

Peers and their role as gender police

The evaluation of media representations of gays and the performance of a hegemonic heterosexual identity among Flemish teenagers.

Elke Van Damme

The anti-discrimination law, signed by all the members of the European Union, lays the legal foundations on which discrimination grounded on someone's gender, age, race/ethnicity, religion/belief, disability and sexual orientation is prohibited. Notwithstanding, homophobia and anti-homosexual behaviour is still present in our contemporary Western society. Homophobia and its verbal and physical manifestation is more than the irrational fear of homosexuals. It is the trepidation of being perceived or unmasked as gay (Kimmel, 1994). This fear is mostly expressed by men and the homophobic behaviour is almost solely directed at gay men. More so, not only the victims of gay-bashing, but also the offenders are most often male. This fear to be perceived as gay implies that gay men are not *real* men and therefore being gay results in a lower status group. When examples of gay bashing and bullying are reported in the media, connections between race, ethnicity and cultural background are often made. In Western European countries, Muslims are often linked with homophobia. However, research of Buijs, Hekma and Duyvendak (2009) stressed that social-economic factors, social class and gender are more important lines that need to be taken into account. In this study, the focus will be on gender differences in the opinions of Flemish teenagers (age 14-18) regarding homosexuality in general, and homosexual representations on television in particular. We believe that diverse representations on television can play a positive role in the construction of attitudes and opinions. Using a qualitative approach, eight in-depth focus groups with 57 teenagers (32 female versus 25 male) were conducted. Results shows that hegemonic gender performances and homophobia can be noted among the evaluation of media representations of gays. A heteronormative masculine identity can be noted in these evaluations. Young men feel the need to stress their own heterosexuality, thus distancing themselves from a homosexual identity. Female teens are, in general, more tolerant towards gays and gay representations, and the performance of a heteronormative femininity could not be recognized .

Keywords: teenagers, sexual identity, homosexuality, reception study, homophobia, performance, masculinity

*“Masculinity has become a relentless text by which we prove
to other men, to women, and ultimately to ourselves,
that we have successfully mastered the part.”*

(Kimmel, 1994, PAGINA)

Introduction

Homophobia, or literally the irrational fear of homosexuals, comes from the socialization of a rigid and hegemonic definition of masculinity (Kimmel, 1994). This traditional interpretation of masculinity installs heterosexuality as the norm, conveying a heterosexual masculinity as biologically natural. In this heterosexist model, homosexuality and other forms of sexual behaviour are regarded as deviant and against nature (Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Plummer, 2001). It becomes clear that different forms of masculinity are not evaluated equally (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003: PAGINA). This dominant hegemonic discourse of masculinity creates a norm to which men measure themselves. It is because of this strict, one-dimensional definition of how to be a man, that the unfound trepidation can grow to be ‘ridiculed as too feminine by other men and this fear perpetuates homophobic and exclusionary masculinity’ (Kimmel, 1994, pagina). So homophobia is also the fear of being seen as gay. This implicates that gayness results in a lower status, a status someone wants to avoid at all costs, even when others get (physically and/or emotionally) hurt in the process. The constant threat and fear that (heterosexual) men endure of being perceived or unmasked as gay, fuels antisocial, homophobic behaviour and talk. It is through this antisocial and exaggerated behaviour and talk that masculinity is determined and reinforced, that men and their manhood are not questioned.

In our contemporary society, violence and physical and verbal aggression are three of the key markers of masculine behaviour that is perceived or understood as authentic (Kimmel, 1994; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). We can say that ‘homophobia is one of the organizing principles of heterosexual masculinity, a constitutive element in its construction. ... One could say that homophobia is the hate that makes men straight.’ (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003: PAGINA). This socialization is recognized in different contemporary cultures, as is illustrated by the similar patterns and the multiple examples of gay bashing and bullying all around the world (Plummer, 2001). These acts ‘are frequently more about gendered behaviour than actual sexual practice’ (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, PAGINA). Moreover, homophobic behaviour and talk is often expressed without the explicit knowledge of someone’s sexual identity (Plummer, 2001). Feminine gender performances such as body language (e.g., swaying) and codes of dressing are ridiculed and

mocked with, resulting in the label of 'being so gay'. Thus, failing to measure up to hegemonic boys' standard is often the foundation for such antisocial behaviour. The avoidance of homophobic behaviour can only be accomplished through the performance of a particular, hegemonic gender identity. Moreover, homophobia as a style is an integral part of this particular gender performance, one that tries to convey heterosexual masculinity as the only natural sexual identity. These homophobic performances are 'as much for the self as others, where heterosexual masculinities are constituted through action' (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, PAGINA; Buijs, Hekma & Duyvendak, 2009: PAGINA). Additionally, sex talk and sexual predation with women as performative acts of a heterosexual masculinity can enhance someone's status and level of masculinity (Kimmel, 1994; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). It is through these acts that a heterosexual masculinity is reflected (e.g., how to behave, eat, think), regulated and reinforced. Boys and men who do not meet these social and cultural standards, or fail to behave conforming the heteronormative discourse, fear ridicule, exclusion, and can be accused of being gay (Buijs et al., 2009: PAGINA; Walton, 2011; Warner, 1999). Additionally, this fear to be stigmatized evokes the tendency to evaluate and adjust one's own behaviour, regardless someone's true sexual identity and preferences. Therefore, gay men and women feel the pressure to adjust their behaviour and gender identity to the codes, prescribed in our contemporary, heterosexual society (Buijs et al., 2009: PAGINA).

In this article, the concept of 'doing' gender, or gender as a performance of an identity (Butler, 1990: 25) is used. The focus is on teens' gender performance among peers (focus groups), when questions were asked regarding homosexual fictional characters on television and the evaluation regarding such gay representations. Our research questions are as follows:

RQ1: Which gay characters' on television are the teens most familiar with?

RQ2: Do these representations of homosexual characters resemble their experiences with gays in their everyday lives?

RQ3: Which ideological gender performances are noted among the focus group participants, and can gender differences be recognized?

Literature review

The socialization of teenagers happens through different agents, namely the media, parents, education and peers. During adolescence, peers gain importance and become key socialization agents in the life of

youngsters. Kimmel labelled peers as a gender police, who constantly threaten 'to unmask [us] men as feminine, as sissies' (1994: PAGINA). As illustrated with this quote, the focus of research is mostly on male teenagers who seem to be scrutinized when it comes to the performance of a heterosexual identity. Through the performance of heteronormative codes of masculinity, teenage boys prove their peers they are heterosexual and thus a true, authentic man. The brief overview of studies that follows next, illustrates the importance of peers and their crucial role in the evaluation and construction of a heterosexual identity.

Research of Plummer (2001) showed that homophobia is recognized in young children, adolescents and (emerging) adults. He concludes that homophobic remarks and references become apparent in early primary school, prior to puberty, sexual identity construction and sexual maturity (p.8). A trend of increasing homophobic meanings is noticed as boys grown older, and boys in general learn to fear to be labelled gay. The tolerance towards gay teens is precarious among high school teenagers: homosexuality is said to be tolerated among peers, although this open-mindedness is limited and constricted. A friend coming out of the closet or an approaching gay teenager are not greeted with this permissiveness. This shift in level of tolerance might be explained due to the fear to be seen as an object of lust, to be regarded as gay as well, or to 'catch it'. Young men fear to 'catch' homosexuality when being touched by a gay man, as if homosexuality is a contagious disease (Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Buijs et al., 2009). Additionally, homosexuality is often separated from a personal, sexual identity; hence reducing it to an act someone can or cannot do (Buijs et al., 2009). Another possibility is that such an opinion, when raised among peers, functions as an identity performance. A result of this performance is the elimination of a homosexual identity, and the establishment of a tough, masculine status and respect among peers (Plummer, 2001). Assuming the interrelation between gender and sexuality results in the stigmatization of everyone who does not measure up the dominant gender norm. Homosexuality cannot be situated in the binary opposition male/female, and therefore it is labelled as unnatural or deviant. This means that, according to this heteronormative discourse, gay men are not *authentic* men, neither are gay women *authentic* women (Buijs et al., 2009).

In the Netherlands, Buijs et al. (2009) investigated young people's attitudes towards homosexuality and homosexual behaviour. They conducted focus group interviews with people who are more likely to perform anti-homosexual behaviour and interviewed 52 offenders of such behaviour. Anti homosexual violence is an extreme form of such a gender performance through which status and respect is

ascertained. In general, a heteronormative or heterosexist discourse was noted among the participants in which homosexuality was regarded as deviant and weird. Individual, homophobic statements were also registered. A *we* versus *them* perspective is noted, with gay men and women functioning as 'the other'. Another trend among the participants was the toleration of homosexuality, but the participants only tolerate homosexuals if gay men (and women) do not bother or harass them. In each focus group, the participants agreed that homosexuality is a lesser form of masculinity, one with exaggerated feminine characteristics. It is through iconic codes (physical, cultural and social) that the sexual identity of a homosexual man is recognized. Physical codes refer to, for instance, swaying hips, but also gestic codes ("a limp wrist") and codes of dress are analyzed. Examples of cultural and social codes are the frequently raised comments that gay men are more emotional and that they are often surrounded by a large group of women with whom they talk about feminine subjects such as fashion and clothes. In the participants mind, thus, sexuality and a sexual identity intersect with gender and gender performance, which illustrates a heteronormative discourse. Similarly, the evaluation of gay characters in television fiction is structured among the same values and beliefs (e.g., a lesser form of masculinity, recognition through iconic codes). Moreover, talking about homosexuality among peers can result in the possibility to be regarded as gay since peers quickly assume that someone's knowledge about the subject comes from being gay himself. Similar results could not be found for teenage girls, as it seems that homosexuality is regarded and valued in less negative ways than in the cultures of young males (cf. Lehtonen, 1995) (Nayak & Kehily, 1996). The respondents in the study of Buijs et al. (2009) who take a tolerant stance against homosexuality are almost all female.

The performance of a heteronormative masculinity was mostly noted in the male focus groups and the authors suspect that this particular form of group dynamics may have influenced the results into a more patriarchal direction. Hence, the importance and influence of peers is taken into account. Male offenders of homophobic aggression gained a good reputation and higher status due to their hostile performance of a hegemonic masculinity, simultaneously avoiding the labelling of 'gay', which 'for them is synonymous with weak and feminine' (Buijs et al., 2009: PAGINA). Apparently, the performance of a heteronormative masculinity and peer pressure intersect and seem to reinforce one another (Buijs et al., 2009).

Peers can also function as gender police about media preferences and the evaluation of certain programs since media texts are often viewed among peers or talked about with friends (see Adriaens,

Van Damme & Courtois, 2011). Ging's (2005) study of Irish male teenagers' consumption and reception of a wide range of media texts illustrates that the performance of a heteronormative masculine identity is also noted in the evaluation of genres and texts. Programs, generally attracting a female audience (e.g., soaps) were not watched by 'real' men. Exaggerated dislikes of genres and texts also stressed their normative masculinity and heterosexual identity. Emphasizing interest in women, beer and cars is another pattern to publicly perform and affirm someone's heterosexual masculinity. Such performances evoked hilarity among the participants, 'but they also enabled participants to achieve a sense of consensus regarding what is permissible and what is not' (Ging, 2005: PAGINA). Ging's participants are critical and media-literate, creatively using genres and texts to construct a masculine identity. However, this media literacy does not mean that they are able to decode texts ideologically.

An extreme example of peer pressure and the performance of a heteronormative masculinity (or the lack of it) is the study of Kimmel and Mahler (2003) about fundamental elements in random school shootings in America. In this study, the association of gender nonconformity with homosexuality is also recognized as a substantial factor in these shootings. Kimmel and Mahler's analysis showed that almost all of the offenders were mocked with, constantly teased and gay-baited for their gender performances that did not measure up to society's norms of hegemonic masculinity. As mentioned in the introduction, these gay-baitings were not based on the shooters' *real* sexual identity but merely because they were different from the others (e.g., artistic, nonathletic, geekish). Since their gender performances differed from the dominant codes of masculine behaviour, these boys were expelled and excluded, and were forced in a cultural marginalized position (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003: PAGINA). This forced, marginalized position due to the questioning of their manhood and the young men's desire to be regarded as a "authentic" man by their peers, are regarded as one of the crucial elements in the shooter's motives.

In this article, we want to examine if Kimmel's assumption about 'peers are a kind of gender police' is relevant among contemporary, Flemish teenagers (age 14-18) when evaluating fictional gay representations (Kimmel, 1994: PAGINA).

Methodology

Contemporary audience studies and reception studies analyze the personal meanings that individuals make of media texts in relation to their lived social and cultural systems, frame of references and

experiences, using different approaches. In this article, the qualitative approach of focus groups was used to analyze teens' evaluations of media representations of gay characters and adolescents' attitudes towards homosexuality. Additionally, the participants' performances of a gender identity are also analyzed. Their opinions can be seen as expressions of personal beliefs, attitudes and feelings, but also as a set of performances in which adolescents leave a particular impression with others, thus performing their identities for others to see (Buckingham, 2008; de Bruin, 2008; Gray, 2008). Focus groups as a method is more appropriate than individual interviews for studying issues of gender and sexuality, because group interactions can stimulate a richer and more complex flow of information (Montell, 1995: 4). Curtin and Linehan (2002: 68) refer to such platforms as 'geographies of inclusion' since the participants learn and perform the rules of normative masculinity. We focused on teens since the construction of identities (e.g., gender, sexual) is an integral part of adolescence, which is a transitional period during which a world based on generational differences is replaced by one grounded on sexual differences (Pasquier, 1996: 354). The construction of a self-identity is a complex matter, formed along various lines and socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity). Identities are not natural or essential, but are fluid and open to negotiation, and therefore they must be performed (Weber & Mitchell, 2008). According to Crossley (1996 in Howarth 2002: 159), identities "are *continually* being negotiated and challenged at an inter-subjective level", are contested through and against representations of our claimed social groups and this influences how people think about and represent themselves (Howarth, 2002: 158-159). Similarly, Buckingham (2008: **PAGINA**) notes that "our identity is something we uniquely process: it is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind".

Since it was necessary to provide a safe and stimulating context to discuss the personal topic of homosexuality and gay representations with respect for each other's opinion, all focus groups consisted of friends. This made it possible to voice (controversial) opinions and beliefs, even when they were different from the common and more general ideas of the group. Participants were between 14 and 18 years old, and because the evaluation of media content was the subject of the focus groups, watching fictional programs regularly was a necessity. Eight focus groups were conducted and 57 teenagers volunteered (32 female versus 25 male). The average age of the participants was 17. Five focus groups consisted of male and female teenagers, whereas three focus groups were homogeneous (one with only girls, two groups with only males). Before the start of each discussion, teenagers were asked to fill out a small questionnaire, in so providing demographical information (e.g., age, type of secondary education).

Twice, visual material was used to stimulate discussion. A semi-structured and open-ended questionnaire was used as a guide during the focus groups. Discussed themes were the social viewing context of television programs, television talk, sexual morality, and the evaluation of fictional stereotypes and representations. The focus of this article is on the participants' opinions about the (stereotypical) representations of gay characters. Discussions lasted between 60 and 75 minutes and afterwards, participants were given an incentive to thank them for contributing.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, including emotions, hesitations, silence or laughing out loud. The qualitative computer program NVivo was used to code rigorously and thematically analyse the transcriptions. A more open coding system was applied, and the codes were structured according to the used questionnaire. However, it was possible for new codes to emerge during the coding process. Using a two-phase coding process, we were critical of the first coding, and we believe that non-systematically and previously made coding errors were given less chance to arise. The focus of the thematic and in-depth analysis is on the identification of certain performances within a specific context, and on possible gender differences within these performances. The results are sometimes illustrated with quotes from the focus groups and for every quote, additional information about the respondent is provided between brackets. This information consists the number of the focus group (FG XX), someone's gender (M for males and F for females), age, and type of secondary education.

Results

He is so gay!

As an introduction to the topic of homosexual representations on television, the participants were asked to name gay characters that are well known or who are part of fictional programs. This way, we wanted to gauge whether our teenage respondents are familiar with fictional gay characters in television formats. Overall, the results show no gender differences and a wide variety of different genres of mostly national television programs, national and international fictional gay characters and almost exclusively national real-life gay actors/famous people. Sometimes, respondents did not know the name of the fictional characters but did remember their homosexual identity. In each focus group, several participants were able to name a gay character, a television program or movie in which gay actors or gay characters had a (leading) role. Different genres and television programs were mentioned, such as

telenovela's (e.g., *Sara, David*), soaps (e.g., *Familie [Family]*), teen drama series (e.g., *Dawson's Creek*, *Skins* and *Spring [Jump]*) and reality programs (e.g., *Kleren Maken de Man [the Flemish version of Queer Eye for the Straight Guy]*). *Brokeback Mountain* was the only movie with gay characters that the respondents remembered. The programs and/or gay characters that were mentioned the most were *Mijn Restaurant [My Restaurant]* in which two gay men participated but were not in a relationship together, Doctor Ann from the Flemish soap *Thuis [Home]* and the Flemish telenovela *David*. People who are gay in real life were brought up as well: several national famous persons were talked about, such as *Koen Crucke, Felicé, Timo Descamps, David Davidse, Yasmine, Sarah Bettens, Showbizz Bart*, and only one international gay man was cited, namely the famous and bisexual singer *Mika*. It is remarkable though that out of the fictional characters and programs mentioned in the focus groups, only one out of three is Anglo-Saxon (both North-American and British). It was expected that teens would mention more English-speaking characters or programs since these are most popular among teens and are frequently programmed on Flemish television channels.

Fictional versus real-life gays and lesbians

Additionally, the participants were asked to compare fictional representations of gays and lesbians with gays or lesbians they know, or with their perceptions of gays and lesbians in general. Thus, the perceived level of reality of fictional gay representations was investigated. According to the respondents, fictional representations of gays and lesbians are often marked with stereotypes. Most teenagers believe that the characteristics of especially fictional gay males are exaggerated, focussing on feminine characteristics. These female characteristics are situated on different levels, such as dress codes (e.g., wearing a purse), physical codes (swaying) and social and cultural codes (e.g., tanned skin, up-to-date with the latest fashion, friend of many women) (cf. Buijs et al., 2009). Producers and the marketing strategies are mentioned in this context: respondents raise the possibility of subtly incorporating gay elements, although the respondents realize that television makers prefer to incorporate obvious, exaggerated characteristics instead. Or as this seventeen year old girl (FG 5) says, "*But yeah, I think that, yeah, it's normal that in series gays are represented more gay than they are in real life*". It seems that, in the context of gay characters, the use of exaggerated stereotypes is considered a convention of televised representations in the respondents' mind.

It is believed among the participants that lesbians are less present in television programs than gay men. Nonetheless, similar results regarding characteristics are noted as for the homosexual male characters.

When a lesbian character is part of the cast, the focus is mainly on her masculine characteristics. However, teens of the second and third focus group disagree and believe that a lesbian character often has extremely feminine characteristics. Moreover, a lesbian is often (extremely) sexually active (e.g., *A shot at love with Tila, Tequila*). It was mentioned in the second focus group that the represented female gays are often a-stereotypical lesbians, and examples of lesbians as beautiful vamps and sluts were raised. These examples conform the typical female characters in American television program in which physically beautiful and sexy women are the norm. Naomi and Emily from the British teen drama series *Skins*, were mentioned in the third focus group, and they were praised because they are not represented as butches but as 'normal girly-girls'. In this focus group, *Skins* was rewarded because of the incorporation of a realistic intimate long-term sexual lesbian relationship, something that hardly occurs between fictional characters in contemporary media formats. The female respondents expressed their likes about this storyline and label it as cool. One participant of the seventh focus group, which consisted solely of boys, mentioned that girls are often shown experimenting with other girls, in fictional formats, but ultimately, these characters turn out to be straight. This comment can be seen as an illustration of the fluid characters of sexuality and sexual behaviour. It also shows that adolescence can be a period in which teens experiment and test their boundaries and that the teenage respondents are tolerant towards girls experimenting with other girls.

Teenagers are aware that for some real life gays and lesbians, these representations might be realistic and function as symbolic resources, while others cannot identify with these portrayals at all. Stereotypes are also present in real life, although the respondents believe that diversity is more present in real life than in television programs. Coming out of the closet is regularly incorporated in the storylines of contemporary television programs and these scenes mostly show confused teens that are often bullied by their classmates and peers. In some focus groups these representations are valued positively because gay viewers may identify with these characters; while others believe that coming out of the closet in real life is accompanied with less drama than seen in the fictional representations. In the sixth focus group (only girls), it was mentioned twice that fictional gay relationships do not last very long and that the intimacy between gay characters is mostly absent except for the teen drama series *Skins* (see supra). These teens advocate for more such representations.

'Doing' gender in the focus groups

Although personal opinions about homosexuality and gay people were not explicitly asked in the focus groups, opinions were still interlaced in the conversation of some focus groups and intertwined in certain answers provided by the respondents. This section focuses on the attitudes regarding homosexuality and gender performances that differ from the hegemonic discourse. Since this is connected with the different ideological gender performances that are noted among the focus group participants, both will be addressed in this section. Additionally, differences among the performances of boys versus girls are also analyzed and reported.

A male homosexual identity is, according to the respondents, irrevocably connected with a feminine performance. Clearly, gender and sexual identity are considered identical since this more feminine performance is recognized as (one of) the main element(s) that makes a male character gay. However, *“I do believe that there are gays that are like..., who are ‘normal’ men” (FG 3, F, 17y, ASO)*. This quote implicates that most male gays are considered to be not *normal* men, and this normality is equalised with a heterosexual identity. This comment also insinuates that feminine behaviour –or performing a different form of masculinity-, recognized in a male body, is abnormal. This abnormality is not only connected with gay men, but with lesbians as well since they are often seen as butch, a label that has a masculine connotation.

Male participants of the homogeneous focus groups with only boys (FG 7 and FG 8) are often more tolerant towards lesbians than male gays. Moreover, the male participants of two focus groups (one mixed focus group, one heterogeneous group with only boys) label lesbian representations as hot and alluring, which displays a hegemonic and heterosexual masculinity. In this hegemonic performance, sex is seen as masculine, males are constantly consumed by sexual thoughts, fantasies and urges, and are driven by natural urges. More so, two women making out is something that turns on ‘real’ men (Kim et al., 2007). One boy stresses that he does not watch programs in which extremely feminine gay men are part of the cast. This comment can be read as performing a certain kind of masculinity, in which watching fictional gay men is unmanly and not done by ‘authentic’ men. Another performance of this hegemonic interpretation of masculinity is laughing at male gay characters, which was a recurring act in the focus groups. Especially when these gay characters express, according to the respondents, extreme levels of femininity, they are ridiculed. One of the boys of the focus groups with male teenagers jokes about avoiding male gays because he does not want to catch the same ‘disease’. This boy defines a homosexual man as *“someone who has a limp wrist” (FG 8, M, 15y, TSO)*. However, a more serious and ‘normal’

character, like Doctor Ann from the Flemish series *Thuis* [Home] is acceptable. When this participant was asked to explain why he saw homosexuality as a transmitted disease, he laughed away his comment, explained that it was only a joke and that he tolerates gays. Labelling homosexuality as a disease and joking about avoiding gays, functions as a performance of a heterosexual masculinity, which results in eliminating a homosexual identity, and a possible forced marginalized position. They may upgrade their position among peers, and gain status and respect. As illustrated by this boy, teens in the focus groups often take a tolerant stance regarding gays, but simultaneously distance themselves from it by stressing that they would never do such a thing themselves. Here, sexual identity is seen as an act or behaviour that someone can or cannot (decide to) do.

Although previous results mostly illustrate that mostly boys perform gender conform the hegemonic discourse, there is also a focus group in which three female participants voiced their opinion about gays clearly. They think homosexuality is weird and disgusting, and they do not understand it. Two of these participants are from Turkish decent and they explained that their cultural background is not tolerant towards gays and they believe that their cultural capital influences their opinion about homosexuality. The third, non-Turkish girl labelled gays and lesbians as not normal and stressed that being gay is something they choose to be (see supra):

*X7 (FG 5, F, age: absent, BSO): But, I can't stand that, gays and lesbians. I'm... I don't want to be rude, but I can,... I think... Man and woman are okay, but... Men and men, and women and women, I think that's weird. How is our contemporary society... How does our society evolves these days? I don't get it. Gays and lesbians, I don't understand that. I think it's gross. I think it's really gross. *loathing* I don't want to offend anyone ... but in my opinion, I think 'Can't they act normal like everyone else? I know, it's their choice but...*

This comment provides us information about the way she views homosexuality. This teenage girl considers homosexuality not as an identity, but as a choice someone's makes. However, this choice cannot be made, she believes, since homosexuality goes against the only 'natural' form of sexuality, namely heterosexuality, which is an essentialist view on sexuality. The other participants of the focus group, however, distanced themselves from this comment. They see themselves as tolerant towards gays and lesbians, and do not mind someone's sexuality. Two boys and a girl (from Ghana) distance themselves from homosexuality and comment they would not 'do it'. A fourth girl stresses her tolerance by mentioning that she has (close) gay friends.

In some focus groups, teens were asked to voice their opinion about whether or not there should be more or less gay representations on television. As mentioned above, lesbians on television can be tolerated because they are hot and pleasant to look at. However, male gays should not be part of every television program because there are enough gays on television already and one boy wants even less representations. The next participant voices his opinion about whether gays should be part of the storylines more often:

X2 (FG 7, M, 15y, TSO): No, there doesn't have to be a disabled person in each program either, right? That's not funny...

We believe that the comparison of homosexuality with a disabled person is not trivial. This comment illustrates that homosexuality differs from the heteronormative discourse, which sees heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as deviant or not normal. However, not all boys in this homogeneous focus group agree with this statement and some believe that there should be more gay representations on television. These participants believe that more fictional representation would make people more tolerant about gays and lesbians in real life, especially since people are coming out of the closet in real life more and more. However, these male participants stress that more realistic representations on television would be also highly appreciated. Here, the possible role of fictional representations and media is stressed and placed in a positive daylight.

Conclusion and discussion

This study showed that the teenage respondents were familiar with mostly national (fictional) gay characters/people. A homosexual identity of the characters or person is recognized due to the often exaggerated use of stereotypes as a convention of televised representations of gay characters, namely feminine characteristics such as swaying and wearing a purse. Such feminine gestures results in the teenage respondents labelling of the character as 'so gay', without knowing the real sexual identity of the character. Someone who acts in a more feminine way, is not a 'real' man, and thus performs a lesser kind of masculinity. 'Doing' gender is in this context equalized with a sexual identity. Gay women are also recognized because of more masculine characteristics, although examples of extremely feminine lesbians were also raised in the focus groups. We believe this trend is recognized in almost all American programs, in which the beauty myth with (very) slim, sexy females is the norm. A fluid, sexual identity is tolerated for girls since experimenting with their sexual identity was positively evaluated. We assume, however, that the same level of tolerance would not be registered for similar behaviour among boys.

This assumption is made upon the male respondents' comments about homosexual men. Gay men are connected with feminine behaviour and are evaluated as not 'real' men. Although boys often stress that they tolerate gays, several comments contradict this statement. For instance, it was often mentioned that they would never 'do' such a thing. In doing so, they distance themselves from it and, once again, regard homosexuality as a behaviour or a choice, not a true identity. Another example is joking with certain feminine characteristics of gay men, or steering away from them altogether in order to avoid 'catching this disease'. With such comments, the male participants stress their own heterosexual identity and this performance makes sure their own manhood is not questioned by their peers. This results in gaining status and respect among their friends. Avoiding television programs in which many gay characters have a role or the statement that there is no need for more gay characters in contemporary television programs also illustrates this performance of a heterosexual, hegemonic and dominant masculinity. A higher level of tolerance is voiced for gay women, since they are seen as hot and arousing and thus more fictional lesbian characters on television are tolerated. Consequently, hegemonic codes of masculinity are displayed in which masculinity is equalized with sex.

In general, the female respondents are more open and tolerant towards homosexuality and gay characters. The performance of a dominant hegemonic femininity was not identified among the majority of the participants. However, three girls of which two were from Turkish decent, regarded heterosexuality as the only biologically natural sexuality.

So do peers take on the role of gender police? The results of the focus group give the impression that indeed group dynamics influence especially boys' behaviour in a patriarchal direction in which a hegemonic masculinity is regarded as the only naturally correct. Boys evaluate and criticize their male peers' gender behaviour, and any deviation of the 'authentic' masculine codes will result in a judgement about their sexual identity. This label defines them as not 'real', not 'normal', or not 'authentic' men. Similar results for girls could not be found in the focus groups. We suspect that similar interactions and comments might be noted among boys outside the context of the focus groups, for instance at school, during soccer practice, etc., since they are playgrounds for performativity. However, peers are not the only gender police; the dominant discourse in our contemporary society defines the rules in which we all play a role. This discourse is structured around binary oppositions (male/female, masculinity/femininity, nature/culture) that do not offer much space for different representations and performances, especially not for boys and males. Any alternative, masculine behaviour is evaluated as homosexual and thus teenage boys are under great pressure to perform the right masculine codes. Otherwise, they are forced

into a marginalized position. Some participants believe that diverse media representations can play a positive role in the construction of more positive attitudes and opinions among teenagers and society in general. A plethora of masculine and feminine performances can function as symbolic resources for gays, can facilitate as empowering in their struggle for acceptance and when coming out of the closet. Moreover, such diverse representations can be stimulating, helpful resources for everyone, notwithstanding someone's gender, sexuality or identity, whether real, authentic or true.

One can criticize the artificial character of watching and discussing media content in group, but previous research (Adriaens et.al, 2011; Ging) has shown that movies and television programs are often talked about with friends and peers. Moreover, this research shows that hegemonic gender performances and homophobia can also be noted among the evaluation of media representations of gays. A heteronormative masculine identity can be noted in these evaluations. This analysis also wants to emphasize the social necessity of similar studies among contemporary teenagers (and audiences in general) since homophobic attitudes and anti-homosexual behaviour are still prevalent anno 2011.

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