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Is Diverse Television Really Diverse?: An Examination of **shondaland**

Julia Gold, Angelina Hammond, Nick Newsome



Introduction

Diversity and intersectionality are both important concepts relevant to discussions of identity. The former is the practice or quality of including people of all identities in a given setting. The latter centers around the interconnectedness of many identities and how this relates to systems of oppression, discrimination, and privilege. These concepts are particularly important in visual media such as television where representations of diversity and intersectionality can influence the societal perceptions of viewers by means of cultivation and social-cognitive theory. The aforementioned theories affect viewers by leading them to believe the world as depicted in the media is analogous to the real world and by providing an understanding of experiences a viewer may not have personally had, respectively, regardless of accuracy in both cases (Dillon and Jones 2019). These theories offer strong evidence for why it is important to have committed, truthful, and developed representations of people of all identities in television.



Why Shondaland?

Shondaland is a successful production company known for creating shows such as *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *Bridgerton*. We selected the company for our investigation of representations of diversity and intersectionality in television to see if a company that is regarded as progressive amongst its contemporaries is still susceptible to a pattern of minoritized-identity piling and other factors that diminish diversity.



Supplemental Materials

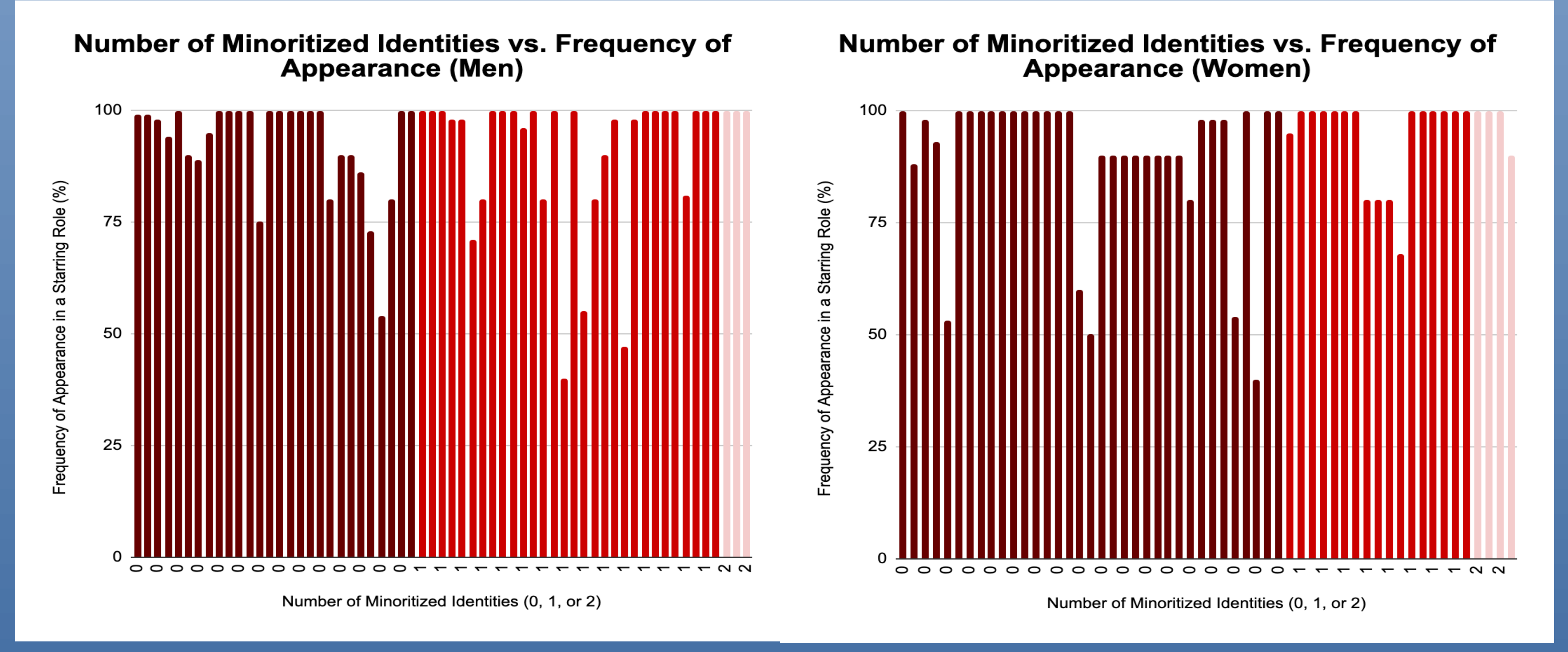
Glenn, C. L., & Spieldenner, A. R. (2013). An intersectional analysis of television narratives of African American women with African American men on "the down low". *Sexuality and Culture*, 17(3), 401+.

Meyer, M. E. (2010). Representing Bisexuality on Television: The Case for Intersectional Hybrids. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 10(4), 366–387.

Meyer, M. (2015). The "Other" Woman in Contemporary Television Drama: Analyzing Intersectional Representation on *Bones*. *Sexuality & Culture*, 19(4), 900–915.

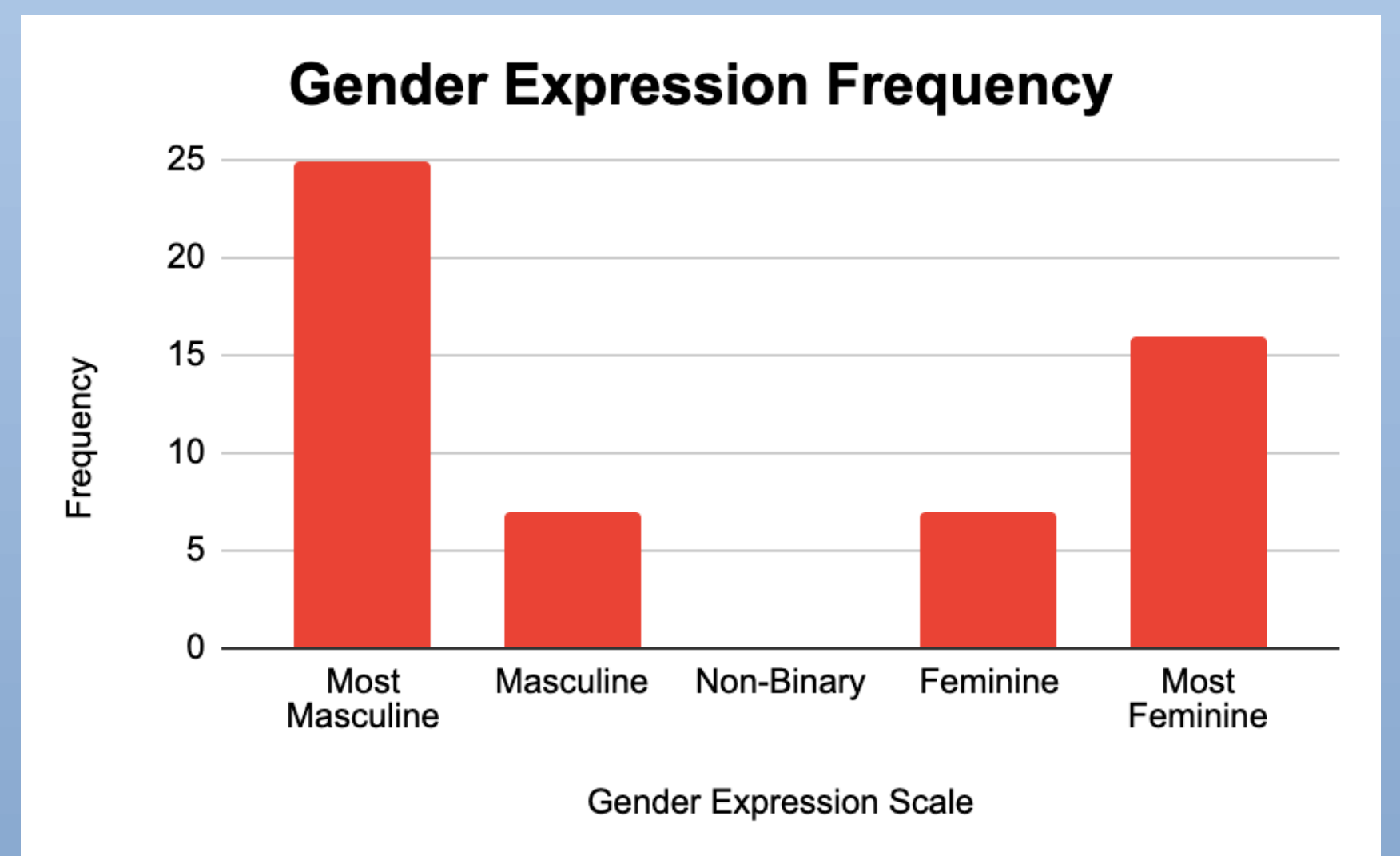
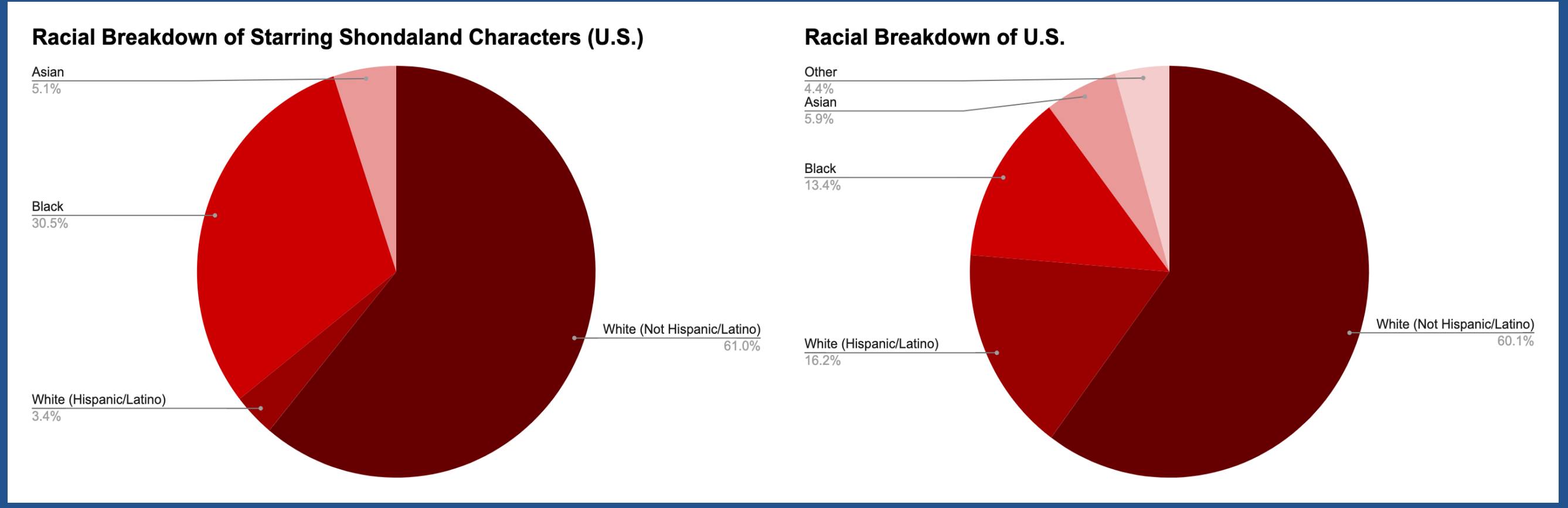
Identity Piling

Presently, there is a prevailing trend of minoritized-identity piling in network television. This means that characters with one minoritized identity tend to have many minoritized identities, thus constituting a piling pattern. This is evident in many television series such as FOX's long-running show *Bones* in which the character Angela Montenegro exhibits multiple minoritized identities including being Asian, a woman, and queer (Meyer 2015). This same pattern of minoritized-identity piling can be seen elsewhere in television through the ubiquity of the non-white queer female character or the sexually-ambiguous African American male character (Meyer 2010; Glenn 2013). This pattern of identity piling provides diversity and inclusion in a checking-off-boxes sense while minimizing the true diversity and inclusion of a television series cast. Identity piling hinders actors of minoritized identities from receiving work by limiting the number of roles available to them and forgoes the large profits that truly diverse media generates (Sperling 2021).



Media Analysis

We collected data that represented not only how much diversity is present in Shondaland programs but also information such as how "risky" Shondaland was willing to be and public reception of the programs. We compiled this data in an aggregate spreadsheet which contained an individual set of spreadsheets for each Shondaland series. Our focus surrounded the main characters of each show, their attributes, and the attributes of the actors who portray(ed) them. We used online resources to collect this data as well as our own viewership of episodes and clips from the various series. In watching episodes and clips of each program, we were also able to compile qualitative findings and understand the nuances of characters and storylines.



Conclusions

In our examination of Shondaland, we found that, while instances of minoritized-identity piling still exist, overall, the production company exhibits far less identity piling than other comparable mainstream media. Further, instances of identity piling decreased over time with Shondaland's more recent series containing greater diversity and more nuanced representations of intersectional identities.

We recognized a similar trend in Shondaland's willingness to explicitly discuss race. Sandra Oh, an original *Grey's Anatomy* cast member, has said that early in the show's programming, the creators intentionally shied away from exploring race. In more recent shows such as *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, however, explorations of race often took center stage. In *How to Get Away with Murder*, for instance, a multi-season long arc examined racial disparities in the U.S. justice system. It is important to note that this trend is not completely linear and that there have been contradictions in the times when Shondaland would and would not consider race. However, the general trajectory remains.

In terms of expressions of gender, Shondaland operates on a binary. Shondaland also does not include any non-binary, transgender, gender-ambiguous, or other gender non-conforming identities on screen. Additionally, the vast majority of characters present as heterosexual.

We did not find strong evidence that the number of minoritized identities a character has affects the frequency of their appearance. Furthermore, most characters did not have more than one minoritized identity.

The representation of intersectional identities is crucial in acknowledging the diverse audiences who watch programming such as Shondaland's. Moreover, in our ever-fraught political climate, it is necessary to shine a spotlight on diverse stories in order to humanize people who are often viewed as political pawns and provide them with the nuances and complexities that political caricatures lack. While Shondaland still has room for improvement on many fronts, it serves as a prime example of what a more representative production company can resemble.