)	91.7%
Funny/ Serious (Stern)	88.9%
Admired/ Unpopular	86.1%
Friendly/ Mean	77.8%
Resilient/Defeated	77.8%
Representation of psychological depth	
Character's struggle with an event, which shows inner life	86.1%
Character's past	94.4%
Growth based on past events	97.2%
Stereotypical representation	
Portrayal of being mentally unstable	100%
Portrayal of ridicule	100%
Portrayal of bodily exposure	100%
Representation of interactions with cisgender / White characters	
Friendly interactions	94.4%
Unfriendly interactions	97.2%

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