

THE LESBIAN PERCEPTION: REPRESENTATION IN ANONYMOUS QUESTIONNAIRES

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ABSTRACT

This article is a small portion of my Ph.D. thesis; it shows the process and conclusion of integration of Lesbian characters in a western context in the media from an anonymous international questionnaires' point of view addressed to the Lesbian community. My research compared different Lesbian oriented films, television shows and Internet based (web) series from the early 1930's to today; the Butch & Femme categorization, the shattering of the Lesbian masculine image throughout media history and the need to become mainstream opposed to queer, and simply blend into the majority of the population. I have explored it with numerous films, television shows and Internet based series (web series) – in order to show the progress. In addition, I have administered anonymous questionnaires, conducted a small sample focus group with Lesbians ages 16 to 45, in order to understand how the modern Lesbian portrays herself and believe the media represents her. I have explored various films and television shows from the different eras, based my research on different books, articles and studies of a similar nature, starting with Queer theory, and post-feminist theory; based on Foucault (1978), Butler (1990), Kama (2003) and Beauvoir (1949) The need to “Belong” is every minority - group’s aspiration, especially in young women, the desire to “look up to someone, or imitate them” or identify with them; or how “deification” according to: Lemish, D. 1998 Spice Girls’ talk: A case study in the development of gendered identity influences this generation of Lesbians. Explains it in her study of “deification” while looking into teenage girls and their relation to a pop group called “The spice girls”, you can clearly see it in my study as Lesbians wear their hair like some characters on the Lesbian Television show “The L Word” which influences this generation of Lesbians.

KEYWORDS: Lesbian Mainstreamism, Stereotypes, Media, Butch & Femme, Evolution, Queer Theory, LGBT

INTRODUCTION

Throughout media history, Lesbians have hardly ever been represented as mainstream or straight looking. Over the past fifteen years, we have witnessed a rise in “Lesbian “mainstreams” awareness”, especially in television shows. Not only in all Gay oriented shows such as: “Ellen”, “Queer as Folk”, “The L Word”, but in every prime-time television show that considers itself mainstream, there are at least one or two Gay or Lesbian characters, for example – “Friends”, “Grey’s Anatomy”, “Glee”, “Beverly Hills 90210”, “Sex and the City”, and “Orange is the New Black”.

The anonymous closed international questionnaire was taken by over a 100 women, both gay and straight, ages 20 – 40, from various countries, from both Europe and the United States. The questionnaire consisted of various questions regarding an all Lesbian Television show; which ran from 2004-2009. General sexual orientation and relationship status, familiarity of various films, Television shows and Lesbian web series. The research method was quantitative - a questionnaire comprising of 20 closed questions, and one final open question was conducted anonymously and published on various Internet sites, such as Facebook, emails and forums and was answered by over a 100 women.

The goal was to measure how Lesbian women today see themselves in relation to the portrayal of Lesbian characters in the media.

The Questions Were

How old are you? What is your sexual orientation? Are you in a relationship? Do you know Lesbian programs? Have you seen the film Go fish? Do you think Lesbians look this way today? Do you know the Television series “: The L word? Do you think Lesbians look like this today? Have you watched all 6 seasons? Which of the characters do you most identify with? In your opinion, does the show reflect a feminist lifestyle? Did the show serve the Lesbian community? Are there other shows which portray Lesbians that way? Do you watch Lesbian web series? Is it “OK” to be a Lesbian? Are Lesbians portrayed as “mainstream” today? What do you think of figure 1?

- **How old are you?**

The majority of the subjects were in their 30's.

- **What is your sexual orientation?**

75% were Lesbians, 20.23% were bisexual and 4.761% were straight.

- **Are you in a relationship?**

58% were in a relationship 42% were single

- **Do you watch Lesbian programs?**

77% said yes, 18% said no.

- **Have you seen the 1994 film “Go Fish”?**

55% saw the film, 33% did not see the film and 9% had only heard of the film.

- **Do you think Lesbians look this way today?**

63% said some of them look this way today, 14.81% said no, 7.4% said yes.

- **Are you familiar with Television series "The L Word"?**

All women were familiar with the series (100%)

- **Do you think Lesbians look like this nowadays?**

63% said some of them 14% said no, 7% said yes.

- **Have you watched all 6 seasons of it?**

72% watched all 6 seasons of the series, 17.85% watched most of it and 8.3% watched only a few episodes

- **Which of the characters on the show could you most identify with?**

The findings were surprising. 32% identified with Alice, a radio broadcaster and the only actress in the series that is out as a lesbian in her real life and is identified in the series as bisexual.

27% identified with Bette Porter, the art gallery manager, who, in my opinion, represents the true female power in the series. Older respondents identified with her more than younger ones.

17% identified with Shane, most of who were younger respondents, under the age of 30.

The other characters were Tina, who was Bette's formerly straight partner, with 7%, Helena with 6% and Jennie with 1%.

- **In your opinion, does the show reflect a feminist lifestyle?**

52% "Yes". 40% "a little bit", 7% "No".

- **In your opinion did the show serve the lesbian community?**

51% "definitely", 47% "a little bit", 1% "not at all".

- **Up until "The L Word", were there other television shows that portrayed lesbians in that aspect?**

88%no"

- **Do you watch any Lesbian web series?**

17.5% yes, 70% no, 9% did not know there were any.

- **Do you know the web series "Girl Girl Scene"?**

7.4% watched the series, 5.5% heard of it, 83% did not know it.

- **Do you know the web series "Seeking Simone"?**

88.88% did not know, 1.85% had heard of it, 5.5% watched the series.

- **Do you know the web series "Anyone but me"?**

3.7% had heard of the series, 81% did not know, 11% watched the series.

- **Do you think there is enough Lesbian representation in the media?**

68.5% said there was not enough Lesbian representation in the media, 9.2% said there was and 18.5% said "it's getting there".

- **Is it "OK" to be a Lesbian?**

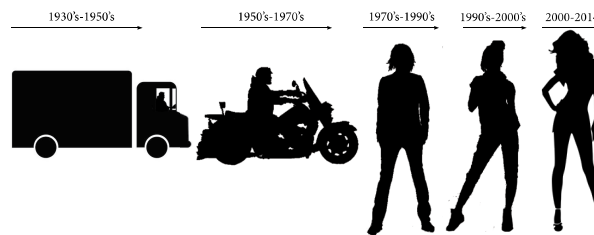
88% said "yes". 7.4% said "someday", 1.81% said "never" and I was very pleased to find that 0% - none of the respondents thought it was not OK to be a Lesbian.

- **In your opinion, are Lesbians portrayed as "mainstream" today?**

54% answered: "a little more acceptable" 30% answered "not yet" and only 15% answered "Yes". It was unfortunate to discover that most of the respondents, mainly lesbians, did not see themselves as more acceptable in our society.

- **What do you think of this? (The only open question)**

Lesbian representation evolution in the media.

**Figure 1**

100% of the women in question, agreed that Lesbians have made a “long way” from the stereotypical “truck driver” into mainstream awareness and blending into the media by presenting a straighter look and attitude especially on Television. This model examines only the Lesbian evolution in the media from the 1930’s to today, showing the shattering of stereotypes and patterns over the years and the involvement of Lesbian characters in various types of media, leaving the prejudice behind and becoming mainstream, by shattering stereotypes over time. Beginning with a “truck driver” Lesbian character representation from the 1930’s to the 1950’s, then “dykes on bikes” from the 1950’s to the 1970’s, the tomboy that represented Lesbians in the media through the 1970’s until the 1990’s, the “sporty spice” character from the 1990’s to the beginning of the millennium. And finally, reaching some sort of the utopian Lesbian character representation from 2000 until now. This tendency has grown in the past five years one can see at least one Lesbian character in every media type of media in the western world. This mainstreamism is all around us and will continue to grow and perhaps expose other marginalized groups into mainstream awareness in the future

All of the women who took this anonymous questionnaire agreed that Lesbians have evolved in their representation in various media, they all agreed that the film remains the most stereotypical format and all think that being a Lesbian today is no different to being black or white, however, they all agreed that unlike those identities – male, female, black or white, it is not the first thing you notice about the person in front of you, since it is no longer necessary to stand out in that way. There are many different aspects one can stand out for and being a Lesbian is not one of them. This entire process leads me to construct the “Lesbian representation, evolution in the media” model which summarized the information garnered into one simple (perhaps a little stereotypical funny) model, showing how the Lesbian characters in the media has evolved from the 1930’s until today. All unanimously agreed that it is exactly what had happened to Lesbians in the media. In their opinion, this is visible both in real life and in all types of media. Lesbians were first represented as “truck drivers” – very masculine, male imitating Lesbians, this was not only seen in film, but in real life as well. This stereotype of their representation in the media and their appearance in reality corresponded to the spirit of the time and one could easily identify who was a Lesbian and who was not. From the 1950’s until the 1970’s, when the second feminism wave hit, and “Dykes on Bikes” were everywhere. Dykes on Bikes – also known as **DOB** is a well known American institution, they were most likely to be found at the front of parades for logistical reasons and have remained there as a symbol of LGBT pride and defiance. They are fiercely independent, self-reliant feminist and have been studied as a social phenomenon as a complex, multilayered form of consumption - related

cultural resistance that raises awareness of social injustice and discursively informs social meanings in everyday life outside the gay pride parade." However, nowadays, Dykes on Bikes have been criticized for not portraying a more mainstream look and using the term **dyke** in their name. Even so, Dykes on Bikes teach that women can be masculine, but also challenge dominant sexual and cultural expectations of what a woman is and what she is capable of. From the 1970's to the 1990's, we see a more "modern tomboy", to whom straight women can also relate to. This image is less intimidating and has a more "friendly" look, harmless and neither a troublemaker nor rebel - like Dykes on Bikes. The next figure depicts what happened from 1990's to the beginning of the millennium when a more sporty-spice type of Lesbian emerged, integrating both tomboy and girly appearances. The final figure is perhaps a little early, since there are still truck drivers, "Dykes on Bikes, tomboys and sporty spices all around the western world, we see them at the supermarket, in films, on television and the internet. This figure does not claim that they are all extinct, but merely that in any evolutionary process, extinction is sometimes slow and progressive, otherwise, according to Darwin, why is there still monkeys around if Homo sapiens descended from them?

Even though this questionnaire was conducted in 2009, I was surprised to discover that Lesbian they considered their sexual orientation to be unaccepted by society. I was disappointed to find that straight women did not know the series, and had no access to Lesbian content. But I comforted myself with the fact that when the movie "**Waiting to Exhale**", in 1995 aired publicly starring Whitney Houston most of the audience was made up of African American women. One would not expect to find upper and middle-class white men and women to go to the cinema to see that film. I believe It was Buckingham (1993), who said, "You cannot see an isolated interaction between the text and the reader, but as a social process in which the spacing of a text has an important role in itself" (p. 18). This kind of analysis assumes that the text representation of an experience and an experience itself are not the same. This does not necessarily mean that "mainstreamism" does not occur, but the smaller a common denominator, the smaller an audience.

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