

## TWO

# The Complex Relationship Between (and Within) the Oppressed and the Empowered

*Contradiction and LGBT Portrayals on The L Word*

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Since its debut in 2004, *The L Word* has become a television phenomenon. Despite its popularity, however, little research has examined individuals' responses to the show and its portrayal of the LGBT population. Lavigne (2009) argues that the popularity of primetime television shows provides an impetus for the critical analysis of these texts. In 2004, Showtime's president of programming, Bob Greenblatt, reported that the critically acclaimed and Emmy-nominated series *The L Word* had about three times the viewers of other Showtime original series (Anderson-Minshall 2006). A 2006 anthology edited by Akass and McCabe presented articles reifying the cultural and scholarly impact of *The L Word*. Although the show aired six seasons and was the first to "attempt to make lesbians, and to a lesser extent, bisexual women, the centre of attention," it was met with mixed reviews (ranging from excitement to skepticism) from scholars, critics, and the media (Warn 2006, 3). Critical analysis of this text has important implications because of its ground-breaking nature and popularity. Thus, this chapter aims to extend the analysis by examining the audience's perspectives in accordance with Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, and Biltreyst's (2008) call for current media studies addressing queer representations to focus on the "real" audience's perceptions of these texts.

In response to the attention given to this television show and the need for greater understanding of the audience's perspective, this chapter combines voices from a focus group and responses to an open-ended survey to examine the ways in which the show empowers or silences lesbian voices. Despite *The L Word's* opportunity to represent and give voice to members of the LGBT community, our analysis leads us to believe that *The L Word* nonetheless problematizes LGBT portrayals by the apparent stereotyping, sensationalizing, and polarizing of its characters' issues and relationships. Social identity theory is utilized as a lens to help us explain how viewers with various identities identify with and gain pleasure from viewing media.

Tajfel (1978) defined social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (63). Thus, social identity is part of the self-concept, but it is separate from personal identity; it is how we relate to and identify with groups we belong to, and this group membership in turn influences our self-concept. According to Harwood (1999), social identity theory suggests that "positive social identity is derived from positively comparing one's ingroups with relevant outgroups" (125). In addition, research suggests that "we receive self-esteem from favorably comparing our ingroups with relevant outgroups" (125). For example, according to Hajek and Giles (2002), younger gay men may discriminate against or make efforts to separate themselves from older gay men in order to increase their own self-esteem through the comparison. Social identity theory inherently relates to media representations of groups because we can possibly identify with characters if we believe we share a group membership, such as sexual preference, with them.

Before *The L Word*, there were few television shows that featured LGBT characters, and there was not a single one in the United States that featured a mostly lesbian (and, arguably, entirely queer) main cast. This lack of representation resulted in the LGBT community's reliance on queering mainstream media in order to "see" representations of themselves. Thus, *The L Word* increased the media representation of lesbians, and for some, this meant having characters to identify with. As one lesbian viewer mentioned in the season finale DVD special features, "With *The L Word*, for an hour, you are not an outsider. You relax. Everyone you see is very similar to you." This opinion is reflected in research; Harwood (1999) found that people prefer to watch television shows that feature their own ingroup members—whether those group memberships are based on class, age, ethnicity, gender, or sexual identification, and so forth.

Moreover, Harwood and Roy (2005) explained that representation in the media is needed for positive group vitality. Groups and communities can possibly find strength, energy, and cohesion from simply seeing rep-

resentation of themselves in the media. As Evans and Gamman (1995) note, "Representation is a basis for political struggle and cultural intervention because representation is not free of social ideologies" (17). Representation connotes strong messages regarding what is considered "right" or "wrong," "natural" or "unnatural" in the mainstream, and this can have extreme negative effects on minority group members' self-esteem or sense of group vitality. As Warn (2006) states,

To those who are straight or white (or both), and used to seeing reflections of themselves every time they turn around . . . it's difficult to adequately describe what it feels like to not see reflections of yourself anywhere. It's even more difficult to convey what it feels like when you do—the rush and jumble of emotion that is often all out of proportion to the actual event itself. (1–2)

Representation and the ability for groups to "see reflections" of themselves is obviously an important component of self-esteem, identity, and group vitality.

However, Harwood and Roy (2005) remind us that not only the quantity, but the *quality* of representation in the media also is important because of how "cognitive representations of those groups might be perpetuated" (193). Because social identity is a way people receive identity support, it may possibly be important for representations to be of accurate quality in order for identification to take place and self-esteem to be supported. The quality of representations of the LGBT community on *The L Word* has been hotly debated. For example, the main lesbian characters on the show are "power" or "lipstick" lesbians in Los Angeles—they have prestigious jobs, are wealthy, and generally live "fabulous," sexually fulfilled lives (Akass and McCabe 2006). Accordingly, while *The L Word* gave voice to some lesbians, it simultaneously silenced others who may not "fit" with the portrayal. Based on these ideas and the exploratory nature of the study, we asked the following research question:

RQ1: How do lesbians perceive the television show *The L Word*?

## METHOD

To address our research question, we accessed two complementary data sources. Specifically, we combined voices from a participant focus group, in conjunction with responses to open-ended survey questions (we asked the same questions with each methodology; a list is available upon request). Both methodologies were approved by the University Human Subjects Research Board, and participants were required to be at least eighteen years of age and informed of the confidential and voluntary nature of the study. We asked general demographic questions, as well as questions about *The L Word* viewing habits. In general, our content questions asked why people watched *The L Word*, what they liked and dis-

liked about it, and whether they perceived the representation of lesbians on the show to be accurate and/or empowering. We also asked whether certain story lines or characters resonated with their experiences.

### FOCUS GROUP DATA

The focus group participants were seven women who identified as lesbian. The average age of participants was fifty years old. One participant indicated that she was Hispanic, while the other six indicated that they were Caucasian. Occupations included student/self-employed, geologist, drafter/artist, legal assistant, and two psychologists. All seven focus group participants were college educated, with five out of seven (71 percent) completing graduate school. All seven focus group participants indicated that they had viewed all episodes (that is, all seasons) of *The L Word*. The focus group was led by one of the researchers for this project and lasted approximately 39 minutes. The "conversation" was audio-recorded and transcribed. To preserve confidentiality, we did not use any participant names in our analysis.

### OPEN-ENDED SURVEY DATA

Forty-nine participants completed our online open-ended survey. While one of the requirements for taking the survey was self-identification as lesbian, only thirty-three actually did so. Five participants identified as bisexual, one as queer, one as same-sex orientation, and one as gay. The other eight participants did not specify their sexual orientation. Thirty-nine of the forty-nine survey participants were specific in identifying their actual age. The average age of these participants was approximately thirty-six years old. Thirty participants indicated that they were Caucasian; while ten did not specify their ethnicity. We also had two participants who indicated that they were Hispanic, and one each in the following categories: Black, Mexican American, Latin, Asian, Jewish, Spanish, and other. Like our focus group participants, the survey participants' occupations ranged from student to librarian to professor to dancer. Eighty-four percent of the survey participants indicated that they had some college experience (while nine participants did not provide information about their education). About thirty-five percent of survey participants indicated that they had viewed all episodes/seasons of *The L Word* (while others indicated that they viewed less, and some did not specify their viewing habits).

## ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis, as proposed and utilized by Owen (1984), was used to analyze the focus group conversation, as well as the open-ended survey responses. Owen defines a theme as "the patterned semantic issue or locus of concern around which a couple's interaction centers" (275). Owen specifies three criteria that must be met in order for data to constitute a theme: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness. Recurrence occurs when ideas are repeated. Repetition occurs when key words, phrases, or sentences occur numerous times. Forcefulness occurs when vocal cues or pauses stress certain pieces of discourse.

## RESULTS

We coded the data and found three major or overarching themes that met Owen's (1984) criteria for thematic analysis: Representation, Awareness, and Entertainment.

*Representation*

Data that fit the Representation theme mentioned portrayals of lesbians, class, gender, appearance, and issues within the lesbian community on *The L Word*. While some participants viewed the representation of lesbians as accurate, others expressed discontent with the ways in which *The L Word* constructed its lesbian characters. For example, a survey respondent expressed that, "due to the realistic experiences and accurate personalities portrayed, the show provided a sense of identity and involvement. In a lot of ways you often felt like you were part of the girls." Similarly, one said, "I felt, generally speaking, most of the characters and their story lines were believable . . . That I could definitely see their lives being played out realistically." Another survey participant, however, wrote that, "it was shallow, exclusive, not part of my reality." Another concluded that the show "was wildly unrealistic for the most part, though it did have its moments. I feel like anyone who might look to this show for validation of homophobia might well find much to support their arguments." Many participants described more specific ways that the show did or did not represent their lives as lesbians. Numerous participants mentioned a discrepancy between the portrayed socioeconomic class of the characters and themselves. A focus group participant, for example, pointed out that "for the most part, the show represents a very, very small amount of lesbian culture—that of the economically privileged." Both data sets featured respondents who noted that *The L Word's* locale and lifestyle were not indicative of the entire lesbian community. For instance, one woman surveyed said, "I think it portrays the affluent

lesbian community in L.A., but I do not think this community represents most of the LGBT population or the issues that affect them."

Another flaw detected by respondents was the overrepresentation of a certain type of lesbian, the attractive femme. In the words of a survey respondent, "few of them looked like lesbians, which made me crazy. No one was fat, or dressed in a dyke-y fashion." Another pointed out that "*The L Word* does not represent the real diversity of the dyke communities I know." Then again, a dissenting voice among those surveyed opined, "I liked the fact that some of the women on the series were feminine. I don't like the fact that lesbians are always portrayed as fat, bland, and ugly."

There was widespread praise for *The L Word's* representation of issues relevant to the lesbian community. In her survey response, one participant wrote, "I think they accurately portrayed a wide range of LGBT issues (especially bisexual issues). They hit on everything from: coming out of the closet to having a child with your partner to infidelity." Another agreed, "It dealt with the issues that I face. It deals with sexual orientation and how same-sex groups (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) interact day-to-day, not just in porn."

### *Awareness*

The Awareness theme included any data that addressed *The L Word's* role in normalizing lesbianism, its potential to educate others about lesbian issues, its ability to provide empowerment, and its role in sensationalizing lesbians. Participants varied in their views of the quality of awareness created by *The L Word*. Many expressed positive reactions to the series' ability to normalize lesbian life. A focus group participant emphasized that "the whole series is normalizing, and the whole series is about lesbians. I mean you know it's not treated like something freakish on the show; it's just who they are and how their lives are chosen." Some even viewed the show as an educational tool. A survey participant wrote, "I think that it is a generally solid show that could at least get some points and understanding across to those who want to learn more about the lesbian and LGBT community as a whole."

Participants were divided in their beliefs about *The L Word's* ability to empower the lesbian community. Most echoed the sentiments of a survey participant who said, "I find the show very empowering. It is inspiring to see beautiful, confident, strong, smart lesbian women owning their sexuality and not letting it hinder their success. It is also empowering to see the importance of supportive relationships." Likewise, another surveyed wrote, "I think the show sends a message that every lesbian is unique and beautiful and should not be afraid to be who they are, which can be very empowering." Others saw the show as disempowering and sensationalizing. One wrote "I . . . didn't think the characters treated each other with

respect, didn't uplift each other, and therefore didn't empower themselves or our community."

### Entertainment

The Entertainment theme addressed participants' comments relating to *The L Word's* functions as a television show, including the constraints of media expectations, the characteristics of drama, and the qualities that attracted viewers. A large number of participants expressed not expecting the show to provide anything but entertainment for viewers. Many agreed with a focus group participant who expressed that "It is entertainment. It takes you outside yourself. It takes you outside of your normal life." In fact, several participants even compared the show to a soap opera. A survey participant wrote, "just as any other drama, it is overdone because everyday life is not 'interesting' enough." Other participants mentioned that they watched the show because of its "beautiful women" and for the "good sex scenes."

Several participants also noted that the accurate representation of an entire community need not be the responsibility of fictional television programming. When the focus group discussion turned to the veracity of the series, one participant exclaimed, "It's a TV show! It's not supposed to be like reality," and another concurred, "why would you expect it to [be realistic]? It's a TV show." Survey participants largely felt the same way. For instance, one survey included the statement, "I think it is impossible for any one show to 'accurately' portray any community—that's a lot of pressure for a TV show," while another asked, "Who wants to see their own struggles on TV reminding us of our reality? Was the Brady Bunch real? No, but millions watched it and for at least 30 minutes, their life was better."

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our project examined lesbians' perceptions of Showtime's television series *The L Word*. Results indicated that lesbians viewed the show in terms of its representation of the lesbian community, its potential to affect awareness, and its role as entertainment. Participants revealed generally positive evaluations of the show, particularly its attempts at capturing experiences relevant to the underrepresented lesbian community. However, participants' responses also illustrated the complexities of portraying a group of individuals in popular media.

The theme of Representation illustrated several areas of lesbian life that our participants perceived in *The L Word*. Harwood and Roy (2005) acknowledge the importance of media representation for group vitality. The fact that participants also recognized inaccurate portrayals of lesbian

identity on the show, however, problematizes the issue of representation. While many participants acknowledged that seeing their social group on the television screen led to positive feelings about the show, others criticized the quality of those representations and questioned their potential effects on viewers' perceptions of the LGBT community as a whole. Research on media portrayals of underrepresented groups reflects this tension. While some researchers (such as Evans and Gamman 1995) maintain that simple representation can be beneficial for group members' identity support and self-esteem, others argue that stereotypical and/or negative representations of group members can harm the group by reinforcing outgroup members' assumptions about ingroup members (Harwood and Roy 2005; see also Burns and Davies 2009).

Responses coded within the Awareness theme revealed mixed feelings regarding the portrayal of lesbians on *The L Word*. Though there seemed to be a general sense of appreciation regarding the creation of a television series focused entirely on a lesbian cast, as well as in the introduction of a transgender character, Max/Moira (also consistent with research by Reed 2009), some participants hesitated to praise *The L Word's* contributions to advocacy efforts in the LGBT community. While some expressed feeling empowered by the inclusion of lesbian issues in popular media, others thought the show took away the voice of "real" lesbians by stereotyping and sensationalizing lesbian life (Burns and Davies, 2009). Disagreements about *The L Word's* effectiveness in raising awareness about the LGBT community were nuanced by varying opinions about the show's role as a source of education versus entertainment.

Our third theme, Entertainment, reflected another set of participants' perceptions of *The L Word*, on its role as a source of fun and entertainment. Some participants reported they felt there was too much responsibility placed on the show; as reported in our results, some viewers did not believe the show should serve as an educational tool. Rather, these participants believed the main purpose of the show was to entertain. These differing beliefs about the aims of the television show reflect the constraints of many television shows in their attempts to represent social groups. While such television shows may aim to positively and accurately portray group members, they nonetheless must cater to the demands of a diverse audience seeking entertainment and pressures from advertisers, executives, and other stakeholders. Our participants clearly recognized this tension in their responses, expressing disappointment with certain inaccuracies in the television show's portrayals but recognizing its primary purpose as a cable television show.

This dilemma has previously found relevance in the literature regarding accuracy and representativeness of another important television drama realm with huge social implications: the medical profession. Though Brodie et al. (2001) conceded that "viewers may not consciously watch fictional programs to learn about health information," some evidence



along with "cultivation theory suggests that health information presented in entertainment media could affect their ideas about health-related issues" (192). Their telephone survey of more than 3,500 regular viewers of the program *ER* showed that information about emergency contraception and about the human papilloma virus was both acquired and retained from *ER* plotlines. Buttressed by Brown and Singhal's (1990) contention that viewers model prosocial functions seen in television episodes, Sharf and Freimuth (1993) examined the season-long portrayal of one character's struggles with ovarian cancer on the primetime drama *thirtysomething*. They found seven distinct "take-home messages" (157) that may be applied to actual coping with cancer.

Turow and Coe (1985) found that primetime television programming during the critical "sweeps week" period of ratings tended to glorify doctors, hospitals, and the traditional medical establishment while downplaying the changing face of health care and its controversies regarding access, appropriateness, and effectiveness. Crucially, Turow and Coe argue that accurate portrayal is not just a matter of educating viewers as they are entertained but is also one of setting "a shared national agenda that politicians most strongly feel a need to respond to publicly when formulating health care policy" (36). As cities, states, and the federal government continue to shape laws concerning gay rights, marriage, and service in the military, the import of the entertainment as prosocial information issue is evermore underscored.

The implications of our participants' responses also should be examined in light of previous research about media portrayals of underrepresented groups. Researchers employ the parasocial contact hypothesis as a lens from which to examine how and why individuals relate to television characters and the ways in which they generalize perceptions of these characters to the groups they represent. In studies of the LGBT community, parasocial contact researchers have examined television shows like *Six Feet Under*, *Will and Grace*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Calzo and Ward 2009; Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2006). These studies provide support for the idea that exposure to positive portrayals of a group in media can decrease prejudice against members of that group as a whole. This is particularly important to our study, as participants indicated that many portrayals of lesbians on *The L Word* were inaccurate and/or stereotypical. Though many claimed that the sheer representation of their group on *The L Word* provided a step in the right direction, the assumptions of the parasocial contact hypothesis point to the importance of the *quality* of the representations in influencing perceptions of lesbians in general.

The potential influence that mediated portrayals of social groups can have on audience members is complex. On the one hand, they seek to provide entertainment for viewers, maintain marketability and viewership, and ultimately make money. On the other hand, even dramatic,

nonfictional shows may nonetheless affect perceptions of the groups they represent (see Burns and Davies 2009 for a similar critique and argument). This poses a challenge for writers of television shows who must simultaneously consider the interests of the group they hope to portray and the constraints of their positions.

Overall, this project provides a preliminary discussion of lesbian viewers' perceptions of *The L Word*. The survey data provided a diverse sample of women across the United States. The focus group data, however, represented a small sample of individuals from a similar geographical location in the Midwest. Future research should attempt to seek the perceptions of even larger and more diverse samples. For example, heterosexual viewers could provide additional information about the role of mediated portrayals of underrepresented groups.

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# Queer Media Images

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# QUEER MEDIA IMAGES



LGBT PERSPECTIVES

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