"Oh, he's gay!" The Perception of Gay Men of their Portrayal in Television and Film

by
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts with
Honours in Social Anthropology

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
April 2016

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Abstract:

Currently, there is little research on the perception of gay men of their portrayals on television and in film. Thus far, literature on such portrayals on the small and silver screens has taken a general survey of men and women of all sexual orientations. This qualitative research explores the perceptions of a group of gay men, as garnered in a focus group, by presenting a curation of TV and movie clips to generate discussion. The main findings suggest that shows and movies are apt to illustrate gay men as overly sexual, flamboyant, and reliant on the act of 'coming out'. The idea of 'coming out', as a focus of the participants, was emphasized as an integral part of a gay man's experience and identity. Participants stressed the importance of recognizing one's homosexuality, as a practical act of saying the words – 'I am gay' – aloud, and they also highlighted the perpetual process of coming out to everyone. Other findings in this research highlight general stereotypes of gay men that establish a standard of 'gayness', which is advanced through these media forms. This standard is utilized by both gay and straight individuals as a reference for what it means to be gay – that is, what it looks and even sounds like to be a gay man. In the case of heterosexual individuals, this research highlights that the portrayal of gay men on television and in film can serve to condition how straight people think about gay men in general. This standard of 'gayness', however, serves as a form of role modeling that serves to inform gay youth how they should act. This anthropological work is a glimpse into how gay men perceive their portrayals on TV and in film, but further study is required to contribute to this very important topic.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Emma Whelan. The task of supervising a group of aspiring social scientists, as they design and execute thesis work, is certainly not an easy one. Despite this daunting task, Dr. Whelan had given me her constant support, a wealth of resources, and invaluable feedback. Truly, thank you!

I would also like to thank the participants of my focus group, who took time out of their schedules to discuss this topic in great length. Their willingness to discuss the topic of this thesis, their thoughtful consideration of the questions put before them, their candor, and their donation of time are things that I wish to recognize. Quite simply, my research – indeed any social research – could not have occurred without the generous support and insightful contributions of participants like them. I cannot thank you enough!

Finally, I wish to thank my classmates and my family for their support. To my fellow researchers in sociology and anthropology: thank you for your companionship and for listening to me talk about my research. The last thank you, but certainly not the least, goes to my family for their support throughout my life and my academic career.

Sincerely, I thank you all!

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Introduction

"Oh a great deal of pains he's taken and a pretty price he's paid
To hide his poll or dye it of a mentionable shade;
Bu they've pulled the beggar's hat off for the world to see and stare,
And they're haling him to justice for the colour of his hair."
(Housman, 1988, p. 217)

As a social scientist, I cannot help but watch a television program with a gay character and wonder: 'why that portrayal?'; and 'why not that portrayal?'. These portrayals, which are equally about what is not shown as it is about what is shown, affect the ways that I have thought about the gay community and even myself. As an openly gay male, I have experienced and witnessed analogous cases to A.E. Housman's young sinner – that is, I have experienced and witnessed the changing of one's image to be more accepted. In the context of being gay, I have personally tried to change my hair by dying it to a more 'mentionable shade' (to borrow from Housman again). There have been social situations in which I have hidden certain traits of mine that might be interpreted as being 'gay', while in other instances I have been less worried about such traits being evident. In any case, I simply go back to what I have seen on television and in films.

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The research topic of this project is the perceptions of gay men of the portrayal of gay men in the mass media, as seen in presentations on television and in film. My thesis will answer the following question: *how do gay men respond to representations of gay men in the mass media?* To answer this question, I conducted a focus group interview in an attempt to analyze how *gay men perceive* such presentations on television and in film.

It is important to note that, as a matter of research design, this thesis will only be looking at television and film for two reasons: (1) for practicality with the time restraints of an honours thesis, and (2) to enable comparison with earlier literature. On the first point – practically – I would argue that the sheer number of media forms that could be analyzed on this topic would demand more than an undergraduate thesis. The use of television and film clips provided a video curation that was easily presented to participants, while it was the formats of TV and film that served as a reference point for my selection of clips. The literature had pointed to several television shows and films that I had either directly used in my research, or that I had used to guide my choice of other shows and films to generate discussion around key themes and issues.   The second pointemphasized the advantage of having readily available statistics on gay characters on TV, as well as having quality literature on these types of media formats.

Finally, a burning question for readers might be – why only gay men? As a gay man, I was able to easily recruit participants and to subsequently build a good rapport with them as an 'insider'. In addition to this practicality, however, I also have a vested interest in the gay community. This is not to say that I have no interest in other members of the LGBTQ community, of course, but I certainly relate more to the struggles faced by gay men in a hegemonically masculine world.

The Importance of Television and Film

Anthropological research on the portrayal of gay men in the mass media is limited (Levina & Waldo, 2000, p. 739). Much of the empirical data that has been collected on this topic has been based on content analysis, which does nothing to go beyond the speculation over what influence, if any, the mass media has over how people are perceived by others (Brown, 2002, p. 43). From the literature review it is clear that Media Framing Theory is the most pertinent social theory that has been articulated concerning mass media influence on the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of people. Media Framing Theory posits that the news both supplies focus on a particular issue/event and then frames that issue/event within a certain meaning (de Vreese, 2005, p. 53). In essence, this theory posits that the media tells people what is important in the world, as well as how people should think about certain events, issues, and even people (Brown, 2002, p. 44).

My project is not confined to news outlets – its intent is to look at various platforms on television, as well as varied content on the big screen (film). In a more general sense, the mass media influences the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of people by portraying norms as an accurate representation of culture (Gerbner, Gross, & Morgan, 2002, p. 51). Norms are embedded and reinforced in our culture through the gradual and cumulative process of repeated exposure to them in media (DeLamater & Hasday, 2007, p. 262-263). Brown (2002) likens the repeated exposure to media forms and their messages to a gravitational pull – this pull bringing us toward the center that, as a point, represents shared concepts and expectations about reality (p. 44). In addition to this

cumulative exposure, media messages influence people via the consistency of similar messages across different platforms (Levina & Waldo, 2000, p. 741). Gross (1991) confirms this last notion by stating that, "the blending of stylistic conventions allows for greater efficacy and mutual support in packaging and diffusing common values" (p. 21). The mass media influences people by reinforcing stereotypes and continually defining what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Brown, 2002, p. 44).

The underlying point here is that media portrayals, regardless of content, can influence the way society views and treats different groups of people (Tobiasz, 2006, p. 29). In many respects, gay men have become much more visible in mainstream media than has been the case in the past (Shugart, 2003, p. 67; Levina & Waldo, 2000, p. 739; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 330). This shift occurred in the 1970s, as the gay rights movement emerged. Media representations prior to the 1970s depicted gay men as effeminate, deviant, and as a social problem that needed to be solved (Shugart, 2003, p. 68). Such representations during the 1970s flourished on the television platform, which led to the articulation of the Cultivation Theory (Brown, 2002, p. 44). According to this theory, television is the most powerful media influence upon culture, as it is through access to television that people receive higher exposures to mediated ideologies, facts, and relationships that define and legitimize the current social order (Brown, 2002, p. 44). The increase of visibility of gay men in the media, over the last forty years, has been a result a social and political shift (Shugart, 2003, p. 67). In this sense, ideas that did not fit in the norm of society – that is, they were alternative ideas – no longer presented the implied social and political threat to the family that they once did (Shugart, 2003, p. 67). Although, from my personal experience as a gay, the argument can be made that we have

advanced in the acceptance and/or toleration of homosexuality, it is important to note that there is still progress to be made. As gay men become more visible in mass media, the concern becomes how it is that gay men are portrayed, perceived, and ultimately treated vis-à-vis those portrayals (Tobiasz, 2006, p. 105).

In the 1990s, the visibility of gay men continued to increase with gay characters appearing on television shows like *NYPD Blue*, *Friends*, *Dawson's Creek* and *Will & Grace*, and in films like *Philadelphia* and *In & Out* (Shugart, 2003, p. 69). However, many scholars have argued that this apparent inclusion into the mainstream media may, in fact, serve to reify the dominant discourse of heteronormativity (Shugart, 2003, p. 67). This reification of heteronormativity occurs, as Walters (2001) argues, in that, "gay identity is made legitimate only through assimilation into the dominant heterosexual gestalt" (p. 18). Homosexuality is only understood, as it is by the masses through the media, in relation to heterosexuality (Shugart, 2003, p. 70). In support of this point, Fejes and Petrich (1993) state:

> While the blatant negative stereotypes of the past no longer consistently occupy daily media content, the more subtle images of heterosexually-defined homosexuality are equally damaging to affirmative gay and lesbian identity politics (p. 412)

An example of this heterosexually-defined homosexuality, which forms (or which is part of) the heterosexual gestalt, is evident in the television show *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) (Shugart, 2003, p. 70). In this popular television show, Will Truman (Eric McCormack), as the lead protagonist, was a gay man who had a close friendship with a heterosexual woman named Grace Adler (Debra Messing) (Shugart, 2003, p. 71; Streitmatter, 2009, p. 115). This intense friendship was even mirrored in the secondary characters of gay man

Jack McFarland (Sean Hayes) and straight woman Karen Walker (Megan Mullally) (Shugart, 2003, p. 71). In presenting the gay man as a duo with his 'hetero-gal', the former is forced into a male-female relationship that is dictated by the heteronormativity (Jacobs, 1998, p. 20). The gay character is given a heterosexual signifier – the 'hetero-gal' – as a safer way to present the gay character to the audience (Jacobs, 1998, p. 20; Shugart, 2003, p. 72).

In the early 2000s, the portrayals of gay men in television continued with shows like *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 2). The presentation of gay men in each of these shows, however, differed quite a bit. *Will & Grace* continued the comedic representation of its two gay characters, which echoed the desire of the show's co-producer, Dennis Hensley that "[t]he only thing we're trying to force down people's throats is comedy" (Hensley, 2003, as cited in Streitmatter, 2009, p. 115). The show was also able to convey the idea that not all gay men were the same, as the two gay characters acted very differently from one another – Will was more masculine than Jack (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 115).

In the television show *Queer as Folk*, however, gay men were portrayed as highly sexual individuals (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 127-128). This point was not only highlighted in the countless sex scenes, but it had also be foreshadowed by one of the very first lines (by the character 'Michael') of the premiere episode: "The first thing you have to know is: it's all about sex. They say men think about sex every twenty-eight seconds. Of course that's straight men. With gay men, it's every nine" (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 128). The show also portrayed gay men as wanting to be isolated, as much as possible, from straight

people (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 128). Other portrayals of the lives of gay men included incidents of gay bashing, concerns of HIV/AIDS, extensive drug use, and the discourse around safe sex; all of which had been largely ignored (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 128).

The television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* moved away from the sitcom comedy of *Will & Grace*, and it had also moved away from the dark world of drug use and promiscuity in *Queer as Folk* (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 143). In its portrayal of gay men, the series had shown 'fab' gay men helping heterosexual men to dress more fashionably, to groom better and even how to redecorate their homes (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 140). In this sense, gay men were to shown to work closely with their straight counterparts in a mentoring role (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 140). This shift in the portrayal of gay men is the case where "a basic-cable channel crossed yet another threshold by exposing TV viewers to an entirely new category of gay men: the real thing" (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 137).

The importance of television and film goes beyond the influence they have on people's attitudes and beliefs, as their importance also stems from the proliferation of such mass media forms in society. These forms of media are widely accessible and used by the Canadian population. In their 2014 reports on the state of the broadcasting and telecommunications industries in 2013, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) highlighted these key figures: 11.92 million Canadians had at least a basic television subscription; 13.9 million Canadian households had an internet subscription; 62% of Canadians owned a cellphone; while internet availability was at 97% nationwide (CRTC, 2014a; CRTC, 2014b). Cellphone and internet statistics are relevant to my focus on television and film, because many people now access TV shows and movies on their mobile devices (cellphones and laptops). In

order to contextualize gay men in this proliferation of media, figures 1 and 2 illustrate the degree to which LGB[1] and, more specifically, gay men are represented on broadcast television (respectively).

Figure 1: Broadcast Network Series Regulars, 2005-2016
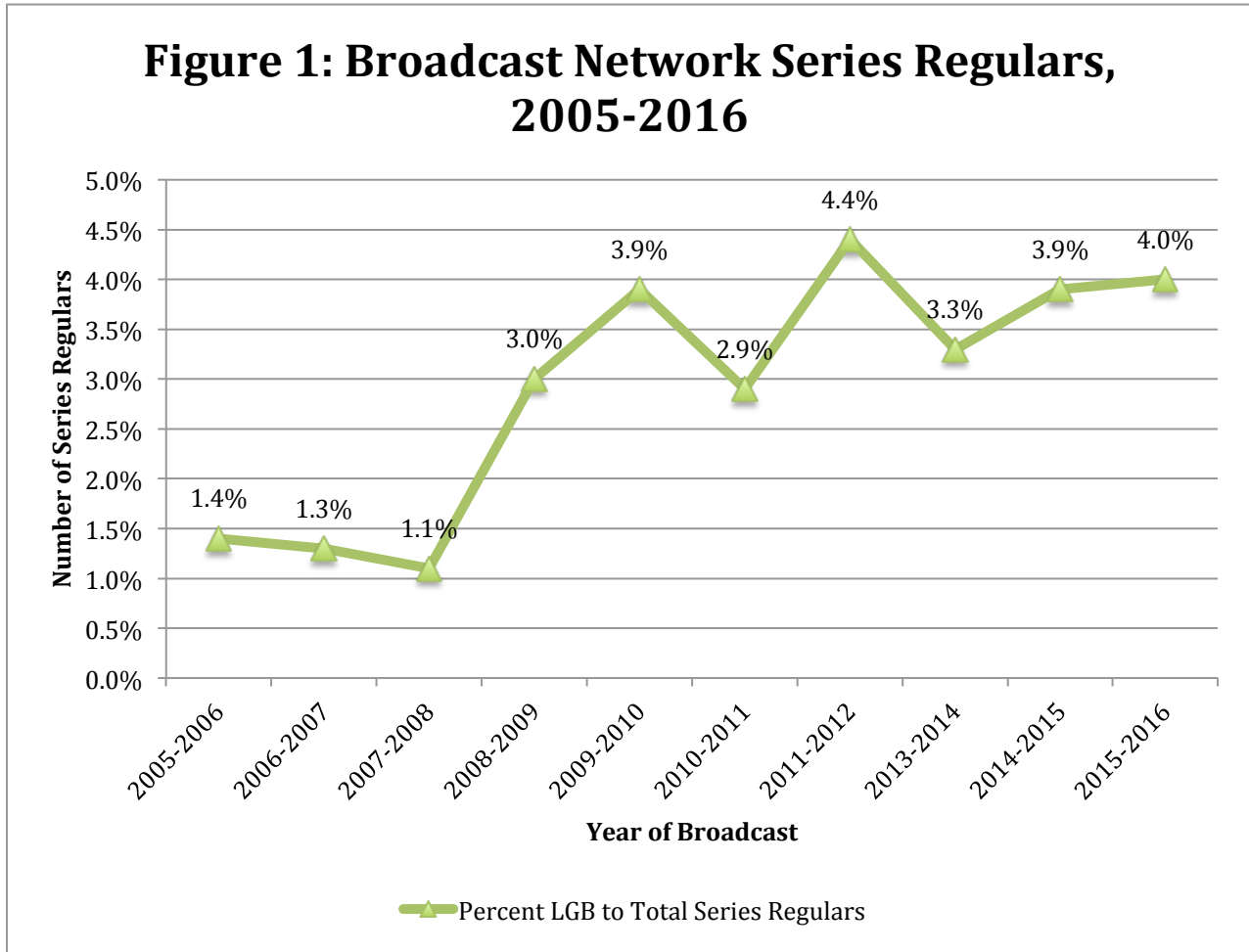
(GLAAD, 2006; GLAAD, 2010; GLAAD, 2016)

In the period between 2005 and 2016, as shown in figure 1, there has been a steady increase in the representations of LGB members in series regular roles. This analysis only looked at series regulars, which are characters that appear in every episode, because it

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[1] LGB = Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual. Figures on transgendered persons were omitted from this analysis because they were not included in the entire 2005-2016 timeframe.

will be these roles that contribute the most to the influence of gay portrayals on

television[2].

Figure 2: Breakdown of Regular & Recurring LGBT Characters on Broadcast Television, 2005-2016
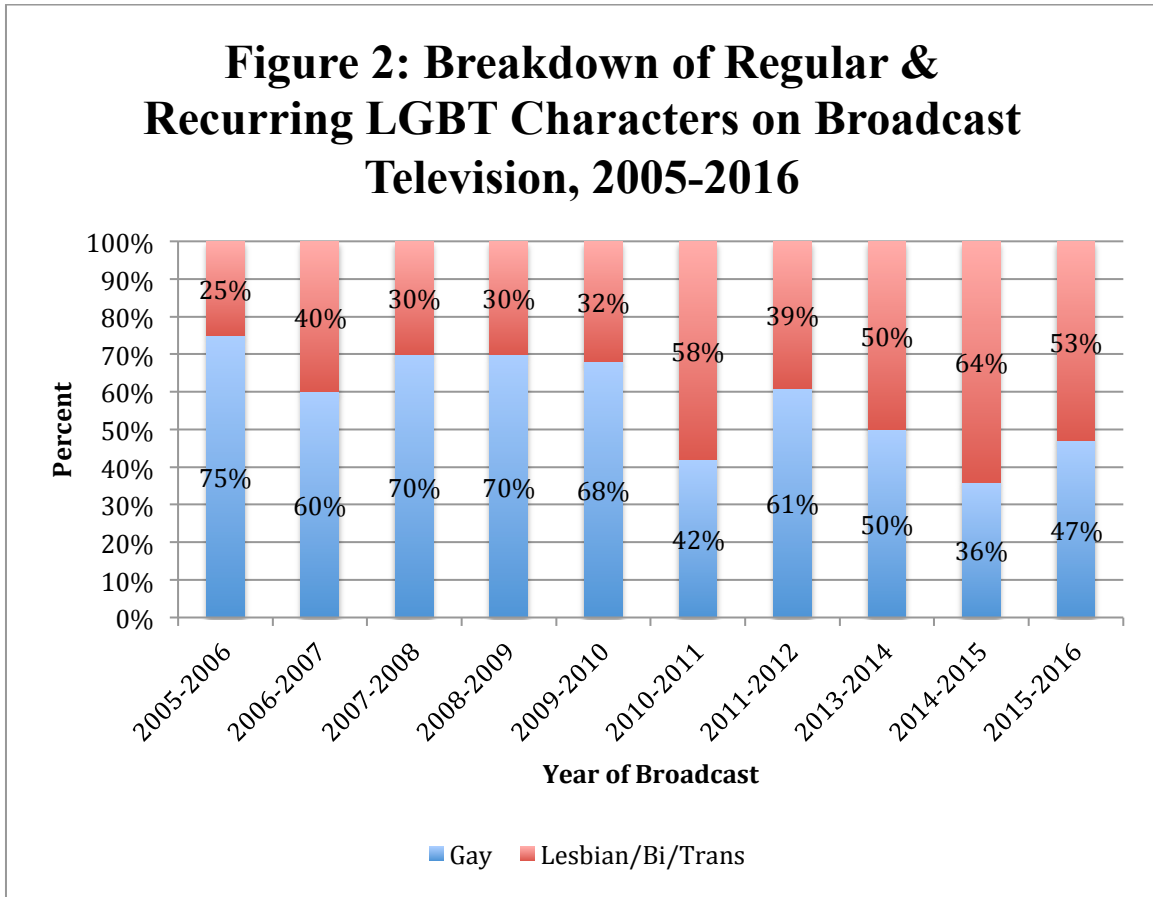
(GLAAD, 2006; GLAAD, 2007; GLAAD, 2009; GLAAD, 2010; GLAAD, 2011; GLAAD, 2012; GLAAD, 2013; GLAAD, 2014; GLAAD, 2015; GLAAD, 2016)

Figure 2 illustrates a breakdown of LGBT representations in both regular and recurring roles, which highlights that gay men have usually been the majority of these representations. In this sense, there is an emphasis on how this majority – gay men – is represented and treated vis-à-vis these television portrayals. Considering the influence that media has on people's beliefs and attitudes, the rising representation of gay men is

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[2] In addition, GLAAD only supplied statistics of series regular roles as a total; there were no statistics on regular, recurring, and guest roles as a total.

likely to have an impact on the lives of these men (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 330-331).

In this research project, I applied Media Framing Theory to consider how the media shapes the beliefs and attitudes of the general public towards gay men. My application of this theory, however, also considers how the media influences the ways in which gay men come to see themselves – as an individual and a community – through those same media portrayals. The process for gay men of developing an identity, which also includes recognition of being homosexual, is heavily "mediated by the cultural and historical context in which GLB [sic] individuals live" (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 331). One of the contextual factors that mediate the development of identity is the media (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 331). This mediation occurs through the development of role models, as characters in television shows and in films that a person can identify with (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 332). Gay characters on television and in film can become role models for gay youth, as these youth identify with the sexual orientation of the character, and it is through this role model status that gay characters come to influence the identity of other gay men (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 332).

Research Methods

The role of the researcher was important in this project, as I am a gay male that sought to conduct research on a group of gay men, concerning their perceptions of the gay men in the mass media. My sexual orientation did make it easier for me to gain access to my sample, as I have that commonality with them, and this relationship between the participants and myself fostered an open and free atmosphere to discuss the topic of this thesis. The creation of an open and free environment in the focus group allowed participants to convey their perspectives on the media portrayals chosen, and it encouraged a degree of comfort with other participants and myself as the researcher.

This project employed the qualitative method of a focus group interview, in which I had five participants. According to Dr. Richard A. Krueger (2002) of the University of Minnesota, one of the main authorities on the focus group method, six participants is the optimal size for a focus group (p. 1). This number of participants allows the moderator to better manage the time allotted for the focus group, while also providing some degree of ease in transcribing the audio recording (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 169). In cases where participants have specialized knowledge and/or experiences to be discussed, focus groups can involve fewer than six people (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009, p. 3). The recruitment strategy for this project involved convenience sampling, in which potential participants were recruited through my social network. Convenience sampling was used because, as a gay male, I was able to access other gay individuals through my social network. This sampling method was also combined with snowball sampling, as I

was able to utilize my network of connections to further recruit gay men who were not part of that network.

The target sample of this project was set to best answer my research question, as well as to provide optimal recruitment potential. The sample inclusion criteria were set as: (1) self-identifying gay male, (2) between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine, (3) that live in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Being openly gay was an inclusion criterion for two reasons: there was no risk in 'outing' an individual through the involvement with other gay men in the focus group; and the design of this research project sought to look at the social status of being openly gay, in relation to the media portrayals of other gay men. The restriction on the age range of participants to twenty[3] to twenty-nine years old was meant to be convenient for recruiting and to position the participants in a common age cohort. The convenience portion of this age range was related to my own age, as the researcher, through which I could easily recruit individuals in my own cohort. The age cohort idea also applied to the media references that I used in my research design. I wanted to have a group of individuals who grew up with the same media content – that is, a group of people in their twenties would have the same media references to rely on from their childhood and adolescence.

This research project focuses on how gay men perceive their portrayals on television and in film. The decision to focus on only these two media platforms was made for convenience, as well as for the statistical and theoretical supports found in earlier literature reviews. For an undergraduate thesis, I chose to limit the number of media

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[3] In addition to the convenience sampling, the lower end of the age range was important because I did not want to include younger gay men who are, presumably, less mature and developed in their identities than males are in their twenties.

forms to just two; this allowed me to focus exclusively on these two media forms and to gather more detailed information on them. Cultivation Theory had encouraged me to focus on television portrayals (Brown, 2002, p. 44). According to this theory, television is the most powerful media influence upon culture, as it is through greater access to television that people that receive higher exposures to mediated ideologies, facts, and relationships that define and legitimize the current social order (Brown, 2002, p. 44). The focus on film, however, simply came from the close correlation of the small and silver screens (I think of movies being shown on TV; commercials for upcoming movies; the production values in TV and film as a similarity; etc.).

In conducting the focus group, I presented a total of 13 clips to the participants: 10 clips from 3 TV series, and 3 clips from 2 films. Again, the focus on TV shows over films is supported by my use of Cultivation Theory. The clips that were shown to participants are as follows (also see Appendix A):

Television: 10 clips
Will & Grace (1998-2006) – 5 clips
Queer as Folk (2000-2005) – 3 clips
Glee (2009-2015) – 2 clips

Film: 3 clips
The Producers (2005) – 1 clip
G.B.F. ("Gay Best Friend, 2013) – 2 clips

These choices of clips were supported by the literature, to an extent, as previous work on how gay men are portrayed in the media had highlighted shows like *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk*. Rodger Streitmatter's book, *From 'Perverts' to 'Fab Five'* (2009), details the changing media depictions of gay men. In the case of *Will & Grace*, Streitmatter highlights the comedic approach to presenting gay males to audiences (2009, p. 115);

however, in *Queer as Folk*, the focus shifted to promiscuity, hyper sexuality, and drug use (2009, p. 128). The use of these media clips was easily decided, but the use of the other clips followed themes from and similarities to Streitmatter's choice of shows. In the case of *Glee,* I extrapolated the theme of the 'fab' gay man, as well as the theme of close interactions between gay and straight men from the *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Streitmatter spoke extensively to the show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, as it related to these two themes, but I chose to use a more modern example with *Glee*. The selection process for films was slightly trickier, as literature on gay film characters is not as developed as that on television characters. The choice to use *GBF* followed the same theme focus used to select clips from *Glee*, but the use of the film *The Producers* came from my personal experiences with the use of the word 'gay' as an insult. In this film, two producers attempt to make a play that is a 'flop' – it is very profitable to spend as little as possible on a crappy play and still charge patrons for admission. They plan to accomplish this by making a play about Adolf Hitler, while also insinuating that Hitler is gay. In making the classification of 'gay' as an insult, the film brings issues of gay portrayal in the media to the fore.

The focus group for this research project was conducted on the campus of Dalhousie University, which provided a private and quiet venue. Participants in the focus group were asked to view a selection of media representations of gay men, and questions were asked of them following each media segment (see Appendix B). The focus group was semi-structured, as a small set of guiding questions was posited and time allotted for deviation from those structured questions. As moderator, I was sure to keep the ensuing conversation(s) within the frame and scope of the research question. The time

commitment was set at no more than ninety minutes, but the duration of the focus group

ran to one hundred and five minutes. I used a digital audio recording device and I took

notes during the focus group. After transcribing the audio recording verbatim, I then

coded the focus group discussion to highlight any patterns or recurring themes in

participants' responses, as well as point to any differences and major variations in those

responses.

The data collected in a focus group is not unlike raw data collected using other

methods, as it needs to be processed by the researcher using their analytical framework

(Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 187). The first step to analyzing the data is to transcribe the audio

recordings (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 187). Once this is complete, the researcher must

synthesize an analysis through highlighting common themes and/or variations in

responses (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 187). This portion of the analysis is a quasi-content

analysis, as a codebook must be created to streamline the process of identifying

commonalities and variation (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 188).

In an effort to ensure that this research is of good quality, credibility and

trustworthiness, it was crucial to utilize the method of member checks (Cho & Trent,

2006, p. 323). In interviews, as well as focus group interviews, findings are considered

more robust and reliable if your observations are supported by the transcribed comments

of your participants (Golafshani, 2003, p. 604). Member checking, however, is like the

term validity in quantitative research – in utilizing this technique, the researcher tests data

interpretations and conclusions with the participants from the group (Cho & Trent, 2006,

p. 322). Checking in with participants on data you have collected, as well as any

conclusions you have made about the subject, can also introduce opportunities for

participants to clarify and/or revise any earlier statement they made (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 322). For my research, I had built member checks into my focus group questions by asking the same questions of clips with the same themes, while also periodically checking with my participants on various points they have made respectively.

The focus group approach itself has various advantages and disadvantages, all of which center around the following setup: a small group of people, usually six to eight persons who do not know one another, is formed by an investigator who will moderate the group with questions and may allow for freedom to deviate from said questions (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 164-165). The informal setting of the focus group is intended to encourage participants to speak freely, in a comfortable setting, about their behaviours, attitudes and opinions (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 166-167). Some of the advantages of using the focus group are:

1) they are highly flexible (in terms of the number of participants needed, the time needed, etc.),

2) they can generate a large amount of data in a short time,

3) they allow exploration of a specific subject, while also allowing freedom to discover unanticipated facets of the subject,

4) and they place everyone in the group, even the researcher, on a even footing to engage in the discussion

(Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 172)

In considering these advantages, my choice to use the focus group method coincided with the nature of the research question – as one that gets at the perceptions of participants (qualitative work). Some of the disadvantages of the focus group method, however, are:

1) the quality of the data collected is heavily reliant on the skill of the moderator (the researcher),

2) attendance is voluntary, so participation can turn out to be low enough to compromise the group focus setup,

3) only a very limited number of questions can be used,

(Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 172-173)

All of the disadvantages are a concern in undertaking focus group data collection, but the most worrisome from my perspective was the first point – the skill of the moderator can influence the data collection (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 172). This point is a source of concern because, as an undergraduate researcher, this project was the experiment in which I learned to hone my craft – i.e. how to actually moderate a focus group effectively and professionally. In an effort to mitigate this potential issue, I utilized "The Moderator's Guide", as section of Berg & Lune's (2012) work *Focus Group Interviewing* (see Appendix E). This guide had assisted me in navigating my first group moderation, which was crucial for this overall project and its success. The biggest concern that I had on this point about moderator skill is on the obligation of said moderator to get a synergy going in the group. As Berg & Lune (2012) point out, it is the goal of each moderator to create a "synergistic group effect", in which each group member feeds off the comments and responses of the other group members (p. 170). It was incredibly important for me to ignite that synergy, as part of my role as the moderator in my research design. In reflecting upon the focus group, my openness with my participants about also being gay assisted me with creating a welcoming and open atmosphere. I was able to laugh with my participants about issues around being gay – as an example, I was able to laugh with them

about certain stereotypes of gay men. I believe that my openness with my insider status

had allowed me to create a synergy that, along with the participants' genuine interest in

the topic, yielded a constructive and detailed focus group session.

Findings

The Power of Media

> *...we blame the movies for our romantic expectations and*
> *we blame porn for our sexual expectations!*
>
> (Participant #5)

As discussed in the literature review of this paper, the mass media influences the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of people by also portraying norms as an accurate representation of culture (Gerbner, Gross and Morgan, 2002, p. 51). Norms are embedded and reinforced in our culture through the gradual and cumulative process of repeated exposure to them in media (DeLamater & Hasday, 2007, p. 262-263). It is through these norms, as portrayed on television and in film, that people come to expect the same reality in their daily lives. The participants in the focus group brought up this point, but they also highlighted the educational component that does and could exist in portraying gay men.

The first thing that most participants recognized was the power of the media through sheer proliferation – that is, the media is available to so many people in the variable access globally. One participant recognized this accessibility of media in North America by stating:

> …everything's technology, [everyone's] got a TV, [access to]
> clips, social media [etc.], so media is a huge part of our lives no
> matter what, you can't escape it
>
> (Participant #4)

 This point was discussed earlier in this paper with the 2014 report from the CRTC, which highlighted these key figures: 11.92 million Canadians had at least a basic

television subscription; 13.9 million Canadian households had an internet subscription; 62% of Canadians owned a cellphone; while internet availability was at 97% nationwide (CRTC, 2014a; CRTC, 2014b).

Participants also spoke to the historical changes seen in the portrayals of gay men when they referred to clips from *Queer as Folk*. The literature on this show, as mentioned earlier, pointed to a set of gay characters that were overly sexualized, promiscuous and frequent drug users (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 128). In reference to these clips, as well as to other shows, one participant stated that:

> …as gay people were [regarded as] less of a person before,
> so they had to emphasize like, you know, the
> scandalous qualities to emphasize that [belief]
>
> (Participant #1)

In this regard, participants recognized the role of the media in constructing the identities of gay men vis-à-vis such deviant and dark portrayals. The stark difference between straight and gay men, as a theme, was continued with the portrayals of gay men as promiscuous. Participant #1 continued his point on this by stating that:

> …a while ago the gay image, like, they wanted to portray an image
> that confirmed that belief [of difference], so they wouldn't portray
> the same image as straight people. They had to portray something
> different than straight people, so they had to focus on different things.
> So, they wouldn't portray, like, you know, people [being] committed
> to a relationship because that would put straight people and
> gay people on the same playing surface.

In this case, this stereotype of gay men served to inform portrayals of both straight and gay men. The participants made several points about how such portrayals, which are not accurate depictions of all gay men, would expose straight and gay people to stereotypes that are not beneficial to gay men in general. For example, participant #4 stated:

> …if I would have watched that when I was younger […] I would
> think that that's how I'm suppose to be going out into the
> community, or that's what I'm going to be dealing with…

The participants continued to discuss the idea that straight people who do not have a lot of exposure to gay individuals simply have the media portrayals of gay men to use as a reference. The danger in this, as they discussed, is that portrayals of gay men as promiscuous and doing drugs may educate such straight people into thinking that all gay men are like that. This becomes very problematic because, to relate back to a previous quote by a participant, such portrayals would ensure that gay men are maintained in the position of the deviant 'other'.

The educational component of media portrayal for gay men, however, is that such portrayals serve to inform young gay men of their expected behaviour. This is also true of portrayals setting expectations about the community as a whole, as young gay men enter into the community for the first time with trepidation. Many of the participants said they initially felt as though the gay community was full of the nefarious characters that were portrayed on television. In one particular case, participant #4 referred to one of his first experiences at a gay bar – a gay couple approached participant #4 in the bar and initiated a conversation about their open relationship. In this conversation, which had been the first time participant #4 had ever encountered an 'open relationship' dynamic, the couple referred to boyfriend 'stealing' as a common and expected thing. In this situation, the participant had indeed encountered the very promiscuous behaviour that a show like *Queer as Folk* had portrayed as a norm in gay community. The intersection of reality and TV was not illustrated in this encounter, but the focus group discussed whether such shows may have influenced this couple by encouraging such a relationship dynamic. In

this case, the gay couple had portrayed themselves, as had characters in *Queer as Folk*, to

be promiscuous and as deviants from the traditional relationship paradigm.

In general, participants consistently highlighted the overall influence that the

media has on the education of gay men. Participant #5 stated:

> …I'm saying [these portrayals are] problematic because it almost
> enforces people, well, the 'gaybies' or like the 'gay youth' to
> grow up, look at the media, like, 'oh, is that how I should be
> acting?', or, 'is this how I should be dressed up?', or,
> 'is this how I should approach guys in the club?'

This was a theme that continued throughout the focus group, as participants drew on

other clips to highlight the same idea – TV and film portrayals have an impact on how

both straight and gay people view gay men.

Gay Men as Sexualized

> *…it's almost to that point where it's like, 'oh, yeah, he's gay!',*
> *it's like, 'oh, sexual machine walking!*
>
> (Participant # 5)

In the quote above, the participant referred to his perception that gay men are

shown in the media as being overly sexual beings. The show *Queer as Folk* prompted a

great deal of conversation around the sexualized image of gay men, especially as it

related to open relationships and the 'targeting' of straight men for sexual 'conquest'.

One participant summed up this theme from the clips as:

> …[the] media shows the gay community as 'predators',
> [that we] basically see straight guys […] as 'easy targets'
> or 'challenges' even.
>
> (Participant #5)

The television show *Queer as Folk* served as the series that embodied this theme; however, the participants brought several other shows into the discussion. For instance, participants #1, #2 and #4 referred to the new television show *How to Get Away with Murder*. This show features a regular gay male character who uses his body to gather information from legal opponents and clients, in order to garner favor with his boss. It was in scenes like these from *Queer as Folk* and *How to Get Away with Murder* that participants saw gay men being overly sexualized.

Participants also spoke about how the very essence of gay identity is defined by a person's perceived sex role. This thread of conversation brought to the fore the apparent need to have someone occupy the 'female' sexual role, while the other fills the 'male' sexual role. In a few instances, participants recollected experiences where they were asked: 'well, who's the girl and who's the guy?' This need to assign two men, who are in a sexual relationship, as male and female spoke to the larger sexualization of gay males according to very heteronormative sex roles that are not necessarily given or followed. Participant #5 stated:

> [this is] sexualizing [you as] obviously a 'bottom' or a 'top'
> , [where] you're like, 'oh, you can't be a top, you're too
> feminine.

Participant #5, who got a resounding agreement from the other participants on this, proceeded to talk about how a 'masculine' gay man is automatically assumed to be a 'top'; while the more 'feminine' gay man is automatically assigned to be the 'bottom'. This is an interesting point because it illustrates the intersection of media influences, sexualization, and interpellation (to be discussed later). In this sense, a 'twink' boy is

automatically assumed to be a bottom because of his feminine characteristics. This sort of imagery is evident in media portrayals that, as a force of their own, set expectations of gay identities that are learnt by both gay and straight people. It is through this portrayal of gay norms and reality that the young gay man, as a consumer of media, may assume some or all of these characteristics of the 'twink' and the 'bottom'.

'Coming Out' and Interpellation

> *…once you come out, you never stop coming out. No*
> *matter how many people you meet, you're*
> *always coming out…*
>
> (Participant #5)

The quote above speaks to the two major components of this section of findings: (1) the continual engagement with aspects of Social Identity Theory, and (2) the act of coming out as interpellation. The concept of Social Identity Theory originated with Henri Tajfel and John Turner as the idea that a person understands who they are based on their group membership (Callero, 2011, p. 562). The core tenet of this theory is that this awareness of group membership is the key to understanding prejudices and intergroup turmoil (Callero, 2011, p. 562). Given this theory, the focus group had discussed quite a few instances where our behaviour – both the participants and my own – were mediated by our membership in the gay community. In Social Identity Theory, the intergroup comparisons remind me of Jacques Derrida's concept of the supplementary. At its core, this concept is about a way of thinking about how meaning is established (Namaste, 1994, p. 222) – that is, in this case, the meaning of the person and the group. Namaste

(1994) summarizes the concept as: "[the] 'supplement' [suggesting] that meanings are organized through difference, in a dynamic play of *presence* and *absence*" (p. 222, emphasis added). The dynamic between presence and absence, as it relates to heterosexuality and homosexuality, can be interpreted as one sexual orientation noting the presence and absence of signifying traits for orientation in another. Derrida posited that heterosexuality opposes homosexuality in this very sense (Namaste, 1994, p. 222). However, this becomes more complex in that the Derridean perspective believes that:

> …heterosexuality needs homosexuality for its own definition: a macho homophobic male can define himself as 'straight' only in opposition to that which he is not – an effeminate gay man.

> (Namaste, 1994, p. 222)

In relation to my focus group research, participants argued that the gay identity was always in reference to heterosexuality. Interestingly, Derrida looked at the path of definition from heterosexuality to homosexuality, but there was no analysis of the reverse case (gay as defined by straight). It is important to consider that homosexuality, as it is presented on television and in film, also mirrors heterosexual relationships. For instance, the 'hetero-gal' friendship between Will and Grace illustrated the male-female dynamic that gay men are expected to form with female 'bffs'. In the focus group, participants discussed this gay male and straight female bond as an expectation set by media portrayals.

Interpellation, as conceptualized by Louis Althusser (1971), looks at ideology as something that is not real (Adsanatham, 2008, p. 46). Ideology is rooted in people because we are "ideological creatures" by nature (Adsanatham, 2008, p. 46). Conversely,

ideology requires humans in order to exist – that is, there needs to be a subject to ideology (Adsanatham, 2008, p. 46). It is in this mutual existence that, "ideology, hence, interpellates or hails individuals as subjects and in doing so, it forms them" (Althusser, 1971, as cited in Adsanatham, 2008, p. 47).

In the case of homosexuality, interpellation provides a sense of homosexual identity, of community, and of meanings to those who are members of the group (Adsanatham, 2008, p. 47). Homosexuality presents an interesting case of repression and enticement, as the subject feels both in various contexts (Adsanatham, 2008, p. 47). In the sense of repression, identifying as a gay male may cause issues around others being homophobic. Repression can also be seen in the subjugation of the homosexual to the heterosexual (Adsanatham, 2008, p. 38). This subjugation will be discussed later under the theme of *hegemonic masculinity.* The enticement factor, however, is the sense of belonging and membership that occurs when an individual identifies as being gay (Adsanatham, 2008, p. 47-48). This sense of being a subject is accomplished through recognition, where there are "moments when we recognize ourselves because we have been addressed, called out to, in a particular way" (Law, 2000, p. 12). In relation to my research, participants were always engaging with the notion of 'coming out' as recognizing oneself in the 'hailing' of a gay identity. In one instance, participant # 1 voiced his dislike of the obligation of gay men to come out:

> …I don't think it should be a milestone, personally, and I can't
> get that out of my head when I watch [these clips] as a gay person.
> So, in a sense, like, I really don't like [these scenes] because
> it's putting emphasis on you [having] to tell someone, like…
> I hate that part so much because straight people don't have that,
> they don't have a scene [like this]…

In his dislike of the coming out obligation, participant #1 rejected the idea that there must be a focus on the presence of homosexuality in the absence of heterosexuality. For him, there should not be a need to say that you are gay and to reject, therein, the presence of heterosexuality. In a final summation on that stance, this participant refers to the coming out obligation as "…oppressing gay people…" (Participant #1).

The idea of interpellation also entails a setting of expectations for the subject to follow, as the interpellative force assigns the subject to a particular social existence (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 106; Butler, 1997, p. 34). This setting of expectations borrows from Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) treatment of the 'insult', as the insult:

> Indicates to someone that he possesses such and such a property,
> and indicates to him at the time that he must conduct himself in
> accordance with the social essence which is thereby assigned to
> him (p. 106).

The implications of the insult for interpellation is evident in the focus group research, as participants spoke of several experiences of being assigned to expected conducts based on their sexual orientation. The expectation of having to conduct yourself based on your social essence is a stereotype in action; people who fall into stereotypes are expected to act in certain ways. One participant referred to a common stereotype of gay men, especially as portrayed in the media, as:

> So, if you see someone flamboyant or something you're like,
> 'oh, he's gay' without even being [sure].
>
> (Participant #5)

In another instance, participant #5 faced a scenario where his residence assistant was rather surprised to find out that he (the participant) was gay. In this case, the R.A. had blamed his surprise on the fact that the participant "did not show" as a gay person. The response of the participant, in a coy manner, was to say "hello!" in a high voice "kind of

just [like what is] portrayed [as a] very stereotypical, feminine [gay guy] in the media"

(Participant #5).

The stereotypical expectations, as another participant noted, are not only a force from

outside the gay community, but that are also pervasive between gay men:

> I know even for myself, when I first came out, I
> felt like I had to…become more feminine to
> even get somebody to take me seriously.
>
> (Participant #4)

In a final summation of these points, one participant simply stated that:

> ..you're born gay, you come with a brochure or a
> manual, you have to [be] a diva, you have to
> wear heels, and give [good] fashion advice.
> No, not really!
>
> (Participant #5)

It was very interesting to see the workings of interpellation in the act of coming out, as I

had never understood the importance I felt about my personal experience of coming out

to family, friends, and various other people in my life. The power and influence of

recognizing one's homosexuality was clear in the focus group – that is, we had all

experienced this interpellation for better or for worse.

Hegemonic Masculinity

The concept of hegemony, which was formulated by Gramsci, is the exertion of

power by subtle means instead of using force (Eichenberger, 2012, p. 3). This is

important for understanding hegemonic masculinity because the dominant social group –

men – has subjugated women through patterns of practice that create and maintain

dominance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). This hegemony, however, does not just subjugate women but also makes other forms of masculinity subordinate to the hegemonic ideal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). This hegemonic ideal permeates culture and sets the standard against which all masculinity is measured (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 281). Young males, as they try to differentiate themselves from girls, learn to categorize themselves in such a way that their masculinity is conveyed to them and to others (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 281). In order to demonstrate masculinity, boys/men take part in manhood acts that imply and claim membership to being male (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 284). However, the idea of hierarchical masculinities grew from the experience of homosexual men with violence and prejudice from straight men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 831). The measure of masculinity is constructed through media and popular culture (Bereska, 1999, p. 74). In a more general sense, gender socialization is learned and enacted through institutions like media, religion, family, and so on (Rogers, 2006, p. 32).

In the case of my research, participants distinguished straight and gay males based on various qualities – not the least of which was masculinity. The group had continually placed gay and straight on opposing ends of an identity spectrum, but they also recognized diversity in gay males that bridged the gap between the ultra-feminine male and the hetero-guy. Although this represented recognition of different types of masculinity, one participant objected to the dichotomization of sexual orientation that are involved – gay and straight. Participant #1 stated:

> …I feel like society likes to go from 0 to 100 with everything
> […so] when [a guy] says, 'I'm gay', that means that he

> eliminates any curiosity of [being] straight…straight
> interactions in his life, right? So, it's like, all of
> a sudden you're gay, but it's like he could still like girls…

In this passage, participant #1 parses out the 'middle' existences between gay and straight. This, of course, brings to mind the sexual orientation of bi-sexuality.

Other Findings

In a general look at the results found in this research study, participants stated that media portrayals of gay men are getting to be more diverse and representative of the spectrum of gay men. All of the participants recognized that television and film portrayals still had a long way to go to reach diversity, as well as higher representations of gay men, but that the changes are at least occurring in increments. Participant #2 highlighted the idea that, even as a comparison to shows like *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk*, television shows are getting less stereotypical and more diverse.

Interestingly, participant #2 also made the statement that the consumers of media – all of us – share some responsibility on what it is that gets shown to us. He stated that:

> ...the truth is, as consumers, actions speak louder than
> words and we, we really, we vote with what we watch
> and what we talk about, and really, you know,
> if there's a show that is doing something really
> well, you know, if you actually do watch the show
> and if you promote the show […] that's how
> you can kind of advocate change […]

This is a profound point, which received unanimous approval from the other participants; it contradicts one of the expectations that I had going into this research, that participants might fault the media for the portrayals of gay men.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research had found a number of interesting results on the question of: *how do gay men perceive their portrayals on television and in film?* Anthropological research on the portrayal of gay men in mass media is limited (Levina & Waldo, 2000, p. 739). Much of the empirical data that has been collected on this topic has been based on content analysis, which does not go beyond speculation over what influence, if any, mass media has over how people are perceived by others (Brown, 2002, p. 43). The theoretical resources used in this thesis were: Media Framing Theory, Social Identity Theory, interpellation, and hegemonic masculinity.

Firstly, the importance of television and film goes beyond the influence they have on people's attitudes and beliefs, as their importance also stems from the proliferation of such mass media forms in society. In relation to this thesis, television and film are forms of media that are widely accessible and used by the Canadian population.

As discussed in the literature review of this paper, the mass media influences the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of people by also portraying norms as an accurate representation of culture (Gerbner, Gross and Morgan, 2002, p. 51). The participants in the focus group brought up this point, but they also highlighted the educational component that does and could exist in portraying gay men. In this case, this stereotype of gay men served to inform both straight and gay men. The participants made several points on how such portrayals, which are not accurate of all gay men, would expose straight and gay people to a type of gay person that is not favorable to gay men in general. The educational component of media portrayal for gay men, however, looks at

how it is that such portrayals serve to inform young gay men of their expected behaviour. This is also true of portrayals setting expectations for the community as a whole, as young gay men enter into the community for the first time with trepidation.

Participants also spoke about how the very essence of gay identity is defined by a person's perceived sex role. This thread of conversation brought to the fore the apparent need to have someone occupy the 'woman' sexual role, while the other fills the 'man' sexual role. Although this brought to mind hints of hegemonic masculinity, as gay men experience difference forms of masculinity than do the hegemonic ideal, I chose to highlight this finding under the perception that gay men are overly sexualized in the media.

The participants also demonstrated that gay identities, insofar as sexual attraction, were always in reference to heterosexuality. In his dislike of the coming out obligation, participant #1 rejected the interpellative force as a dynamic between presence and absence. For him, there should not be a need to say that you are gay and to reject, therein, the presence of heterosexuality. The implications of the insult on interpellation is evident in the focus group research, as participants spoke of several instances of being assigned to expected conducts based on their sexual orientation. The idea of being expected to conduct yourself based on your social essence is a stereotype in action; people who fall into stereotypes are expected to act in certain ways.

My research also showed that participants distinguished straight and gay males based on various aspects – not the least of which was masculinity. The group continually placed gay and straight on opposing ends of an identity spectrum, but there was mention of diversity in gay males that bridged the gap between the ultra-feminine male and the

hetero-guy. Although this represented recognition of different types of masculinity, one participant objected to the rigidity of the labels of sexual orientation that are involved – gay and straight.

In a general look at the results found in this research study, participants stated that the media portrayals of gay men are getting to be more diverse and representative along the spectrum of gay men. All of the participants recognized that television and film portrayals still had a long way to go to reach diversity, as well as higher representativeness of gay men, but that the changes are at least occurring in increments.

The significance of this study must be considered with the depth of its qualitative work in mind, as the findings here represent a snapshot in time of the perceptions of a small sample of gay men. In this sense, there is no claim to generalizability about the gay community at large. However, this study does illustrate that further qualitative research needs to be conducted on how gay men feel about their portrayals in mass media (as a whole). As a gay male myself, I have a vested interest in this topic, but I strongly believe that the dynamic between LGBTQ and straight people can only be made better by understanding all perspectives on these diverse groups.

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Appendix A: List of television and film clips and timeframes.

TV:

Will & Grace (1998-2006)

- "Jack Homo for Holidays" [5:27-6:12]
- "A Gay" [0:00-0:45]
- "Jack Spelling Bee" [0:00-1:19] + [3:10-3:45]
- "Karen Breathe Mint" [0:07-1:13]
- "Gay Bee" [0:00-1:54]

Queer as Folk (2000-2005)

- "Brian Kinney and his client" [0:00-2:50]
- "I know what he is doing" [0:17-1:04]
- "Coming Home to You" [0:37-2:00]

Glee (2009-2015)

- "Kurt Comes out to His Dad" [0:00-2:06]
- "Santana Finds Out Karofsky's Gay" [0:46-1:50]

FILM:

The Producers (2005)
- "Keep it Gay" [0:00-1:00] + [1:20-2:30] + [3:30-4:10]

G.B.F. (2013)
- "You're Gay Now?" [0:00-0:48]
- "G.B.F. (Gay Scene) #2" [0:00-1:21]

Appendix B: Focus Group Questions List

AFTER EACH SEGMENT of CLIPS:

1) How accurate do you consider this portrayal of gay men?

2) What issues do you see in this portrayal of gay men?

GENERAL DISCUSSION:

3) Beyond this small selection of media representations of gay men, how do you believe gay men are included in the mainstream media? How much are they portrayed? How are they portrayed? What do you think of these representations?

4) Have you ever felt an intense emotion because of a particular portrayal of gay men in the media? If so, could you tell us about it?

5) What, if anything, needs to change in the representation(s) of gay men in the mass media?