Queer theory and change.
Towards a pragmatic approach to resistance and subversion in media research on gay and lesbian identities

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Abstract
This paper wants to challenge the tendency in media studies on gay and lesbian identities to remain within two dominant paradigms: the essentialist or the post-structuralist traditions. Consequently, we will elaborate on the question: if media research emphasizes social change, should it mainly adopt a political and strategic identity claim which refers to essentialism, or, should it acknowledge discourses as more important, and therefore use post-structural and queer theoretical insights? Since we discuss the case of gay and lesbian identities, we will focus on possible resistance in popular culture, which mainly involves offering alternatives to the continuous representation of heteronormativity.
We will argue that for social change to occur, there needs to be a symbiosis between agency and structure. To this end, a dialectic approach is needed that bridges the gaps between, on the one hand, a post-structuralist project that creates awareness of norms, discourse and hegemony, and on the other, identity politics that have the potential to change laws and institutions.
This paper will offer a mainly theoretical exploration and will use illustrations from popular media culture with a focus on television. To this end, this paper will illustrate how LGBT-targeted television channels employ the discussed strategies of resistance.

Keywords: media studies – essentialism – queer theory – resistance

Introduction

[...] many gays, lesbians, and feminists themselves see no advance at all in a queer theory that, after all,

would simply "deconstruct" them, along with their political gains, out of existence.

Ken Plummer (2005, p. 369)

In my view, the post-structuralist stance, as most evidenced by Judith Butler, seems a rather obvious form

of political naivety, but it is often not recognized as such.

Max H. Kirsch (2000, p. 9)

The idea of deconstructing gay and lesbian identities came to the fore when a critical body of thought, inspired by post-structuralism and literary theorists, started defying traditional dichotomies and hierarchies in society. This body of ideas has been labelled 'queer theory' and envisions the creation of a society where

equality can be experienced within every social interaction by the 'queering of culture'. This practice is understood to mean the reinterpretation and deconstruction of dominant power structures in society (Kirsch, 2000, p. 33). In particular, literary, film and media scholars (e.g. Doty, 1995; Sedgwick, 1985) have been reading canonic and popular culture against the grain. By reimaging texts outside the boundaries of heteronormativity, these queer readings aim to uncover and deconstruct the normative discourses embedded in popular media products. However, despite the proliferation of these academic perspectives that aim to queer culture, there is no significant social change. Today, gender and sexuality still function as normative and binary cultural systems in our social reality. Heterosexuality is still the norm in culture, society and politics: 'everyone and everything is judged from the perspective of straight' (Chambers, 2003, p. 26). Heteronormative discourses are still today 'deeply bound up with the maintenance of the gender binary' (Ward & Schneider, 2009). Since queer theory rejects civil-rights strategies (Stein & Plummer, 1995, p. 135), one can question its political grounding, and moreover, start doubting its democratic and emancipatory potential. Activist views that use the politics of identity to claim recognition are opposed to these methods, and believe in a strategic essentialism to offer resistance and assimilation (De Lauretis, 1987; Fuss, 1990).

Media have been instrumental in propelling the changing perception of gay and lesbian identities (Streitmatter, 2009), and have the potential to participate in an emancipatory project that envisions social change. However, in popular culture, strong heteronormative assumptions are still being proliferated and reiterated by numerous media representations. Since the general emphasis in media and cultural studies is on being part of a democratic project, we will argue that, in the sphere of media studies research, critiques on popular culture should stay in touch with everyday life and social reality. Popular texts are polysemic (Fiske, 1989) and can therefore be seen as inherently possessing a 'potential site of resistance' (Best, 1998). In the case of gay and lesbian identities, this resistance mainly involves offering alternatives to the continuous representation of heteronormativity. However, the queering of culture has been reproached as a 'carnivalesque, parodic, rebellious, and playful' form of resistance (Plummer, 2005, p. 370) that does *not* support a pragmatic approach to media research focussing on gay and lesbian identities. Therefore, we aim to offer a media critique that merges academic discourses on resistance within a given social reality. In particular, this contribution will focus on an elaboration and evaluation of resistant strategies that emphasize a clear strategic identity, such as empowerment and – from a more queer perspective – subversion/deconstruction. Furthermore, these strategies will be approached as instruments to uncover and challenge (hetero-) normativity, and to generate a realistic critique on media representations.

It will become clear that social change balances between agency and structure (Giddens, 1994). Consequently, media research on sexuality and emancipation should adopt the politics of representation

and a politic of norms, each offering different resistant strategies. A politics of representation, which claims strategic essentialist identities, emphasizes a political outcome; while a politics of norms operates at the individual, social and cultural level rather than at the political. We will argue that a dialectical approach that uses these two positions and blends them into a synthesis seems to be adequate.

This paper will offer a mainly theoretical exploration and will use illustrations from popular media culture with a focus on television. To this end, this paper will illustrate how the rise of LGBT-targeted television channels employs the discussed strategies of resistance.

The problem with the cultural and political in gender and sexuality

The strongly polemic views between the post-structural insights that emphasize a fluid identity concept on the one hand and the more activist view that uses identity politics to claim recognition on the other, is elaborated upon in this first part. We will argue that each of these positions fail to offer concrete potential for social change. Instead, we suggest a dialectical approach, which should also reflect on critiques done on representations in media research. Further, it is important to realize that, although each of the views has a very different interpretation, their fundamental goal is the same: to accept the diversity which is reflected in all institutions, identities and practices.

On the role of identity politics and representation

In this paper identity politics is interpreted as a tactical strategy for social change, largely adopted by social movements such as the lesbian and gay movements[1]. Identity politics, according to Buckingham (2007, p. 7), 'refers primarily to activist social movements [...] [that] have struggled to resist oppressive accounts of their identities constructed by others who hold power over them, and claimed the right for self-determination.' Further, he defines essentialism as 'the tendency to generalize about the members of a particular group and assimilate them to a singular identity' (p. 7). Buckingham sees essentialism as a critique on identity politics because it is inevitable that the latter neglects multiple identities and thereby reduces personalities in a nonsensical way. Bernstein (2002, p. 532), in her definition of identity politics, directly links its vision to an essentialist outcome in the case of the lesbian and gay social movement:

'[Identity politics] Refers to politics based on essentialist or fixed notions of identity. In the case of lesbians and gay men, homosexuality is seen as fixed, whether it is conceived of as a result of nature (genes, hormones, etc.) or nurture – etched indelibly in early childhood socialization resulting in a unitary identity that cannot be altered.'

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[1]Identity and identity politics can also be discussed as an analytical concept. Thorough contributions which clearly discuss debates concerning identity (politics) and identification as analyzing tools are very valuable (see Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), but are not the focus of this paper.

It is clear that this essentialist perspective on identity can maintain a conservative status quo when relying on so-called 'gay genes' and unchangeable fixed identities. However, from a constructivist perspective, the notion of a biologically fixed identity repudiates the discursive power of society and overlooks the multiple dimensions of an identity. Further, different identity positions derive meaning through their relations and interactions with other identity articulations. As such, homosexuality only exists in relation to its opponent heterosexuality, one of many binary oppositions that are discursively rendered hegemonic. This diachronic debate of essentialism versus constructivism culminated in the 1970s, but remained too polemical for resolution. It was into this situation that authors such as Diana Fuss (1990) and Teresa De Lauretis (1999) wrote, addressing the academic discord regarding identity. In *Essentially speaking: Feminism, nature and difference*, Fuss offers a compromise between the essentialist and constructionist views by positioning herself as 'an anti-essentialist who wants to preserve (in both senses of the term: to maintain and to embalm) the category of essence.' (1990, p. xiv). She makes it clear that 'essentialism can successfully operate, in particular contexts, as an interventionary strategy.' (p. 32). Kirsh (2000, p. 60), for his part, asks: 'in the context of social change, is it productive to reify categories and then dismiss them, because of the danger of their "essentializing nature"?' Looking from a social change perspective, identity politics can be considered as a necessary interventionary strategy. A historical look at the lesbian and gay movement shows that a strong identity claim was a necessary empowerment strategy in the 1960s and 1970s in order to gain political access (Bernstein, 2002). As Weeks (1996) argues, the sodomy status and the recognition of homosexuals as a different category in medical sciences, led to a strategic labelling that has actually forced further recognition and acceptance. In this way, the creation of a gay and lesbian community was encouraged, which gradually formed a subculture in which gay and lesbian identities were socialized. Hence, a strategy of identity politics can be considered a form of resistance, rooting, as it does, for institutional and communal change. Since it concerns issues that are situated at the political level, it does not engage with social and individual identity practices that are situated at the social and cultural levels.

Representation is a significant issue in identity politics. The right to be visible, acknowledged, and in this way legitimated, is indispensible for social change. Therefore, media representations of gay and lesbian identities in popular culture are crucial. However, *being* represented as a subculture is as important as *how* they are represented. Hence, the politics of representation – in analogy with identity politics – calls attention to the constant reproductions of the existing power structures that dominate, and to subordinate identities in representations (Durham & Kellner, 2006, p. 390). To 'represent someone or something in a certain way, within a certain "regime of representation"' (Hall, 2003, p. 259), holds enormous symbolic power. Stereotyping as a hegemonic representation practice is the most obvious example of the use of this power, which excludes and naturalizes everything that does not belong to the dominant cultural practices.

As Streitmatter (2009, p. 2) underscores, media have been instrumental in propelling a changing perception of gay and lesbian identities. Media have the potential to participate in an emancipatory project that envisions social change. Research on media and its representation of gender and sexuality is at the core of feminist media studies, creating a paradigm that is largely adapted by media and cultural studies to analyze the relation between gender and sexuality, and media and culture, in a critical way (Van Zoonen, 1994). From an identity politics perspective, being represented as a group is an important aspect that is, among others, translated into so-called 'counting heads' research, which monitors, for example, the share of LGBT characters in television series. An obvious example of this, for the American television market, can be found in the *Where We are on TV Report*, published by GLAAD[2] (2010b). Since gay and lesbian identities have long been symbolically annihilated (Hart, 2000; Westerfelhaus & Lacroix, 2006), the claim for participation and representation in popular media, such as television, is clearly an empowerment strategy enacted at the institutional level. However, media critique does not only underscore the importance of being represented, it also denounces the long-lasting and highly stereotyped representation of gay and lesbian identities (Dyer, 2002; Hart, 2000; Streitmatter, 2009). Although these authors claim that enormous progress has been made, the outcome to this day 'is one of those "half empty, half full" stories. It is not the worst of times, and it's certainly not the best of times' (Gross, 2007, p. 121). For Streitmatter, the media representation of gay men and lesbians should, as he concludes, enter a fourth stage: 'S-E-X' (Streitmatter, 2009, p. 186). From his point of view, representations of gay men and women are not realistic because they are 'de-sexualized'. This request for more authentic and 'real' representation of gay and lesbian identities is an obvious example of their claiming a clear identity that should become empowered in the media because of their potential to spread significant meanings about our daily environment.

However, can we consider this media critique as being supportive of *real* social change? One could argue that this demand for a distinctive gay and lesbian identity only reinforces inequality and, hence, upholds binary oppositions, while all non-normative alternatives remain excluded. This argument will be further elaborated in the next part of this paper.

Going beyond the system: towards a politics of norms

Simultaneously with the constructionist versus essentialist debate (cfr. supra), critical theories and paradigms were highly influenced by the postmodern turn in the 1980s, resulting in post-structuralism and radical ideas of destabilization by deconstruction. With regard to gay and lesbian identities, postmodernism positioned the rejection of the so-called meta-narratives (cfr. supra), with an emphasis on 'local knowledge'.

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[2] The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) is an American non-profit organization that 'amplifies the voice of the LGBT community by empowering real people to share their stories, holding the media accountable for the words and images they present, and helping grassroots organizations communicate effectively. By ensuring that the stories of LGBT people are heard through the media, GLAAD promotes understanding, increases acceptance, and advances equality.' (2010a).

Hence, it recognizes 'otherness' and 'difference', but dismisses all symbolic hierarchies. Moreover, identity in postmodernism is approached as fragmented, and the idea in social theory of a biographical continuity that is coherent but yet continuously revised (see Giddens, 1994, p. 5), is abolished (Featherstone, 1995). In this way, post-structuralism differs strongly from identity politics that reclaims identities. Social theorists and social constructionists such as Anthony Giddens (1994) and Richard Jenkins (2008) stress identity as a social process of becoming that is formed through social and cultural contexts which might change. Thus, significant similarities between social theorists and post-structuralist views are noticeable. In contrast to the essentialist thinkers, post-structuralist theorists believe that the categorization, which is created within a dominant and hegemonic discourse, only serves to reconstruct categories and binary oppositions between heterosexuals and homosexuals, such as in gay and lesbian studies. This is also the case between men and women in feminist studies (Mouffe, 1995; Seidman, 1997). Moreover, it labels people and almost automatically attributes a higher value to one of the categories (Derrida & Bass, 2003). Therefore, a radical deconstruction is necessary to emphasize an emancipatory movement.

Using these post-structuralist ideas, and highly influenced by the works of Foucault (1990; 1980; 1977) on power, ideology and sexuality, literary theorists (e.g. Butler, 1999; De Lauretis, 1987; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1991; Wittig, 1992) have combined these insights to completely rethink gender and sexuality. This body of ideas has became institutionalized in academia and labelled 'queer theory'. These theorists reflect a resistance against the discursive power of heteronormativity and underscore the necessity to deconstruct the normative axioms of gender and sexuality. Because the contributors often use highbrow, elitist and incomprehensible language, the question of what queer theory will actually teach us (see Berlant & Warner, 1995) and, moreover, doubts regarding its democratic and social potential, are still relevant today. Queer theory is about offering a resistance which aims to deconstruct all normative axioms about gender and sexual identity. Defining queer theory is particularly difficult because there is little consensus: Halperin (1995, p. 62) attempts to define queer theory as follows: 'Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. [...] It is an identity without an essence. "Queer" then, demarcates not a positivity, but a positioning vis-à-vis the normative – a positioning that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men' [emphasis in original]. Furthermore, he argues that this theory wants to make us 'think what has not yet been thought' (2003, p. 343). The action that queer theory subscribes to is the '"queering" of culture, ranging from the reinterpretation of characters in novels and cinema, to the deconstruction of historical analysis' (Kirsch, 2000, p. 33). Since we are focussing on media research in this paper, we are particularly interested in these queer reinterpretations or explorations done in popular media research. Queer reading practices are done in film studies (e.g. Doty, 1995), but also on popular film and television productions, such as *Star Trek* (e.g. Kerry, 2009) and *X-Men* (e.g. Gauntlett, 2008). Studies done

on 'gay shows' such as *Will & Grace* (e.g. Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002), *Queer eye for the straight guy* (Lacroix & Westerfelhaus, 2005) and *The L World* (Chambers, 2006) adopt queer theory to formulate a critique that looks beyond the counting head stories and politics of representation (cfr. infra). Particularly, they reproach the heteronormative representations on mainstream television which continuously confirm the existing hegemonic discourses concerning gender and sexuality which are presented, to quote Antonio Gramsci's (1978) expression, as 'common sense'. From this point of view it can be said that there is nothing inherently queer about 'gay television' (see Avila-Saavedra, 2009).

Since queer theorists urge for change in the normative notions of gender, sexuality and identity, it can be argued that they also engage in an emancipatory project of social change. However, whereas an identity politics strategy is enacted at the political level and is engaged in institutional and communal change, queer theory resistance rejects civil-rights strategies and the politics of assimilation (Stein & Plummer, 1995, p. 134). Rather, queer theorists argue that change should be looked for at the individual, or social and cultural level, rather than at the political. Therefore, media research that explores from a queer theoretical perspective will focus on the politics of norms rather than on the politics of representation.

A Dialectic Approach to Social Change

Discussing both positions makes it clear that there are indeed strong polemical views concerning research into gay and lesbian identities as portrayed in the media. When reviewing this debate, we reduced it to its true nature: the essentialist versus the post-structuralist debate. Consequently, the question arose: if media research emphasizes social change, should it mainly adopt the politics of representation, or, should it acknowledge discourses as more important, and therefore adopt the politics of norms?

By adopting the politics of representation, identity claims will constantly be made whereby these identities will be re-established within the existing hegemony. Showing sex on television between two male characters, in prime time, will maybe shock the mainstream audience, but what else will it be than a short-term act, an excess within a mainly heteronormative institution such as television? Does such an act change long-term norms and values in society at a social and cultural level? On the other hand, if a queer theoretical perspective is adopted, what political grounding will this 'queering of culture' have and, moreover, would it not lead to extreme relativism that would confuse personal action (e.g. queer reading practices) with structural power (Kirsch, 2000, p. 42)?

A dialectical approach that uses these two positions and blends them in a synthesis seems to be a reasonable middle path. This is not an obvious matter, because there seems to be a tendency in media and communication studies for research to reflect one of these two paradigms: This is not a new statement but has already been mentioned by Nathalie Fenton (2000, p. 724) in her article on *The problematics of*

postmodernism for feminist media studies. Research that emphasizes a politics of norms is mostly linked to textual analysis, but does not adopt the audience reception and the production context. Further, politics of representation is often limited within the binary gender and sexual system, as shown in quantitative research reports in which the numbers of LGBT characters in primetime are counted.

As Anthony Giddens (1994) states, for social change to occur there needs to be a symbiosis between agency and structure. A post-structuralist project creates awareness of norms, discourse and hegemony at the individual, cultural and social level, while empowerment and strong identity claims can change laws and institutions. For gay and lesbian identities in particular, the political is as important as the individual, or social and cultural, level, since recognition and representation as a group are needed to defy symbolic annihilation and to achieve social change.

Representational strategies of resistance

As we have argued that the achievement of social change is benefited by a dialectic approach, different media critiques and strategies of resistance that are either essentialist or post-structuralist, need to be reconciled. Since our paper focuses on media research regarding gay and lesbian identities, we therefore suggest how these oppositional approaches for looking at representation and resistance can become complementary, and work as catalysts for social change. To this end, we will draw on the study of representational strategies of resistance articulated within popular texts, a perspective that is considered to be equally as important as the study of dominance and exploitation in contemporary popular culture products (see Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, & Biltereyst, 2008). Since popular texts are polysemic (Fiske, 1989), they can be considered as inherently possessing a 'potential site of resistance' (Best, 1998). With regard to gay and lesbian identities, this resistance can be represented by the articulation of alternatives to the ubiquitous representation of the heterosexual matrix in the decoding and encoding phase.

	MACRO INSTITUTIONAL/POLITICAL	MESO SOCIAL/CULTURAL	MICRO INDIVIDUAL
Resistance strategy	Empowerment ↓	Subversion/ Deconstruction ↓	
View of identity	Strategic identity claims/essentialism ↓	Identity as a fluid, ongoing process Identity as a performance ↓	
Media research critique	**Politics of representation**	**Politics of norms**	

FIG. 1: Strategies of resistance and media research critiques

As our starting point, we have stressed that each form of resistance operates at a different level. Thus, representational strategies that depart from an essentialist perspective will be situated at the political level, by which we mean institutional, and will rely on strategies of empowerment. To this end, assimilation is perceived as a goal that allows a group to become recognized for its 'otherness'. Thereby, a social minority group can achieve a political identity that grants the group symbolic power. For media representations in particular, identity then becomes represented as a strategic identity. In relation to media, frequent and rounded gay and lesbian representation will be demanded. For instance, it will require gay and lesbian characters who are depicted as regular characters, who are granted equal screen time, who are treated in a similar fashion to the other characters, who are depicted having a romantic and sexual life, whose sexual orientation is not treated as an issue, and who are allowed to embrace their sexual orientation. If presented in this way, these strategies will avoid negative depiction, will only sparsely allow stereotyping and will condemn homophobia. Finally, these representational strategies will incorporate the struggle for identity, the personal and social acceptance of gay and lesbian identities and the importance of gay and lesbian rights (e.g. same-sex marriages and adoption rights).

This media research critique focuses on the politics of representation and empowerment, which, most remarkably, do not engage in questioning society nor its established norms and values. For example, representations of homophobia in popular television culture are, as Battles and Hilton Morrow (2002) conclude in their research on the television sitcom *Will & Grace*, represented as the problem of a 'marginalized individual', but never societal. Further, gay and lesbian identities and relationships are mostly presented in relation to heterosexuality. The heterosexual lifestyle is constantly celebrated, and seen as

more 'authentic' (Avila-Saavedra, 2009). The popular *gay male/straight female-narrative* in *Will & Grace* and in popular films such as *My Best Friend's Wedding* (dir. Paul John Hogan, 1997) shows gay and lesbians represented as a minority that wants to be like the heterosexual majority (Shugart, 2003). Therefore, gay and lesbian characters function as symbolic and political characters that, due to little individual incoherence and lacking multiple and fluid identities, persistently maintain the gender and sexual binary system (Sedgwick, 1990). Consequently, in media and popular culture, heterosexuality is – at all times – the default performance that is made hegemonic in these numerous representations of gay and lesbian identities. These issues need to be addressed when criticizing representations in popular culture. This becomes possible when adopting a media research critique based on a politics of norms. The resistance strategies this critique employs are subversion and deconstruction. Rooted in post-structuralism and queer theory, these strategies aim to defy the discursive power of heteronormativity. Here, representational strategies will tackle how norms mobilize individuals into fixed identity positions, and expose how gay, lesbian and straight identities are represented as fixed, articulated as desiring to be normal, like the 'heteronormal' majority, often with a focus on the nuclear family. By representing queers as either oppressed by heteronormative discourses, or offering counter-discourses that envision a social reality for queers outside of heteronormativity, media representations of gay and lesbians can engage in deconstructing or subverting the hegemonic power of heteronormativity. When critiquing media products, it is of major importance to look beyond this social and cultural system of norms, since sheer representation and visibility do not suffice to achieve social change. A subversive strategy of resistance, as elaborated by Judith Butler (1999), draws out the problem of heteronormativity, because it emphasizes the problem of normativity in general. Subversion questions cultural practices, and shows where norms operate through the parody of cultural practices (e.g. cross-dressing, butch/femme performances). Grotesque and enlarged acts can be useful because the optimal operation of a norm is invisible (Chambers & Carver, 2008, p. 146). Although the political and pragmatic outcome of subversion and/or radical deconstruction is questionable, it is valuable in media representations as an alternative strategy. The drama series *Queer as folk*, both the British and American versions, can be seen as subversive as it primarily depicts gay characters. Initially, this radical inversion feels odd because it indicates the heteronormative standard.

When assessing media representation of popular culture, the strategies of empowerment and subversion/deconstruction should not be seen as opposites, but as elements that enforce and promote one another. For instance, the politics of representation can be employed to fight for same-sex marriage rights. Queer theorists, such as Michael Warner (1999), have reproached the identity politics movement for making same-sex marriage a political issue, stating that marriage should, in fact, be seen as yet another institution that legitimates other forms of heteronormative oppression. We agree with the reproach that the

institution of marriage holds mechanisms of oppression, but argue that subversion and a politics of norms may be able to deconstruct these oppressions from within the institution, or even redefine the institution. However, same-sex marriage rights need to be recognized first, in order to be able to successfully subvert the institution, without having to limit the subversive practices to heterosexual marriages. With regard to media representations, it can be argued that individual representations of queers who, for instance, do not define their sexual identity as 'gay' or 'lesbian', and who articulate their gender on a continuum between masculinity and femininity, offer a liberating and transgressive image of sexuality and gender outside the borders of heteronormativity. However, these representational strategies depend equally upon those earlier strategies that fought symbolic annihilation, brought gays and lesbians to the screens, and that root for a political and emancipatory vision of gay and lesbian rights. Academic perspectives on media representation of gay and lesbian identities, which endorse an emancipatory goal, should therefore rise above the strong polemic debates and acknowledge that both resistance strategies in popular culture, and empowerment and subversion/deconstruction, reinforce each other and have the potential to operate as catalysts in the mediation of social change.

Taking a look at contemporary 'gay television': the case for gay channels

So far, we have argued that adopting a politics of representation and a politics of norms is indispensable when evaluating the contemporary products of popular culture. In addition, we looked into resistance strategies that are based on different views of identity. A politics of representation emphasizes a strategic identity that empowers minorities, while a politics of norms operates from a queer theorist perspective that rejects civil-rights strategies but subscribes to counter-discourses and queer reconstructions by subverting the popular culture. In this part we will further elaborate on the different approaches which we mentioned by means of examples. We will consider so-called 'gay' and 'lesbian' channels (e.g. Logo, Here!, Gaysat.tv, OUTTV, ...) as cultural products that employ both strategies of resistance at different levels. Gay television can be considered a text that is 'gay' because of the sexuality of the audiences, producers and/or the content itself. By 'gay and lesbian channels' we refer to those television channels that are primarily aimed and marketed at LGBT audiences. Notice that we are only considering the more 'mainstream' gay and lesbian channels, which should be dissociated from adult pornographic channels of which HARDtv (Canada) and XMO (the Netherlands) are examples. In addition, it should be stressed that our overview is non-exhaustive but provides illustrations for the theory. We will discuss those channels through a qualitative structural analysis, based on the programming strategies, genres and program descriptions. Since the context is of major importance, we will also look at some press articles related to these channels. Further,

we will also look at the channels' websites, because far reaching convergence is abundant in a post-broadcasting media landscape.

How are these channels to be evaluated as popular cultural products when considering an emancipatory approach which emphasizes media as instrumental in propelling the changing perception of gay and lesbian identities (cfr. supra)? We distinguish three levels to answer this question: Firstly, there is the level of the channel itself, which exists among other mainstream cable channels. Secondly, there is the overall program schedule. Thirdly[2], there is the level of the programs' content.

The fact that gay and lesbian channels do exist next to other channels is political, since it is a way of establishing clear strategic gay and lesbian identity claims within a mainly 'domestic medium and, as such, closely associated with the home, the family, the quotidian; in other words, the heteronormative' (Davis & Needham, 2009, p. 6). Besides, these channels label themselves as clearly 'gay'. With regard to Logo, the channel's website highlights its bond with the gay and lesbian community: 'The LGBT world has a place all its own with Logo, the new lesbian & gay network from MTV Networks' (Viacom, 2008). TIMM TV[3], a German channel with the motto 'Wir lieben Männer', positions itself with an essentialist brand promise and clear identity. Moreover, there seems to be a link with civil rights, emancipation, activation and the right for an own television channel, explained MTV chairman,[4] Tom Freston, at the start of Logo (Seckler, 2004). This political fight for representation, as we elaborated earlier, results from the historic struggle against symbolic annihilation, which brought gays and lesbians to the screen. When thinking about a politic of norms one could argue that, gay channels are not very different from other television channels. They use the same codes or templates to produce television texts, websites, etc. As TV Watcher Allesandra Stanley writes in The New York Times: 'Gay Cable's Like Straight, Except for Nervous Jokes' (Stanley, 2005). Those channels depart from the standard cultural codes when they transform these into queer texts that may offer significant gender play. This subversion can be read as a queer statement that presents an alternative to the overload of heteronormative shows on television:

'The striking thing about Logo, a new cable channel owned by Viacom, is how much it looks like the rest of cable television. It has movies, a wedding makeover show, travel tips, a reality show about a young guy starting his own business, and lots of sexy music videos and raunchy comedy routines.' (Stanley, 2005).

As was made clear in the last citation, at the level of the overall program schedule, gay and lesbian channels offer a broad range of genres, comparable to most mainstream television channels. When looking at the program schedule of the Dutch OUTTV[5], we notice the inclusion of fiction, such as comedy, fantasy, drama and full-length films. Furthermore, there is also room for factual programs about travelling, lifestyle

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[3] At the moment when writing this paper (September 2010), the German gay and lesbian channel TIMM TV just stopped broadcasting.
[4] The gay channel Logo is part of Viacom's MTV unit.
[5] We looked at the program schedule from September 6th 2010 until September 19th 2010.

and reality television. Looking at the actual programs, it is noticeable that certain shows, including, for example, *Buffy*[6], *Six Feet Under*[7] and *Absolutely Fabulous*[8], do not have specific gay content, as does a series drama such as *Queer as Folk*. Nevertheless, through the use of camp humor and subtext, these programs become queer sensitive and are thereby absorbed into queer subculture. Queer texts, subtexts and radical transgressions of normative assumptions regarding gender and sexuality, can be found in *Buffy* (see Amy-Chinn, 2005) and *Six Feet Under* (see Aaron, 2009; Chambers, 2003). This 'mainstreaming' with an outspoken queer edge is a strong subversive play with the politics of norms. In sharp contrast, gay and lesbian channels also show programs that depict and underscore a 'fixed' gay identity such as *Dante's Cove*[9], a 'gay' remake of *Buffy* according to the Advocate:

'Colichman says he's finished production on Dante's Cove, a gay Buffy the Vampire Slayer-esque series-- "and it's really gay Buffy," he promises, "with the most beautiful cast on Earth"--and a Christmas movie starring George Hamilton.'(Jones, 2004).

However, strong identity claims can also be found in factual programs such as in the documentary series *Coming Out Stories* on Logo. This program is aimed at agency and empowerment, claiming gay and lesbian rights and defying homophobia through different coming out stories

Regarding the content of the programs, different strategies of representation can also be applied: While articulating multiple conflicting gender identities, and articulating a gender performance, characters play with a politics of norms which is, for example, clearly the case for the role of Spike in *Buffy* (Amy-Chinn, 2005). On the other hand, examples where a single character may even position himself as gay, and thereby articulate strategic essentialism, can be found in numerous factual programs on gay and lesbian channels (e.g. *Coming Out Stories*), but also as fiction in 'true story' films such as *Gray Matters* (dir. Sue Kramer, 2006), which was aired on Logo.

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[6] Programmed on Logo in April 2010.
[7] Programmed on OUTTV in September 2010.
[8] Programmed on TIMM TV in April 2010.
[9] *Dante's Cove* originally aired on the channel Here! but often reruns on other gay and lesbian channels such as OUTTV.

Conclusion

And so we have two traditions seemingly at serious odds with each other. There is nothing unusual about this – all research positions are open to conflict within and without.

Ken Plummer (Plummer, 2005, p. 370)

The examples presented from gay channels deal with a niche in popular television culture which clearly represents gay and lesbian identities. Our aim was to show that, when critiquing the phenomenon of LGBT channels in media studies, there is a need to go much further than just talking about how this brings gays and lesbians to the screen. Looked at from different perspectives, such as the politics of representation, the politics of norms, and various resistance strategies, it becomes clear that no unequivocal critiques and conclusions are possible. In the theoretical section of this paper we emphasized that each resistant strategy can offer valuable insights to the discussion and evaluation of contemporary media products. By not giving in to polemic debate between essentialist and post-structuralist views, we have tried to renegotiate queer theory's conceptual language. We have tried to emphasize the importance of a critique strongly intertwined with social realities, therefore we transgressed two different traditions. Furthermore, we believe that a harmonization between the oppositional positions of identity politics and queer theory should be employed in future research on the emancipation of gay and lesbian identities. The tendency in media and communication studies, where research reflects on only one of these two paradigms, should be challenged. Despite promising a 'pragmatic' approach to resistance and subversion in media research on gay and lesbian identities, the examples we have discussed here are all rather marginal, therefore we would like to emphasize the necessity for future media research into mainstream media phenomena which are strongly in touch with everyday life, and are highly relevant for a democratic and empancipatory approach to gay and lesbian identities. There is a great need to look with a dialectical eye.

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