NZ On Air
Irirangi Te Motu

Seen on Screen

2024

Rūrangi season 2
Autonomouse

Contents

Executive Summary

"I really believe in television as a medium for creating empathy and telling personal stories. You get this unique chance to sit with characters and see how they grow and change across a season. I've always wanted to present my friends and family in ways that hopefully others can watch and identify with. We're just as messy and nuanced as everyone else, but we're also coping with this added layer of scrutiny[1]."

– Mohamed Hassan, writer and creator of Miles From Nowhere

In the time between the publication of the first *Seen on Screen* report (2022) and this research, the media landscape has become increasingly crowded. Local audiences have never had such easy and immediate access to an enormous amount of international content. At the same time, New Zealand's population has never been more diverse. In this globalised, algorithm-driven media environment, it is essential for Kiwis to see themselves represented and have their stories told.

Seen on Screen (SoS) 2022 was inspired by two projects undertaken by the British Film Institute. The first was Black Star, which looked at the number of Black actors in UK films between 2006-2016, the roles they performed, and the types of characters they were most frequently cast to play. The second was the Filmography project, which built on Black Star by cataloguing information (including gender) about the casts (all ethnicities) and crews of British films between 1911-2017. Both pieces of work investigated the on-screen representation of UK socio-cultural groups as an attempt to "increase the diversity in [British screen] narratives in order to appeal to audience tastes that we are failing to serve".[2]

NZ On Air's purpose is to reflect and develop the identity and culture of Aotearoa New Zealand. On screen representation matters for all New Zealanders – it is at the very core of delivery on this purpose. Ensuring local content availability for underserved audiences is also one of NZ On Air's core directives. Reaching them requires that funded content is representative of their communities and valuable in its portrayals of New Zealand life. Our funded content creates this value in several ways. Compelling narratives entertain while provoking thought. Layered characters with relatable motivations foster empathy. Stories set around the country, and across decades, build a shared national identity. Authentic depictions of Kiwi communities make viewers feel seen and understood. This

[1] https://www.thepost.co.nz/culture/350179340/mohamed-hassan-how-tv-can-change-way-we-think
[2] https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/black-actors-british-film-industry-statistics

was affirmed in the 2024 NZ On Air Public Awareness and Attitudes Survey, which found that two-thirds of Kiwis value the diversity of the local content that we fund.[3]

Some of the content analysed as part of this report has come from initiatives such as Every Voice[4], Episode one[5], and Te Puna Kairangi[6], and the NZ On Air - Te Māngai Pāho Reo Māori Co-Fund[7]. These initiatives exist to broaden both the range of creatives involved in content, and to create content that can authentically reflect the audiences it serves. The next iteration of this *SoS* research will include projects created as a result of recent funds, including the Pacific Media Fund[8] and Within My Reach[9].

Key observations

- Across all combined roles, every ethnic category except European saw an increase in on-screen representation as compared with *SoS 2022*. However, amongst minority ethnicities, Asian only reached and/or exceeded its population benchmark in the lead role category. Within that, Asian men were consistently less represented than their male counterparts across all role categories.
- European characters were well represented across all role types and had the closest gender parity, with European males constituting 20% of roles and European females making up 19%.
- While representation has increased for characters and actors from Middle Eastern backgrounds, Latin American and African ethnicities were the least represented across roles and cast.
- Male characters and cast outnumbered their female counterparts in three role categories (leads, series regulars, and guest stars) while women had the greater representation in the supporting and recurring roles. This finding suggests that men continue to get representation across all levels of storytelling (from most to

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[3]https://www.nzonair.govt.nz/news/public-awareness-survey-2024/

[4]Every Voice was a collaboration between NZ On Air, Screen Australia, and TikTok which funded projects exclusively for TikTok. https://www.nzonair.govt.nz/news/nz-on-air-screen-australia-and-tiktok-announce-every-voice-2022-recipients/

[5] Episode One: Web Series and Pilot Programme supported early-career Pan-Asian creatives to develop six web shows and improve their industry skills.

[6] Te Puna Kairangi, the Premium Productions for International Audiences Fund is designed to support projects that are ambitious and bold with significant international appeal.

[7] This co-fund encourages quality, compelling Māori language content for distribution to a broad range of audiences.

[8] The Aotearoa New Zealand Pacific Regional Media Fund is an MFAT-supported collaboration between NZ On Air and Pacific Corporation Broadcasting Ltd. The Fund aims to deepen ties between New Zealand and the Pacific through investment in the media sector and will provide digital-first content for Pacific audiences.

[9] Within My Reach supports the creation of social media-first content for youth (15-24) audiences.

least impactful on the plot). While female characters make important contributions to narratives in secondary roles, they have fewer opportunities for primary or casual representation.

- Most depictions of disability were physical and only 2% of characters had any form of disability or were neurodivergent.
- Gender diverse characters were present in every role type except guest star and made up 3% of all characters.

- 3% of characters were identified as being non-heterosexual and they predominantly came from European and Māori backgrounds. There was some non-heterosexual representation in characters from Asian and Pacific backgrounds.[10]

- All non-heterosexual characters were series regulars or above, meaning they played roles with above-average screen time and importance to the storyline. Examples of projects with such characters are *Rūrangi s2, Ships In The Night, Double Parked*, and *The Boy, the Queen, and Everything in Between*.
- Short-form content has less variety of role types because of limited episode lengths. Longer content, which is more likely to be serialised, has more opportunity for multiple role types.

Why have we done this research?

NZ On Air /Irirangi Te Motu was established under the Broadcasting Act 1989.
Our purpose is to reflect and develop New Zealand identity and culture
by promoting and funding content about New Zealand and its interests, as well as special provisions for the promotion of Māori language and Māori culture (section 36.a.ii). [11]. The Broadcasting Act 1989 requires us to specifically ensure that content is available for Aotearoa's audiences, with an emphasis on delivering to communities that have been historically underrepresented in media, including women, rangatahi and tamariki, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities (section 36c).

The Act also recognises the value of equal employment opportunities when it comes to creating content for underserved audiences (section 41). In other words, our funded

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[10] While reading these results, please keep in mind that sexual orientation does not relate to gender identity.

[11] NZ On Air also provides funding for NZ music and administers the Games Sector Development Rebate, in addition to a range of other industry development funding. The agency also conducts, commissions, and publishes research and promotes local content through various communication channels.

content requires the participation of creatives with the knowledge, expertise, and lived experience to make it authentic. In screen content, we report on this participation through the Screen Diversity Reports[12]. *SOS* provides the on-camera outcomes, or the audience-side perspective.

The audiences we serve are not homogenous and they deserve a variety of representation. Our Equity and Representation Strategy summarizes this as "depicting a wide range of identities and experiences in TV shows, movies....without relying on stereotypes or marginalizing certain groups".[13]

Annex C displays the most used character adjectives, organised by ethnicity and gender.[14] While these lists provide only a glimpse of the complexities and nuances that audiences experience by watching the character stories unfold on-screen, they demonstrate the range of portrayals across funded content. For example, Māori male characters are both 'cheeky' and 'formidable', but also 'loyal', 'humble', 'sensitive', and 'ambitious'. Female Middle Eastern characters are 'studious' and 'defiant', 'independent' and 'defiant', as well as 'mothers, nurses, and best friends'. While some of the adjectives reflect negative characteristics or behaviors, authentic representation goes beyond a simplistic good/bad binary.

Stereotypes are unlearned when the beliefs that create them are challenged, which is why productions like *Far North*, which is explored later in this report, are so impactful. Based on a remarkable true-crime story, *Far North* follows various Chinese, Tongan, European, and Māori characters who become embroiled in an international drug smuggling operation. Audiences come to understand the difficult personal circumstances of the ensemble as well as the socio-economic factors that led some of them to crime, such as institutional poverty and racism. They are sympathetic yet accountable, resilient but fallible, often naïve, and at times, ruthless. In this way, *Far North* avoids shallow stereotyping while balancing the weight of cultural representation with captivating world-building.

There are three other case studies in this report which showcase uniquely and identifiably NZ stories, told from the perspectives of underserved communities. Whether those communities are rural and remote, rangatahi and Māori, multi-cultural, or immigrant and refugee, these highlighted stories connect audiences to various times and places in New Zealand history, reminding viewers that diversity has always been a part of the fabric of New Zealand society.

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[12] These reports provide statistics about the ethnicity and gender of the key creatives (directors, writers, and producers) of funded screen content and artists who receive music funding.

[13] https://www.nzonair.govt.nz/documents/1280/Equity_and_Representation_Strategy_final.pdf

[14] These adjectives were pulled from material provided by producers, such as character descriptions, scripts, and show bibles. It is not exhaustive and should be taken as a representative qualitative sampling.
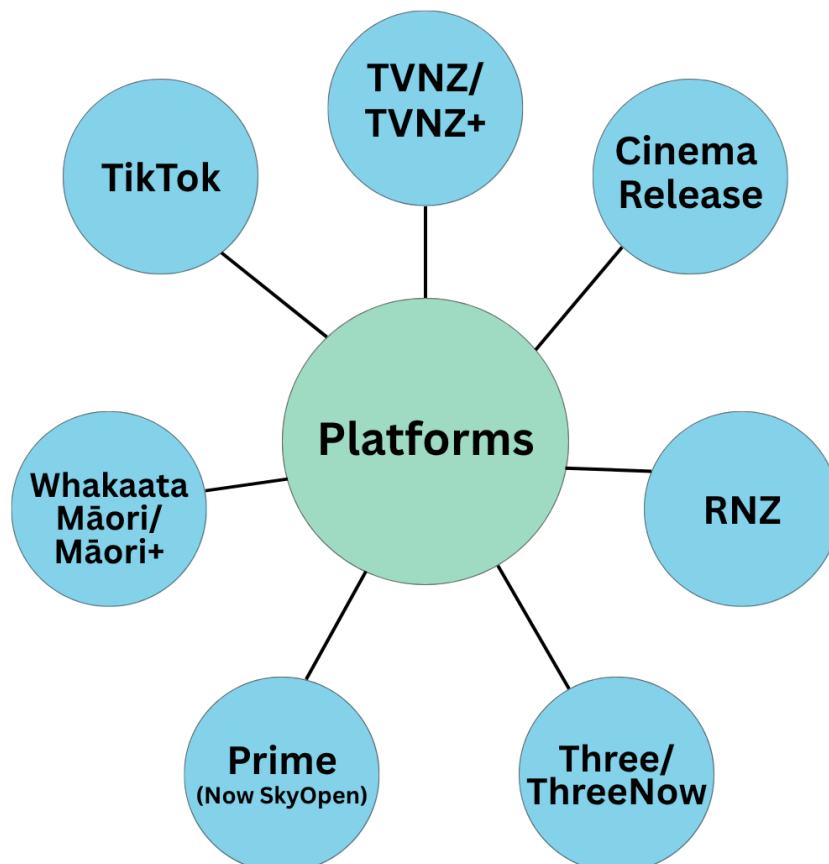
Methodology and scope

This report looks at **30** scripted Drama and Comedy projects funded between July 2021 – 30 June 2023. While the inaugural research examined productions funded from July 2017 – July 2021, going forward, we intend for *SOS* to remain a biennial report. This necessary delay between the reporting period and report publication gives projects enough time to film, complete post-production, and release, thus providing us with an accurate record of the characters on screen.

As established in *SOS* 2022, we catalogued all named characters who appeared on screen by role type, along with their ethnicity and gender (inferred or stated[15]), sexuality (if disclosed), as well as any disabilities or neurodivergence. These categories were also catalogued for the actors portraying the characters using reputable sources such as talent agency biographies or public disclosures by the actors. For all but two roles (0.4%) the gender and ethnicities of the actors matched the gender and ethnicities of their accompanying characters. As such, findings in those categories can be read interchangeably to refer to both cast and characters. For all other categories (sexual orientation, disability, and neurodivergence) the findings only relate to the fictional on-screen roles.

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[15] Inference means that gender and ethnicity were communicated through context or taken at face value. For instance, any characters not identified as non-heterosexual were inferred to be heterosexual. Characters with European names and phenotypes were inferred as European unless otherwise identified. Inference is useful because screen is a visual medium and this research attempts to identify whom audience members might reasonably assume is being represented.

30 Projects

500 Roles

12 Dramas

18 Comedies

Platforms

- TikTok
- TVNZ/TVNZ+
- Cinema Release
- RNZ
- Three/ThreeNow
- Prime (Now SkyOpen)
- Whakaata Māori/Māori+

Differences from *Seen on Screen 2022*

Seen on Screen 2022 covered 95 productions across all the genres of Scripted screen content that NZ On Air funds. These included Drama, Comedy, Children's content, and Scripted Factual programmes, such as *Jono and Ben 2018* and *Taskmaster NZ*. This type of comedy show has been since reclassified as Non-fiction General Factual.

This report limits the scope of research to **scripted Drama and Comedy** content. We are only looking at **fictional** characters whose representations and stories, by their nature, invite commentary and analysis. This means that we avoid making value judgements about real people (actors, entertainers, journalists, or interview subjects) who typically portray themselves in the Non-Fiction genre. The Children's genre presented multiple issues for category classification. Many characters were non-human or animated and therefore were of indeterminate gender and/or ethnicity. Children's content also tended to fall into a Non-Fiction genre and involved children appearing as themselves rather than child actors portraying fictional roles, which made it problematic to research and compile gender, ethnicity, or disability information. As a result, the decision was made to exclude the Children's genre entirely. All of these changes make it easier to compare results over time which ultimately makes this research more sustainable.

In addition, this report captures for the first time content designed for first/exclusive release on social media platforms. Examples include projects funded as part of the Every Voice[16] initiative, such as *The 9-5ers* and *Ships In The Night*, which were created for Kiwi audiences who consume short-form media on TikTok. A list of all the projects in scope, along with their primary platforms, can be found in Annex A. *Seen on Screen 2024* also uses population benchmarks that were collected as part of the 2023 NZ Census. The first *Seen on Screen* report used statistics from the 2017 NZ Census, and this must be kept in mind when making any comparisons.

Defining the roles

This report categorizes roles into five tiers (in descending order of importance to the story and appearances on screen): lead, supporting cast, series regular, recurring role, and guest star[17]. It continues to use the definitions provided in the original report and detailed descriptions of each role type are located in Annex B.

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[16] Every Voice was a collaboration between NZ On Air, Screen Australia, and TikTok which funded projects exclusively for TikTok. https://www.nzonair.govt.nz/news/nz-on-air-screen-australia-and-tiktok-announce-every-voice-2022-recipients/

[17] Seen on Screen 2022 also included a category for cameo roles. As there was only one cameo role in scope for this report, the category has been excluded and the single role has been counted among the 'guest star' statistics.

Defining ethnicity

This research uses the ethnic categories recommended by Statistics NZ, these being European[18], Māori, Pacific, and Asian[19]. As is standard practice within NZ demographical surveys, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America are grouped together as MELAA in recognition that New Zealanders from those ethnic backgrounds have historically (and still) constitute less than 2% of the population.[20] While we recognise that ethnicity is a complex series of socio-cultural, linguistic, and (in some cases) racial identifiers, using these categories means that we can compare our results against the population benchmarks supplied by Statistics NZ. Actors who belonged to more than one ethnic group were counted in each applicable group. As a result, the percentage of people belonging to each ethnic group may not add up to 100. This methodology is in line with Census survey collection and our own Diversity Reporting [21].

A note on gender

The gender categories used across both *Seen on Screen* reports are female, male, and gender diverse, which are also the categories used by Statistics NZ, most recently in the 2023 Census. Although male and female refer to biological sex and not gender, which is made up of various aesthetic, behavioural, and socio- cultural norms, in this research, they are used as synonyms for cismen and ciswomen[22] to ensure standardisation across the research and allow for direct comparison to population benchmarks. 'Gender diverse' encompasses all identities outside of the cisman and ciswoman binary, including (but not limited to) transman/transwoman, non-binary, gender non-conforming, gender-fluid, Takatāpui, Fa'afāfine or fa'atama, Fakaleitī, and Irawhiti. We acknowledge that this categorisation is not unproblematic and will continue to attempt to expand the constraints of existing data classification standards.

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[18] European includes the commonly used category of NZ European.

[19] Asian includes ethnicities in the Pan-Asian category.

[20] According to both the 2018 and 2023 Census, which put all MELAA-identifying persons at 1.5% and 1.9% of the populace. The MELAA abbreviation is statistically convenient and not a value judgement about MELAA-identifying Kiwis.

[21] https://www.nzonair.govt.nz/documents/1281/Diversity_Report_2024_-_Final.pdf

[22] Cisgender refers to people whose gender identity also matches their biological sex.

Contextualising the findings

In addition to the changes made between *Seen on Screen 2022* and this report, there are several considerations to keep in mind when reading its findings.
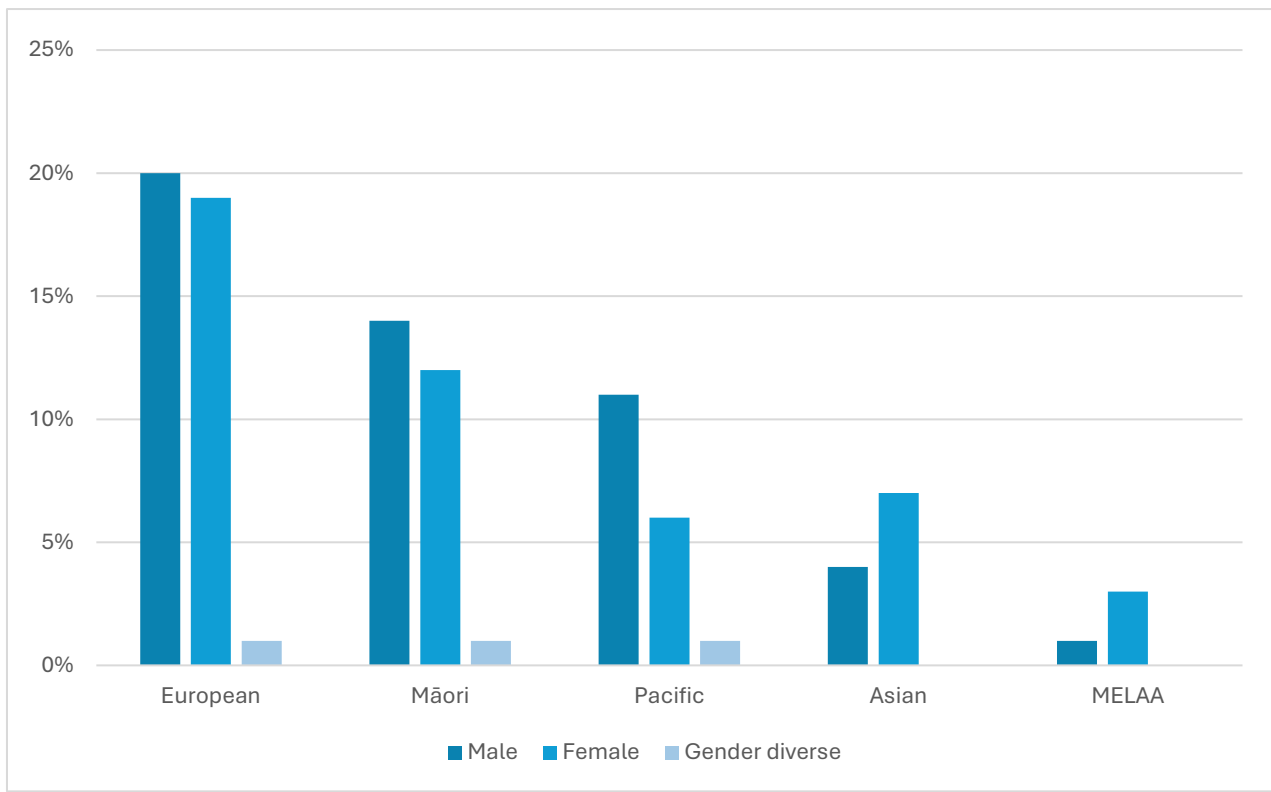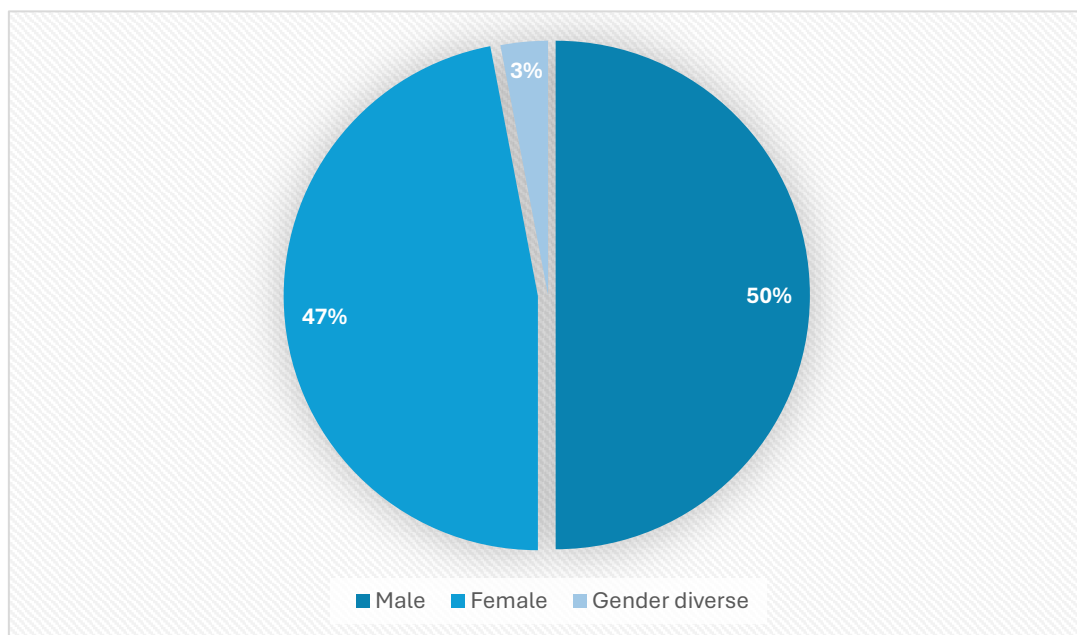
- While every effort was made to ensure accurate cataloguing across all categories, time and resource constraints meant that the researcher was unable to watch the entirety of every piece of content, hence the use of supplementary materials (such as character descriptions, scripts, and story bibles) provided by producers.
- Although ethnicity categories are compared and contrasted, multiple actors identified with two or more ethnicities and this speaks to the increasing diversity of a bi-cultural and multicultural Aotearoa New Zealand.
- The representation measured in this report is not weighted according to content type or duration. For example, no differentiation is made in the statistical analysis between the lead actor/s in a programme with multiple 40-minute episodes versus the lead/s in a short-form series designed for social media release. This is an effort to avoid privileging one type of format over another or equating longer on-screen representation with 'better' representation, especially as many underserved audiences are consuming shorter content on non-traditional viewing platforms, as discussed in the *Where Are the Audiences 2024* report and the *Where Are The Māori Audiences* report.[23]
- When reading these statistics, it is important to understand our legislative functions and the public media principles on which they were based. Commercially funded content, which has historically made up a large portion of the media environment, does not have the responsibility of reflecting the diversity of New Zealand culture. Furthermore, catering to smaller 'niche' audiences (those that fall outside of the 'general NZ European' label) is perceived to be commercially risky, especially when competing for attention in a landscape that is increasingly front-loaded with international offerings. As a result, there have been, and continue to be, many commercial programme offerings for a general NZ European audience. NZ On Air-funded content only constitutes a portion of local screen media therefore any 'overrepresentation' of an identity category (gender, ethnicity, etc) in this research, comparative to population benchmarks, may be seen as an attempt by the agency to address an underrepresentation.

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[23] https://www.nzonair.govt.nz/news/where-are-the-audiences-2024/ and
https://www.nzonair.govt.nz/news/where-are-the-maori-audiences-and-what-are-they-consuming/

Role overviews

Total roles – Ethnicity and gender

Legend: Male, Female, Gender diverse

Ethnicity	Male	Female	Gender diverse
European	20%	19%	1%
Māori	14%	12%	1%
Pacific	11%	6%	1%
Asian	4%	7%	
MELAA	1%	3%	

Total roles - Gender

Male 50%, Female 47%, Gender diverse 3%

Legend: Male, Female, Gender diverse
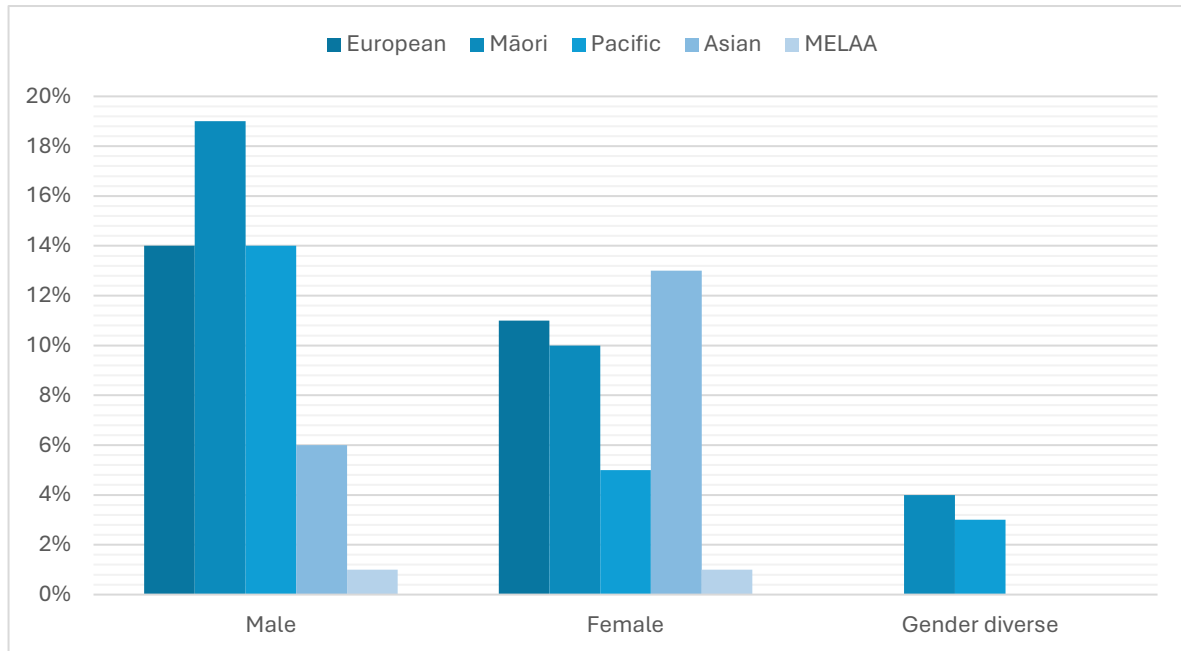
Total roles - Ethnicity
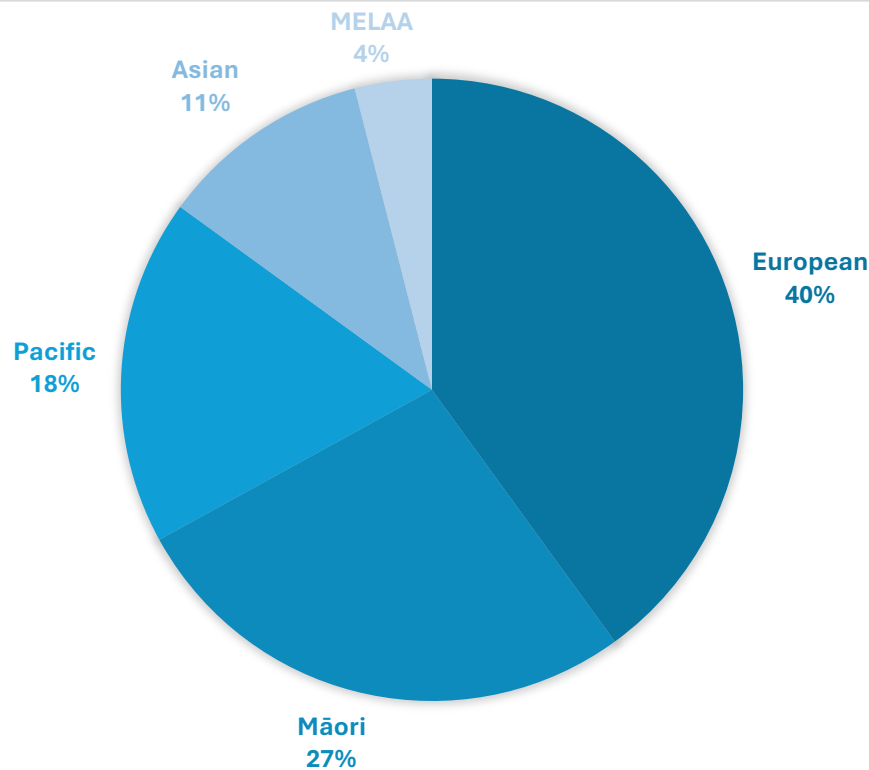
- Roles performed by actors from European backgrounds made up 40% of on-screen representation. Although this is below the population benchmark of 68%, it is still the most-represented ethnicity, both in character and actor backgrounds. This is a decrease from *Seen on Screen 2022* where 58% of all characters had some European descent.

- The second most-represented ethnicity was Māori, which experienced a boost from 19% (in 2022) to 27%, an additional 9% over the population benchmark of 18%. This is partly attributable to the majority-Māori cast and characters of several productions, notably *Ahikāroa* 5, *Kairākau* 3, *Only In Aotearoa 3: Wāhine Edition, Kura 3,* and *Ka Whawhai Tonu*.

- Pacific-background actors saw a minor increase from 13% in 2022 to 18%, with both figures being higher than the 9% Pacific New Zealander benchmark. There were several productions with Pacific-led casts and characters, including *Duckrockers*, *Inky Pinky Ponky*, *I Got You s2*, and *The Tongan Rogue General*.

- Asian was the only minority ethnicity that did not reach or exceed its population benchmark. 11% of all characters were of Asian descent compared to the 17% population benchmark, however there was strong Asian representation in shows like *Homebound 3.0* and *Long x Xia*.

- MELAA cast representation doubled from 2% (the current population benchmark) to 4%. However, the majority of MELAA representation came primarily from the Middle East, with two productions (*Miles From Nowhere*, and *Raised By Refugees* s2) contributing just over half of the Middle Eastern roles.

- Gender diverse cast members made a statistically significant jump from 0.5% in 2022 to 3%. All gender diverse roles were played by gender diverse actors, indicating the shifting industry norms around authentic portrayals of gender diverse identities and the value of lived experience. However, no cisgender roles were played by openly gender diverse performers.

- Gender diverse characters came from three out of the five ethnic groupings, with the highest percentage being from Māori backgrounds, followed by those from Pacific and then European backgrounds. Multiple projects included trans and gender diverse characters whose experiences contributed heavily to the main storylines, or were, in come cases, fundamental to the core premise. Within these projects, ethnicity was also a central theme, which may explain the intersection of gender diverse Māori and Pacific characters. Examples include *Rūrangi s2*, *The Boy, The Queen, And Everything In Between*, *Inky Pinky Ponky*, *Not Even*, and *Testify*.

- Female characters made up 47% of the overall cast, up 3 points from 2022. Male actors played 50% of roles, down from the previous research's figure of 55%.

- The closest gender parity was between male and female European characters, with male Pacific characters represented on screen twice as much as female Pacific characters. Meanwhile, female characters outnumbered their male counterparts in both Asian and MELAA categories. A programme such as *Far North* could account for some of these results given it features a number of female Asian characters and male Pacific characters, as well as *Kāinga*, which alone includes 10 female characters of Asian and Middle-Eastern descent.

- Short-form content tends not to have the capacity for a variety of role types. In some instances, such as *Ships In The Night* and *Long x Xia* (both made for viewing on TikTok), the majority of the named and/or credited characters to appear on screen are the leads. This was also the case with stories that revolve around a core ensemble cast, where the need to focus on multiple lead characters means less resources for the inclusion and development of 'meatier' role types, like supporting characters and series regulars. Consequently (such as in projects like *Not Even*) recurring and guest roles tend to be more prevalent. This is more common in the comedy genre, where the events of an episode are typically driven by the lead characters, the interactions between them, and the premise at the core of their relationships. By the same logic, longer content, which tends to be serialised and fall within the drama genre, has more opportunity for – and often, requires – characters of multiple role types to progress both the overarching
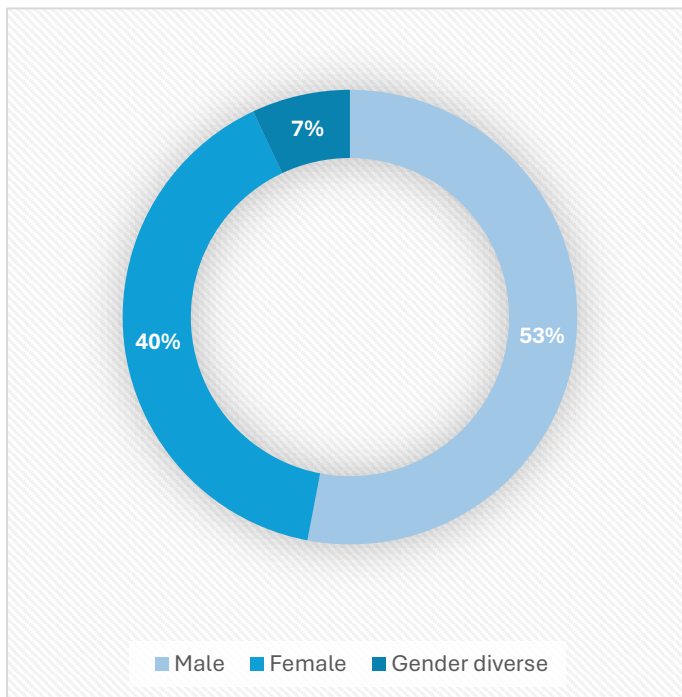
narrative and the season's various subplots, which make up the focus of the episodes. Examples include *Far North, The Gone*, and *Testify*.

Lead Roles

Lead roles – Ethnicity and gender

Legend: European, Māori, Pacific, Asian, MELAA

	European	Māori	Pacific	Asian	MELAA
Male	14%	19%	14%	6%	1%
Female	11%	10%	5%	13%	1%
Gender diverse			4%	3%	

Lead roles - Gender

Male 53%, Female 40%, Gender diverse 7%

Lead roles - Ethnicity

European 25%, Māori 33%, Pacific 22%, Asian 19%, MELAA 2%
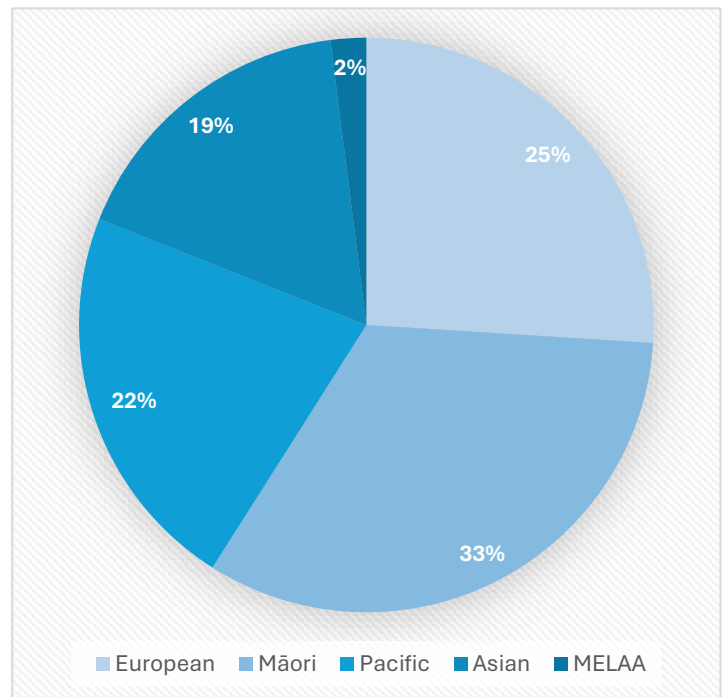
- Actors with Māori heritage had the most on-screen representation in lead roles, making up just over one-third of primary characters. This is a significant increase from the first wave of research, wherein Māori actors played 24% of lead roles. Additionally, male Māori characters had the highest representation in lead roles, with eight drama and four comedy projects having at least one Māori male lead[24].

- Out of all the role categories, Asian characters were most represented in the lead role category at 19%, exceeding their population benchmark by 2%. Asian female lead characters outnumbered their counterparts in other ethnic categories. They made up 13% of leads, followed European females (11%) and Māori females (10%). There were a number of productions in scope with Asian leads, including *Homebound 3.0, Raised By Refugees 2*, *Kāinga*, and *Ships In The Night*.

- The first round of research showed that no actors from MELAA backgrounds were cast in lead roles. In this round, 2% of lead roles depicted MELAA characters, however, the lead male role was played by an actor of European descent[25]. Furthermore, there was no representation in the lead categories by characters or cast from Latina American or African backgrounds.

- Pacific lead characters had similar representation as lead European characters, at 22% and 25% respectively. This is an increase of almost 10% for Pacific characters and a decrease of 30% for European characters.

- Gender diverse characters had strong showings in lead roles at 7%, compared to 0.4% in 2022, owing to trans lead characters in such shows as *Rūrangi s2, Not Even,* and *Testify.*

- Although male leads outnumbered female leads by 14%, there was good gender parity between female Māori and European leads and male European and Pacific leads.
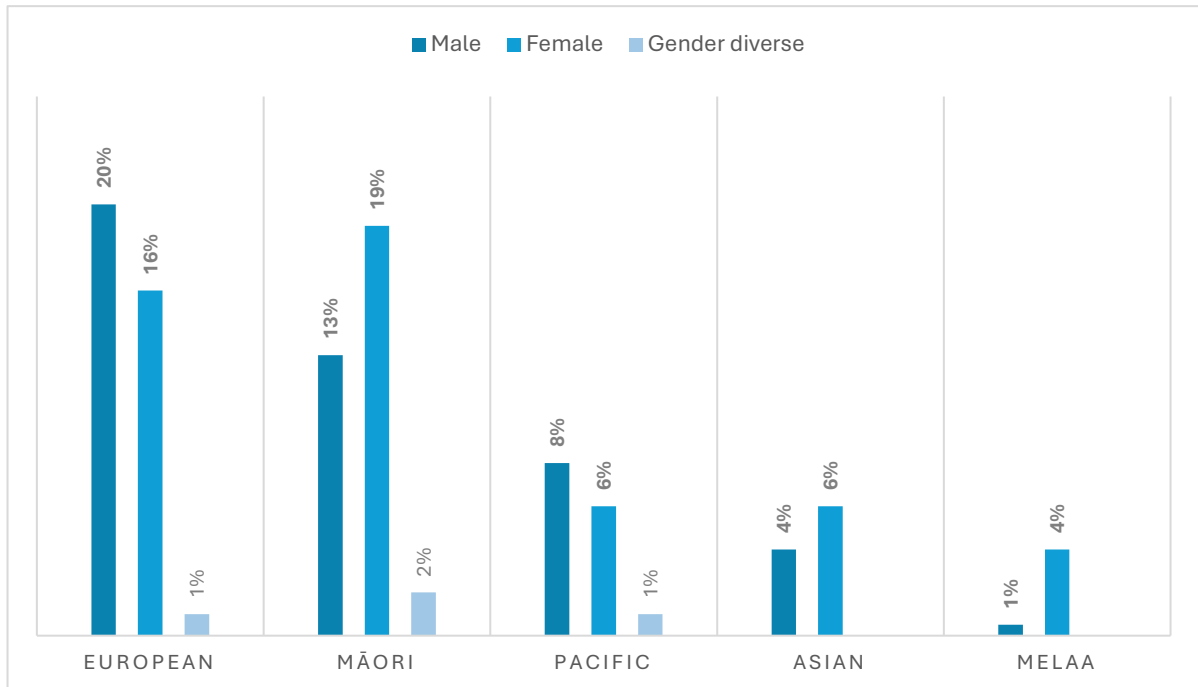
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[24] These being *Far North, One Lane Bridge 3, Ahikāroa 5, Rūrangi 2, Ka Whawhai Tonu, Testify, Kairākau 3, Ships In The Night, Kura 3, Not Even, n00b*, and *The Boy, The Queen, And Everything In Between*.
[25] One of only two actors to play a character that did not match their ethnic background.
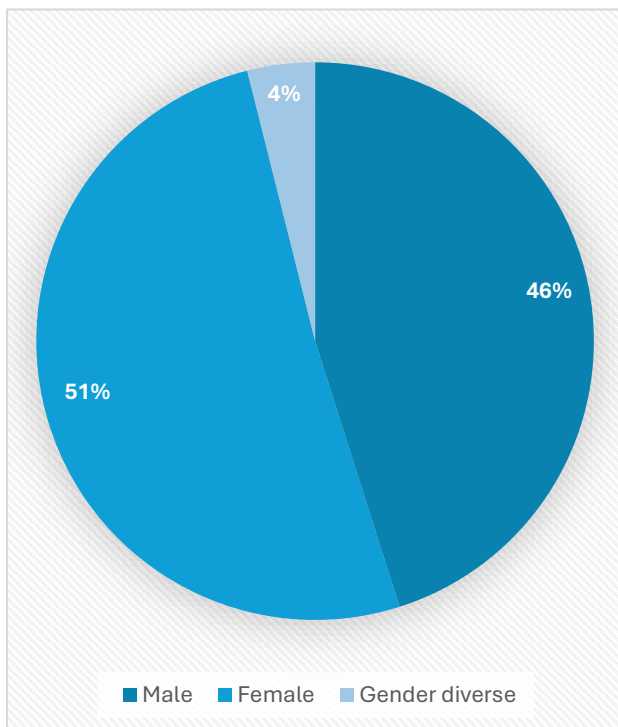
Supporting roles

Supporting roles – Ethnicity and gender

Legend: ■ Male ■ Female ■ Gender diverse

Ethnicity	Male	Female	Gender diverse
EUROPEAN	20%	16%	1%
MĀORI	13%	19%	2%
PACIFIC	8%	6%	1%
ASIAN	4%	6%	
MELAA	1%	4%	

Supporting roles - Gender

Gender	%
Male	46%
Female	51%
Gender diverse	4%

Supporting roles - Ethnicity

Legend: ■ European ■ Māori ■ Pacific ■ Asian ■ MELAA

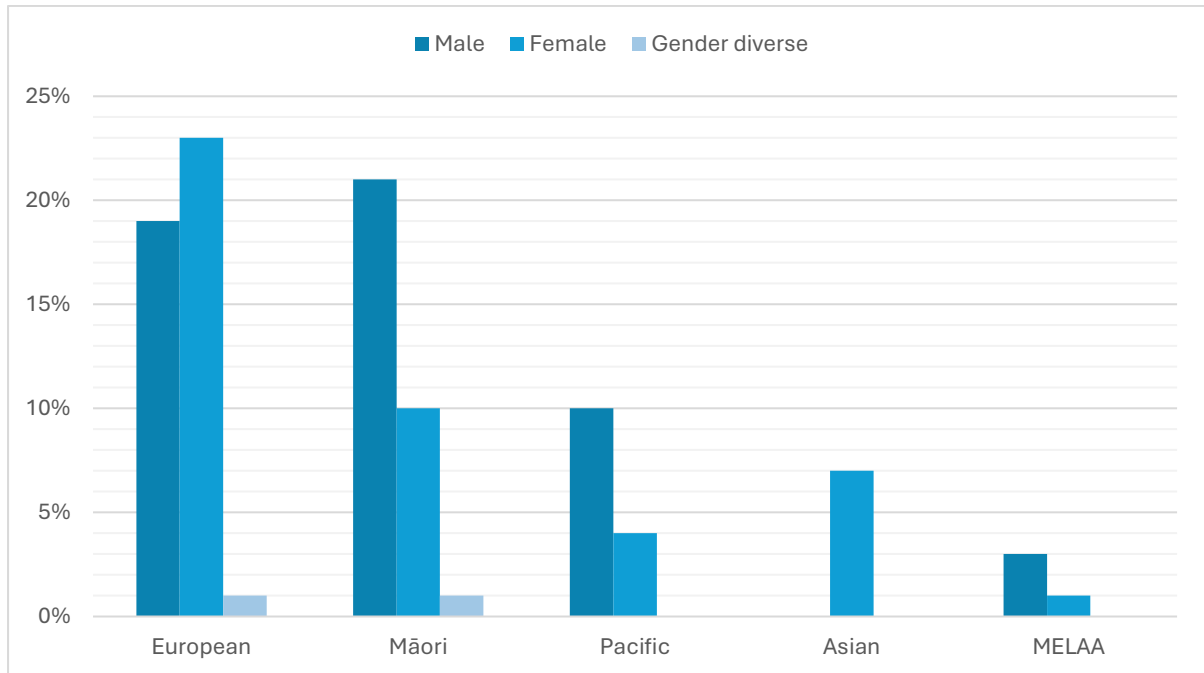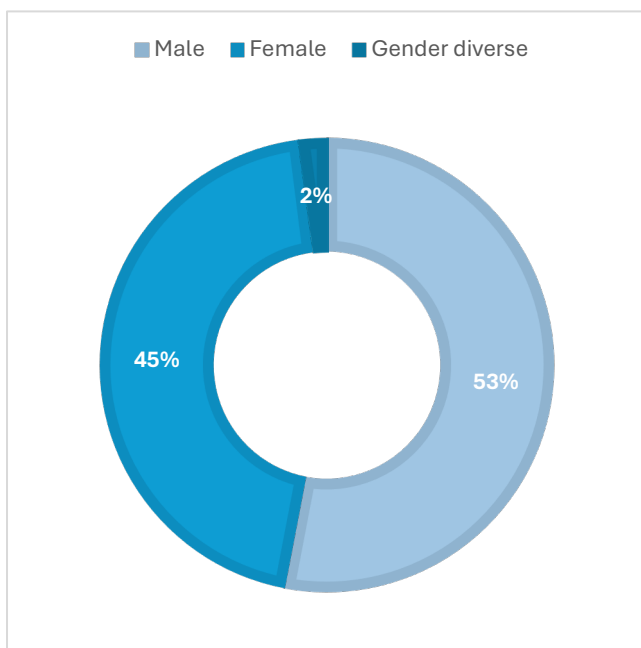| Ethnicity	%
European	37%
Māori	34%
Pacific	15%
Asian	10%
MELAA	5%
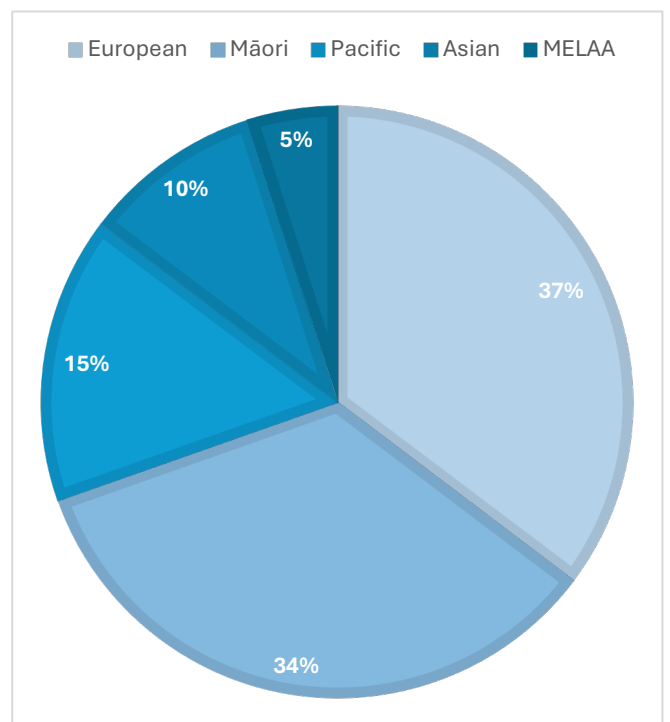
Series regular roles

Series regular roles – Ethnicity and Gender

Series regular roles – Gender

Series regular roles – Ethnicity
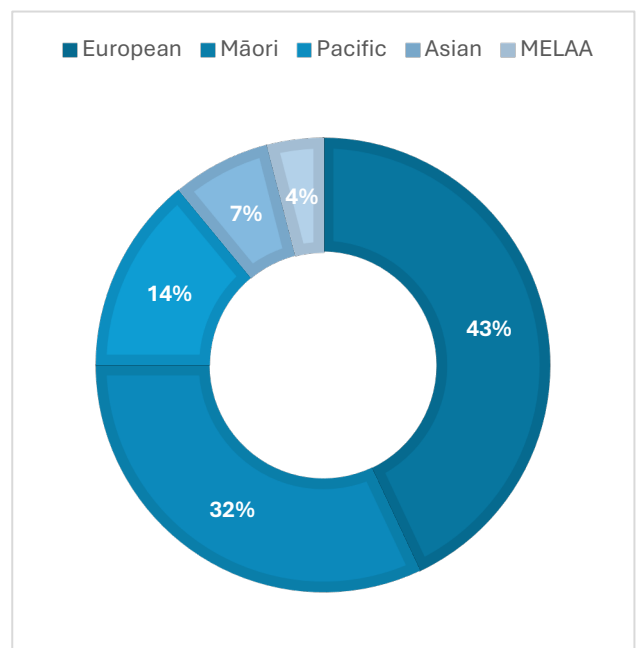
Recurring

Recurring roles – Ethnicity and gender

Bar chart showing recurring roles by ethnicity and gender (Male, Female, Gender diverse):
- European: Male 21%, Female 28%, Gender diverse 3%
- Māori: Male 11%, Female 12%
- Pacific: Male 2%, Female 5%
- Asian: Male 5%, Female 6%
- MELAA: Male 1%, Female 6%

Recurring roles – Gender

Pie chart – Gender: Male 40%, Female 57%, Gender diverse 3%

Recurring roles - Ethnicity

Pie chart – Ethnicity: European 52%, Māori 23%, Pacific 7%, Asian 11%, MELAA 7%
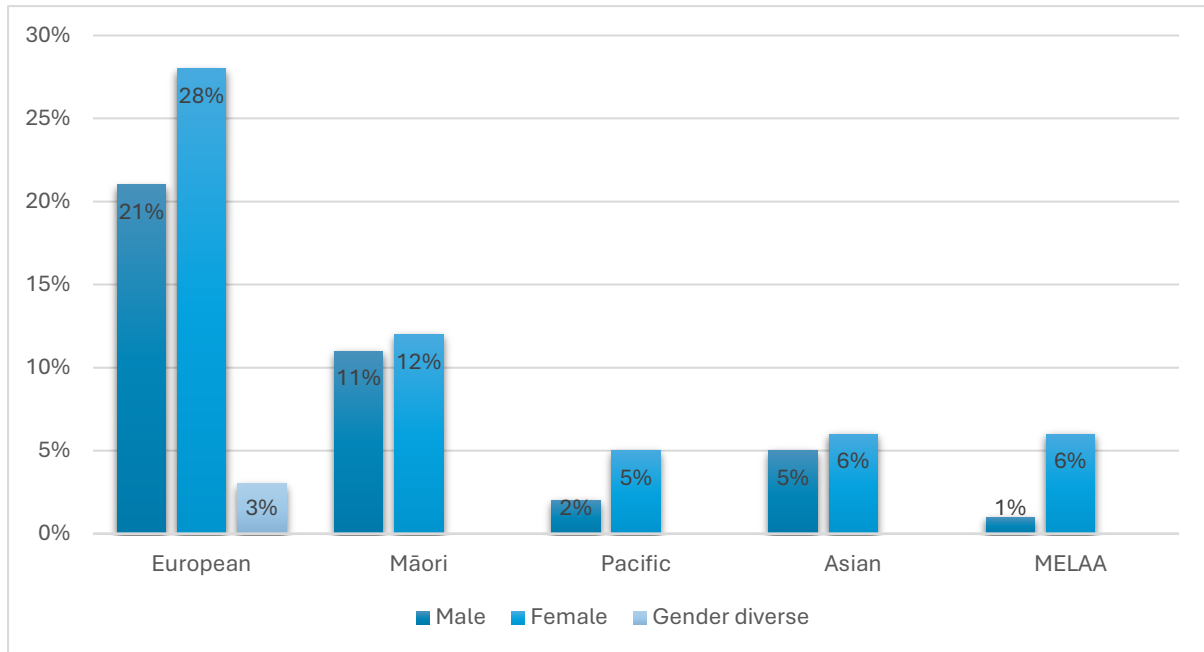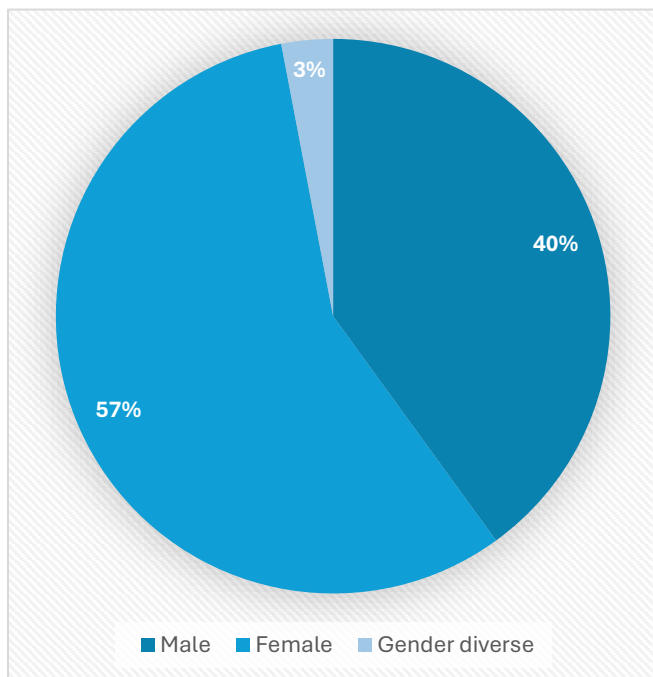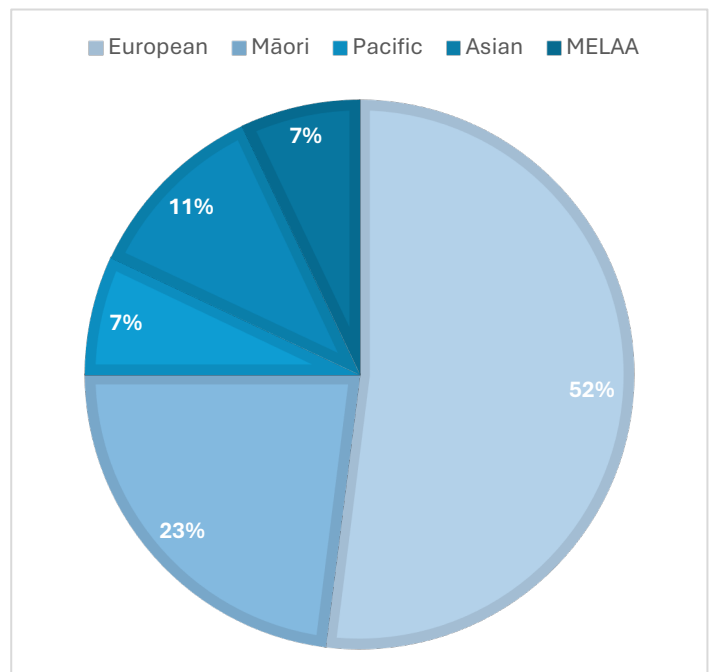
Guest stars

Guest stars – Ethnicity and gender
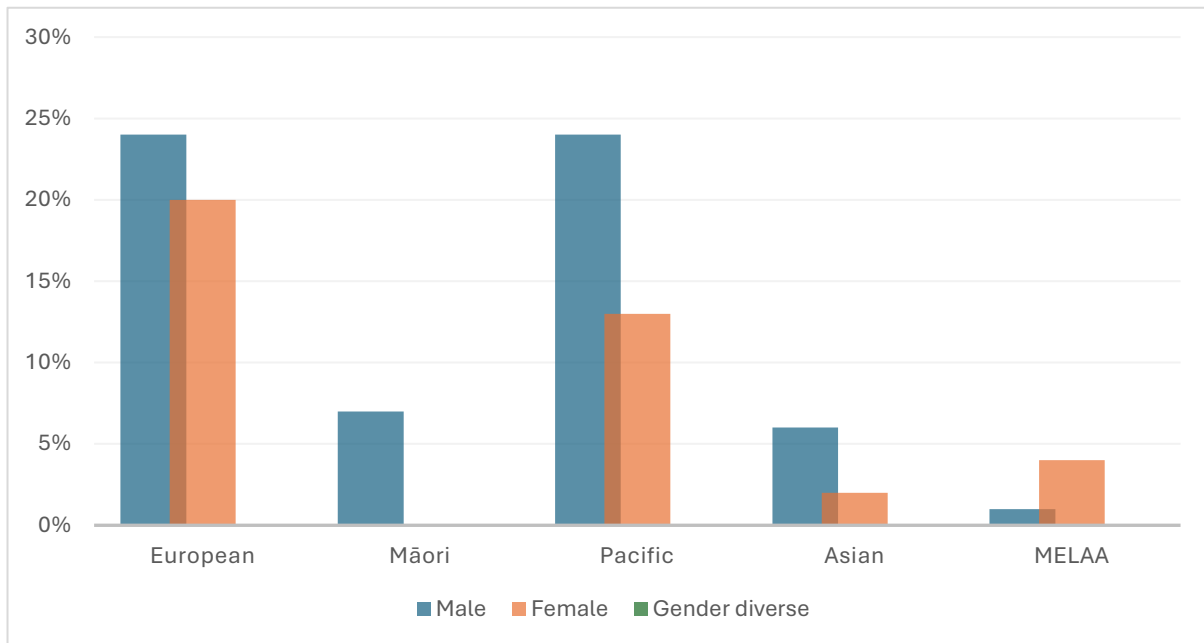
Guest stars - Gender
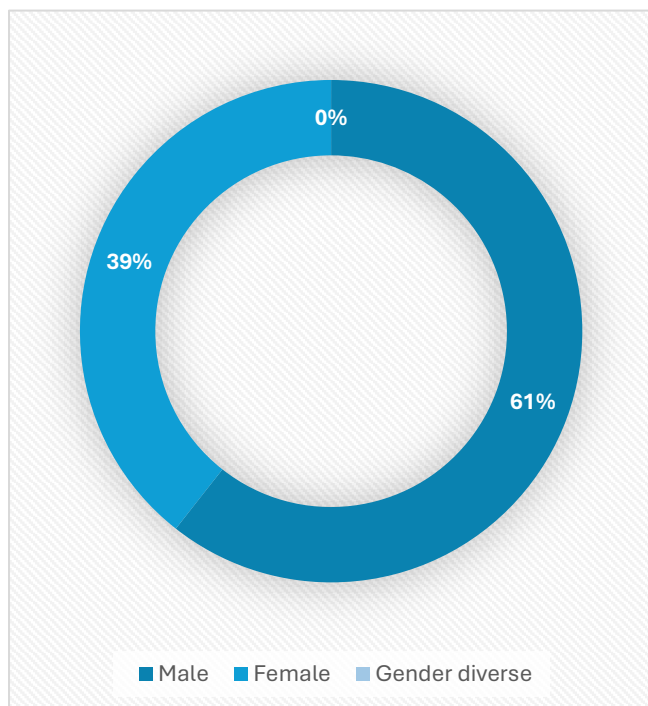
Guest stars - Ethnicity
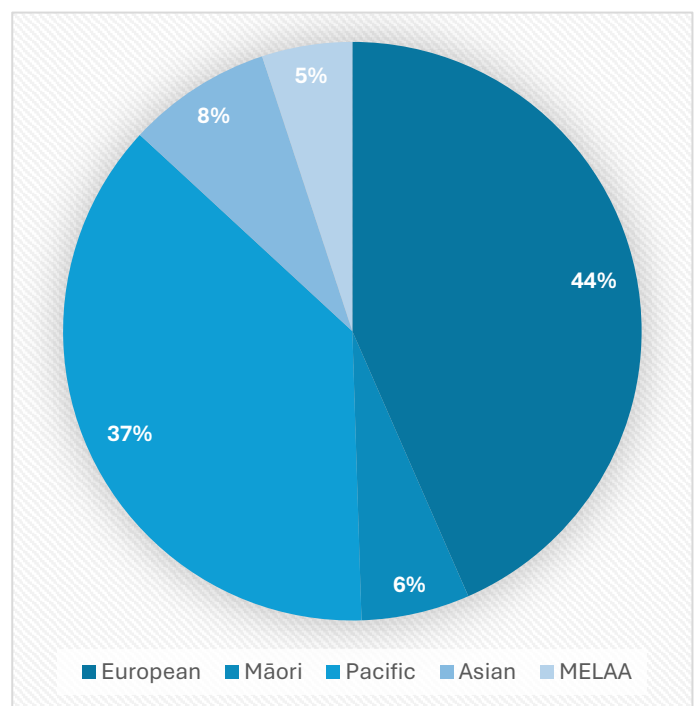
Disability and neurodivergence[26]

Disability and neurodivergence – role type
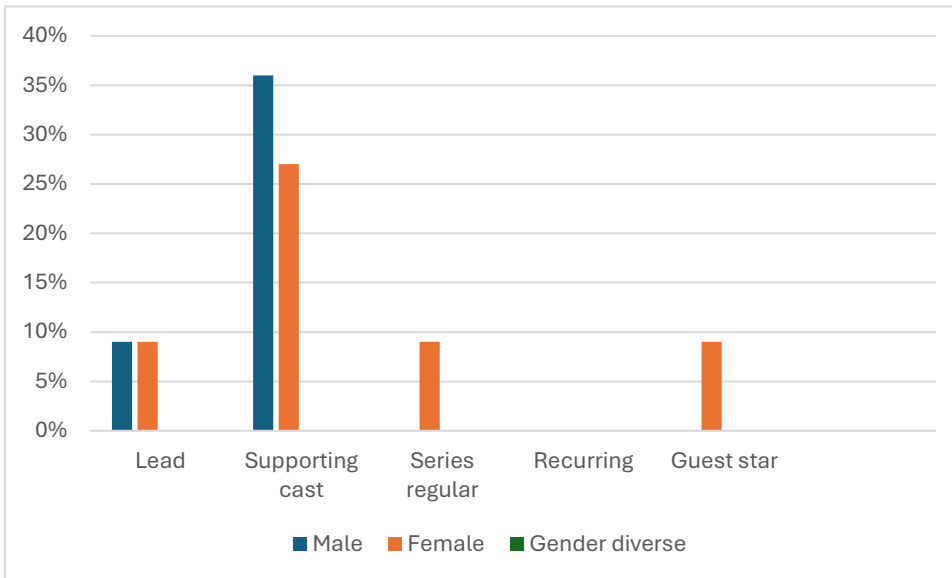
Disability and neurodivergence – Physical and mental illness or neurodivergence
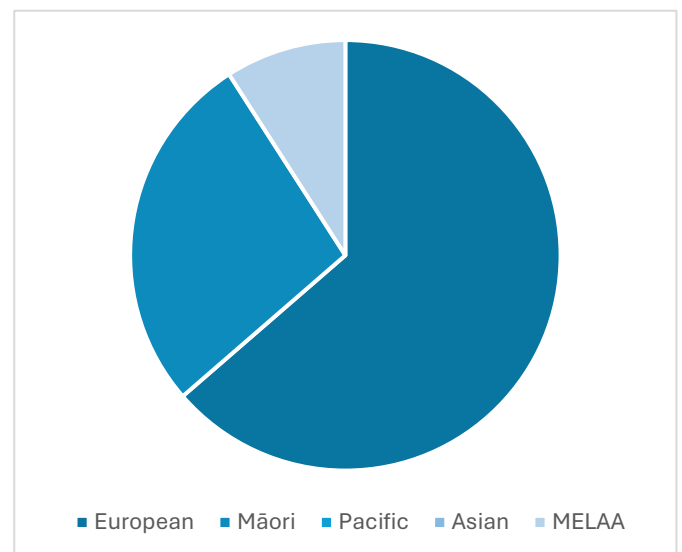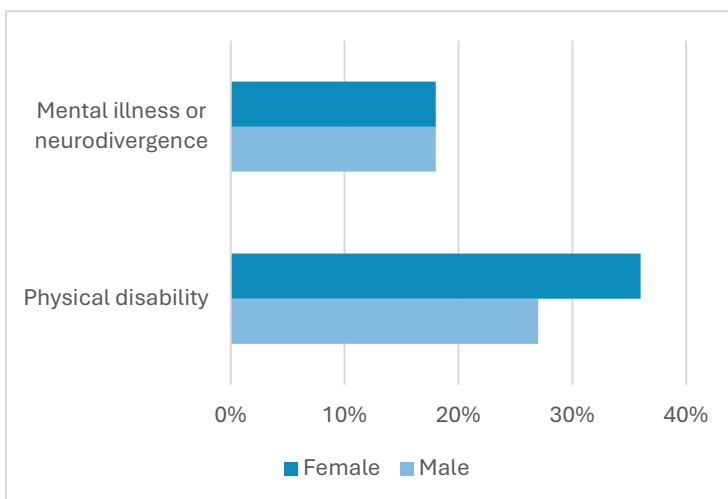
Disability and neurodivergence - ethnicity

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[26] Due to the low number of characters in both the neurodivergent and disability categories, they were grouped into one for reporting purposes. We plan to report on each category separately in future should the numbers increase.

Sexual orientation – Non-Heterosexual Characters[27]

Non-heterosexual characters - Ethnicity

Chart legend: European, Māori, Pacific, Asian, MELAA

Values: European 38%, Māori 31%, Pacific 13%, Asian 19%, MELAA 0%
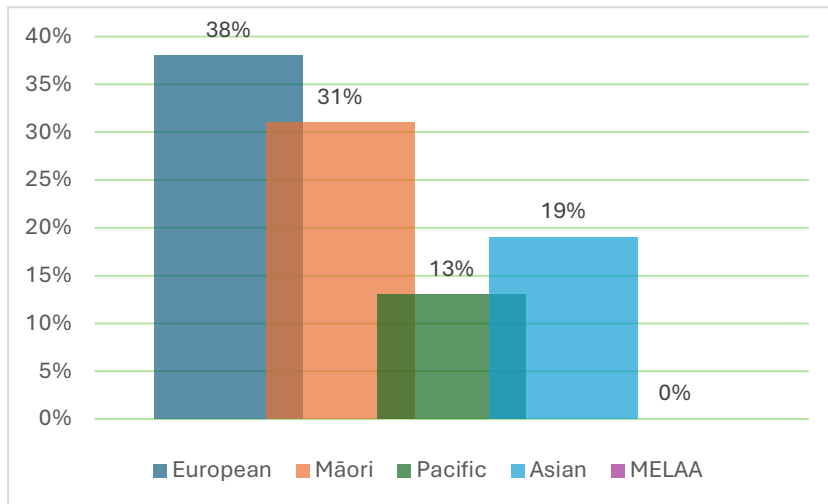
Non-heterosexual characters – Role types

Lead 43%
Supporting cast 43%
Series regular 14%

Legend: Lead, Supporting cast, Series regular, Recurring, Guest star

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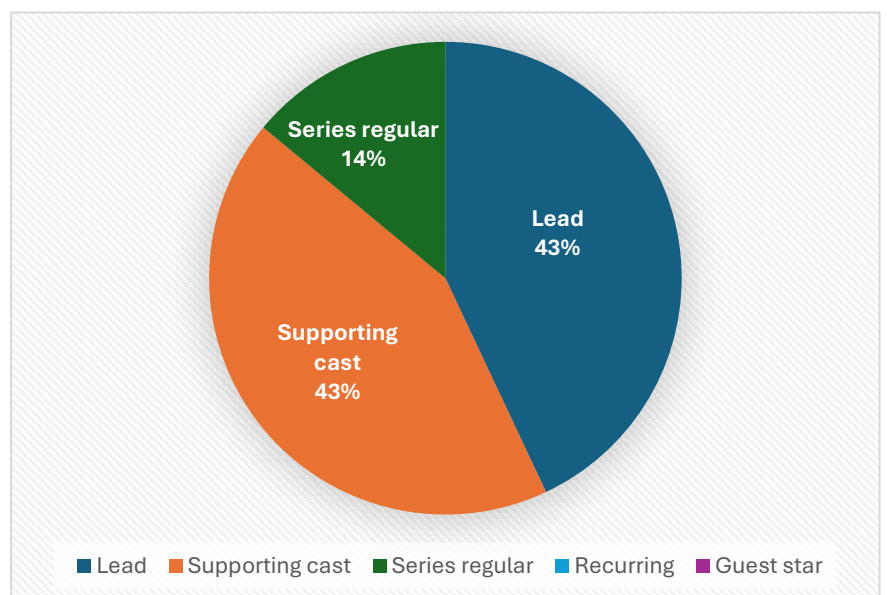
[27] This section focuses on non-heterosexual characters as 96% of characters were identified as heterosexual, either by outright statement, context, or omission. These graphs show the ethnicities and role types of 4% of characters who were identified as non-heterosexual.

Supporting Roles

- Over half of all supporting characters were female with female characters outnumbering their male counterparts in the Asian, MELAA, and Māori categories. This is partially because of the female supporting characters in projects like *Homebound 3.0, Only In Aotearoa 3: Wāhine Edition,* and *Miles From Nowhere*.
- Asian and MELAA male characters were underrepresented compared to their population benchmarks.
- Supporting characters from Māori and European backgrounds were almost equally represented and made up two-thirds of roles in this category.

Series regular roles

- Male characters outnumbered female characters by 8% in series regular roles, notably in the Māori, Pacific, and MELAA categories thanks to projects like *Kura s3, Miles From Nowhere,* and *Duckrockers*.
- European characters had the largest proportion at 43%, 11% more than the next-largest representative group (Māori characters).
- There were no male Asian series regular roles.

Recurring roles

- European female characters made up almost 30% of recurring characters, more than all Māori recurring roles combined. Over half of all recurring characters were of European descent, including all gender diverse roles in this category.
- Female representation was the strongest in this category at 57%, with male characters only making up 40%.

Guest stars

- Male representation was the strongest in this category at 61%, with the single highest concentrations coming from Pacific and European males. The latter can be partly credited to content like *The Tongan Rogue General* and *I Got You s2*, two Pacific-focused short-form projects with different guest stars appearing in every episode.
- The closest gender parity was between European guest stars. In contrast, all Māori guest stars were male.

Disability and neurodivergence

- Most characters with disabilities came from European backgrounds with no Asian or Pacific characters represented with disabilities or neurodivergence.
- Although 54% of characters with disabilities were female, the highest single concentration of disabled roles came from male supporting characters. Some of this can be explained by the male supporting roles in *Spinal Destination*, a comedy that takes place in a spinal rehabilitation unit.
- Most depictions of disability were physical.
- Only 2% of characters overall had any form of disability or were neurodivergent.

Sexual orientation

- 4% of characters were identified as being non-heterosexual and they predominantly came from European and Māori backgrounds. There was some non-heterosexual representation in characters from Asian and Pacific backgrounds.[28]
- All non-heterosexual characters were series regulars or above, meaning they played roles with above-average screen time and importance to the storyline. Examples of projects with such characters are *Rūrangi s2, Ships In The Night, Double Parked*, and *The Boy, the Queen, and Everything in Between*.

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[28] While reading these results, please keep in mind that sexual orientation does not relate to gender identity.

Unique and universal: Diverse stories are Kiwi stories

Raised By Refugees (season 2) comedy, Prime (now Sky Open)

Raised By Refugees (s2) continued the story of the Assadi family as they navigate life as South-Asian Kiwis on the North Shore in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Based on comedian Pax Assadi's childhood, the show examines the refugee and migrant experience from a multigenerational perspective. Lead character Pax loves basketball, hip-hop, and comedy, but finds his cultural identity and faith tested by the temptations of high school. His parents Afnan (Iranian and Christian) and Safia (Pakistani and Bahá'í) balance their differences as Safia runs her own business and Afnan pursues university education. Little brother Mahan and grandad Masood provide comedic relief while their respective ages give them security of place in New Zealand society.

Producer Cam Bakker noted the positive effects of representation on creatives and the communities they're reflecting: "As has been an all-too-familiar catch-cry from minority comedians and creatives, these people grew up not seeing faces like their own on-screen. The show's focus on refugee experiences allowed for a deeper understanding of cultural integration, identity, and the challenges that refugee communities face, particularly in a New Zealand context."

"Apu from The Simpsons was the only person I could really relate to growing up. He wasn't Iranian or Pakistani, but close enough ay? Nowadays, as a Middle Eastern adult, I see more Middle Eastern men as terrorists and freedom fighters on the 6 o'clock news than anything positive. I want my presence on television to contribute to changing that trend for young and old Middle Eastern and South Asian people in NZ" – Pax Assadi.

Kalyani Nagarajan, who plays Safia, connected with her character as well as the challenges that young Pax faces. "Many people can relate to having an immigrant mother trying to raise their first-generation child. As a first-generation daughter, I constantly feel this obligation to make my parents happy and proud of me with the choices I make in my life."

The show garnered positive reviews from local and Australian media and was acquired by the Australian streaming service Stan in 2022. It was also well-received by audiences who appreciated its handling of complicated topics with humour and heart.[29]

"Season 3?? Please keep making this! It's such an amazing show"

"I just finished season 1 in a cliffhanger. When can we watch season 2 in Australia?"

"Binge watched season 1 as it was impossible to stop watching. Looking forward to season 3. Season 2 left us with a tight knot in the stomach..... You have the gift of storytelling @paxassadi and a superb team that clearly believes in you and your story".

"What a funny, brilliantly written show...it does deep into really difficult issues and turns it into comedy gold. So glad [Pax] made another series as the first one was brilliant".

"Please, please, please make another season"

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[29] https://www.smh.com.au/culture/tv-and-radio/spirited-kiwi-comedy-has-plenty-of-cheek-and-family-charm-20220715-p5b1uq.html
https://thespinoff.co.nz/pop-culture/24-02-2022/raised-by-refugees-brings-my-immigrant-childhood-to-life-with-even-more-laughter

"Man, Kiwis really make great TV. Honestly, as an Aussie, I shouldn't admit this, but they do much better stuff than us. Great feel-good show that reminds me what life was like for people I cared about during that time".

Audience feedback

Miles From Nowhere, comedy, Prime (now Sky Open)

On March 15th 2019, New Zealand suffered the worst mass shooting in its history when a terrorist took the lives of 51 individuals at Al Noor Mosque and the Lindwood Islamic Centre. This tragic event brought Muslim Kiwis to the forefront of public discourse and highlighted the lack of representation around their experiences in, and contributions to, New Zealand society. Filling this gap was *Miles From Nowhere*, the first local programme to centre Muslim Kiwi characters. Its premise was bold and unique - aspiring singer/songwriter (and Muslim) Said develops a secret friendship with Gabe, the SIS agent tasked with monitoring him after a misunderstanding at his mosque. The show tackles hefty subjects like countersurveillance, bigotry, and alienation with a comedic edge while normalising the cultural complexities of Muslim-Kiwi culture.

In service of authenticity, Said is not a flawless protagonist. Actor Arlo Gren, who portrayed Said, described him as being "aimless" and "in a deep, deep hole"[30]. Like many young adults, he struggles with his mental health, finding his purpose, living at home, and a recent breakup with Marwa, his outspoken and principled ex-fiancé. Played by Roxie Mohebbi, Marwa rebuffs stereotypes of Muslim women as docile and subjugated, and this characterisation "resonated not only with [Mohebbi] but with audiences around the

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[30] https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/afternoons/audio/2018926373/miles-from-nowhere-a-unique-nz-comedy

world".[31] Rounding out the cast are Ahmad, Said's abrasive yet charming friend, Shadia and Soraya, Said's cajoling (but loving) mother and sister, and Waheed, a Māori convert to Islam and the affable local Imam.

In addition to resonating with viewers across the motu, *Miles From Nowhere* prompted discussion about immigrant and Kiwi-Muslim experiences across local media.
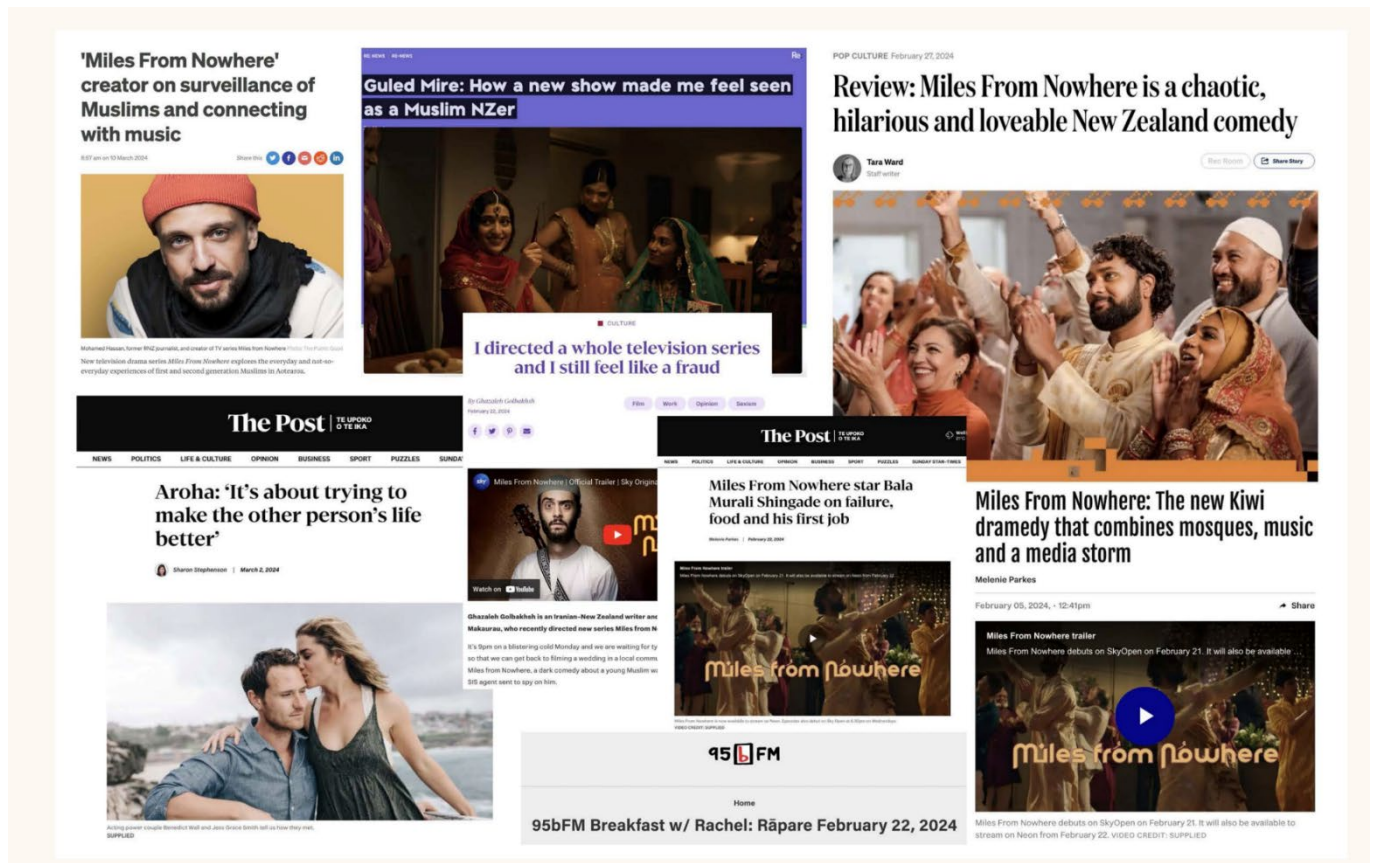
Ahikāroa (season 5) drama, Whakaata Māori/MĀORI+

Ahikāroa is a long-running bilingual drama that follows the tumultuous personal lives of a rangatahi ensemble cast. Season 5 characters include fan-favourite Geo, bossy Hemi, selfless Te Ururangi, Kid, a spiritually gifted Tohunga, raucous Kuini, and adventurous Haki. With five seasons under its belt, the show has a strong fan base that enjoys the mix of melodrama, realism, and spirituality as the characters go through love, loss, trauma,

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[31] https://www.renews.co.nz/how-miles-from-nowhere-made-me-feel-seen-as-a-muslim-new-zealander/

and redemption. Producer Ataraiti Waretini noted that audiences "love the show, want it to run all-year around, and want more than one episode at a time".

Ahikāroa resonated with international audiences for portraying the highs and lows of young urban Māori life in realistic, yet entertaining, ways. The ensemble cast indulge in sex, partying, and bad behaviour, as they balance adult responsibilities, tension-filled plots, and interpersonal dramas. As a bilingual show, *Ahikāroa* also spotlights reo Māori to audiences at home and abroad. Season 5 was recognised for its storytelling, winning Best Ensemble Cast and Best International Director at the British Web Awards and receiving the award for Best First Nations Series at the Melbourne WebFest.

Ahikāroa also adopted a 'by Māori for Māori' position, giving its many Māori cast members and creatives a strong training ground to develop their skills. Examples include cast members Nepia Takuira-Mita, Mataara Stokes, and Awhimai Fraser, whose experience on *Ahikāroa* led to opportunities on *Shortland Street* and Disney [32]. Such secondary benefits demonstrate the value of the local screen ecosystem while delivering value to viewers.

> *"I can't just watch one episode, I have to binge watch the whole series with Ahikāroa".*
>
> *"I watched the first episode and can't wait for the rest!! Wish I could binge the whole series!"*
>
> *"I caaaaaan't!! 2 episodes a week – I need my whole season binge!"*
>
> *"I need to know what happens next!!"*

Audience feedback

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[32] *The Lion King Reo Māori*, *Moana 2*, and *Frozen Reo Māori* respectively

Far North**,** drama, Three, Three Now

Far North depicts the explosive true story behind NZ's biggest drug bust. Ed and Heather are a married couple living a quiet life in Ahipara. Unbeknownst to them, a ship carrying half a billion dollars' worth of methamphetamine is stranded off the coast of Ninety Mile Beach. The ship's crew –women from Hong Kong, who speak onscreen in Mandarin – are slowly starving to death, as the Tongan-Australian gang entrusted with retrieving the drugs struggle comically to accomplish their task. Audiences follow Ed and Heather as they are drawn into this web of crime, bad decisions, and danger, before eventually foiling the plans of a Chinese drug trafficking gang thousands of kilometres away.

Far North garnered wide and consistent viewership and drove a "significant uptake" in Three Now registrations[33]. It received seven nominations at the 2024 NZ TV Awards and won in the Best Costume Design category. Audiences appreciated that the show combined the intrigue of international narcotics smuggling with the no-fuss attitude that characterises small-town NZ.

> *"Comedy of the year. Nearly suffered a laughter-induced injury watching the boat launch scene. This show will sell worldwide."*

> *"I'm really loving this series! The cast are absolutely amazing, especially Robyn Malcolm and Tem Morrison."*

> *"It's truly excellent, really enjoying it."*

> *"We're loving it, great work!"*

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[33] https://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/temuera-morrison-and-robyn-malcolms-crime-thriller-far-north-hits-huge-viewing-milestone/AHJRK3M4QFGR5MLRPBBQRQWZNE/

"Congratulations, doing what you do best, quality drama. Chur for the mahi"

"I love how their [Ling, Bi, and Jin Hui] POV is told in this story"

Audience feedback

Far North's cast also recognised the importance of local storytelling and authentic, challenging representation.

"We need more of our stories, we need to be reflecting more of our own stuff to our own people so it's been great to be doing this and being part of this and show a bit of the North"- Temuera Morrison

"I think through all the Asian cinema, significant movies, TV shows, you don't see these characters, not often you don't see it, because it's always been marginalised...Asian women always being portrayed like victims but weak rather than a fighter, rather than this rich layered character...so it's amazing, that's why I say it's my dream character" - Xiao Hu

Appendix A: Projects in scope

Project	Genre	Platform
One Lane Bridge s3	Drama	TVNZ 1/TVNZ +
Kāinga	Drama	RNZ
Ahikāroa s5	Drama	Whakaata Māori/MĀORI+
Rūrangi s2	Drama	Prime (now Sky Open)
Ka Whawhai Tonu - Struggle Without End	Drama	Theatrical release
Far North	Drama	THREE/ThreeNow
The Gone	Drama	TVNZ 1/TVNZ +
Friends Like Her	Drama	THREE/ThreeNow
Testify	Drama	TVNZ 2/TVNZ +
Kairākau s3	Drama	Whakaata Māori/MĀORI+
Mysterious Ways	Drama	TVNZ 1/TVNZ +
Ships In The Night	Drama	TikTok
Duckrockers	Comedy	TVNZ 2/TVNZ +
Kura s3	Comedy	TVNZ +
Inky Pinky Ponky	Comedy	Whakaata Māori/MĀORI+
Double Parked	Comedy	THREE/ThreeNow
Not Even	Comedy	Prime (now Sky Open)
Educators s3	Comedy	TVNZ +
Long x Xia	Comedy	TikTok
n00b	Comedy	TikTok
The Tongan Rogue General and the 13 Chambers of South Auckland	Comedy	TikTok
Raised By Refugees s2	Comedy	Prime (now Sky Open)
Miles From Nowhere	Comedy	Prime (now Sky Open)
Kid Sister s2	Comedy	TVNZ +
I Got You s2	Comedy	RNZ
Spinal Destination	Comedy	Prime (now Sky Open)
Only In Aotearoa 3: Wāhine Edition	Comedy	Whakaata Māori/MĀORI+
The Boy, The Queen, And Everything in Between	Comedy	TVNZ +
The 9-5ers	Comedy	TikTok
Homebound 3.0	Comedy	THREE/ThreeNow

Appendix B: Role quality definition

Role quality	Definition in scope
Lead	Person performing has a named character, is on screen for a high proportion of production and / or is featured in all episodes. This role is key to the narrative and plot, and mentioned in synopsis, as well as promotional materials such as posters, marketing and related articles.
Supporting Cast	Role is a named character, and integral to the plot and narrative, albeit not central. They are on screen and featured for a significant amount of content or across 80% or more episodes. The Supporting Cast roles are mentioned in related promotional materials.
Series Regular	This role is an established and core cast member, will typically have a named character and be important to narrative and plot development. Series Regular contributes with frequency but may not be in every episode / storyline, however, will be featured in upwards of 60% of screen time. Series Regular may also be a character that comes in and out of a longstanding series.
Recurring	Role is normally a named character but may also refer to profession /character description and is featured across multiple episodes, albeit with less frequency or relevance to ongoing narrative. This role will appear more sporadically or with less dialogue.
Guest star	This role is typically a one-off appearance or a role wherein the guest is placed in the part of a judge, special guest, panel member etc. Sometimes, these characters are named or can be seen 'playing themselves'. Guest Star roles can also be involved with the plot or have a connection to the main storyline in a meaningful way.

Appendix C: Character adjectives

Asian

Female	Male
Anxious	Brave
Assimilated	Chaotic
Beauty therapist	Conflicted
Bright	Dreamer
Doctor	Drug lord
Dry humour	Eccentric
Energetic	Father
First generation	Fixer
Immaculate	Funny
Impeccable	Gang leader
Mother	Hard-working
Mechanic	Popular
Pragmatic	Ruthless
Serious	Translator
Sexy	Wise beyond his years
Smart	
Successful	

European

Female	Male	Gender diverse
Antagonistic	Billionaire	Awkward
Attention-seeking	Boyfriend	Non-binary
Aunt	Brother	
Confident	Charismatic	
Controlling	Criminal	
Detective	Confident	
Devoted	Dealer	
Difficult	Detective	
Fearless	Doctor	
Feminine	Egotistical	
Fiery	Entitled	
Independent	Farmer	
Inexperienced	Killer	
Judge	Leader	

Loyal	Magnate	
Manipulative	Mentor	
Pragmatic	Mob boss	
Responsible	Narcissist	
Single mother	Powerful	
Strong	Troubled	

Māori

Female	Male	Gender diverse
Aunty	Ambitious	Activist
Detective	Calm	Beautiful
Dutiful	Charming	Determined
Encouraging	Cheeky	Fiercely intelligent
Fun	Confident	Intense
Generous	Father	Leader
Inscrutable	Formidable	Mesmerizing
Kind	Gawky	Podcaster
Mentor	Hard-working	Popular
Mother	Humble	Quick-witted
No-nonsense	Loyal	Smart
Sister	Mentor	Sophisticated
Speaks her mind	Respected	Trans
Supportive	Sensitive	
Tenacious	Uncle	
Wise		

MELAA

Female	Male
Best friend	Abrasive
Defiant	Charming
Driven	Creative
Hardworking	Disillusioned
Independent	Melancholic
Mother	Outspoken
Nurse	Singer-songwriter
Studious	

Pacific

Female	Male	Gender diverse
Alpha female	Brash	Fabulous
Bright	Bright	Fakaleitī
Detective	Cheeky	
Dogged	Dad	
Funny	Doting	
Hard-working	Enigmatic	
Lazy	Fallen	
Loyal	Funny	
Matriarch	Gang leader	
Mother	Geeky	
Overbearing	Goth	
Party girl	Humble	
Proud	Loner	
Self-assured	Optimistic	
Street smart	Overachiever	
Strong-willed	Overconfident	
	Philanthropic	
	Philosopher	
	Quiet	
	Swagger	

Appendix E: Glossary

Key term	Definition in scope
Disability	Use of term as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 1, "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."
Diversity	Refers to the importance of recognising and representing the plurality of human experience, particularly across categories such as age, gender, ethnicity and race, sexual orientation, economic status, and health and disability.
Ethnicity	Ethnicity and ethnic groups refer to cultural characteristics and is self-identified. Ethnicity is not one single homogenous category, and this research refers to the multidimensional and intercultural dynamics that make up ethnic profiles.
Equity	The imperative to show fair, varied, and nuanced portrayals of various socio-cultural categories, especially those categories and/or audiences which have not been historically and/or typically visible on screen or within mainstream narratives. Equity also recognises the ways in which these groups/audiences have been structurally excluded or misrepresented because of classism, colonialism, bias, and other prejudicial forces.
Gender	Socially constructed system for classification of characteristics that relate to aspects and/or qualities of femininity and masculinity. Gender is not to be understood as the same as sex/ sexual orientation. Key words that might occur in this research regarding gender can be tagged as: girl, boy, man, woman, gender diverse, trans & transgender, fa'afafine, gender queer, non-binary.
Representation	Exploring the way content portrays society as well as how personal characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, identity etc. are shown on screen, how engaging and authentic these presentations may be and whether they are negative exaggerations or stereotyped examples.