Title

'I could see myself doing something like that': US women's engagement with characters who experience abortion, adoption and surrogacy on Little Fires Everywhere

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"I could see myself doing something like that": U.S. women's engagement with characters who experience abortion, adoption, and surrogacy on *Little Fires Everywhere*

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 Abstract

Building on existing scholarship examining how audiences interpret reproductive experiences on film and television, we investigate how viewers make meaning of representations of motherhood, abortion, adoption, and surrogacy on the Hulu limited series *Little Fires Everywhere*. We recruited twenty-one participants to watch the series and conducted three virtual focus groups of seven women each. Based on the racial identities of the main characters of the series, we segmented these groups by race: one group each of white women, Black women, and Chinese American women. Focus groups were facilitated by moderators who matched the racial and ethnic backgrounds of each group. We asked participants about their overall reactions to the series, impressions of various characters, and each reproductive health plotline. Participants expressed both tender and critical reactions to characters who endured motherhood, surrogacy, and adoption, yet most participants were overtly critical of Lexie, the character who obtained an abortion. We argue that this is likely because the character of Lexie is written as largely unsympathetic, leaving audiences with little opportunity to form a parasocial relationship with her. We discuss the implications this has for cultural conversations and understandings of abortion more broadly.

Keywords: abortion, adoption, surrogacy, television studies, audience studies

Introduction

A giant mansion is engulfed in flames, and though the fire department has just arrived, there's no hope of saving the quickly collapsing building. A short, white, blonde mother, her skin tinged with ash, watches them try to contain the conflagration, with tears in her eyes. So begins Hulu's acclaimed series *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020), based on the novel of the same name by Celeste Ng (published 2017), starring Kerry Washington and Reese Witherspoon as mothers whose lives become intertwined during the fall of 1997. Their relationship begins in the first episode, when Elena (Witherspoon) calls the police to report seeing two people sleeping in an old parked car that she did not recognize. This interaction with law enforcement is Mia's (Washington) and her 15-year-old daughter, Pearl's (Lexi Underwood), welcome to Shaker Heights, a suburban Ohio neighbourhood that advertises itself as a "post-racial" utopia, though racialized and classist resentments teem under the surface.

The limited series explores themes of race, class, and motherhood, yet one particular issue underscores them all: reproduction. In its eight episodes, the series includes plotlines about unintended pregnancy, infertility, miscarriage, abortion, adoption, and surrogacy (See Table 1). Scholarship has focused primarily on a content analyses of this series, contending with its depictions of "politics of female rage" (García, Gámez Fuentes, and Nicolau 2022), how it grapples with a particularly American conceptualization of race and motherhood (Williams 2022), and how it builds on Hollywood's preference for feminist politics divorced from feminist political struggle (Goldstein and Murugan 2022). Notably little scholarship has focused on the portrayals of reproductive experiences throughout this series, and utilised audience studies methodologies to interrogate how viewers make meaning of these portrayals. This is especially important given the limited scholarship about the relationship between onscreen representations

and their impact on audience attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, particularly related to contested political issues such as abortion. That is, to understand if representations of reproductive experiences impact audiences, we must ask them. This study aims to fill that gap through in-depth focus group discussions with viewers of *Little Fires Everywhere*, focusing on understanding viewers' responses to these characters based on their reproductive experiences.

Reception studies and audience studies scholarship has long contended with issues of conceptualising and measuring the dynamic relationship between televisual content onscreen and audience responses offscreen. Understanding the relationship between televisual representations of reproductive experiences and audience interpretations of these representations may be particularly relevant given the current crisis of abortion access. Over the last decade, portrayals of abortion on U.S. television have increased (Herold and Sisson 2020), yet this cultural shift in media representation of abortion has not resulted in political progress. On the contrary, in June 2022, the United States Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization,* decision withdrew the legal right to abortion, endowing states with the power to criminalise the procedure. We argue that one way of making sense of increased representation and increased regulation is by investigating how audiences interpret these representations, especially in relationship to other televisual representations of reproductive experiences. We selected *Little Fires Everywhere* precisely because it includes representations of so many reproductive health experiences, providing an opportunity to hear how viewers respond to these portrayals in relationship to one another.

Motherhood and Reproductive Health in U.S. Entertainment Media

Though motherhood and reproductive health both have long histories of being depicted on television, the scholarship studying these portrayals is uneven, with much more published

work analysing motherhood onscreen than abortion, surrogacy, and adoption representations. Scholarship on televisual portrayals of motherhood find that "images, representations and constructions of mothers have shaped, and continue to shape, the way we imagine the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering" (Heffernan and Wilgus 2018). These representations both idealise and critique conservative ideals of a selfless mother, understood innately or explicitly as young, white, wealthy, and thin. Feasey claims that "even though both fictional and more factual representations of motherhood on the small screen continue to break through the mask of 'good' motherhood…these genres continue to do so while simultaneously upholding this romanticised maternal ideal" (2012, 11). While a history of televisual representations of mothers is beyond the scope of this study, our participants' interpretations of the characters on *Little Fires Everywhere* are undoubtedly in conversation with these cultural imaginings of motherhood.

Though less frequently portrayed on television, central to representations of surrogacy are societal concerns about class and race "purity," particularly in depictions of gestational surrogates who differ in race or class from the people for whom they are carrying pregnancies (Le Vay 2019). As with more widespread televisual depictions of motherhood, surrogacy portrayals often centre the stories of white, affluent (infertile) women while rendering invisible or denigrating the experience of the gestational carrier, often a woman of colour (Le Vay 2019). In her study of focus group responses to portrayals of surrogacy, Le Vay found that participants notice this racial subtext: "a specific type of user of reproductive technologies was identified – white, coupled, heterosexual, and middle class" (2019, 215). Even as new genres emerge, such as the "surrogacy thriller" (Connell 2022), these archetypes persist and underscore the immense cultural weight of conventional ideals of family formation. Given these patterns, it is notable that

Little Fires Everywhere presents a unique depiction of surrogacy in the visibility and depth of focus on Mia, the gestational surrogate, instead of on the couple struggling to conceive.

Depictions of adoption are similarly plagued with misrepresentations that diverge from the reality of birth parents and adoptees while glorifying adoptive families. The plethora of adoption depictions in popular culture far exceed the practice of adoption in real life, and these portrayals often sanitise adoption as a "wholly benevolent institution" (Satz 2021). Common adoption tropes include children separated at birth and adopted into different families, a "loner orphan" with extraordinary gifts, and the troubled adoptee on an existential quest pursuing their "real" families (Birnbaum 2021). Notably absent from these categories is the birth mother, a figure that is often invisible in portrayals of adoption. Huh writes about her experience watching *Little Fires Everywhere*, highlighting the uniqueness of centering women of colour as birth parents and finding echoes of her struggles both as an adoptee and transracial adoptive parent (Huh 2021). We build on this scholarship by attending to the emotions *Little Fires Everywhere* evokes among viewers in relation to Mia and Bebe (Lu Huang).

Despite being a common medical procedure in the United States (Jones, Kirstein, and Philbin 2022), television often depicts abortion in inaccurate ways: exaggerating medical risk, (Sisson and Rowland 2017), misrepresenting patient demographics (Herold and Sisson 2020), and depicting unrealistically few barriers to access (Sisson and Kimport 2017). However, there are examples of abortion stories on television that are accurate, nuanced, and humanising (Engle & Freeman 2022) and some scholarship finds that these portrayals increase audiences' knowledge about abortion (Sisson et al. 2021). We contend that *Little Fires Everywhere* offers a "representative" portrayal of televisual abortion depictions in that Lexie, the character who obtains an abortion, is similar, demographically, to the majority of characters who obtain

abortions on television; that is, she is younger, whiter, and wealthier than abortion patients in real life. As such, our focus group participants' interpretations of Lexie's abortion, taken in the context of their reactions to other characters on this series, provide insights into if and how a character's abortion-seeking impacts impacts an audience's relationship with that character.

While prior scholarship has largely examined portrayals of categories of reproductive experiences – e.g., characters who have abortions, characters who are mothers – we argue for studies that examine these issues jointly as a more accurate, holistic representation of people's experiences. That is, audiences are not only mothers or not only people who have had abortions, for example, but often both, and bring these experiences to bear in their understandings of plotlines about reproduction and motherhood. Our study is an attempt to integrate audience understandings of characters across the spectrum of parenting and pregnancy experiences. Furthermore, because issues of race and representation emerge repeatedly in analyses of televisual representations of motherhood, surrogacy, adoption, and abortion, we explore audience interpretations of *Little Fires Everywhere* through the lens of race.

Television Audience Reception Studies

Reception is the process through which "audiences differentially read and make sense of messages which have been transmitted, and act on those meanings, within the context of the rest of their situation and experience" (Morley 1980, 11). That is, audiences make sense of television content in the context in which they watch television, both literally (e.g., in their living room or bedroom, on their phone or on a large screen) and "situationally" (e.g., in their political and context, through the lenses of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc). Building on Morley's definition and the decades of audience reception research that followed, Schrøeder articulates a digital-age understanding of audiences as "the people who, in their capacity as social actors, are attending

to, negotiating the meaning of, and sometime participating in the multimodal processes initiated or carried out by institutional media" (2019, 160).

Narrowing in on female audiences, others (e.g., Press 1991 and D'Acci 1994) articulate the contours of "feminist" television and how women make sense of the characters, plotlines, and problems depicted in the context of their own lives. Of particular relevance to our analysis is Press and Cole's book *Speaking of Abortion: Television and Authority in the Lives of Women* (1999) in which they examine how entertainment media representations of abortion influence abortion discourse among non-activist women, differentiated by class and abortion ideology. Their participants' discussions served as an entry points for conversations about the role of medicine, human rights, and government in abortion decision-making; Press and Cole remark that "even though the groups…brought very disparate readings to the classed subtext of these abortion stories, they all responded to television's implicit framing of the issue as primarily concerned with an individualistically based and economically driven version of choice" (1999, 131). Press and Cole focus explicitly on class and abortion views as the main differences between their focus groups, as the majority of their 34 groups were composed of white women (87, 1999). We build on Press and Cole's pioneering work by centering issues of abortion and race within audience studies, integrating components of Moore's "racialized media reception" theory in which "cultural referents often divaricate along racial and other axes of identity" (2021, 61). That is, we hope to better understand if and how our audience members' racialized frames of reference impact how they interpret the various reproductive health storylines on *Little Fires Everywhere*.

Scholarship on abortion depictions since their book's publication has focused on understanding the patterns of inaccuracies in abortion depictions (e.g., Herold and Sisson 2020,

Sisson and Kimport 2017), tracing themes in abortion depictions over time (e.g., Herold and Sisson 2023, Engle and Freeman 2022) and quantitative impact studies (i.e., Sisson et al. 2021, Brooks et al, 2022). Indeed, the content and context of abortion depictions have changed drastically since Press and Cole's book, yet little research qualitatively analyses contemporary audience interpretations of twenty-first century abortion depictions. This study endeavours to address this gap in our understanding of how audiences make sense of abortion portrayals onscreen in a series that contains depictions of multiple reproductive experiences, with a particular focus on how race shapes this meaning making.

Methods

Given prior research suggesting focus groups as an appropriate methodological tool for qualitative audience analysis (Lunt and Livingstone 1996), this method was our chosen approach. We worked with Cris Bain-Borrego Research and Jackson Associates/Screen Engine to recruit participants for three specific focus groups from Jackson Associates' proprietary database of research volunteers. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, participants needed to identify as women (cisgender or transgender) and be between the ages of 18 and 54, as this is the primary viewing demographic for *Little Fires Everywhere*. Participants also needed to have access to a Hulu account and to report not having watched the show in its entirety prior to the study. Prior to each focus group, Screen Engine screened interested potential participants in detail via telephone, confirming eligibility and ensuring that their personal technology and Internet connection were compatible for online focus group participation. We had seven participants per group. Participants were asked to complete the initial online screening survey, watch eight episodes of *Little Fires Everywhere* on Hulu over the course of about one month, complete the content assessment survey to confirm that they attentively viewed the show, and

participate in the 90-minute virtual focus group on the platform Zoom. The study was approved by the WCG IRB. Participants received $250 at completion of the focus group.

The baseline questionnaire contained demographic questions about each participant's age, race, geographic location, and reproductive experiences (such as abortion, miscarriage, adoption, and surrogacy). We crafted these questions to match themes in *Little Fires Everywhere*. The content questionnaire included images from various episodes of the television series along with questions to confirm that participants watched the entire series and recalled specific characters and plotlines.

Because the show dealt explicitly with racial themes within multiple story arcs (e.g., how Elena and Mia interacted in ways that were shaped by their race; how Bebe's story was shaped by her immigrant status and language barriers), we wanted participants to feel comfortable talking about race, ethnicity, and both interpersonal and institutional racism candidly. Thus, we designed each focus group to be racially homogenous. We held three focus groups: one each for white women, Black women, and Chinese American women. We selected these racial/ethnic groups based on the plotlines and character demographics in *Little Fires Everywhere*. To increase group comfort, we used focus group moderators who identified with the race of the group they moderated. We purposively recruited a mix of participants from urban, suburban, and rural regions of the United States. All focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were coded in Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program, and analysed by the first author for emergent themes following grounded theory methods.

Results

Demographics. All participants identified as female, with a majority (62%) in their 30s and about a quarter (24%) in their 40s. About a third each lived in the Northeast (33%), Southeast (33%),

or Pacific Northwest (29%) United States. The majority (62%) did not identify as currently raising children. The vast majority (90%) of participants reported ever using birth control, and slightly less than half (43%) reported ever being pregnant. Slightly more than one third (38%) of participants reported ever giving birth, about one fifth (19%) reported having at least one abortion, and one fifth (19%) reported at least one miscarriage.

[Table 2 about here]

Below, we group our findings by fictional characters to explore participant reactions and interpretations across focus groups.

Elena: "I had sympathy for her, believe it or not."

Because the show portrays Elena as the primary antagonist in the series, intentionally disrupting her own family's life and attempting to ruin Mia's, we anticipated that participants would have an overwhelmingly negative response to this character. Instead, many shared that they found aspects of her character to be relatable and realistic. One participant imagined her future mothering as similar to Elena's:

"I can [relate] with Elena. I mean, I think that she's, like, a crazier version, but I'm definitely Type A, and I don't have kids, but I could see myself being a helicopter mom." (Chinese American group)

The depiction of the pressures that working mothers face resonated with participants, as well as the logistical and emotional challenges of parenting. One participant even mentioned envying Elena's organisational system and her stamina:

"I reared four children, and it's hard and you put your everything into it. It's not just a couple hours a day…Her schedule board is my wet dream. I'm sorry, but all those tabs,

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Oh my gosh…I would have loved to have had the energy that Elena had in the focus and the drive." (white focus group)

Others explained Elena's actions in the character's broader concern for her family; a participant in the white focus group stated, "I think Elena was definitely overbearing, maybe definitely a little too controlling, but it was out of goodness. It was out because she wanted to give her kids these opportunities." Even when discussing "mistakes" that Elena made, participants were able to forgive her, particularly when considering the challenges of motherhood:

During the course of the series, Elena is depicted as uniquely critical of her fourth child, Izzy, disciplining her more frequently and harshly than her other children. Participants expressed compassion for both for Elena and Izzy, and some even related personally to Elena's ambivalence about her fourth pregnancy and the struggles of parenting small children:

"I could identify with Elena because as a young mother with little kids, you do the best that you can… and especially the part when she got pregnant the last time she didn't want the baby, I was in that situation…I wasn't- trust me, I wasn't privileged and I'm not white. However, the fact of the struggling of raising kids…you feel bad at times that you don't really want your kids but you do what you gotta do." (Black focus group)

Even in the context of Elena's racist microaggressions and attitudes, participants were able to hold both that she was wrong and also categorised Elena's racism as largely benevolent. Participants in each focus group commented on Elena's "white privilege" and her lack of awareness regarding how to navigate conversations about race. Reflecting on Elena's interactions with Mia, one participant shared:

"She also seems to have a really significant white saviour complex... there was like a scene at the dinner table and she was like, you know how I rescued [Mia] or saved her or

something along those lines…That's what she wants out of it, she wants to have that praise of coming to someone's rescue" (Chinese American group)

A participant in the focus group of Black women described how pitied Elena's clumsiness in conversations about race and racism:

"I had sympathy for Elena, believe it or not, I felt sorry for her that she just couldn't see past that surface layer. I feel like that resonates a lot with white women with power or wealth and I just felt sorry for her that she couldn't see past Bebe's possible issue. Why she couldn't care for her child. She couldn't see past Mia's situation. I felt saddened for her more than anybody."

One participant in the focus group of white women remarked that Elena did not understand the role race played in her conversations with Mia, and perhaps thought "'I'm not prejudiced,' but I think deep down inside, there were some prejudices." Even in discussing Elena's racism, participants in each group seemed to consider that character with tenderness and care, giving her the benefit of the doubt about her weaknesses and flaws.

Mia: "I think I probably would have done the same thing."

Throughout the series, Mia is portrayed as a more sympathetic, relatable, creative, and loving character than Elena, which focus group participants noticed; across the groups, at least one participant commented that Mia was their favourite character. They used words like "strong," "caring," and "maternal" to describe her, with some saying that they recognized themselves or their mothers in this character.

Mia took at least two actions in the series that brought up mixed feelings for participants: choosing to parent her child instead of honouring her surrogacy agreement, and assisting Bebe in her custody case. Two participants in the white women focus group used consistently negative

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language to describe Mia, one labelling her choices as "really just selfish…they weren't based on what was going to benefit Pearl [her daughter]" and the other participant invoking her own experience of surrogacy to castigate Mia's decision making:

"I have been a surrogate mother. So let me just say…with Bebe and, and Mia, the things that they've done and just because they are the birth mothers of these children does not mean that they are good mothers or that they should even be the mothers."

Others reiterated that Mia was probably "emotional" both because of pregnancy hormones and because of her brother's death. This respondent put Mia's actions in this broader context:

"I mean, when you're pregnant you're all sorts of crazy anyway. And then her brother passed away and then her parents like, disown her. I think all she had left was the baby." (Chinese American focus group)

A participant in the white women's focus group echoed these sentiments, saying, "I think it was very important that she had something that she felt like was her own and that's why she ended up keeping the child." Several participants in the Black focus group emphasised their understanding of Mia's situation, with some saying it resonated with what they might do if faced with the same choice:

"I think I probably would've done the same thing Mia did. Because I am an emotional person and she was in a very emotional state when…her parents had rejected her, her brother…told her to keep the baby. Her closest family member had just died and she just ran off. So I could see myself at that age, I could see myself doing something like that."

Participants were less sympathetic towards Mia's involvement in Bebe's case. One participant commented on the negative impact this had on her assessment of Mia:

"I started to get mad at Mia when she interfered with Bebe and the baby…I guess she must've felt guilt on her own and she was trying to rectify her own guilt. I felt that she stuck her nose where it didn't really truly belong, and because I really loved her in the beginning. I got mad at myself for getting mad at her." (Black focus group)

Notably, this participant wanted to continue feeling positively about Mia, and was so invested in this character that she was angry with herself for her own reactions. Overall, participants found ways to understand Mia's actions, which did not get in the way of them feeling broadly positive about this character.

Bebe: "She made a bad decision under desperate circumstances."

Across focus groups, most participants expressed empathy and concern for Bebe. One participant in the Chinese-American group said, "She didn't know the backend with anything in regard to social services…she struggled, and I think she even said that she didn't know that by dropping off her baby that she was going into the system." These participants contextualised Bebe's decision-making, both to relinquish her daughter and to kidnap her, as actions taken by a desperate mother in a broken system, and expressed a desire for Bebe to overcome these obstacles. Other participants empathised with Bebe's struggles of early motherhood:

"It's very difficult having a child, especially at the beginning when you're raising them and in Bebe's situation without knowledge, you don't know, you're scared. You're a first time mom, you're a single mom…because she didn't know anything else to do, she didn't know why the baby wasn't eating. There was a lot, there's a lot going on, because she's [undocumented], the resources weren't there for her to make these choices. And so I feel like that was the only option for her and in her circumstances, I think that that was probably the best thing that she could have done for that child." (Black focus group)

Other participants gave Bebe the benefit of the doubt, such as this participant in the white focus group:

> "I don't think she wanted to do what she did. I think she made a bad decision under desperate circumstances. So you felt her pain, that she was trying to do what she thought, in that moment, was best for her baby."

Each of these participants was able to assert both that Bebe's actions related to relinquishing her infant were not ideal, yet these actions took place under specific circumstances, namely Bebe's contested immigration status and lack of access to resources. This acknowledgement of systemic injustices, even if not stated explicitly, painted Bebe as a flawed but empathetic character. Relinquishing her infant outside in freezing weather does not define her character; instead, participants used this as evidence that Bebe needed structural and interpersonal support.

Some participants had more ambivalent reactions to Bebe kidnapping her daughter from Linda's home, yet still expressed an understanding of Bebe's point of view even while disparaging her actions. One participant in the white women's group commented: "The outcome of Bebe taking the child, like, I think that is horrible and I do think that's selfish, but I think her giving the child up, she was just like in utter despair." For others, Bebe's situation helped them understand the complexities of adoption in general. One participant in the Black women's focus group shared, "I can see why people now give their kids up for adoption because maybe they just can't have them, even though they love them so much. They just realise they can't give them the life that they think that they deserve."

Lexie: "What a disgusting, privileged human, you know?"

Unlike other characters who audiences had plenty of reason to judge (Elena, who mistreated her youngest daughter; Mia, who deliberately severed a surrogacy agreement; Bebe, who relinquished her baby outdoors in freezing temperatures and later kidnapped her from an adoptive family) participants had very little empathy for Lexie. Her treatment of Pearl during her abortion-seeking provided them with more evidence of her ruthless pursuit of selfish goals. Across focus groups, participants labelled Lexie as "a disgusting, privileged, human," "an asshole," "spoiled, like, so entitled," "manipulative," and "mean." One participant even commented, "I want to punch this girl in the face." It was not Lexie's abortion that seemed to convince participants of this character's malice, but instead her treatment of Pearl, which included using Pearl's name instead of her own during the abortion appointment.

Given this negative impression of Lexie's character, many shared that when the show revealed her unintended pregnancy, they expected her to have an abortion. Several participants mentioned their understanding of Lexie's aspiration to have a "perfect" life, which did not include becoming a mother as a teenager, and thus they assumed she would have an abortion. Participants in the Black women's group in particular shared that they were not surprised that Lexie took advantage of Pearl at the abortion clinic. One participant shared: "I wasn't surprised that Lexie used Pearl's name…she didn't want to ruin her perfect image, so she figured she could, like, ruin someone else's." Participants in the Black women's focus group also discussed how Lexie's decision to return to the Warrens' apartment after her abortion was tinged with racist assumptions:

> "I feel like she went to Mia's house because [she thinks] they've probably been through this before because they're Black, and they probably had a ton of abortions."

Another participant in the Black women's focus group extrapolated on Lexie's assumptions about Black women and abortion and her own experience of racial stereotypes related to pregnancy decision-making:

> "Growing up it was always [a] stereotype that the Black girls get pregnant as teenagers and we go have the abortion. But when I was in school way back when it was a lot of the white girls were getting pregnant and going to have the abortion and the fact that they had the money without having to go to their parents, they have the money to go pay for their abortions and they didn't have to keep the babies….And most of black girls kept their babies…And so I think this is realistic."

Across all the focus groups, only participants in the white women's group expressed sympathy for Lexie in her treatment of Pearl. One participant shared that she "didn't judge Lexie" for using Pearl's name as an alias because "everything's about the outward appearance and how people perceive her," implying that Pearl's name provided cover for Lexie's reputation. For this participant, this deceit made intuitive sense for Lexie's character. Another participant related Lexie's actions to her own experience as an abortion seeker:

> " I can see why Lexi would use an alias…not as many people in that area knew who Pearl was and Lexie is obviously very well-known because of her mother. And so I can see how she was trying to hide her identity. And I had been in Lexie's shoes when I was in college and going through that as well. I didn't tell anyone about the situation and for her to trust Pearl and Mia with that information, showed that she considered them people who she could confide in…I can see why she did it because her secret getting out would affect her more than it would affect Pearl in that situation."

In these instances, both Lexie's abortion and her decision to use Pearl's name were justifiable based on their impressions of this character as someone who cares about the opinions of others and as someone deserving of privacy. While they did not uniformly praise Lexie's actions, they were able to justify behaviour that participants in other focus groups found inexcusable.

Discussion

Overall, we found that focus group participants were eager to discuss the show's themes related to motherhood, surrogacy, adoption, and abortion, yet the depth of their emotional connection to and commentary on these characters differed based on reproductive experience and race. By asking participants to share impressions of characters across reproductive experience – motherhood, surrogacy, adoption, and abortion – we were able to compare and contrast their understandings of each. While not representative of attitudes towards these issues generally, we found that characters who were already mothers (Elena, Mia, and Bebe) garnered the most warmth and connection from our participants. We discuss possible reasons for this below.

Across focus groups, participants expressed nuanced, empathetic viewpoints for three of the four female characters about whom we inquired: Elena, Mia, Bebe, and Lexie. They could both relate to these characters in their reproductive decision-making and also critique them for perceived negative attributes or actions. Discussions about these characters involved exploring their choices in regards to reproductive health, but participants did not debate their worth and dignity as (fictional) human beings. Participants seemed to reserve unique judgement, including name-calling, for Lexie, the character who obtained an abortion. We contend that this is not because of her abortion-seeking, per se, but because the character herself is portrayed as relatively irredeemable. In all three focus groups participants viewed her behaviour, including

taking advantage of Pearl and inappropriately seeking comfort from Mia, as confirmation that she is a "disgusting, privileged human." When discussing Elena, Mia, and Bebe, women in each focus group had both positive and negative comments about these characters. Yet with Lexie, only participants in the white women's focus group expressed sympathy for her in addition to disdain.

Several factors likely contribute to participants generally expressing contempt for Lexie while expressing sympathy for other characters. First, both Elena and Mia are portrayed by well-known actors (Reese Witherspoon and Kerry Washington, respectively), and our participants may have already had warm feelings towards these characters because of familiarity with the women portraying them. This does not, however, explain the depth of the differences in empathy our participants expressed for Bebe as opposed to Lexie. Our participants clearly understood Elena, Mia, and Bebe as mothers, even if flawed, and this societally sanctioned identity, while often fraught, may have enabled participants to excuse or accept otherwise off-putting actions.

Another possibility is that Lexie is a secondary character whose abortion does not define her, but instead takes place during a single episode ("Duo," which aired on April 1, 2020). For Elena, Mia, and Bebe, their reproductive health storylines are core components of their characters and appear as themes throughout the series, not just in a single episode. Audiences may be more likely to identify with main characters than secondary characters, especially when given multiple opportunities to cultivate emotional connections with these characters (Moyer-Gusé and Dale 2017). Indeed, repeated exposure to Elena's, Mia's, and Bebe's reproductive decision-making considerations and outcomes over the course of the series may have increased our participants' identification with these characters, involving audiences in these storylines to a

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greater degree than Lexie's abortion plotline and enabling them to develop parasocial

relationships with these adult characters.

If one pre-condition of identification with a character is a perceived similarity between

that character and the viewer (Schiappa, Allen, and Gregg 2007), it is possible that race

facilitated this connection between participants in the white women's focus group and Lexie.

That is, these participants may have used a racialized frame of reference – their whiteness – to

see themselves and their past behaviours in Lexie, including having abortions and/or treating

friends of colour poorly. Because Lexie is a young white woman, participants in the white focus

group may have found it easier to empathise with this character's otherwise objectionable

behaviour than participants in our Black women's focus group and Chinese American focus

group.

Understanding what creates connections, or parasocial bonds, between audiences and

characters matters tremendously; increased involvement with a character may produce higher

levels of transportation and emotion among audiences, which in turn increases the possibility that

the television content can influence audience knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour (Murphy et al.

2011). Both the content of the television depiction and the circumstances in which it is viewed

must be taken into consideration when exploring the impact of these depictions. As Press and

Cole write, people "form their ideas about abortion, the family, and their own identity as

individuals in dialogue with these television images" (1999, 39). Our results provide some

possible context for the disparity between increase in depictions of abortion on U.S. television

and the simultaneous increase in abortion restrictions in the U.S. over the same time period. It

may be that, like Lexie, the types of characters who often seek abortions on television do not

meet the optimal conditions for parasocial contact, including being presented as "realistic and

attractive (physically, socially, or relationally, and similar to the viewers" (Schiappa, Allen, and Gregg 2007). Indeed, exposure to negative or even neutral portrayals of abortion seekers may confirm existing anti-abortion biases audiences already have. Because Lexie is portrayed so negatively, audiences may see the actions related to her abortion seeking, such as her taking advantage of Pearl and concealing the abortion from her mother, as confirmation of negative stereotypes of abortion seekers.

There is limited research on how character qualities and narrative contexts influence abortion attitudes; one study found that negative contextual factors related to the abortion contributed to increased anti-abortion attitudes post-exposure (Brooks et al. 2022). More research is needed to understand the interplay between abortion-related content, characters, and contexts and how these elements contribute to abortion knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs.

Limitations. Our study has several limitations. First, because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted focus groups virtually instead of in-person. Participants did not have the opportunity to form in-person connections with each other, which may have changed the dynamics of the focus groups. Second, our findings are not generalizable because of our small sample size and because we only asked participants to reflect on one series. Future research might conduct qualitative analyses that include a larger audience sample and a two or three television series instead of just one. Third, because we asked the audience to watch the series as part of study participation, they may not have chosen to watch it unrelated to this study, and may not represent the views of the show's organic audience. Nevertheless, we are confident in the study's strengths, which include segmenting participants by race to encourage comfort in focus group discussions and asking participants to view the entire series to be able to discuss broad themes throughout instead of watching clips.

Conclusion

Our participants were able to contend with the complexity of motherhood, surrogacy, and adoption amongst *Little Fires Everywhere* characters, likely because the characters at the centre of these storylines were given significant screen time and nuance. Conversely, participants denigrated Lexie, the character seeking the abortion, not for her pregnancy termination but, we suspect, because her character was largely unsympathetic and the events surrounding her abortion served as more evidence of her poor character. This suggests that the visibility of abortion, in particular, onscreen is not enough to challenge cultural misperceptions, but the type of character, and type of plotline involved, must be attended to as well.

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