

## ***The Reality Check on Reality TV Representation***

To Casting Directors, Producers, Creatives and Innovators behind Reality Television:

As stars of, fans of and avid consumers of reality television, we write to you with hearts full of hope and a vision of a more inclusive future for the TV life unscripted.

Most of all, we pen this letter as proud members of the LGBTQ community.

Reality TV has always had the striking power to shape perceptions, ignite meaningful conversations, and inspire lasting change. Iconic shows like *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *The Voice*, *American Idol*, *The Challenge*, and *The Amazing Race* have earned high ratings and captivated audiences for years, paving the way and showcasing a diverse array of talent and personalities.

However, a glaring gap has emerged and must be earnestly addressed: the need for fair, accurate and **relevant** representation of LGBTQ people. People like us.

While we've made impressive strides in LGBTQ visibility over the decades, the fact remains that for far too long now, reality shows too often include just one LGBTQ storyline or depend on a single LGBTQ cast member to represent an entire community of individuals and experiences.

This kind of storytelling is stale, archaic and does not truly reflect the vibrant and diverse queer community that exists in our country and LGBTQ communities around the world.

And the consumer data does not lie.

According to [the most recent Gallup Poll](#), 9.3% of U.S. adults openly identify as LGBTQ, with the largest portion of the community identifying as bisexual (56%).

Among Gen Z, (ages 12-27), the most diverse generation and largest population of future consumers, this number expands exponentially, with 23% reporting as part of the LGBTQ community. A number of polls and studies conducted, including GLAAD research, indicate these populations are even higher than what has been reported.

The goal of reality TV is to entertain by exploring real experiences with people we connect with on a deeply emotional and parasocial level, to the extent that the attitudes and behaviors of audiences who watch are impacted; there is real-world connection in reality TV. So, if the industry is to achieve its mission of mirroring society, and appeal to viewers consuming new and successful shows, our reality TV casts should be much more inclusive, much more representative and much more relatable. The next generation of audiences demand this.

To be clear, the inclusion of LGBTQ people in reality TV is not just about the numbers; it's about the unique stories and perspectives they bring to the screen. Representation matters because it has the power to change hearts and minds. When viewers see LGBTQ people living authentically, forming relationships, facing challenges, and celebrating victories, it breaks down stereotypes and dispels ignorance, hate, misinformation and harm.

LGBTQ people and stories inspire, enlighten and entertain.

Inclusion of our stories on television can foster understanding and empathy, crucial in combating anti-LGBTQ attitudes, legislation and even violence today. GLAAD research confirms that people who have seen our community in media (in TV shows, movies, or ads) report feeling that they are up +50% **more** familiar with us, compared to those who have not seen us in media. Even more, media exposure drives comfortability in interacting with our community in various scenarios by up to +35%, including learning that a family member is LGBTQ, and working alongside LGBTQ people.

Reality TV offers a unique platform to introduce the world to the diverse and multifaceted queer community. Seeing us offers a real chance to showcase the resilience, creativity, and joy that define LGBTQ people. And by casting more LGBTQ people, you are not just adding diversity for diversity's sake; you are enriching your shows with the depth and richness of real, authentic lives.

For true inclusion to happen means industry-wide education and action.

The nature of reality television, especially in reality competition shows, can prove harrowing for LGBTQ people, especially for transgender and gender-nonconforming competitors. Reality competitions programming specifically is inherently gendered: categorizing, casting and grouping by assumed gender or athletic ability, appearance or gender expression. Time and time again, we see the consequences of irresponsible standards of care to those who are part of your shows and stunts.

On the casting front, the ramifications of having a singular LGBTQ person or experience reflected in a reality series or competition show can have devastating effects on that person who can be left feeling alone and isolated from the other cast, much like how anti-LGBTQ rhetoric often frames LGBTQ people: alone and without community. As such, cast members facing this kind of risk can be targeted online and in the real world after the show's run.

And we know that someone's queerness is just a small part of who they are. Casting a singular storyline or having one's queerness or transness be the central focus also places an undue burden on the cast members against others on the cast.

When it comes to producing, editing and delivering a show with impact and resonance, depending on one LGBTQ person to carry "the" LGBTQ storyline isolates other intersectional storylines and experiences. Bolstering LGBTQ inclusion on screen includes providing support for your LGBTQ cast behind the scenes, where isolation can continue, from craft services to the production trailers. As such, we call on you and your colleagues in the industry to include more diversities of experiences across your productions and teams.

In general, titular portrayals can be mitigated and a show can be majorly enhanced by having multiple and diverse members of the LGBTQ community to provide organic, genuine, queer relationships and interactions. Further, protecting contestants from isolation and being exemplified or tokenized – at all levels of productions – is needed to provide greater accountability when portraying the raw realities of LGBTQ people on screen in a reality setting.

When it comes to including transgender people in your cast and supporting authentic transgender stories in programming, it's important to be reminded of the value of casting **more than one** transgender person or story, so that again, one person's story does not dictate that of an entire community. The components of reality programming, as discussed above, can become even more complex for queer, nonbinary and transgender talent of color because of the inherently binary and gendered nature of reality TV.

Programming more responsibly and preventing occurrences of triggering gender dysphoria, isolation and the experiences of not being considered on shows is a first step in shifting the culture of toxic treatment of LGBTQ people in reality TV.

Groundbreaking reality TV featuring a multitude of LGBTQ stories have included: *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *Queer Eye*, *Selling Sunset*, *Project Runway*, and *We're Here* – all of which have dominated Emmy and other industry honors in structured, unstructured and competition categories – all of which have been massive hits in ratings, ad revenue and popularity with fans and audiences.

The reality check on reality TV is that the time is now to boldly show up for audiences now, not just show them what we think has worked in the past.

We urge you to take a bold step towards inclusivity.

We urge you to create, produce and cast without prejudice and with the present and future of our community and our industry in mind.

Let's move beyond tokenism and commit to casting LGBTQ people in numbers that truly reflect our community.

Let's give audiences the opportunity to see more love stories, more struggles, more triumphs, and more everyday moments from queer lives.

Let's use the power of reality TV to make the world a more accepting, understanding and *real* place.

Together, we can create a future where everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, feels seen, heard, and valued on the reality TV screen.

With love and hope,

**Frankie Grande**

**Peppermint**

**Sarah Kate Ellis**

*Joined alongside the undersigned LGBTQ talent, creators, artists, thought-leaders, and allies:*

***Nicole Byer, Michelle Buteau, Paulie Califiore, Alan Cumming, Monét X Change, Racquel Chevremont, Elliott Cooper, Sandra Diaz, Nicole Franzel, Ilana Glazer, Taylor Hale, Bob The Drag Queen, Britney Haynes, Derrick Levasseur, Jazz Jennings, Margaret Josephs, Amrit Kapai, Meghan King, Ts Madison, Meredith Marks, Greg Mathis Jr., Elliot Page, Phaedra Parks, Xavier Prather, Queen Priyanka, Rachel Riley, Michaela Jaé Rodriguez, Christian Siriano, Braunwyn Spinner, Chrishell Stause, Zeke Thomas, Andie Vanacore, Sheree Whitfield, and Peter Weber.***

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Sign the petition and learn more at [GLAAD.org/RealityTV](https://GLAAD.org/RealityTV)

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