

Revisiting reception research: Case study on diasporic LGBTQs

Alexander Dhoest,
University of Antwerp, Belgium

Abstract:

This article reflects on the heritage of reception research, considering its continued relevance today. After a brief retrospective overview of early reception research, a project about diasporic LGBTQ media uses is used to explore to what degree early reception research continues to be useful. Continuities and changes are discussed, focusing in particular on their methodological implications. Considering a specific group allows us to discuss the ways in which media connect to the multidimensional social contexts of everyday life and on their significance in relation to issues of identity formation at the intersection of race and ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality. Despite some necessary adjustments in the context of media multiplicity, it proves useful to revive the 'ethnographic' drive in reception research, aiming for a holistic understanding of media experiences. At the same time, the project at hand questions models of audience activity, freedom and resistance as expressed in early reception research.

Key Words: reception research; sexuality; diaspora; identity; television; intersectionality

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to describe the 'moment' of reception research. It provided an academic response to Western television from the 1970s, where a number of evolutions conspired to increase viewer options: the multiplication of channels, including the introduction of commercial ones in Europe; the greater accessibility of these channels through cable and satellite technologies; and greater user control through VCRs and subsequent recording technologies. As the first wave of reception research was the product of such a particular media context, one wonders how it applies to the current period of even greater viewer (now 'user') choice in terms of technologies and content. In academic terms, reception research was part of the 'cultural turn' in media studies as exemplified by the rise of Cultural Studies, which also makes one wonder how it applies to the current academic

landscape where 'new media studies' seem to have taken over, radically reorienting the field towards online and (more recently) social and mobile media.

This article looks back at the heritage of early reception research, and reflects on its continued relevance for analysing the meanings of media, in particular film and television, to contemporary audiences. To do this, it draws on a recent research project on the consumption and reception of different media among diasporic LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer)¹ people living in Belgium. Rather than extensively discussing the findings of this project, it is used as a case for methodological reflection. Moreover, rather than drawing primarily on the most recent writing in the field, this article deliberately returns to earlier work, to explore to what degree it is still useful. This article's primary aim is to put things in perspective: both media and media research have drastically changed in the past decades, but is it worth holding on to some 'older' insights?

The article starts with a brief retrospective overview of reception research. Then, the project is presented, focusing in particular on its methodological choices and entering into dialogue with early reception research. Similarly, some findings of the project are discussed in relation to themes in, and critiques of, reception research. While the project also dealt with online media, the focus in this article is on the reception of film and television representations, partly for practical reasons (as it would take up too much space to adequately discuss the findings on online media uses) but primarily in order to explore continuities and changes in relation to earlier writing on the same media.

Reception research

To start, it is necessary to establish what exactly is meant by 'reception research'. According to Ien Ang, reception analysis considered 'the ways in which people actively and creatively make their own meanings and create their own culture, rather than passively absorb pre-given meanings imposed upon them' (Ang 1995, p. 136). Klaus B. Jensen and Karl E. Rosengren (1990) described it as a kind of qualitative audience research which aims to combine social-scientific and humanistic approaches to reception, combining audience and content analysis. Different terms circulated to refer to a broadly similar field of qualitative audience research, such as 'new audience studies' (e.g. Corner 1991) and 'interpretive audience studies' (e.g. Carragee 1990). In this article, the term 'reception research' will be used to refer to the totality of this research.²

Reacting to earlier models of rather linear media influences and effects, and inspired by Stuart Hall's seminal 'Encoding/decoding' essay (Hall 1980), reception research shifted the focus to the 'active' viewer. This led to a wave of 'bottom-up' studies focusing on audience agency and freedom, opposing the idea of mass media audiences as 'cultural dopes' (Ang 1990). This research also reacted against textualism, reading off meanings and ideological consequences from texts without considering the interdiscursive context of readers. As Ang (1989) states, politically this research was modest in its ambition, not aiming to disclose 'the' meaning of media products but rather exploring their meanings and pleasures for historically situated audiences.

Despite its huge success and impact, reception research was also harshly criticized. While it is not possible here to do justice to the breadth of the debate, some of the critiques will be touched upon as they are of relevance to a discussion about reception research today. Also, some alternative conceptualisations of audiencehood will be introduced, which help to better understand the role of media to the audiences studied in this project.

Early reception research was quickly associated with one of its key premises, that of 'the active audience'. Indeed, as mentioned above, reception research positioned itself very much in opposition to textualism and media determinism. As noted by some, it may have overstated its point, simplistically representing effects research (McLeod et al. 1991) and exaggerating its own innovative nature in an act of 'revisionism' (Curran 1990). More fundamentally, the very idea of the 'active' audience was criticized or at least qualified by many. In particular, the focus on the 'free' and 'powerful' audience was questioned, Seaman (1992) labelling it as 'pointless populism'. Others questioned the equation of 'activity' with 'resistance' (Barker 1998) and the way the encoding-decoding model privileges readings that stand away from the text (Barker 2006). In a similar vein, Kellner (1995) warned against the 'fetishism of struggle' while Livingstone (1998) cautioned against quantitative generalizations based on exceptional cases of resistance.

While the notion of resistance will be discussed further on, here I want to reflect on the notion of audience freedom, that is: the possibility to freely consume and decode texts at one's own will. To start, it is worth pointing out that most of the key authors in the field quickly downplayed the equation of activity with 'freedom' and 'power' (Ang 1989). For instance, David Morley, who first operationalized the encoding/decoding model in his study on the *Nationwide* audience (1980), from the start stressed how audiences' social positions steer – but do not determine – their decoding by giving them access to particular codes. Besides class (as prioritized in Morley's work), other social positionings like gender were considered as influencing but not determining readings (Ang 1989). Even John Fiske, the supposed champion of audience freedom, stressed the social determination of readings (1987, pp. 80-81). More generally, audiences were seen as constrained by economical and industrial, political and ideological contexts, which cautioned against romanticizing their power (Morley 1993; Ang 1995). Or to quote Fiske (paraphrasing Marx)³: 'People can and do make their own culture, albeit within conditions that are not of their own choosing'. (1989, p. 57).

Case study: Diasporic LGBTQ media uses in Belgium

Based on this brief overview, I will now present a recent research project on diasporic LGBTQs, focusing on its methodological choices and situating these in relation to early reception research. Similarly, some research findings will be presented in such a way as to create a dialogue with insights from older reception research.

Theoretical background

The project discussed here is a follow-up on exploratory research on media uses among LGBTQs in Flanders, the northern, Dutch-language region of Belgium (Dhoest and Simons, 2011; Szulc and Dhoest, 2013; Dhoest, Herreman & Wasserbauer, 2015). As no people with a migration background participated in the former project, the aim of the current project was to explore the importance of media in the process of identity exploration by diasporic sexual minorities living in Belgium.

On the one hand, diasporic audiences have increasingly become the object of audience research, ethnicity and race having replaced class as the 'master category of analysis' (Morley 2006). In this context, the term 'diaspora' is used to refer to the transnational movements, positions and connections of people in contemporary globalised society (Brah 1996).

On the other hand, however, sexual minorities are hardly studied empirically in audience research. Although they have been identified as a key demographic in terms of online media use (e.g. Campbell 2004; O'Riordan and Phillips 2007), it is striking how the rich literature on LGBTQ representation hardly led to a concomitant analysis of the meaning of these representations for LGBTQ audiences. While queer research has (mostly theoretically) focused on the potential for resistance in reading media texts (Doty 1993), actual audience research on such reading practices is rare (Dhaenens et al. 2008; Haslop 2009). Echoing the critique on textualism mentioned above, Joshua Gamson (2000) mentions the 'overtexualisation' of queer studies, the analysis of discourse taking precedence over the analysis of real world events. To quote Ken Plummer, there is a lot of research on texts 'but very little indeed which investigates empirically the fragmented natures of aged/classed/racialized audiences of differing sexualities actually making sense of media forms.' (Plummer 2000, p. 54)

The few empirical research projects in this field do confirm the key importance of media to the development of LGBTQ identity and self-esteem (e.g. McKee 2000; Kama 2002). However, the LGBTQ audiences in such research mostly belong to the ethno-cultural majority in their respective countries, leaving unanswered questions on the importance of media in the lives of diasporic sexual minorities. For this reason, the current project explores the meaning of media in the process of identity exploration among LGBTQs with a migration background, using semi-structured in-depth interviews. In the interview, they were asked about the way they identified, both in terms of sexuality and of ethno-cultural belonging, and about the role media had played in developing their sense of identity.

Reception research?

Before discussing the methods and findings of this project, it is worth situating it in relation to the tradition of reception research. At a basic level, the project can be considered as reception research as it empirically explores the meanings attached to media by a particular audience, giving a 'bottom up' account of the importance of media in their everyday lives. It

is also a useful contribution to this field, for as already observed by Ann Gray (1999), despite its impact not all that much empirical research was done in the context of ‘new audience research’. Although more research was done over the years, including projects focusing on diasporic and LGBTQ audiences (e.g. Gillespie, 1995; Georgiou, 2006; Kama 2002), there is still a very limited knowledge about the meanings of media as situated in the lives of specific, historically and culturally situated audiences. Particularly in relation to LGBTQ audiences, the focus has strongly shifted towards ‘new’, online media (e.g. Gray 2009, Mowlabocus 2010), leaving unanswered the question what LGBTQ traditional media content (still) means to LGBTQ audiences.

While a lot of early reception research focused on single texts (e.g. Ien Ang on *Dallas*, 1985), a tradition followed up in fan studies (e.g. Jenkins 1992), the current project explores the meanings attached to a variety of texts, genres and even media, in order to try to grasp the multiplicity of sources of relevance in their quest for identification. As such, it is in line with Janice Radway’s critique that the focus on single texts perpetuates the notion of a neatly bounded circuit, rather than exploring ‘how multiple, publicly constituted discourses call to social subject who, in turn, through complicated processes of identification, actively locate themselves within at least several of those discourses’ (Radway 1988, p. 364). This being said, of course it still makes sense to (also) focus on single texts, and indeed one of the findings of the current project is how strongly particular texts still matter.

Sample

As discussed among others by Kim Schrøder (1999), a key methodological issue in reception research is the lack of generalizability, related to limited convenience samples. Although generalization is not aimed for in qualitative research, participants are too easily assumed to represent a social category such as class, or more recently race and ethnicity, which they tend to be reduced to, which Morley (2006) discusses as the problem of essentialism.

In order to avoid such essentialism, this project used various channels of recruitment in order to constitute a diverse sample, hoping to explore the variety of positions within the group of diasporic LGBTQs in Belgium. The participants were recruited through e-mail, social media (in particular Facebook), LGBTQ associations as well as associations working with/for diasporic LGBTQs. This led to a varied sample of 35 participants, who all live in Flanders (the Northern, Dutch-language part of Belgium) or Brussels but have backgrounds in 25 countries outside of Western Europe.⁴

In terms of migration backgrounds, three ‘groups’ can be distinguished: sexual refugees (10), who generally left their country because of their sexual orientation; voluntary migrants (14), who came to Belgium for studies, work or love; and second generation migrants (11) who were born in Belgium from parents born abroad. As to age, at the time of the interview (in 2013) the participants were between 22 and 49 years old (average age 33.5).

Rather than – essentialistically – considering these individual participants as representative of their country or culture of origin, in this paper the group as a whole is

considered to be representative of variations within the diasporic LGBTQ community in Belgium. However, there are some caveats: while the 35 participants constituted a very diverse group in many respects, in other respects the sample was unbalanced. Thus, most participants (29) were men, which among other things reflects the more precarious position of women in this group, particularly among the sexual refugees and second generation migrants. Although no population figures are available to back this up, it also seems that the group was unbalanced in terms of sexual orientation (most participants identifying as gay or lesbian, hardly any as bisexual, queer or other), gender identity (no participants identifying as transgender) and level of education (17 participants having university degrees and 11 higher vocational education). So, despite the variety of participants it is important not to simply generalise the findings to all diasporic LGBTQ individuals in Belgium.

Method: in-depth interviews

By using in-depth interviews, the current project also inscribes itself in the tradition of reception research. While generating rich data, interviews have their shortcomings, for instance in being limited to what is communicable and what the viewer is conscious of (Höijer 1990). Moreover, as extensively discussed in the broader literature on qualitative research, the interview context is charged with mutual perceptions, (class and other) distinctions and power dimensions, which necessitates self-awareness and reflection on behalf of the researcher (Seiter 1990). Indeed, reception researchers seem to have been prone to self-reflection, not only within the research process but also critically reassessing their own work and its limitations (e.g. Morley 1981).

In this project, I used in-depth interviews as they allow a deep, holistic, contextualized view on a broad range of media uses which are interconnected and related to the person's life and context. However, I equally came across the abovementioned limitations and complications, realising that discussion is only possible on what the participant is conscious of, can and wants to verbalize. These limitations became particularly clear in the context of some interviews with lower educated participants, mostly sexual refugees. Not only did some struggle with the language of the interview (Dutch, French or English), they also struggled with the level of abstraction and reflection any interview implies. Even if the question was just to tell about their experiences, in their own words, for some this was difficult, in part because their experiences were very painful (most having had to escape their country because of physical threats) and/or taboo (homosexuality being unspeakable in their home culture and remaining hard to discuss in the context of the interview). Of course, their hesitations and silences are telling as such, but they do imply that these interviews are quite different and often harder to analyse let alone quote than those with more articulate participants.

Any interview is charged with power imbalances and begs for self-awareness and ethical 'good care' over the participants. I became acutely aware of this by interviewing such a broad range of people about such delicate topics. For some, talking about their sexuality to a perfect stranger seemed a totally neutral thing to do. As a result, I was often more

hesitant to ask the questions than they were to candidly answer them. For others, trust had to be built up before and during the interview, as they had limited knowledge of academic research and seemed anxious to share information with me, particularly those who did not have an official legal status in Belgium. As a consequence, some were not quite sure what to expect, but all were given ample introduction before signing an informed consent form – which, however, seemed to add to the insecurity of some by introducing a formal tone to the generally rather informal interview process.

To build up trust, for some it was extremely important to know that their identity would not be disclosed in any way, as they often had to keep their sexual orientation secret from their social environment. In some interviews, sexuality was the elephant in the room. For instance, some participants seemed hesitant at first, but after a while they inquired after my own sexual orientation, after which they seemed less inhibited to share their experiences. In other cases, the participants knew – or suspected – my sexual orientation and (very occasionally) flirted with me. Although I didn't in any way respond to this unspoken tension, it is worth acknowledging it as part of the research process (see Newton 1993). Quite a few asked about my own relationship status, which I shared as part of a broader process of exchange beyond the simple question-answer dynamic. I felt I had to share some of my own experiences if I expected candid self-exposure by the participants.

As a consequence of all these dynamics, these interviews – like all interviews – did not disclose objective 'facts' or easy to interpret 'data', but rather constituted an exchange and joint construction of a narrative, the interviewer and interviewee together creating a 'story' in a particular social setting. Although I was acutely aware of the power imbalance and mutual perceptions in the research context, and I tried as much as possible to get the participant's own voices heard in the research report, I also became aware of the impossibility to control the variability of the research dynamics. In sum, these interviews – like all interviews – are the result of the encounter between a particular researcher and a particular participant, having a specific conversation based on prompts provided by the researcher and strongly dependent on the emotionally charged interpersonal dynamics (including insecurity, attraction, irritations, assumptions, misunderstandings and many other highly uncontrollable dynamics).

Ethnographic inspirations

Reflecting on the limitations of the interview, it is worth returning to one of the popular yet controversial descriptions of early reception research, that of 'audience ethnography'. Pleading for a holistic analysis of readers, texts as well as contexts of reading (Moore's 1990), audience researchers were strongly inspired by ethnographic principles entailing a focus on meanings in particular social contexts. However, most of this research was not ethnography proper, as it did not engage in long-term participant observation but mostly relied on in-depth interviews (Moore's 1993).⁵ Like anthropology, this type of research tried to understand social life through first-hand, direct experience, using audience talk as its prime

source of data (Gillespie 2007). The aim was to provide rich and in-depth descriptions of audiences' interactions with and interpretations of media texts (Höijer 1992).

While the project under discussion was not ethnographic as such, I did draw inspiration from ethnography in different ways. First, I kept a diary throughout the research process, reflecting not only on my developing ideas but also on the interview experiences and observations. Second, I participated in the meetings of four organizations for diasporic LGBTQs, to get a better sense of this 'group' and to meet some people outside of the rather artificial interview context. I also interviewed 12 people involved in these organizations, which again helped me get ready for the interviews and provided me with the necessary context. Thirdly, I continued to interact with the participants after the interview, mostly through a secret Facebook group (joined by 24 out of the 35 participants) where I posted clips, links, quotes from interviews as well as the preliminary research report for their feedback. Although interaction and activity in this group was rather limited, it did entail that many of the participants became Facebook friends and were glad to share this part of their media use with me.

In line with current ideas on ethnographic self-reflexivity (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007), the research process also made me acutely aware of my own position and presuppositions. All interviews confronted me with my privileges as a white middle class gay man who grew up in Belgium: the self-evidence of higher education and financial security, relatively easy access to LGBTQ information and representations, and a generally supportive social environment in relation to sexual diversity. For instance, while talking to the female participants I became more aware of continued male privileges and gender imbalances, also in LGBTQ circles. Particularly in the interaction with sexual refugees (many of whom were physically threatened and most of whom struggle to find education or employment in Belgium) this almost led to shame on my behalf, prompting an involvement that extended beyond the interview situation. Some of these participants wanted to stay in touch and sometimes asked for my advice or help.

Freedom versus social limitations

Having discussed the methodological underpinnings of the project, now it is worth returning to one of the key issues in reception research, that of audience freedom.

By studying diasporic LGBTQs, the current project continues the reception research tradition to focus on media uses in relation to particular social groups. Their social position is not seen as determining readings but rather as providing shared frames of reference and access to codes, leading to the formation of 'interpretive communities' (Mitra 2010). However, one of the critiques on earlier reception research was that it tended to prioritize single axes of social positioning, initially class but also gender and race (Morley 1981).

As a response to this critique, and drawing inspiration from feminist research (Crenshaw 1989), this project used the notion of intersectionality to address the mutual interdependence of several social positionings, in particular sexuality and ethnicity. Rather than enumerating forms of discrimination, intersectionality refers to the non-additive,

transformative interactivity between different forms of social subordination (Choo and Ferree 2010). Intersectionality is also a central concept in queer studies, attending to 'the ways in which various categories of difference inflect and transform each other' (Hall and Jagose 2013, p. xvi). Beside the pivotal interaction between sexuality and gender, other issues such as race, class and religion are increasingly included in queer analysis.

In the interviews, it quickly became clear that the participants' sexual identifications interact with their ethno-cultural and migration background, as it is generally easier for the first generation migrant participants to develop a sense of sexual identity, while those from the second generation (who are surrounded by their family and often also a broader ethno-cultural community) more acutely have to negotiate between sexual and ethno-cultural identifications, which in turn has an impact on the media they have access to and the meanings they attach to them.⁶

In line with intersectional thinking, it also became apparent that other dimensions beside sexuality and ethnicity complicate this picture. First, unsurprisingly, gender strongly affects identifications and media uses, the female participants in particular having a harder time both to affirm their sexuality and to gain access to relevant media. Second, class strongly structures the interviews, higher educated and self-dependent migrants (mostly of the first generation) having greater freedom to explore their sexuality than the mostly poor and lower educated refugees. Finally, age comes up as a structuring variable particularly in terms of access to online media, the younger participants generally having easier access to LGBTQ information, representations and contacts through the internet. Again, this cautions against essentialistically considering the participants as representative of a supposedly self-contained category of 'diasporic LGBTQs'. Rather, the media uses and interpretations of each individual participant seem to be partly determined by their position in relation to a number of intersecting social categorisations.

Freedom versus textual limitations

As demonstrated above, the uses and meanings of media within this group are not completely free, but they are strongly structured by the participants' complex and intersectional social positions. Beside these social constraints, Klaus B. Jensen (1987) also discussed media factors informing decodings, in particular textual structures. Indeed, readings are limited by the texts that are available to audiences and by their codes and structures, so it does remain crucial to analyse these texts (Brunsdon 1990; see also Fetveit 2001).

In this project, such textual limitations to audience readings quickly came to the fore. First of all, at a very basic level, reading practices are strongly determined by the texts that are available. Although current, mostly Western accounts imply unlimited access to virtually all media content, the interviews disclosed very limited access to LGBTQ-related media content. Particularly for sexual refugees, who generally grew up in countries where same-sex sexual practices were criminalized, access to LGBTQ information and representations was very limited:

Q: At the time when you realised you liked men, did you images or information, or nothing at all?

Alain (Burundi): Nothing at all.

Q: No films or allusions?

Alain: Nothing at all.⁷

Voluntary migrants, too, often grew up in countries where same-sex sexuality was taboo and as a consequence hardly had access to LGBTQ representations in their home country:

Q: Did you have any idea of what it meant, or was this something nobody talked about? Like did you have, on TV or in newspapers...

Tuyen (Vietnam): Nothing.

Q: So it's complete silence?

Tuyen: Yes it is!

Even second generation migrants, growing up in Belgium where homosexuality is supposedly widely accepted, grew up without many media sources, particularly the slightly older participants (over 30). So, even in an age of media multiplicity, audiences have to 'make do' with what they have access to, reminding us of Charlotte Brunsdon's statement that audience research often has to conclude that 'the audience is making the best of a bad job' (1990, 69).

Beside the absence of information and representations, the interviews also disclose limitations as 'encoded' in the available media content. Talking about TV representations of same-sex sexuality, most participants refer to persistent issues of negativity and stereotyping, particularly in their countries of origin but also in Belgium and in the Western media they have access to. For instance, voluntary migrant Felipe refers to stereotypes of gay men in his home country, Peru:

Q: Did you have any information or any idea what it was to be gay?

Felipe: No, the image, the cliché of what was gay, it was the horrible one, the extremely... In the Peruvian context the cliché of what was a gay, in the '80s-90s, is a guy who works as a hairdresser, who dresses as a woman, and loves to make a lot of scandal.

Frederick, a voluntary migrant from the Philippines, also remembers TV programmes with stereotypical images of effeminate men:

Frederick: Yes, that was in comedy. Perhaps that's why it was so stereotypical.

Q: Did you look for that kind of images, or did you think it was negative?

Frederick: I didn't want to be associated with... Perhaps that's the reason why I didn't easily say 'I'm gay', back then.

Maga, a sexual refugee from Chechnya, also complains about the negativity of gay films in Belgium: 'I never watch LGB movies, they always end badly, always. (...) I always read the summary, and when the person dies, I don't watch.' However, despite uttering their discontent, most participants do not propose 'queer' readings.

Resistance?

This brings us to the idea of audience resistance, as privileged in reception research in general as well as the specific literature on LGBTQ reception. Larry Gross (1991), one of the first researchers to write about LGBTQ audiences, discussed three potential strategies of resistance: ignoring problematic media representations; subverting or appropriating them; and creating one's own media. Subversion was long seen as the key strategy to deal with heteronormative representations, with 'camp' as an ironical reading position based on a shared 'gay sensibility' (Babuscio 1977), leading to specific decodings of texts like *Dynasty* (Finch 1986) and stars like Judy Garland (Dyer 1987). This line of thought was further developed in queer theory, which privileged 'queer' readings, conceptualised as resistant readings, 'against the grain' of the text (Doty 1993). As Dhaenens, Van Bauwel and Biltreyst (2008) explain, queer readings imply repositioning texts outside the borders of heteronormativity, revealing the queer potential of popular cultural texts.

However, in this project such resistant readings are rare. Rather, most participants seem to 'make do', preferring negative or stereotypical representations to none at all, thus confirming the existence of other readings positions beside the idealised queer viewer. For instance, talking about stereotypical images of gay men in soaps in his home country Rumania, voluntary migrant Matteo states: '...but still I think it is a good way of educating people, even with that. I mean, certain types of people are watching that, so I think it is good to have it.'

This echoes the 'resilient' reading position as discussed by Andre Cavalcante (2014) in relation to transgender audiences. He states that the focus on resistance fails to account for less heroic modalities of reading and that it sets up structures of value in which the oppositional is preferable and valuable, and alternative stances are seen as unfavorable and retrograde. He introduces the notion of 'resilience' as a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of adversity, as a way to endure messages that run counter to one's self concept. Similarly, in his discussion about the role of media to Israeli gay men, Kama notes a strong wish for 'normality' rather than resistance: 'Their objective is not undermining or toppling the pillars of the dominant, heteronormative ideology with the aid of radical representations or oppositional codes of interpretations. On the contrary, they were in favor of fortifying normative aspects of their existence.' (Kama, 2003: 89).

Even Susan Driver (2007), focusing on girls identifying as queer and resisting heteronormative models, does not observe a straightforward condemnation of mainstream

texts but notes how the girls she interviewed were adept at enjoying the pleasure of popular media while at the same retaining a skeptical ambivalence. In the current project, the interview with Aliz, a voluntary migrant with Hungarian roots, is a good example of such ambivalence. On the one hand, she's very happy with the increase in mainstream representations of homosexuality:

It makes me happy. It makes me happy to see that when I was growing up I didn't have access to this at all, and now that there is, it's always nice. It's also nice how they change the mainstream. (...) Now, if a TV show does not incorporate gay characters, it's like: oh, there's something wrong with that. It's really nice, and it's becoming more natural and mainstream.

At the same time, she does complain about the normativity of portrayals, particularly of lesbians:

Of course, we're still talking about normative gay, normative lesbian, the lesbian that is still pretty much a truck driver because she cannot be too feminine, because then it's confusing. (...) It's mainly white, mainly middle or upper class, and it's very much dykish.

A similar issue is related to the overwhelming Western character and whiteness of the available representations. While some participants (particularly of African origin) lament the absence of non-Western and non-white representations, most are (also) able to connect to Western and white representations, again 'making do' with the limited representations available to them. For instance, when asked about recognition in Western films, second generation participant Jalil, with roots in Tunisia, says:

Mostly in the themes, not the characters because they are mostly white. Unless you go to a queer movie like *Jihad for Love*, that's about us. But a film like *Weekend*, one of my favourite movies. As such, it's about two white guys in a very white circle of friends, so... Not the characters, but the story is very recognisable.

Similarly, sexual refugee Samuel from Sierra Leone, when asked if he recognises his experiences in Western films, states:

Yeah, you see yourself in the picture. There are some things that are similar, when it comes to family, and if you are caught, you sometimes imagine: if I was caught in my country, I would face this kind of situation.

In short: resistance is not the only nor even the predominant reading position identified in the interviews. This reminds us of Barker's caveat in relation to the focus on resistance in

reception research: 'A great deal of media and cultural audiencing has facets of the routine, the inconsequential, the meaningless, and the deliberate letting go in the face of desired experiences.' (Barker 2006: 124) As an alternative, he discusses the notion of the 'reading strategy', conceiving viewing as a motivated activity which can be both active and (deliberately) passive. In this context, it is worth commenting on some responses by younger second generation and voluntary migrant participants, who often took LGBTQ representations for granted. The key point, for them, is that film or TV series should be good. For instance, when talking about gay cinema, Matteo from Rumania says:

Matteo: I'm not a big fan. (...). I like movies in general, but I don't focus on...

Q: For some people, having grown up without images, it's sometimes nice to suddenly have this opportunity.

Matteo: I can understand. Otherwise I'm not just into that, if it's a movie it should be good movie because of other things as well.

To these participants, film and television representations of LGBTQs were not very important nor meaningful, at least at the time of the interview. This final point reminds us of yet another critique of early reception research, the fact that it deliberately looked for instances of 'meaningful' interaction with media. Hermes (1995) discussed this as the 'fallacy of meaningfulness', or the assumption that all media use must be deeply meaningful to audiences.

The continued importance of single texts

Despite the current lack of interest in LGBTQ representations among some participants, for all participants individual texts (be it books, films, TV shows or websites) had been significant in their process of sexual self-exploration. Rather than resisting mainstream representations, in the context of scarce representations the participants in this project drew heavily on particular media texts in developing a sense of identity and self-worth. The examples vary but include such films as *Brokeback Mountain*, *Weekend* and *Boys don't Cry*, and TV shows such as *The L Word*, *Will and Grace* and *Queer as Folk*. For instance, when asked if he liked *Brokeback Mountain*, Kossi, a voluntary migrant from Togo, comments:

Yes, even if I had already done my coming out, it really touched me as a story, because it was more subtle than the gay person from the middle class... I think that's why I liked it, among other things. The fact that it was situated in a rural setting, not in a city for a change. Beyond its cinematographic qualities, it's a complicated story, in a rural setting, with ultimately grey lives, which is more representative of what happens in the world.

Similarly, when asked if film or television helped her at the moment she started to identify as a lesbian, second generation participant Fatima, with Moroccan roots, states:

Yes, mostly *The L Word*. (...) Because it's just pleasant, very recognisable, also very explicit, and everybody can recognise themselves in one of those characters.

While the interviews did not go deeply into their reading of these texts, what became apparent is how meaningful a particular set of texts are to each of them, within their very particular (cultural, social, national) contexts.

The fact that single film and television texts carry a lot of weight is in line with early reception research on the significance of particular texts to specific audiences. However, one major change in comparison to earlier research is that it has become quite difficult to discuss representations and images as linked to a single medium. Although the interview guide for this project had separate sections on mass media (in particular in TV and film) and online media, most participants regularly accessed TV and film online, for diverse reasons: because they didn't have a cable subscription; because they preferred to watch TV and films dubbed or subtitled in a particular language; because it allowed them to search for specific LGBTQ programs; and for the sake of privacy, watching privately rather than in the cinema or the shared living room. So while single texts continue to play a key role in the use of media in relation to identity formation, the exclusive focus on single media has become largely untenable. At the same time, despite the variety of media and devices used to access them, film and TV images do continue to be one of the key sources of representations of same-sex sexuality.

Conclusion

The last observation brings me back to my initial question regarding the contemporary usefulness of reception research. Although I did not have the space here to sufficiently elaborate on the actual findings of this project, I hope it has become clear that the use of in-depth interviews in order to study the meanings of media in the context of people's lives is still a fruitful approach. In quite a short time, I was able to explore the variety of dimensions which intersect and mutually influence each-other among diasporic LGBTQs. In each case, these dimensions created a particular, individual but socially determined context for media uses. Although the sample in this project does not allow for broad generalization, I do believe in the validity of my observations in relation to the importance of media for sexual minorities in a diasporic context. The diversity of this sample (in terms of country of origin, generation of migration, level of education, gender, age etc.) reminds us of the fundamentally 'messy' and diverse nature of the social reality which quantitative or even more focused qualitative research may obscure.

It is exactly this 'close-up' view of reality, emphasizing the individuality of media users (who are only sketchily presented in the current article for a lack of space), which made reception research so refreshing some thirty years ago, and which may offer a welcome alternative to implicitly technologically media-deterministic or at least media-centric accounts on the significance of contemporary media to audiences – which continue

to be conceptualized, implicitly, as Western heterosexual families, another issue this project aims to address. While audience freedom, power or resistance do not prominently come to mind when analysing the interview transcripts, the interviews do disclose idiosyncratic individual journeys through a limited and often problematic media offer. The participants combine a number of strategies to deal with media, such as resourcefulness (to find representations), resilience (in the face of hostile representations), subversive readings (of mainstream representations) but also quite normative readings (preferring 'normal' characters). Rather than answering questions about 'the' meaning of LGBTQ representation to a clearly defined audience, this project draws attention to the strongly contextual nature of the meanings attached to media for audiences which are always complex and intersectional in more ways than we can grasp. Moreover, their agency and 'power' is clearly (to be) situated within a number of structuring contexts, not only the textual and social ones discussed in this article but also broader cultural and societal, economical and political contexts. So yes, reception research continues to be relevant.

The primary focus in this article on film and television does not do justice to the range of media uses by the participants, as online and mobile media turned out to currently be their primary source of LGBTQ information and representations. However, it also became clear that these audiences continue to draw meaning from particular texts, often originating in film and television, regardless of the device or medium they use to access them. If 'new media' research is often interested in patterns and profiles of use (as exemplified by the current focus on 'big data'), reception research may help to keep an eye on the meanings of such uses as well as the images and representations which continue to play a prominent role in these uses. In view of the crossmediality and interdependency of contemporary media uses, holistic, ethnographically inspired qualitative research may be more useful than ever – particularly in the area of studies on media and sexuality, as stated by Lisa Henderson (2013). In a similar vein, Katherine Sender (2012) argues for increased reflexivity and a focus on affect in studies on queer media consumption: particularly among diasporic sexual minorities, media are charged with a number of contradictory emotions which remain to be explored. While the current article has attempted to make a contribution to this literature, it is clear that much more work is needed to do justice to the complex, situated, intersectional and emotional engagements of particular LGBTQ audiences with media representations.

Biographical note:

Dr. Alexander Dhoest is associate professor in communication studies at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. His research focuses on the role of media in the creation and consolidation of social identities, in particular national, cultural, ethnic and sexual ones. In his latest research, he has explored the intersections of ethno-cultural and sexual identities and the way they relate to the media uses of diasporic LGBTQs. Contact: alexander.dhoest@uantwerpen.be.

References:

- Alasuutari, Pertti, 'Introduction: Three phases of reception studies', in Pertti Alasuutari (ed.), *Rethinking the media audience: The new agenda*, London: Sage 1999, pp. 1-21.
- Ang, Ien, *Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Ang, Ien, 'Wanted: Audiences. On the politics of empirical audience studies', in Ellen Seiter et al (eds.), *Remote control: Television, audiences, and cultural power*, London: Routledge 1989, pp. 96-115.
- Ang, Ien, 'Culture and Communication: Towards an Ethnographic Critique of Media Consumption in the Transnational Media System', *European Journal of Communication*, 5 (2), 1990, pp. 239-260.
- Ang, Ien, *Living room wars: Rethinking media audiences for a postmodern world*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Babuscio, Jack, 'Camp and the gay sensibility', in Richard Dyer (ed.), *Gays and Film*. London: British Film Institute 1977, pp. 40-57.
- Barker, Martin, 'Critique: Audiences 'R' us', in Roger Dickinson, Ramaswami Harindranath & Olga Linné (eds.), *Approaches to audiences: A reader*, London: Arnold 1998, pp. 184-191.
- Barker, Martin, 'I have seen the future and it is not here yet: Or, on being ambitious for audience research', *The Communication Review*, 9, 2006, pp. 123-141.
- Brah, Avtar, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, London: Routledge, 1996.
- Brunsdon, Charlotte, 'Television: Aesthetics and Audiences', in Patricia Mellencamp (ed.), *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1990, pp. 59-72.
- Caldwell, John, 'Convergence television: Aggregating form and repurposing content in the culture of conglomeration', in Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (ed.), *Television after TV: Essays on a medium in transition*, Durham & London: Duke University Press 2004, pp. 41-74
- Campbell, John E., *Getting It On Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality, and Embodied Identity*, New York: Harrington Park, 2004.
- Carragee, Kevin M., 'Interpretive media study and interpretive social science', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 7 (2), 1990, pp. 81-96.
- Cavalcante, Andre, 'Shifting from resistance to resilience: Articulating resiliency as an LGBTQ audience practice', *Paper presented at the ICA conference, Seattle, 22-26 May 2014*.
- Choo, Hae Yeon and Myra Marx Ferree, 'Practicing intersectionality in sociological research: A critical analysis of inclusions, interactions, and institutions in the study of inequalities', *Sociological Theory*, 28 (2), 2010, pp. 129-149.
- Corner, John, 'Meaning, Genre, and Context: The Problematics of 'Public Knowledge' in the New Audience Studies', in James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (ed.), *Mass Media and Society*, London and New York: Edward Arnold 1991, pp. 268-284.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé W., 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, pp. 139-67.
- Curran, James, 'The New Revisionism in Mass Communication Research: A Reappraisal', *European Journal of Communication*, 5 (2), 1990, pp. 135-164.
- Dhaenens, Frederik, Sofie Van Bauwel & Daniel Biltereyst, 'Slashing the fiction of queer theory: Slash fiction, queer reading, and transgressing the boundaries of screen studies, representations, and audiences', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 32 (4), 2008, pp. 335-347.

- Dhoest, Alexander, 'Identifications, communities and connections: Intersections of ethnicity and sexuality among diasporic gay men', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*. Online first: 5 February 2015. DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2015.1009463
- Dhoest, Alexander, Robbe Herreman & Marion Wasserbauer, 'Into the Groove: Exploring lesbian and gay musical preferences and 'LGB music' in Flanders', *Observatorio (Obs*) Journal*, 9 (2), 2015, pp. 207-223.
- Dhoest, Alexander and Simons, Nele, 'Questioning queer audiences: Exploring diversity in lesbian and gay mens' media uses and readings', in Karen Ross (ed.), *The handbook of gender, sex and media*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell 2011, pp. 260-276.
- Doty, Alexander, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Driver, Susan, *Queer girls and popular culture: Reading, resisting, and creating media*, New York: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Dyer, Richard, *Heavenly bodies: Film stars and society*, London: BFI, 1987.
- Fetveit, Arild, 'Anti-essentialism and reception studies: In defense of the text.' *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4 (2), 2001, pp. 173-199.
- Finch, Mark, 'Sex and address in *Dynasty*', *Screen*, 27(6), 1986, pp. 24-42.
- Fiske, John, *Television Culture*, London: Methuen, 1987.
- Fiske, John, 'Moments of television: Neither the text nor the audience', in Ellen Seiter et al. (ed), *Remote control: Television, audiences, and cultural power*, London: Routledge 1989, pp. 56-78.
- Gamson, Joshua, 'Sexualities, queer theory, and qualitative research', in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (ed.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, California: Sage publications 2000, pp. 347-365.
- Georgiou, Myria, *Diaspora, Identity and the media. Diasporic transnationalism and mediated spatialities*, Creskill: Hampton Press, 2006
- Gillespie, Marie, *Television, ethnicity and cultural change*, London: Routledge, 1995.
- Gillespie, Marie, 'Television drama and audience ethnography', in Marie Gillespie (ed), *Media audiences*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press 2007, pp. 137-182.
- Gray, Ann, 'Audience and reception research in retrospect: The trouble with audiences', in Pertti Alasuutari (ed.), *Rethinking the media audience: The new agenda*, London: Sage 1999, p. 22-37.
- Gray, Mary L., *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, New York: NYU Press, 2009.
- Gross, Larry, 'Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media', pp. 19-46 in M.A. Wolf & A.P. Kielwasser (eds.), *Gay People, Sex and the Media*, New York/London: The Haworth Press 1991, pp. 19-46.
- Hall, Donald E. and Annamarie Jagose, *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Hall, Stuart, 'Encoding/decoding', in Stuart Hall et al. (ed.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, London: Hutchinson 1980, pp. 128-138.
- Hammersley, Martyn & Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in practice (third edition)*, London: Routledge, 2007.
- Haslop, Craig, 'Wot no queers: The search for sexual representation in audience research', *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network 2* (1), 2009.

- Henderson, Lisa, 'Communication, sexuality, defamiliarization', *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 2013, pp. 2468-2481.
- Hermes, Joke, *Reading women's magazines: An analysis of everyday media use*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.
- Höijer, Birgitta, 'Studying viewers' reception of television programmes: Theoretical and methodological considerations', *European Journal of Communication*, 5 (2), 1990, pp. 29-56.
- Höijer, Birgitta, 'Socio-cognitive structures and television reception', *Media, Culture and Society*, 14, 1992, pp. 583-603.
- Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1992
- Jensen, Klaus. B., 'Qualitative audience research: Toward an integrative approach to reception', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 4, 1987, pp. 21-36.
- Jensen, Klaus. B. & Karl E. Rosengren, 'Five Traditions in Search of the Audience.' *European Journal of Communication*, 5 (2), 1990, pp. 207-238.
- Kama, Amit, 'The quest for inclusion: Jewish-Israeli gay men's perceptions of gays in the media', *Feminist Media Studies*, 2 (2), 2002, pp. 195-212.
- Kama, Amit, 'Negation and validation of self via the media: Israeli's gay men's (dis)engagement patterns with their representations', *The Communication Review*, 6, 2003: 71-94.
- Kellner, Douglas, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between modern and postmodern*, London: Routledge 1995.
- Livingstone, Sonia, 'Audience research at the crossroads: The 'implied audience' in media and cultural theory', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1 (2), 1998, pp. 193-217.
- McKee, Alan, 'Images of gay men in the media and the development of self esteem', *Australian Journal of Communication*, 27 (2), 2000, pp. 81-98.
- McLeod, Jack M., Gerald M. Kosicki, & Z. Pan, 'On Understanding and Misunderstanding Media Effects', in James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (eds.), *Mass Media and Society*, London and New York: Edward Arnold 1991, pp. 235-266.
- Mitra, Rahul, 'Resisting the spectacle of pride: Queer Indian bloggers as interpretive communities', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 54 (1), 2010, pp. 163-178.
- Moore, Shaun, 'Texts, readers and contexts of reading', in Paddy Scannell, Philip Schlesinger & Colin Sparks (eds.), *Culture and Power: A Media, Culture and Society Reader*, London: Sage 1991, pp. 137-157.
- Moore, Shaun, *Interpreting audiences: The ethnography of media consumption*. London: Sage, 1993.
- Morley, David, *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding*, London: BFI, 1980.
- Morley, David, 'The "Nationwide" Audience - A critical postscript', *Screen Education*, 39, 1981, pp. 3-14.
- Morley, David, 'Active audience theory: Pendulums and pitfalls', *Journal of Communication*, 43 (4), 1993, pp. 13-19.
- Morley, David, 'Unanswered questions in audience research', *The Communication Review*, 9 (2), 2006, pp. 101-121.
- Mowlabocus, Sharif, *Gaydar Culture*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.

- Murphy, Patrick D., 'Doing audience ethnography: A narrative account of establishing ethnographic identity and locating interpretive communities in fieldwork', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5 (4), 1999, pp. 479-504.
- Newton, Esther, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty years in America's first gay and lesbian town*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.
- O'Riordan, Kate & David J. Phillips (eds.), *Queer Online*, New York: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Plummer, Ken, 'Mapping the sociological gay: Past, presents and futures of a sociology of same sex relations', in Theo Sandfort, Judith Schuyf, Jan-Willem Duyvendak & Jeffrey Weeks (eds.), *Lesbian and gay studies: An introductory, interdisciplinary approach*, London: Sage 2000, pp. 46-59.
- Radway, Janice, 'Reception study: Ethnography and the problems of dispersed audiences and nomadic subjects', *Cultural Studies*, 2 (3), 1988, pp. 359-376.
- Schrøder, Kim C. , 'The best of both worlds? Media audience research between rival paradigms', in Pertti Alasuutari (ed.), *Rethinking the media audience: The new agenda*, London: Sage 1999, pp. 38-68.
- Seaman, William R., 'Active audience theory: Pointless populism', *Media, Culture and Society*, 14, 1992, pp. 301-311.
- Seiter, Ellen, 'Making distinctions in TV audience research: Case study of a troubling interview', *Cultural Studies*, 4 (1), 1990, pp. 61-84.
- Seiter, Ellen, *Television and new media audiences*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.
- Sender, Katherine, 'No hard feelings: Reflexivity and queer affect in the new media landscape', in Karen Ross (ed.), *The handbook of gender, sex and media*, Malden (MA): Blackwell, 2012, pp. 207-225.
- Szulc, Lukasz & Alexander Dhoest, 'The Internet and Sexual Identity Formation: Comparing LGB Internet Uses Before and After Coming Out', *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research*, 38 (4), 2013: pp. 347-365.

Notes:

¹ In line with current usage in academic literature, I use 'LGBTQ' as an inclusive umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities, to reflect the varied identifications among the participants, even though no transgender individuals participated in this research.

² For a more extensive overview, see for instance Moores (1993), Seiter (1999) and Alasuutari (1999).

³ More exactly from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.'

⁴ The sexual refugees come from Brazil, Burundi, Chechnya, Irak, Morocco (2), Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. The voluntary migrants come from Cameroon, Cuba, Hungary, Norway, Palestine, Peru, The Philippines, Poland, Romania (2), Syria, Togo, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. The parents of the second generation participants were born in China (2), Congo, Morocco (4), Tunisia (2) and Turkey (2).

⁵ For some exceptions, see Gillespie (1995) and Murphy (1999).

⁶ For a further exploration of the intersection between sexuality and ethnicity in this group, see Dhoest 2015.

⁷ All quotes from interviews are literal quotations (if the interview was done in English) or translations (if the interview was done in French or Dutch). For the sake of anonymity, the participants' names have been replaced by names used in their (or their parents') country of origin.