



## Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

### WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

Men who are only or predominantly sexually, romantically, and/or emotionally attracted to other men, and boys who are attracted to other boys. This includes *all* men and boys: transgender (or “trans”), intersex, and cisgender (or “cis”). “Gay” is a sexual orientation, an embodied part of a person’s identity, no matter their relationship status or sexual/romantic experience. Note: Some non-binary people predominantly attracted to men also identify as gay.

### HERE'S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

While tremendous gains have been made in representation, gay men and boys are still rarely depicted in leading roles in TV and film, especially those who aren’t white and/or masculine. Without their own arcs and stories, mindful exploration of gay identity is often impossible, erasing the shared history (e.g., activism, HIV/AIDS epidemic) and culture among gay men, as well as the specific challenges they face (e.g., homophobia, body dysmorphia\*, increased risk of physical and sexual violence). The portrayals that do exist tend to fall into caricatures or palatable, heteronormative\* versions of gay identity for straight audiences. These depictions erase the nuances and wide-ranging experiences of the many men and boys who make up the gay community and their unique, joyous culture.



*Gay and queer men face significant discrimination **globally**, including the death penalty in some countries.*

## GAY MEN AND BOYS

### OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

- **Prizing Masculinity:** Depictions that *only* center masculine gay characters (i.e., those with traditionally masculine bodies, mannerisms, and interests) and/or devalue gay characters who are more traditionally feminine (i.e., softer or higher voice, smaller body type, emotional). This upholds femmephobia\*, a harmful bias for all audiences to internalize.
- **BIPOC Fetishization:** BIPOC men being objectified (e.g., “fiery” Latinx lover, musclebound Black man, submissive Asian), especially by white gay protagonists. It’s dehumanizing and removes BIPOC queer men’s agency.
- **Gay Best Friend:** Sidekicks to straight protagonists whose primary purpose is providing comedic relief (e.g., stereotypically sassy, overly dramatic) without their own stories or goals (e.g., having queer friends, romantic/sexual partners).
- **Off-Limits Crushes:** Gay characters who obsess over straight characters, romantically and socially. This falsely depicts gay men and boys as predatory, holds up only straight men as desirable, and overrepresents this kind of attraction. Most gay men are predominantly attracted to other queer men.
- **Queer-Coded Villains:** Campy and feminine (sometimes disabled) antagonists and villains who are implied to be gay. These harmful portrayals depict queer people as deviant, justifying violence and murder of gay and queer characters, usually killed by straight, masculine heroes.
- **Gay Panic:** Men afraid that any intimacy or physical touch with another man will make them appear gay (e.g., paranoid straight guy, closeted homophobe). Even when played for comedy (e.g., the offensive “no homo”), this paints being gay as wrong, disgusting, and to be avoided.

### THINGS WE'D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

- **Care & Community:** Gay characters in supportive community with other queer people, helping one another through challenges related to their identity (e.g., depression, familial rejection) *and* modeling positive behaviors (e.g., gay joy, seeking mental health resources).
- **Breaking Gender Norms:** Gay characters of all kinds breaking perceived “gender norms” (e.g., emotionally vulnerable, avoiding violence, enjoying “feminine” hobbies).
- **Destigmatizing HIV:** Positive portrayals of HIV+ characters living healthy and successful lives, dating, in relationships, and having sex with supportive partners. Tell stories about getting tested, discussing HIV status, using medications (e.g., ART, PrEP, PEP\*), and disparities in access to treatment for underprivileged communities.
- **Safe & Consensual Sex:** Depict healthy sex (e.g., using protection, taking HIV medications) and consent. Show these behaviors as the norm, not prudish or overly cautious, and dispel the myth that gay men welcome *all* sexual contact, which perpetuates the false belief men can’t be sexually assaulted.
- **Varied Attraction:** Attraction and romance between gay characters of all kinds (e.g., BIPOC, disabled, trans, intersex, older, HIV+, feminine). Portray different types of consensual relationships (e.g., casual, monogamous, polyamorous), sex, and desires.
- **Body Positivity:** Characters with a wide variety of body types who are celebrated and supported. Show gay characters dealing with their bodies (e.g., getting professional help for eating disorders; finding a balance of fitness, diet, and body acceptance).
- **Reframed Violence:** Without exploiting as trauma porn, address violence against gay men and boys (e.g., intimate partner violence\*, sexual assault, hate crimes), through their own POVs. Show both the difficulties (e.g., stigma against men as victims, lack of resources for gay men) *and* empowering portrayals.

\*Denotes a term in the glossary

## QUICK FACTS

- ➔ Of the 138 series regular and recurring LGBTQIA+ characters on cable TV in the 2021-22 season, 45 were gay men, including one trans man.
- ➔ 26% of gay men are disabled, but only seven gay characters were disabled in the 2020-21 TV season.
- ➔ Over 10% of all FBI-reported hate crimes in 2019 were committed against gay men.
- ➔ Gay and queer men face significant discrimination globally, including the death penalty in some countries. The U.S. Supreme Court only fully decriminalized sex between two men in 2003.
- ➔ ~1.2 million Americans are HIV+, but only two HIV+ characters appeared in the 2021-22 TV season. As of 2020, 88% of Americans acknowledged stigma around HIV (e.g., the FDA's discriminatory ban on queer men donating blood).

## ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- The Atlantic: "[Cruising In The Age Of Consent](#)"
- Avert: "[What Is An Undetectable Viral Load?](#)"
- GLAAD: "[Glossary of Terms: LGBTQ](#)"  
"[State Of HIV Stigma Study, 2020](#)"  
"[Where We Are on TV, 2021-2022](#)"
- GQ: "[Why Body Image Issues Pervade the Gay Community](#)"
- Human Rights Campaign: "[How HIV Impacts LGBTQ People](#)"
- Juvenile Justice: "[The Other Side of the Rainbow: Young, Gay, and Homeless in Metro Atlanta](#)"
- Painted Brain: "[Queer Men: A New Face to Body Dysmorphic Disorder](#)"
- Pew Research Center: "[The Global Divide on Homosexuality Persists](#)"
- Talkspace: "[The Mental Health Issues Gay Men Deal With](#)"
- Them: "[Almost Half of Gay Male Couples Experience Intimate Partner Violence, Study Says](#)"
- ThoughtCo: "[The American Gay Rights Movement](#)"
- VOX ATL: "[Media Vs. Me: A Gay Teen's Journey To Self-Actualization](#)"
- The Washington Post: "[It's easier now for gay men to adopt. But they still face lots of push-back, and weird questions.](#)"

## GLOSSARY

### ART, PrEP, and PEP:

Antiretroviral therapy (ART) medication treats and manages HIV in HIV+ people. Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) are used by HIV- people at risk of getting HIV through sex or injection drug use. When taken correctly, these medications can make HIV+ people undetectable (i.e., reduce the amount of HIV in the body to untransmittable levels) and prevent the spread of HIV.

### Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD):

A body-image disorder characterized by persistent, intrusive preoccupations with perceived flaws or defects with any part of one's body, which, in reality, might be slight or nonexistent. BDD affects 2.2% of men and 2.5% of women in the U.S.

### Femmephobia:

Discrimination or hostility toward someone who's perceived to embody or express femininity (including effeminate gay men). Femmephobia can come from both cis het and queer people, often rooted in internalized homophobia and toxic masculinity.

### Heteronormativity:

The inaccurate belief that heterosexuality is the default, natural, or normal expression of sexuality. It upholds the false gender binary and the notion that sexual and marital relationships should be between people of "opposite" sexes (i.e., a man and a woman who conform to rigid notions of gender, sexuality, and gender roles).

### Intimate Partner Violence (IPV):

Physical, verbal, psychological, economic, or sexual violence committed by a current or former partner. While most IPV portrayals feature women in straight relationships, LGBTQIA+ people experience IPV at comparable rates but are less likely to report it due to stigma, lack of resources, and perceived power balance in same-gender relationships.

Please visit our [Expanded Glossary](#) for in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms: **affirmative consent, femme, gender binary, gender expansive, HIV/AIDS, minority stress, mlm, polyamorous, queer, queerbaiting, queer coding, same-gender-loving, toxic masculinity, and undetectable.**

In-kind support and materials for this factsheet were provided by the following partner organizations. Please contact them for additional information, story guidance, and in-room consultations.



A list of the most up-to-date contact information for all of our partner organizations can be found on our website: [WriteInclusion.org/factsheets](https://WriteInclusion.org/factsheets)

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY:

