Redefining Family On Screen: Analysing *Modern Family* And Its Representation Of Non-Traditional Families In American T V Sitcoms And Its Social Impact.

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Abstract

Modern Family[1] (2009-2020) is a television sitcom which notably challenged the idea of a 'family' on mainstream American Television. *Modern Family* engaged with a modern representation of families by setting non-traditional family narratives; intercultural marriages, same-sex parenting, age-discrepant marriages, and blended families, within the American mainstream media spotlight. This study will attempt a content analysis of the representation of non-traditional families in *Modern Family*. The purpose of this study is not only to get better understanding of the non-traditional family portrayals, but also to analyse if this reformulation in any way reshapes larger societal perceptions of inclusivity in mainstream popular American Culture.

Previous studies such as Staricek's *Textual Analysis of Gender in Modern Family* (Staricek, 2011), have analysed the show's depiction of same-sex parenting, gender roles, and generational gaps. These scholars largely acknowledge that the *Modern Family* series balances the narrative of family between questioning and reinforcing conventional ideas, by using humour as a tool. However, scholars differ on whether to consider *Modern Family* as a truly progressive show, or if it reinforces traditions by domesticating differences.

Drawing on queer theory and cultivation theoretical frameworks, this article will try to build upon earlier works in this field, to examine how the series portrays non-traditional families, how it made such families visible on prime-time television, and how this mainstream visibility opened a cultural space for broader acceptance of same-sex parenting, intercultural marriages, and generational gaps. By doing so, this study will try to examine if *Modern Family* culturally modernised the family structures, and simultaneously helps in normalising "modern families", and whether this contributes in any significant

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[1] Modern Family is an American sitcom created by Christopher Lloyd and Steven Levitan, which aired on ABC from 2009 to 2020. The sitcom follows the lives of three interconnected families, using a mockumentary style format.

way to society's cognitive shift in making traditional families central and making them familiar to a broader audience through humour and relatability.

Keywords: *Modern Family*; Non- traditional families; American Sitcoms; T V Shows; LGBTQ+ representation; Blended families; Migration; Family diversity; Gender Roles; Generational Gap; Normalisation; Social impact.

Introduction

The idea of family, as a social institution, is a foundational component of human life. According to Sarah Hoiland, family is a social group formed by blood relations, marriage, or adoption, creating emotional, economic, and social bonds among its members (Hoiland,2016). It serves as the primary site of socialisation, shaping individual identity and values through care, discipline, and responsibility. The changes in the family structures have extensive implications because of this central role. Historically, the idea of a heteronormative family model of two heterosexual parents and biological children in one household has anchored moral and cultural order, reinforced by religion, law, and media (Betty E Cogswell 391-392). This image appeared in books, advertisements and early television shows as the perfect and stable unit. Popular media representations on television like, *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963) portrayed the nuclear family structures as harmonious, while alternative family structures were largely ignored. These kinds of representations contributed so much to the stereotype that deviations from the traditional family structure were seen to be abnormal or dysfunctional.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the traditional nuclear family idea has evolved over time. Feminist and LGBTQ+ movements challenged heteronormativity, and broadened family definitions to include same-sex parents, blended families, single-parent households, and chosen family. Migration fostered intercultural marriages and challenged traditional assumptions about cultural homogeneity (Trask 20-21). More women's entry to workforce and seeking education altered traditional gender dynamics within families. Divorces and remarriages have become more acceptable, resulting in blended families in which children might have step parents or step siblings. These dynamics produced diverse forms of families across cultures and social classes, and prioritised emotional bonds over biological ties.

As real-life family structures evolved, popular culture started to reflect these changes. According to cultivation theory, long-term exposure to television content shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality and influences what they consider as normal or acceptable (George Gerbner et al. 23). While early sitcoms stuck to the traditional nuclear family model, newer ones started to explore diversity. Shows like *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) updated the family dynamics with a black family, but still kept it straight and heteronormative. Even in the 1990s, the sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004) had a lesbian couple Carol and Susan raising Ross's baby, but they were side characters for jokes, not the main family. *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) gave us Will, the first gay lead on prime-time TV, but he was single, childless, and funny for being 'gay'.

Shows like *Modern Family* did not just mirror the changes, but perhaps also aspired to shaping them. It focuses on the lives of three related but autonomous nuclear families living in Los Angeles; a same- sex couple raising an adopted Asian child, a blended intercultural family which was formed through remarriage, and a heterosexual nuclear family which challenges traditional gender roles. In *Modern Family*, non- traditional families are not depicted as side characters or comedic relief. Instead, they are the focus of the show's storyline. Each family is given equal screen- time, space and importance. This structural choice shows a change in how family sitcoms conceptualise normality. The show attempts to represent the change in the idea of families on mainstream television. Through its mockumentary style and humour, the show depicts different relationships and experiences, making non-traditional family structures familiar and relatable worldwide. The mockumentary format lets characters address the camera directly, expressing thoughts and emotions with intimacy and authenticity to foster viewer

empathy. By breaking the fourth wall, it humanises characters and reveals their internal struggles. Humour also makes sensitive topics like same-sex parenting, adoption, LGBTQ+ relationships, intercultural marriage, and gender roles more accessible, reducing discomfort and easing engagement with unfamiliar dynamics (Tison Pugh 161-162).

Traditional families on TV have a mother, father, and their own children, all matching in race and culture. Wiscombe notes that the traditional nuclear family remained the most frequent configuration on American television even in the 2000s (Wiscombe 65). LGBTQ+ characters were often sidekicks or comedic relief. Alex Assaf's thesis suggests early LGBTQ+ representation relied on 'meta-disparagement humour', keeping gay characters visible but not integrated into family life (Assaf 8–10). This marginalised representation of LGBTQ+ people and their lives reinforced the traditional family structure. Wiscombe identifies the appearance of LGBTQ+ families as a 'new family configuration' after 2004; earlier studies did not even consider them a category (Wiscombe 67). Gay men were stereotyped as emotionally exaggerated; parenting and domestic life were rarely linked to them, assuming LGBTQ+ relationships were unsuitable for raising children or forming a stable and functional family. According to Coffin, the narrative choice, the show employs to represent Mitch and Cam's family directly challenges the stereotype that gay couples are unfit to raise children (Coffin 36).

Queer Parenting Beyond Stereotypes

Modern Family shows that same-sex parents can build strong families by focusing on Mitch, Cam, and their adopted daughter Lily as a real family unit. This challenges old sitcoms where gay characters were just jokes on the side. Queer theory helps to explain how the show reclaims the idea of family from stereotypes about biological ties. Mitch and Cam handle adoption problems, big relationship steps, and daily parenting with real emotions that go beyond gay stereotypes. Staricek notes that the show split into a "mom-like" figure Cam and "dad-like" figure Mitch to fit familiar roles. This makes queer families easier for mainstream viewers to accept. Studies by Myers show this reduces biases, especially among young people. Unlike *Will & Grace* with its lonely gay lead or *Friends* with its awkward jokes on the lesbian couple, Mitch and Cam are main characters. Their story across 250 episodes helps viewers to get used to them. According to Gerbner et al. TV shapes what we see as normal.

Modern Family negotiates gayness by depicting Mitch and Cam's relationship milestones within heterosexual norms, making same-sex relationships familiar but often erasing their queer distinctiveness. In "Suddenly, Last Summer" (Season 5 Episode 1), the show places Mitch and Cam's engagement inside a familiar convention, so a gay wedding appears as the obvious next step in a long-term relationship, rather than controversial. The episode opens on 26 June 2013, the day gay marriage became legal in America, connecting their narrative to legal history. Both individually decide to propose with nervousness and excitement, resembling traditional heterosexual scenes. This removes strangeness from gay marriage but absorbs it into a heteronormative template. Sometimes, in the show, the gayness is exaggerated for humour, especially through Cam's expressive and emotional personality. When the storyline needed emotional depth or seriousness, it presents Mitch and Cam seem just like any heterosexual couple. When the show avoids stereotypes, it absorbs their gayness into straight norms. For example, the engagement scene follows the exact structure of a heterosexual couple's engagement. This makes the homosexual couple acceptable for audience, but might dilute the radical parts of queer life. While the show's episodes celebrate gay marriage, the normalisation can make queer identities seem less 'queer'. The shows attempt to be progressive and provide comfort and familiarity leaves the audience wonder if true queerness survives in the mainstream. However, according to Telios' surveys, watching the show links to support for gay marriage through emotional connections with characters.

In "The Wedding Part 1 and Part 2" (Season 5 Episodes 23,24), Mitch and Cam's wedding is the emotional focus, using familiar chaos, rituals, and joy to normalise same-sex marriage. It feels like any family event. Jay's emotional growth is particularly important in these episodes as he was once

uncomfortable with Mitchell's sexuality. In one of the early episodes, it is shown that Jay announces himself before entering Mitch and Cam's house to avoid seeing any romantic intimacy between them ('Pilot' Season 1 Episode 1). Jay evolves from unease to securing the wedding venue and walking Mitch down the aisle, symbolising generational acceptance. The episodes reshape traditions to include LGBTQ+ relationships, emphasising love over biases. Yet, like the engagement, the wedding follows heteronormativity: grooms in a borrowed setup, without alternative ceremonies or marriage critique. While the gay wedding celebrates inclusivity and progressiveness, they also emphasise the paradox that this representation can normalise LGBTQ+ identities so much that their queerness can become invisible and can fall into the template of heteronormativity. According to Pugh, *Modern Family*'s adaptations of sitcom narrativity allow it to advance its progressive ambitions, while the program also plays with the humour of gay stereotypes ultimately to demolish binary assumptions of queer political identity (Tison Pugh). However, the wedding resolves conflicts, strengthens family bonds and reinforces that love and commitment define family.

Modern Family depicts Mitch and Cam raising Lily as a valid family model that challenges traditional ideas of blood relation, heteronormativity and gender roles in parenting. The portrayal also exposes limits like institutional tokenism. In "The Future Dunphys" (Season 4 Episode 19), Mitch and Cam take Lily to a Vietnamese restaurant to teach her cultural background. Lily says she is not Vietnamese, but gay, identifying with her parents over race, as her classmate claims Italian identity from his parents. They explain that even though they come from different places, they are still a family because families are created through love and care rather than blood relation. This challenges the idea that a 'normal' family must share race, sexuality, and biology, presenting a chosen family. In 'Unplugged' (Season 2 Episode 5), while Mitch and Cam are seeking elite pre-school admission for Lily, the receptionist says these schools love diversity and their same-sex couple with an adopted minority baby will stand out. But an interracial lesbian couple, one disabled partner, raising an African child outranks them. This exposes DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) tokenism: diversity becomes competitive rather than dismantling hierarchy. Mitch and Cam benefit from inclusivity but compete over marginality.

Cultivation theory explains the social impact of the show. Seeing queer family life over and over makes it feel familiar for the audience. This changes stereotypes through lots of TV time. Pugh suggests that jokes about stereotypes actually help break assumptions and build acceptance.

Diversity within domesticity

Old American sitcoms showed parents close in age as stable couples, with no ethnic mixing. Step-families were rare and full of clashes. For instance, the show *Step by Step* (1991–1998) had a blended family, and it start with a messy barbecue party where the step-siblings fought and insulted, always pushing the idea that only blood ties make a real family.

Modern Family flips this with Jay Pritchett and Gloria Delgado's diverse setup. Older rich American Jay weds younger Colombian immigrant Gloria, mixing- race, age, culture, and step-relations in ways old shows never did. The step-father-step-son bond in this family grows strong despite early awkwardness. Scholars like Stoiljkovic note how this challenges uniform family norms, showing effort builds ties beyond biology. Trask sees it as a sign of global mixing, where immigrant roots enrich home life instead of causing splits.

The family embraces multi-ethnic life openly. Gloria brings Colombian food, music, and celebrations like Christmas fireworks. Jay joins in awkwardly at first, learning Spanish phrases and salsa dancing, showing respect for her culture. Manny mixes American school life with his Colombian pride, like wearing a poncho (a Colombian traditional attire) on the first day of school. Joe hears both English and Spanish spoken in his home daily. This proves different backgrounds strengthen bonds, not weaken

them. Jay's changes show everyday Americans can welcome immigrant ways through love. Gloria keeps her identity without pressure to blend in fully. Kids gain fuller lives as bilingual and bicultural, challenging old uniform family dynamics. However, jokes about Gloria's accent or passion risk 'fiery Latina' stereotypes, but humour turns them into family laughs that pull everyone together.

Shifting gender roles

Phil and Claire Dunphy look like a classic nuclear family in *Modern Family*: straight married parents with three biological kids under one roof. But the show flips gender roles to challenge old ideas. Claire acts strong, practical, and bossy, like the traditional "dad" figure. Phil comes off dreamy, silly, and kid-like, more like the "nurturing mum." This setup shows even "normal" families can have flexible roles based on personality, not strict gender rules (Borer and Alexander 14-16). Borer and Alexander note how this pushes for equal parenting with shared chores, unlike older shows like *Father Knows Best* where dads ruled wisely and moms stayed soft at home. Vukovic points out some old power stays, with stronger male figures like Jay Pritchett still on top, but the Dunphys question "tough guy" rules and "weak woman" limits (Vukovic 28-32). The show exaggerates their traits for laughs, yet makes role swaps feel normal. Wood argues media often locks in these rigid ideas, but here Phil's playfulness and Claire's toughness earn respect and make audiences rethink masculinity and femininity (Wood 235). Even in a basic nuclear shape, they prove families thrive when roles bend to personal strengths. This helps viewers see flexible parenting as the new standard.

Modern Family's cultivation of inclusivity

Modern Family transformed television's portrayal of family by centring non-traditional structures that older sitcoms ignored. Unlike the uniform, nuclear ideals of earlier sitcoms, the series showcased Mitch and Cam's same-sex parenting with adopted Lily, Jay and Gloria's interracial age-gap marriage with stepson Manny and son Joe, and Phil and Claire's nuclear home with reversed gender roles. Through mockumentary humour, everyday struggles, and character growth, these families became relatable and endearing to millions.

Cultivation theory explains the show's broad social impact. Morgan et al. emphasise television's cumulative effect: repeated exposure molds perceptions of reality. Across nearly 250 prime-time episodes, viewers witnessed non-traditional families handling parenting, weddings, and conflicts just like anyone else. Mitch and Cam's stability normalised gay domesticity; Jay and Gloria's passion eased interracial acceptance; Phil's softness and Claire's strength showed flexible roles work. Telios's thesis supports this: parasocial contact with characters fosters pro-gay attitudes, especially among casual viewers. Continuous visibility reduced discomfort, shifting society from wary tolerance to comfortable familiarity.

Queer theory reveals deeper representational tensions within this progress. The show contested heteronormativity by making queer lives visible. Mitch and Cam's proposals and wedding followed familiar scripts, domesticating difference into mainstream acceptance. Yet it exposed limits such as DEI tokenism, while stereotypes like Gloria's 'fiery Latina' risked commodification. Jay's growth with Manny broke 'evil stepdad' tropes through earned bonds, but cultural jokes sometimes reinforced binaries rather than dismantling them. Queer visibility advanced inclusion but often sacrificed radical edge for palatability.

Together, cultivation theory proves *Modern Family*'s tangible influence while queer theory tempers optimism with nuance. Cultivation shows how globally syndicated episodes primed inclusivity through sheer repetition. Queer analysis reveals selective progress, favouring affluent, photogenic stories over

messier realities like disability or systemic inequality. The show's commercial success where others failed, making difference central, not marginal, demonstrates mainstream television's power to reshape kinship norms. *Modern Family* proved family emerges from chosen bonds of love and effort, not rigid biology or roles. By humanising variance through laughter, it fostered lasting inclusivity, showing popular culture can drive social evolution when it dares to centre the diverse as normal.

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