Often seamlessly interwoven with each other, the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ contradictorily have connotations that distinguish them from each other. Psychologist Robert Stoller (1968), was the first to distinguish between the terms gender and sex. According to Stoller, the word ‘gender’ describes how much feminine and masculine behaviour an individual displays and the word ‘sex’ describes the biological characteristics of a person. Mikkola (2017) gives a similar definition, “Gender denotes men and women depending on social factors such as social roles, position, behaviour and identity and sex denotes the biological characteristics of someone’s body.” The social construction of gender and gender performativity are vital for dissecting gender representations and cultural patterns of behaviour.

The term ‘queer’ denotes a history that is political and academic at once. Individuals who wanted to not be constrained by labels and be fluid or inclusive in their own stated desires or those who wanted to challenge hegemonic assumptions of sexuality described themselves as queer (Doty, 1993; Jagose, 1996). The long, arduous struggle by the queer community to secure the rights they deserve and combat the discrimination they face is evident from the timeline comprising the significant milestones that guided the course of LGBTQIA+ movement in the U.S. Consequently, queer theory emerged out of the need to theoretically locate and define the community that has been recurringingly deemed to be ‘unnatural’ and excluded by virtue of its non-conformity to a majorly heterosexual, monogamous world. While a wide range of movies and sitcoms represent the queer community, the way the community is addressed and portrayed varies extensively.

From the very first scene, F.R.I.E.N.D.S. is about six straight people defining themselves against a threatening queer other and is littered with anti-gay jokes. While interviewing a male nanny, Ross aggressively asks if he’s gay. Joey complains about queer women not sleeping with him. Rachel makes out with a university friend, then pities her for thinking that might indicate romantic interest. “We’re straight,” the friends basically yell at us at every opportunity. And disturbingly, it’s the characters with gay family — Chandler and Ross — who are most disgusted by queerness.

It’s incredibly cruel for Ross to freak out about Ben playing with a Barbie in front of his queer co-parents, essentially telling them that he doesn’t accept their identity and doesn’t want his son to be like them. Even worse is Chandler’s dehumanising contempt for his queer father, which mutates into a loathing of any kind of effeminacy or gender non-conformity, in himself or anyone else. Three seasons before Chandler’s father plays a speaking role, ‘he’ is already a punchline. In other words, the show’s creators decided to construct a white, heterosexual norm and to present any divergence from that norm as threatening. Airing in 1994, F.R.I.E.N.D.S.’s queer representation is applauded while its homophobia
and transmisogyny is excused the socio-cultural backdrop of the time. But what is it about The Office that makes it a strong contradiction to Brooklyn Nine-Nine?

The Office, an American television sitcom that lasted for a span of eight years from 2005 to 2013 is a series that depicts the everyday lives of office employees in the Scranton, Pennsylvania branch of the fictional Dunder Mifflin Paper Company. Punctuated by comedic situations and embellished by amusing yet distinct characters, the show attempted to portray diversity in the work environment only as endpoints for jokes and the harsher consequences of the same are also wedded to the shows’ ideas surrounding comedy.

In the third season premiere of The Office, Oscar Martinez comes out. Oscar is a gay character incorporated into the show as a passive recipient of all homophobic jokes, as a result of which he faces discrimination in the workplace due to his sexual orientation. In season 5, Oscar is roasted by his boss Michael by simply being called “gay”, but not just this one instance but a string of situations throughout the show are aimed at ridiculing Oscar for his sexual identity. Michael functions as a caricatured image of a heteronormative boss, ignorant about workplace etiquette and the day-to-day existence of gay individuals. His constant need for validation, his immaturity and his blatant remarks on sensitive issues are components residing under the garb of his misogyny and masculinity that supposedly justify his actions. Michael’s attitudes ultimately create a hostile work environment for Oscar, yet he remains ignorant about their implications. Finally, Michael gives into stereotypes surrounding gay men in the working world. He states, “gay people can be businessmen...like antique dealers or hairdressers.” By default, Michael only imagines gay people occupying more effeminate positions in their professions; we can clearly observe here, how gender performativity and sexual identity intermingle to create stereotypes. Similar to Michael, Dwight, given his family background and personality type, acts as a representation of people with “regressive” notions about what being homosexual entails. Upon Michael disclosing that Oscar is gay, Dwight claims that Oscar cannot be gay because “he’s not wearing women’s clothes.” While Michael’s homophobia and offensiveness gets delivered to the audience in a subtle manner, Dwight’s ideas about homosexuality are more overtly ridiculous. His notions fall into the overarching claim that all gay men are effeminate and lesbian women are masculine. Later in the episode, he claims that one of his female coworkers might also be gay, “look at Phyllis...she makes no attempt to be feminine.” Dwight’s interpretations of homosexuality bear evidence to the fact that he views gender performativity as the sole determinant of sexual identity.

The aforementioned is just one example of the many instances in the show that are indicative of internalized homophobia. In one episode, Michael Scott declared that he chose to be straight just like Oscar chose to be gay implying that being queer is indubitably a choice. Along with Oscar, an effeminate character named Andy Bernard is accused of being “gay”, given his choice of colourful clothing, acapella singing and his inability to conceal his emotions. Gender performativity, sexual identity and sexual preferences in The Office are ruled out against rigid yardsticks of heteronormative behaviour; deviating from the same is a shame that calls for discrimination. The Office hence is a reinforcement of the mistaken stereotype of gay men “naturally” being effeminate. The show moreover, attempted to base their comedic claims on ignorance, buffoonery and outright discrimination in the hope that the audience perceives it as bizarrely ridiculous and pathetic enough to be laughed at. In addition to the “playful” othering and alienation of select groups, there are no instances of their respective co-workers or even they themselves standing up against the mockery inflicted on them.

Brooklyn Nine-Nine, on the other hand, is also an American sitcom depicting the everyday detective lives of the detectives in the 99th precinct of the New York City Police Department in Brooklyn. It first aired in 2013 and is an ongoing show. This show, on the other hand, is a rendition of a healthy work environment with professional yet supportive relationships, equality between both genders, and acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community as is evident from the normalization, inclusion and support given to characters like Captain Holt, his husband Kevin and Rosa Diaz who belong to this community. No instances of discrimination, alienation, or ignorance towards the issue have been noted. Instead of making homosexuality, race, ethnicity or gender the punch line, Brooklyn Nine-Nine made the ignorance surrounding it the joke. There is no questioning Holt’s authority because of his sexual orientation, no cringe-worthy “it’s okay to be gay” lesson to be learned, and no big deal made about interracial same-sex marriage. Furthermore, unlike The Office, Brooklyn Nine-Nine has well-rounded characters, each of whom has dominant personality traits and idiosyncrasies, and their sexuality is just an additional layer to their identity and
not emphatically central to their identity.

The precinct’s captain, Captain Raymond Holt, is not only a person of colour, but he also addresses his sexuality from the very first episode, revealing that he is a happily married gay man. We learn that despite his hard work and competence, Holt was held back in his career due to politics, prejudice, sexual and racial discrimination. Now that he finally has his own command, he wants to prove himself via the success of his precinct. Unlike most stereotypical representations of “effeminate” gay men, Holt is robotic, monotonous, supremely intelligent and possesses a degree of normative “masculinity”. Just like Holt, detective Rosa Diaz, is introduced as a tough, intimidating, aggressive character who in the later seasons of the show comes out as bisexual. An important point here is that never was bisexuality firmly fixated on her identity and even after she declared to be bisexual, her co-workers’ attitudes towards her didn’t change at all nor did her personality suddenly and drastically change. In the 10th episode of season five, Rosa Diaz came out as bisexual. By allowing Rosa explicitly to identify as bisexual, the show is taking steps towards legitimizing both bisexuality and the word bisexual itself. At the end of the episode, when the squad comes together to comfort Rosa after the complicated experience with her parents, Holt tells her,

Diaz, you should be very proud of yourself. I know things aren’t exactly where you wanna be right now, but I promise you they will improve... Every time someone steps up and says who they are, the world becomes a better, more interesting place, so thank you.

Lastly, metrosexual Charles Boyle, unlike Andy Bernard is not once accused of being “gay” or mocked for being effeminate and quirky. Americans’ views toward the LGBTQIA+ community have changed substantially in recent years. The legal landscape for queer people has also shifted, including a Supreme Court decision four years ago that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide. For example, 63% of Americans said in 2016 that homosexuality should be accepted by society, compared with 51% in 2006. Perhaps as a result of this growing acceptance, the number of people who identify as “Queer” in surveys is also rising. Hence, by 2013, when Brooklyn Nine-Nine’s first season aired, the number of individuals who identified themselves as “Queer” across different states in the U.S. rose sharply on account of bills and laws passed in favour of the community by legalizing same-sex marriages and the gradually dwindling stigma associated with the community. Prior to that, roughly in the early 2000s, we observe movements and protests being carried out in certain regions without really creating a profound impact on the majorly apathetic country entrenched in discrimination and unacceptance. This is perhaps why the nasty, discriminatory humour depicted in The Office given its commencement in 2006 wasn’t protested against. Additionally, the two shows contrast on the basis of the type of comedy they sought to present to the audience. While Brooklyn Nine-Nine was established on healthy comedy, acceptance of people from all strata of society and mutual respect, The Office, sought to portray ignorance and misconduct as a form of ridicule. The genre of comedy and an upsurge in queer audiences are dual factors contributing to the contrast between these two shows.

The collective nostalgia over F.R.I.E.N.D.S. is still powerful enough to coax Netflix into paying $118 million for streaming rights; consequently, it still influences cultural attitudes about queer genders and sexualities. Similarly, shows like The Office, given its popularity continue to perpetuate homophobia. Brooklyn Nine-Nine
isn’t a perfect show; it has transformed the American cop life into a goofy series of crime-solving while glossing over issues like police brutality. However, it doesn’t run the risk of bigotry and appropriation as it’s a diverse show which stands out for normalizing and accepting a community that has time and again been marginalized in reality and on the television. The careful engineering of a variety of issues including women in the workplace, sexual harassment, feminism, supportive friendships in the workplace devoid of competitiveness and consensual humour make it wholesome. While shows in the past have failed to abide by ethical and moral values in pursuit of appealing to the audience, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* has created equilibrium between the two.

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