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**Does representation matter?**

**Exploring the effects of positively perceived media representation  
on the identity and sense of self of LGBTQ women**

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for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology**

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## Dedication

*"L'amour ne peut pas être égoïste, c'est la reconnaissance infinie."*

*George Sand*

*A ceux qui m'ont toujours soutenue et ont accepté mes habitudes de travail  
incompatibles avec toute forme de socialisation et de vie de famille.*

*J'apprécie plus qu'il ne m'est possible de le mettre en mots.*

*Merci.*

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### **Abstract**

In the recent years, media representation of minorities, including LGBTQ+ people, has steadily been increasing. The question of quality and its impact on mental health of the depicted populations remains – not all kinds of representation are the same, and not all lead to positive mental health outcomes. This thesis seeks to explore the impact of positive media representation on the identity and mental wellbeing of queer women using a mixed-methods approach.

The quantitative part of this research suggests there is a relationship between exposure to positive media representation and the development of a more solid minority identity in queer women. Additionally, the results confirmed the influence of other factors described in the literature, such as the country of residence and religion. The qualitative approach expands on these findings and provides an inside view on the mechanisms by which media representation can be internalized and turned into self-identity.

*Keywords:* LGBTQ, bisexual, queer, media representation, psychology.

## Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

*"J'aurais besoin de ressentir l'acceptation sociale de tous, d'avoir une bonne image des gais et lesbiennes représentés dans les médias et dans la population."*

*"I would need to feel social acceptance from everyone, to have a positive image of gays and lesbians represented in the medias and the population."*

*Girl, 20 years old - interviewed by Dorais (2015, p. 33).*

LGBTQ people experience sexual and/or romantic attraction to their own gender, and/or have a gender identity that does not match their biological sex (American Psychological Association, 2012). They constitute a minority group for which it can be a great challenge to build a positive minority identity that affirms their sexual orientation, gender identity or both. Yet, positive LGBTQ identity is a known predictor of better mental health (Meyer, 2003) for a population whose prevalence of mental disorders and suicidality is high enough to demand special attention, like in the sample studied by Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson (2010) where one-third of the participants met the DSM-IV criteria for a mental disorder and one-third had attempted suicide in their lifetime.

Capturing the experience of individuals who have to deal with both a sexual orientation that doesn't conform to social expectations and a sexist society, radical feminist Jill Johnston wrote in 1973 :

*"And not least of the categories of identity is that of sexual status under the law which allowed of no other orientation than that of heterosexuality. Lesbian identity was a criminal or non-identity. The conspiracy of silence was to prevent such an identity to emerge" (p. 68).*

Several approaches to the concepts of identity and the self underline their discursive nature (Madigan, 2011), including Foucault's post-structuralist perspective,



which states that the self under study is constructed by discourses (1975). Thus, identity is formed by the narrative and the images developed about it. It cannot thrive out of nothingness; it is situated in a cultural context which is, in part, shaped by the media. In two words, representation matters. The way LGBTQ individuals see themselves portrayed in the media (press, television, cinema, literature, etc.) impacts their view of themselves (Chetcuti & Girard, 2015; Dorais, 2015; Kennard, Willis, Robinson, & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2016; McInroy, & Craig, 2015, 2017).

It becomes, therefore, legitimate to hypothesize that positively perceived representation in the media might contribute to reinforcing a positive LGBTQ+ identity, especially since more and more queer characters have been visible onscreen in the last year (GLAAD, 2017). However, media representation stays unbalanced when it comes to gender. For example, females constituted only 32% of all the speaking characters in major feature films in 2016 (Lauzen, 2017). Thus, it could be misguided to try to study the experience of queer individuals with representation without taking into consideration gender-related differences. Given the need for literature on the subject, this study will be limited to the exploration of the effects of positively perceived media representation on the identity and sense of self of LGBTQ women.

My choice of topic and my take on this matter are also rooted in my personal experience. I am a bisexual woman whose late coming out can be connected to the lack of visibility of bisexuality in France, where I grew up, in the 1980's and 1990's. I could not truly confront what I was because I could not put a name on what I felt, because I had never been given a chance to relate to someone who would be like me, because I was blinded by external and internalized stigma. I tried to conduct this study

while owning the perspective introduced by my personal history as recommended by Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999). I also selected the literature that support this work to reflect my own theoretical orientations, including the use of a narrative approach as a therapist.

### **Identity and Sense of Self**

There are many definitions of concepts as important as "identity" and "sense of self," which does nothing to prevent a certain amount of confusion between them, as most authors do not necessarily justify their use of particular terminology, as Cass underlines: "sometimes it can be inferred that identity is intra-personal; at other times, that it is outside the person. [...] In several instances, the notion of self [...] is intricately bound to the idea of identity" (1984, p. 108).

I will here consider identity as defined by Amin Maalouf (1998) and Jill Johnston (1973). The former explained that identity is what makes a person unique, not identical to any other person (1998), while the latter specified that "identity is what you can say you are, according to what they say you can be" (1973, p. 68). I will also adopt Cass' perspective on the self as the "personal aspect of individual functioning conceived as self-representation and self-perceptions" (1984, p. 110), and, therefore the subjective part of a person's identity.

Therefore, as suggested by Johnston (1973) and in the wake of Foucault's conceptions (1975), I chose to consider identity and sense of self as a dynamic phenomenon constituted by integrating the socio-cultural narratives of the individual's environment. Such a point of view is also consistent with Mikhail Bakhtin's beliefs that individuals are direct contributors to each other's identity, that one's self would be invisible, incomprehensible, and unusable without the permanent relationship to the

other (Madigan, 2011). It is equally supported by Maalouf's understanding that identity keeps building itself and transforming itself throughout life, starting from early childhood, when the young child is shaped by their environment, their family's beliefs, rites, attitudes, conventions, fears, aspirations, prejudices, bitterness, feelings of belonging and non-belonging (1998).

The idea of a specific identity based on sexual orientation has become more present in the literature since the late 1960's with, at first, the idea of an homosexual identity that entailed diverse meanings such as "defining oneself as gay, a sense of self as gay, an image of self as gay, the way a homosexual person is, and a constant behavior in relation to homosexual-related activity" (Cass, 1984, p. 108). Among the notions that have emerged from this first conceptual wave, I chose to keep my focus on positive LGBTQ+ identity, which means an identity that encompasses a sense of self that includes the individuals' acceptance of their sexual orientation or gender identity in a positive way, i.e., having positive emotions and thoughts about oneself in the context of identifying as a LGBTQ (Riggle, Mohr, Rostosky, & Balsam, 2014).

### **Sexual Minority Identity Development**

In the United States, 11% of the population reports not being heterosexual (16% for women) (Coffman, Coffman, & Marzilli Ericson, 2013) and less than 1% identify as transgender (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016). Younger adults use LGBTQ labels more freely (Gates, 2014). About 55% of sexual minority women identify as bisexual rather than lesbian (Gates, 2011). Mustanski, Garofalo, and Emerson (2010) found a rate of about 10% of non-cisgender persons among the LGBT community.

Different theories address the way LGBTQ individuals form an identity that encompasses the acceptance of their sexual orientation and/or gender. However, most of those approaches are focused on sexual minorities and do not include transgender or gender non-conforming identities. Yet, gender nonconformity appears to be a common denominator to all LGBTQ experiences, even for individuals who will later embrace a cisgender identity, i.e. experience a gender identity that matches their gender assigned at birth (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2008).

According to Erikson (1963, as quoted in Waldner, & Magrader, 1999), identity formation is a developmental task characteristic of adolescence. However, when it comes to sexual minority identity, the formation process can take place later in life. Positive queer identity is considered established when the person has built a favorable self-image as part of a sexual minority, despite the conflicting pressure between the internal need to express homoerotic feelings and the desire to conform to social norms in a context where heterosexuality is always presumed (Guittar, 2013; Waldner & Magrader, 1999). Identity building is an individual process that often takes place over a long period of time (Checuti & Girard, 2015) and for which common patterns have been identified.

The first developmental model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity was described by Cass in 1979 (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). It entails six stages, starting with (a) identity confusion (questioning one's identity), followed by (b) identity comparison (realizing that there is a difference), (c) identity tolerance (tolerating the probability of being LGB), (d) identity acceptance (accepting the idea of a different sexual orientation), (e) identity pride (which can imply hostility towards heterosexual people as a group), and finally (f) identity synthesis (described above as

integration). When in stage (c) and (d), individuals do not necessarily develop a positive idea of their newfound identity and can present high level of internalized stigma: they can still more or less consciously subscribe to negative stereotypes and prejudices that are common about sexual minorities (Meyer, 1995).

Rosario's approach decomposes the process in only two main steps, identity formation and identity integration (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2008). The first part refers to the beginning of the self-discovery and exploration process; the second implies the acceptance and commitment to the newly-built identity by forming positive attitudes toward same-sex sexuality, engaging in social activities within the LGB community, and being comfortable with identity disclosure.

This journey can be experimentation-centered or identity-centered. In the first case, sexual exploration is prominent, while more self-reflective means of forming new attitudes towards one's sexuality are used in the second case (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011). In both scenario, coming out stays an essential component but also one of the most stressful aspects of queer identity formation, both as the first realizations about one's sexual orientation or gender identity, but also as lifelong process of disclosure through day-to-day revelations of one's queerness to other people (Cox, Dewaele, Van Houtte, & Vincke, 2011). It always entails some initial, but temporary, crisis, since self-disclosing means risking incomprehension, rejection, stigmatization and even discrimination. Longer-term benefits are, however, undeniable: the individuals are liberated from the negatives consequences of suppressed emotions. Being open about one's identity is associated with better social support, which is essential to dealing with the effects of social stigma (Meyer, 2003; Cox, Dewaele, Van Houtte, & Vincke, 2011).

Specific differences have been identified in the sexual minority identity development of bisexual people. The social norms of heterosexual attraction can indeed be partially followed, which tends to delay the initial coming out (Calzo et al., 2011). The burden of those cultural expectations also explains what Guittar (2013) calls "the queer apologetic," to describe an individual who publicly comes out as bisexual, despite only experiencing same-sex attraction. This "identity compromise" would then help lessen the disappointment and disapproval of relatives and friends, and facilitate the self-acceptance process by making it more gradual (Guittar, 2013). Nevertheless, it contributes to the instability of self-identification observed in bisexual people by stereotyping their identity as transitional, which adds to an experience of non-belonging to both the heterosexual and gay communities (APA, 2012; Hoang, Holloway, & Mendoza, 2011). Thus, bisexuality has been associated with complications in the latter stages of identity building ("identity integration" in particular) but also more psychological distress than lesbians and gay men (Hoang, Holloway, & Mendoza, 2011). This connection between minority identity and mental health has also been established by several other authors.

### **Minority Identity and Mental Health**

**LGBTQ women's mental health.** LGBTQ people experience social stigma, which is a negative social attitude or disapproval targeting a personal characteristic that can result in prejudice and discrimination against individuals presenting this specificity (APA, 2012). They also face heterosexism, defined by Herek (1995) as "the ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community" (p. 321, as quoted in APA, 2012; Rich, 1980; Russel & Fish, 2016). For queer women sexism becomes an

additional stressor, and they generally have more hurdles to face when developing their minority identity in an environment marked by a power imbalance favoring males (Chetcuti, & Girard, 2015; Szymanski & Kashubeck-West, 2008). Szymanski and Henrichs-Beck (2014) found that among their sample of almost 500 American sexual minority women, 65 % reported being subjected to some disapproval because of a behavior that did not conform to female gender stereotypes, 61 % claimed having heard sexist comments regarding their body or clothing, and 46 % indicated having been threatened sexually at least once in the past six months. Furthermore, 51 % had to face anti-gay remarks from family members, and 36 % were rejected by family members at least once in a while within the past six months.

In parallel, numerous studies have shown that LGBTQ individuals experience higher rates of mental health issues than the general population (Meyer, 2003). American LGBTQ youth present with more emotional distress, mood and anxiety disorder symptoms, self-harm, suicidal ideation and behavior (Russel & Fish, 2016). According to Marshal et al. (2011), they are three to seven times more likely to commit suicide. The Canadian Community Health Survey showed that sexual minority women were diagnosed with lifetime mood disorder significantly more than heterosexual women (11.4% in lesbians, 25.2% in bisexual women, 7.7 % in heterosexual women) (Tjepkema, 2008), which is consistent with other international studies (Steel et al., 2017). In France, suicidal ideation is more likely among gay and bisexual young women than for their heterosexual counterparts (Genon, Chartrain, & Delebarre, 2009). The survey *Contexte de la Sexualité en France* (2008, as cited in Genon, Chartrain, & Delebarre, 2009) found that 89.2% of gay and bisexual women between 18 and 24 years old reported having been depressed during the last twelve

months (versus 33.1% of straight young women). In the Netherlands, Sandfort, de Graaf, Bijl, and Schnabel showed that women with same-sex partners were 44.2% to have experienced major depression in their lifetime, which is significantly higher than the 20% prevalence that they measured among heterosexual women (2001). Overall, bisexual women appear to have the poorest mental health outcomes of all sexual minority groups (Steel et al., 2017).

**The minority stress model.** The link between the two phenomena described above has been established through the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) by showing how those social stressors impact the mental health of LGBTQ individuals. The original research was focused on sexual minority individuals, but its results have been confirmed for a transgender sample as well (Testa, Habarth, Peta, Balsam, & Bockting, 2015). Meyer (2003, 2015) identified that negative influences impact the person along a distal to proximal continuum: distal stressors, such as discrimination, rejection, violence, or micro-aggressions, are external to the person, while proximal elements "are transmuted through socialization and experienced by the person through internalizing cognitive processes" (2015, p.209). Thus, this term includes internalized social attitudes (e.g. internalized homophobia or internalized heterosexism), felt stigma or expectation of rejection and discrimination, and concealment of sexual and/or gender identity. As an illustration, Barnes and Meyer (2012) found that exposure to a religious environment that rejects homosexuality, and therefore promotes homophobia, was associated with higher internalized homophobia in a diverse sample of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals living in New York.



Meyer's model (2003) also underlines that the stressors' effect on mental health is mediated by the prominence of minority identity in one's sense of self, the integration of this identity or self-acceptance, and its valence, which refers to self-evaluation. Higher self-acceptance and self-evaluation are linked to lower mental health risks.

**The feminist perspective.** Research done within a more feminist framework led to findings consistent with the processes described in the minority stress model. Szymanski and Kashubeck-West (2008) found that internalized stigma (sexism and heterosexism/homophobia) significantly predict psychological distress for lesbians and bisexual women. Their results also show that self-esteem and social support are mediators of the relationship between internalized heterosexism and its mental health outcome (only the social support factor was found to play the same role in the case of internalized sexism).

Both social support and self-esteem were confirmed by several authors to be key protective factors for LGBTQ individuals' mental health. Kertzner, Meyer, Frost, and Stirratt (2009) underlined the importance of coping mechanisms such as community connectedness and enhanced self-esteem, which reduce the negative effects of minority stress on mental health. Later, Meyer (2015) reaffirmed the determining influence of community resilience, or minority coping, as a defense against the stressors faced by queer people. This concept refers to the norms and values, the role models, and the opportunities for social support available for an individual belonging to a given community.

Russel and Fish (2016) highlighted several factors that affirm LGBTQ youths' identities, such as school policies and programs, family acceptance, dating, as well as the ability to come out and be out. Parental and peer support have been consistently positively correlated with positive mental health, self-acceptance, and well-being (Sheet & Mohr, 2009, as cited in Russel & Fish, 2016; Shilo & Savaya, 2011, as cited in Russel & Fish, 2016). Furthermore, besides the consistent findings reported by Russel and Fish (2016) of an association between lower mental health symptoms and higher self-esteem, the three-year longitudinal study of Bauermeister et al. (2010) showed an increase in self-esteem and a decrease in internalized homophobia for sexual minority youth who dated same-sex partners compared to those who dated other-sex partners.

Finally, when it comes to lesbians specifically, Keleher, Wei, and Liao (2010) found that both positive feelings about being gay, i.e., a positive minority identity, and perceived social support mediated the relations between attachment style and well-being (life satisfaction, depressive symptoms, and loneliness).

### **Media Representation of LGBTQ Women**

**From Hollywood's Golden Age to YouTube.** From 1930 to 1968, Hollywood film production was governed by a simple rule stated in the Motion Picture Production Code: "Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden" (1930). Thus, representation of any sexual minority on screen had to circumvent the censorship (White, 1999). In the last twenty years, more and more lesbians, bisexual and transgender women have been portrayed in films and on television (Diamond, 2005; McInroy & Craig, 2015). The past restrictions have had long-lasting effects, but queer

representation has always found a way to exist; it has tremendously increased in quality, and online media played a major role in that improvement.

The limitations imposed on Hollywood during its Golden Age led to the development of subtext representation. As White (1999) summarized, "what is actively prohibited can nevertheless be inferred from its discursive effects" (p. 1). Signs had to be deciphered; codes had to be cracked. Both queer female characters and the audience found themselves "searching for women in the shadows" (White, 1999, p. 215). Nevertheless, even then, some representation was surprisingly explicit and powerful. In the 1933 biopic of the seventeenth-century lesbian Swedish monarch *Queen Christina*, Greta Garbo plays a visibly sapphic heroine despite a heterosexual romance storyline. If the movie had a few close calls with the censor, a kiss between the Queen (dressed in men's clothes in a way that fits the classic butch/masculine lesbian imagery) and her lady in waiting made the cut to the copy distributed in theaters (White, 1999). This portrayal appears even more important now that Garbo's involvement in same-sex relationships is now widely recognized, according to Tosha Rachelle Taylor in her analysis published on the sapphic website AfterEllen:

"When I watch *Queen Christina*, I feel like I'm sharing a secret with Garbo and her contemporaries. [...] In some ways, I find her performance in the film more relatable than many contemporary gay characters, specifically because it is Garbo. While Garbo struggled in her relationships with women as well and would go on to be a recluse, she was the bi icon who seemed to appear onscreen in front of me at a time when I needed one" (2016).

Much later, by the 1990's, lesbians had become a version of their time's novelty, but only in a presentable, reassuring, "straightened out" manner. Even on the famous cover of *Time* magazine's April 1997 issue that proclaims "Yep, I'm gay," Ellen DeGeneres appears in make-up and clothes that are more traditionally feminine

than in her usual style (Ciasullo, 2001). However, no matter how imperfect the representation was, the second part of that decade was also a turning point in the wake of DeGeneres' coming out as a lesbian both in character in her sitcom and off-screen. Diamond (2005) observed an upsurge of openly lesbian characters (but fewer bisexuals) and same-sex relationships in the media in the last five years of the 20th century and the very beginning of the 21st (movies like *The Hours*, *Chasing Amy*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, and television shows such as *ER*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Once and Again* or *Queer as Folk*). More and more female celebrities also started to come out, providing visibility to themselves and their sapphic audience (White, 1999).

The representation of transgender people has also increased since the 1970s, with an acceleration in the last two decades (McInroy, & Craig, 2015).

Today, according to GLAAD (2017), out of 901 regular characters counted on 115 primetime scripted shows on American broadcast networks for the TV season 2017-2018, only 6.4 % are LGBTQ, which is the highest percentage since they began collecting this type of data. Gay men constituted 47% of these queer characters, lesbians 24%, and bisexuals (six males and sixteen females) 26%, while 5% were transgender.

On scripted cable programs, 103 LGBTQ regular characters were counted, 42% being gay men, 27% lesbians, 22% bisexual women, 6% bisexual men, and 4% transgender or gender non-conforming. The balance is different on scripted shows offered by streaming services, with 51 LGBTQ regular characters, with 36% of lesbians, 24% of gay men, 30% of bisexual women and only 3% of bisexual men.

Seventeen transgender or gender nonconforming characters were identified across all the platforms (nine transgender women, four transgender men, and four

non-binary characters.) However, only 11 of these characters had known sexual orientations; six were identified as heterosexual, two as gay, two as bisexual, and one as lesbian.

GLAAD (2017) also observed a clear improvement in the representation of queer persons of color on broadcast television, but one needs to consider that there is still a much progress to be made in terms of accurate representation of racial minorities and intersectional characters.

The development of online media, social media, and platforms such as YouTube has led to the emergence of a new type of LGBTQ representation that sometimes merges with more traditional forms. Thus, out lesbian YouTuber and web personality Hannah Hart debuted in 2017 on the Food Network with her show *I Hart Food*. Another YouTuber, the trans-advocate Gigi Gorgeous was named as one the hosts of MTV's revived *Total Request Live* (GLAAD, 2017).

**Media representation and identity formation.** Raley and Lucas (2006) underlined that LGBTQ youth's identity formation is generally not influenced by their family and peers in the same way as their non sexual minority counterparts'. Most children and adolescents grow up around adults and older kids who serve as models of what a cisgender heterosexual man or woman can be. They are, however, much less likely to be able to refer to an "out" queer model. Therefore, the media become a primary influence on the identity development process. The impact of media representation was confirmed by a study conducted by McInroy and Craig (2017) about the impact of media representation on young LGBTQ adults. They found that traditional media (television in particular) could create a common dialogue

and validate identity. Online media could also offer space for discussion and creativity.

**Harmful tropes and minority stress.** Despite the fact that the representation of LGBTQ women in the media has increased, some harmful tropes persist to this day.

One of the most well-known of these toxic plot devices is the Bury Your Gays trope, which designates the “gay curse” or the lack of a happy ending for gay characters. Even when a relationship is allowed, it generally ends badly, with often the death of the one who "perverted" the other by pursuing them more aggressively (TV Tropes, n.d.). The death of Lexa in the show *The 100* falls right into this trope, with the character, a fan favorite, killed by a stray bullet seconds after consummating her relationship with the lead (a bisexual woman). It sparked outrage among some of the viewers, more so because the show runner and writers had engaged with fans and guaranteed that the character would be treated well (Ryan, 2016; Shakeri, 2017; Snarker, 2016). This attitude towards the sapphic fanbase of the show could be compared to queer-baiting, which refers to adding voluntarily homoerotic subtext between two characters, usually protagonists, to attract LGBTQ audiences without intending to transform it into anything concrete. It also entails any attitude from a show's cast and crew that would encourage fans to support these non-canonical relationships with the implicit promise that they could be written into reality (Shakeri, 2017).

Furthermore, Diamond (2005) describes how sapphic stories and characters are shaped for the heterosexual male consumer through the trope of heteroflexible characters, who just toy with the idea or experiment with same-sex relationships while

remaining within acceptable heteronormative boundaries. For example, out of the three female-female kisses in the very successful show *Ally McBeal*, two were to trick male observers, and one was completely experimental to confirm the heterosexuality of the protagonists. The male fantasy of watching sex between otherwise straight women, overused in porn, has moved to mainstream media, reinforcing the idea that "the most desirable and acceptable form of female-female sexuality is that which pleases and plays to heterosexual male gaze" (Diamond, 2005, p. 105). The author added that this idea of same-sex testing also contributed to the erasure of bisexuality through a dichotomization of sexual orientation between lesbians and "straight women."

GLAAD (2017) also reported several issues in the portrayal of bisexuality: (1) bisexual characters using sex only as a mean of manipulation or transaction, (2) a character's interest in more than one gender as a temporary plot device soon forgotten, (3) bisexual characters depicted as fundamentally untrustworthy or with no morals. McInroy and Craig (2017) found that, in traditional media, bisexual individuals were generally characterized as confused or curious.

These tropes participate in creating negatively perceived media representation, which seems to contribute to the general process of social stigmatization. This type of harmful portrayal can affect LGBTQ women both on the distal and proximal level. It maintains a negative environment through the diffusion of harmful stereotypes and ideas that can influence social conducts, such as the rejection of bisexual individuals, who are deemed manipulative or untrustworthy. Then, the messages conveyed can be internalized, like the impossibility of happiness for queer people which, therefore, reinforces internalized homophobia and heterosexism

(Dorais, 2015; Meyer, 2003; Russel & Fish, 2016; Szymansk & Kashubeck-West, 2008).

However, the perception of what makes representation positive or negative stays very subjective. Diamond (2005) explained that, if the portrayal of sapphic sexuality through conventionally feminine, attractive, "heterosexual-looking" women was problematic, it could also have a very positive influence on young queer women by offering an alternative to the stereotypes of lesbians as hostile, unattractive, and necessarily masculine looking. Jeanne, one the participants of Chetcuti and Girard's study on the appropriation of sexuality by young French gay men and lesbians (2015), confirmed this point of view by stating that the representation of very feminine lesbians was a way to widen the field of potential identifications.

McInroy and Craig (2015) reported in their qualitative research on media representation of transgender people that their participants could judge completely differently the same representations. One character could be perceived as problematic by some of their interviewees but as positive by others.

**Positive representation and its impact.** McInroy and Craig's participants might have made contradictory statements about the quality of the same representation, but a larger consensus seemed to emerge about what constitutes positive representation:

"The more positive representations emphasized by participants also tended to be more fully integrated into storylines and less tokenistic. These more authentic portrayals often normalized transgender identity, depicting characters as complex individuals instead of disproportionately focusing on their transgender identification" (2015, p. 612).

Diversity and accessibility of the representation were also mentioned as positive features. Online media were considered more likely than offline



(“traditional”) media to offer the positive, realistic portrayal sought for by the participants. Online spaces also provided some of the participants with the means to develop a sense of connectedness in personal support communities through social media and through YouTube (McInroy & Craig, 2015).

Another crucial dimension of the experience with positive media representation seems to be the ability to see fictional characters or celebrities as role models. This theme appeared in McInroy and Craig's work with transgender individuals (2015), but also in Dorais' research (2015). This time, the emphasis was made on public figures known for being in a queer relationship and raising children with their spouse, making them inspiring role models to the participants.

The importance of the identification with the representation is also suggested by Kennard, Willis, Robinson, and Knobloch-Westerwick (2016), who found that the impact of the exposure to different types of social roles depicted in magazines was mediated by the participants' views of themselves.

Chetcuti and Girard (2015) observed the more general effect of exposure to positive representation. Both for lesbians who first identify as bisexual before embracing their identity as gay and those who take a more direct path, positive references encountered in the media, in movies, in books or online played a determining role to help them overcome rejection, then shame to achieve a more integrated minority identity.

The stakes of positive representation for LGBTQ women could be summarized in the words of Stephanie Beatriz, a Latina actress who came out as bisexual shortly before her character in the American broadcast primetime sitcom *Brooklyn 99* came out as bisexual as well. When the writers of the show approached

her with this development, she was eager to take the change to offer a positive example of a bisexual character:

“I was so excited about it because as somebody who identifies as bi — queer — I just had nothing like that when I was growing up. [...] The gay characters I can remember were most often stereotypes. Even a show like ‘Friends,’ you watch back, and you’re like, ‘Ooh, I can’t believe that’s the choice they made.’ And as someone who’s bi, you have absolutely nothing — no representation at all. And to be able to try to do something like that on our show and have a character come out as bi was really important for me” (Nyren, 2017).

### **The Research Question**

Given what is known of the impact of media representation on LGBTQ women and how minority identity mediates the impact of social stigma and its internalization, it can be hypothesized that the exposure to positive representation might help reinforce minority identity through mechanisms which affect the individual's sense of self.

In other words, I aim to answer the following question: what are the effects of positively perceived media representation on LGBTQ women's identity and sense of self? The impact of social support and self-esteem, known moderators between social stigma and its mental health outcome for LGBTQ individuals, will need to be taken into account.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

### **Design**

I decided to opt for a mixed design with an online questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews aiming to provide a better understanding of the quantitative results and explore how positively perceived media representation could impact identity and the sense of self in particular. The quantitative questionnaire

stayed online for about a month between December 2017 and January 2018. The interviews were realized in the same timeframe.

### **Quantitative Approach**

**Hypotheses.** It was hypothesized that there would be a correlation between exposure to positively perceived media representation and LGBTQ women's identity, more exposure to positively perceived media representation predicting a more positive LGBTQ identity (H1).

Two additional hypothesis were formulated. First, it was thought that there would be an effect of the participants' social support experience on the relationship between exposure to positively perceived media representation and LGBTQ identity (H2). Second, that this relationship between exposure to positively perceived media representation and LGBTQ identity would be affected by the participants' self-esteem (H3).

**Quantitative data analysis.** I decided to conduct a relationship analysis between each of the factors and the dependent variable (nested linear regression).

**Dependent variable.** As I aimed to determine if positively perceived media representation could favor a more positive minority identity for LGBTQ women, I chose to use as dependent variable the score of the Multifactor Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Positive Identity Measure (LGB-PIM) (Riggle et al., 2014) (Appendix E). My search for a satisfying tool also including a measure of transgender or gender non conforming individual was unsuccessful.

This 25-item measure divides positive LGB identity into five dimensions: self-awareness, authenticity, community, intimacy, and social justice. Each sub-scale

regroups five items that are rated by the respondent on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Each sub-scale score was computed by averaging the 5 sub-scale items, then these sub-scale scores were averaged to obtain a total score. The questions were randomized via the online survey platform (Qualtrics), as recommended by Riggle et al. (2014).

The psychometric qualities (validity, reliability and validity of the constructs) of the LGB-PIM were confirmed through two different studies with 624 and 272 sexual minority participants including non cis-gender individuals (Riggle et al., 2014).

***Independent variables.*** The independent variables were spread in four different models. The first one focused on verifying the H1, the second H2, and the third H3. The background information was only added to the fourth model since those data could all have an effect on the minority identity of the participants.

*First model.* In order to verify the first hypothesis, I decided to design a specific questionnaire with 5-points Likert scales (Appendix D) to measure:

- The exposure to positively perceived media representation in formative years (under 18 years old) by computing the scores of the first and second question (REP1 and REP2);
- The exposure to positively perceived media representation after 18 years old, by computing the scores of the third and fourth items (computation of REP3 and REP4);
- The total exposure to positively perceived media representation, from the specific questionnaire designed for the study (computation of REP1 to 4).

The other questions about representation designed for this study aim at exploring the mechanisms that might be at work in the potential impact of positive

portrayal of LGBTQ women on the identity of the queer audience. The respondents had to answer 5-points Likert scale questions ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) on subjects relating to the following topics: a) their perception of the general positive impact of LGBTQ women's media representation on themselves (REP5); b) their perception of the effect of LGBTQ women's media representation on their feelings about social support (REP6); c) their perception of the effect of LGBTQ women's media representation on their self-esteem (REP7); d) their potential identification with some of the LGBTQ women positively represented in the media (REP8).

*Second model.* The measure of social support was added for the second level of the regression, using the global score of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MPSPSS) (Wilcox, 2010; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) (Appendix F). This 12-items scale encompasses 3 sub-scales: significant other, family, and friends. Each item is evaluated using a 7-point Likert scale, a higher score meaning better social support.

*Third model.* The self-esteem factor was introduced in the third model. It was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) (Appendix G). This widely used 10-item scale and unidimensional scale focuses on global self-worth by assessing both positive and negative feelings about the self. The answers were given using a 4-point Likert scale format ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Five items were reversed, which was taken into account when calculating the final self-esteem score.

*Fourth model.* This model was completed with the introduction of the background information that could impact the participants' minority identity: sexual

orientation, gender identity, relationship status, age, county of origin, and religion/spirituality. It was gathered through the specific questionnaire designed for this study (Appendix D).

### **Qualitative Approach**

Three in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, two in person and one via video chat (interview guide in appendix K). I recorded and transcribed them manually. I chose to use thematic analysis to process the resulting data. This inductive method consists of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes found in the data. It allows the researcher to generate a rich and detailed, yet flexible, understanding of the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I followed the six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

I intended to aim for an in-depth understanding of the individual experience as a source of data to enrich my approach to the impact of positively perceived media representation on LGBTQ+ women. I followed the standards of quality established by Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie (1999) and strived to identify any bias, ideas, prejudice or stereotypes that could have affected my understanding of these participants and our take on the topic. I also took into consideration the cultural differences factor when working with the material provided through the interviews (Buckley, 2017).

I initially chose to perform the thematic analysis from a descriptive perspective. However, while familiarizing with the interview material, patterns in the participants' wording and non verbal communication (for example, nervous laughter)

emerged, indicating internalized stigma and even allowing for an assessment of the strength and valence of their minority identity. Therefore, I decided to do an additional, distinct round of coding through a more clinical perspective to take into consideration those initially unexpected elements. This choice embedded my study in specific theoretical frameworks (minority stress model and feminist perspective).

The statistical analysis of the quantitative data was executed before the thematic analysis of the qualitative data. The interpretation of each set of results was informed by the other. The integration of the two sources was done with the intention of gaining additional insights and drawing better supported conclusions that could not have been reached by following only one of these methodologies (Levitt et al., 2018).

## **Participants**

**Inclusion criteria.** Because of the lack of existing measurement tools adapted to the transgender or gender non conforming population, the participants were recruited based on their sexual orientation. However, the sample included female-aligned transgender or genderqueer identities (excluding of trans-women identifying as heterosexual.) The participants had to be women over the age of 18 years old who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or generally "queer" when it comes to their sexual orientation. Any answer below "18" to the age item of the online survey led to its final page, with no possibility to respond any of the other questions.

In order to simplify the understanding of this work as well as the coding process, I adopted the following definitions inspired by the American Psychological Association's *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients* (2012) and the *Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender*

*and Gender Nonconforming People* from the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) (2011):

- "lesbian" and "gay woman" are used as synonyms, meaning female-identified individuals who experience sexual and/or romantic attraction to members of their own gender;
- "bisexual woman" is used as an umbrella term for all female-identified individuals who experience sexual and/or romantic attraction to members of more than one gender. It includes "pansexual" and "polysexual" identities.

Participants were asked to choose the term that matched the most their sexual orientation among the ones listed above. They also had to select a gender identity among those listed below:

- "cisgender woman": woman whose gender identity matches the gender assigned at birth (biological woman);
- "transgender woman": female self-identified individual, who was assigned a male gender at birth, from which she has been potentially transitioning socially or physically;
- "female aligned gender non-conforming person:" gender non-conforming people (non-binary, gender fluid, gender queer, etc.) identifying with a more feminine expression of gender.

The participants needed to speak English. There was no restriction related to their country of residence or origin.

**Exclusion criteria.** Any individual not matching the inclusion criteria mentioned above was excluded from the study. People experiencing or having experienced psychotic symptoms could not participate in the qualitative part of the



study, as they would have presented a too great risk of being unreliable narrators. All the participants to the in-depth interviews were screened using the psychosis screening questionnaire (Bebbington, & Nayani, 1995) (Appendix J).

**Sampling.** For the qualitative part of this study, I used purposive sampling (Buckley, 2017.) My main selection criterion was to ensure a high quality of data to deepen our understanding and analysis. Therefore, I looked for participants with reflective qualities and some depth in their awareness of their experiencing of media representation.

**Recruitment of participants.** The participant were recruited using local LGBTQ organizations, such as Leiden University Pride, as well as social media (Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter) by contacting influencers. The respondents to the online survey were invited to volunteer for the in-depth interviews.

**Informed consent and privacy.** The relevant forms and information given to the participants about the research are presented as part of the appendices (Appendices B, C, H and I). All the data have been anonymized as early as possible in the process. The first names of the participants interviewed and some identifiable information were changed to preserve their privacy. The authorization to pursue the study was given by Webster University Institutional Review Board on November 29th, 2017 (Appendix A).

## Chapter 3: Results

### Quantitative Results

266 responses to the online survey were collected, 200 of which were complete and kept for data analysis. Most incomplete answers fell in two categories:

- individuals under 18 years old who were directly sent at the end of the survey when entering their age;
- people who just clicked on the link but did not actually start the survey (blank answers) or survey stopped early (after the background questions.)

**Descriptive statistics.** The youngest participants were 18 years old and the oldest 65 years old. The average age was around 23.5 (M=23.64, SD=8.1). The results of the participants (LGB identity score) over the age of 31 years old (M=5.6, SD=0.75) did not show any significant difference from the ones of the respondents whose age was within the standard

deviation (M=5.4, SD=0.75) (Independent Sample Mann-Whitney U-test, Sig.>0.05).

Therefore, I decided to keep the answers of the older participants for the analysis.

Almost half of the participants (46.5%) identified as gay or lesbian, 32.5% as bisexual/pansexual or polysexual and 21% as queer (fig. 1) A large majority of the

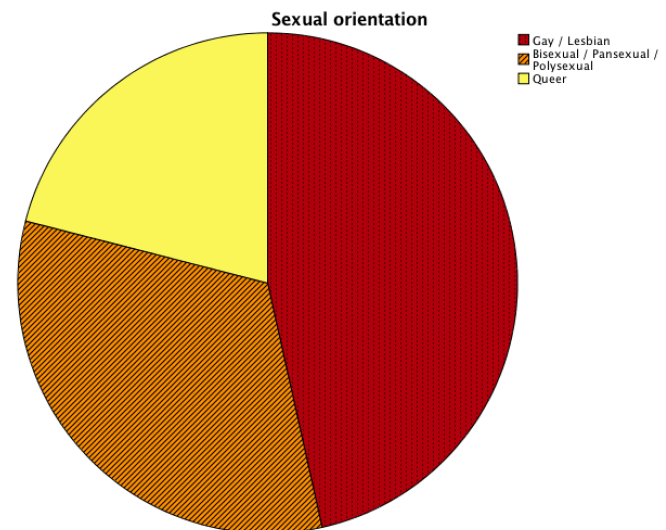


Fig. 1 Sexual orientation of the survey's participants.

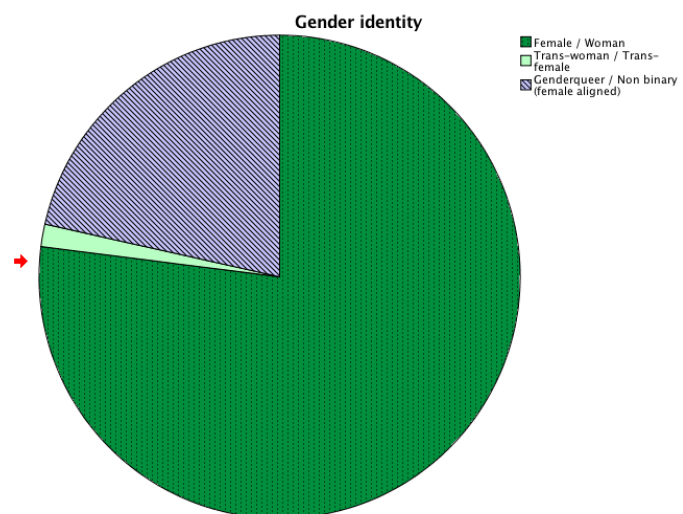


Fig. 2 Gender identity of the survey's participants.

participants identified as female, 3% as trans-women and 21.5% as genderqueer or non-binary (female aligned) (fig.2). The sample also features mostly single individuals (69.5%), a little under a third (27%) in a monogamous committed relationship and 3.5% in a polyamorous relationship (more than two partners).

The participants were from 26 different countries (country where they spent the most time in their life), but almost half of them (97, i.e. 48.5%) identified the United States of America as their homeland, 10% were from Germany, 7.5% from the Netherlands, 6.5% from the United Kingdom and 6 % from Canada. Most participants were from North America (54.5 %) and Europe (40.5 %, 80 from the European Union – including the United Kingdom – and one from Ukraine), Central and South America were represented with respondents from Mexico (1), Brazil (2) and Venezuela (1). Participants from Indonesia (3) and Malaysia (1) represented Asia, two respondents were from Oceania, one from Australia and one from New Zealand. There were no participants from the African continent.

Finally, a large majority of the participants (66%) considered that religion or spirituality were not important in their life.

The scores of the LGB-PIM (Riggle et al., 2014) (dependent variable, from 1 to 7 – the higher the score is, the more positive is the LGB identity) revealed a mean of 5.43 (SD = 0.75).

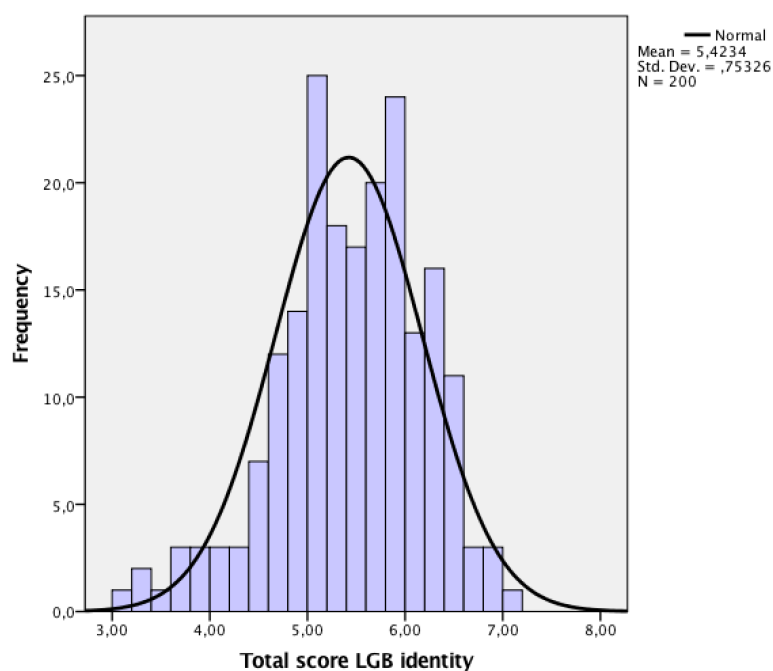


Fig. 3 LGB-PIM total score

**Regression.** The hierarchal regression was run as described in the methodology section, with the background information used only in the fourth model as every one of those data could be considered a moderator of positive minority identity. Given the number of complete responses to the survey, normality was assumed. For the country of origin, only the effect of being from the United States and the Netherlands was compared to the baseline (all the other countries) because those were the countries of origin of the participants to the in-depth interviews.

*Model Summary<sup>e</sup>*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				Sig. F Change	Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2		
1	,418 <sup>a</sup>	,175	,149	,69470	,175	6,827	6	193	,000	
2	,464 <sup>b</sup>	,215	,187	,67938	,040	9,804	1	192	,002	
3	,464 <sup>c</sup>	,215	,182	,68115	,000	,003	1	191	,958	
4	,621 <sup>d</sup>	,386	,325	,61894	,171	5,033	10	181	,000	2,050

*Table 1 Regression model summary*

**Main results.** Three of the four models turned out to be significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), and only the third model revealed itself non significant. As expected, the fourth model was the most satisfying one ( $R^2 = 0.386$ ) (Fig. 4). All the assumptions were met. As intended with the survey design, there was no collinearity between the variables measuring the perceived effect of positive representation on the participants self-esteem and social support and the variables measuring the participants' self-esteem and social support through scales with validated psychometric qualities (Fig. 5). However, using a measure of exposure to positive representation by combining the items reporting exposure before 18 years old and after 18 years violated the collinearity assumption. Therefore, it was decided to exclude the combined variable and keep the reports of the exposure before 18 years old and after 18 years old to realize a finer analysis.

Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model	Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
4	(Constant)	1,802	,000		2,680	,008		
	Exposure to rep. before 18	,012	,026	,032	,481	,631	,749	1,334
	Exposure to rep. after 18	,090	,039	,153	2,295	,023	,763	1,310
	General positive impact of rep.	,047	,091	,040	,515	,607	,563	1,775
	Impact on social isolation	,054	,082	,055	,663	,508	,491	2,037
	Impact on self esteem	,252	,075	,274	3,370	,001	,513	1,950
	Identification to rep.	,059	,049	,083	1,201	,231	,705	1,417
	Age	,013	,007	,139	1,830	,069	,589	1,698
	Sexual orient. Bisexual	-,310	,110	-,193	-2,828	,005	,726	1,377
	Sexual orient. Queer	-,199	,132	-,108	-1,511	,133	,664	1,506
	Gender trans	,159	,380	,026	,418	,676	,899	1,113
	Gender queer	-,002	,122	-,001	-,018	,985	,765	1,307
	Monogamous relationship	,168	,109	,099	1,534	,127	,815	1,227
	Polyamorous relationship	,301	,261	,074	1,155	,250	,834	1,199
	Country NL	,372	,179	,131	2,084	,039	,864	1,157
	Country USA	,434	,097	,289	4,480	,000	,817	1,224
	Religion/spiritual	-,239	,100	-,151	-2,385	,018	,848	1,179
	Social support	,008	,004	,139	2,020	,045	,711	1,406
	Self-esteem	,012	,009	,104	1,451	,149	,655	1,527

a. Dependent Variable: Total score LGB identity

Table 2 Regression coefficients - fourth model

The results showed that there is no significant correlation between exposure to positive representation before 18 years old and positive LGB identity ( $p=0.631$ ). However, the exposure to positive representation after 18 years old is positively correlated with positive LGB identity ( $p<0.05$ ,  $B=0.153$ ) (Fig. 5).

This result can be connected with the T-test realized between exposure to media representation before 18 years ( $M=4.50$ ,  $SD=1.98$ ) and after 18 years old ( $M=7.11$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ) that confirms that the difference between the two means is significant ( $M=-2.61$ ,  $SD=1.98$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Thus, the non-significance of the correlation between exposure to positive media representation before 18 years old and positive LGB identity might actually be linked to the lack of exposure to positive

representation during childhood and adolescence. It can be then considered possible possible to reject the null hypothesis when it comes to the correlation between exposure to positively perceived media representation and positive LGB identity (H1), but only for the exposure after 18 years old.

It should also be underlined that the correlation between exposure to positive representation after 18 years old and positive LGB identity was not significant in the other models ( $p > 0.05$ ), indicating that at least one of the non-significant variables about the participants' background information introduced in the more complete model acted as a suppressor.

***Moderating effects.*** Two potential moderators of the relationship between exposure to positive representation and positive LGB identity had been hypothesized. Self-esteem measured through Rosenberg Self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) turned out to be non-significant ( $p > 0.05$ ) (Fig.5), despite the use of the same scale by Szymanski and Kashubeck-West (2008) in the study where they identified self-esteem as a mediator about the mediators of the relationship between internalized heterosexism and psychological distress in lesbian and bisexual women. Therefore, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected when it comes to the effect of self-esteem as moderator of the relationship between exposure to positively perceived media representation and positive LGB identity (H3).

However, the correlation between social support, as measured with the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Wilcox, 2010; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), and LGB positive identity was confirmed by the results in the fourth model ( $B = 0.139$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) (Fig.5). The introduction of this variable led to a change in the significance and weight of the correlation between exposure to positive

representation and positive LGB identity between the first ( $B=0.133$ ,  $p=0.57$ ) and the second model ( $B=0.117$ ,  $p=0.88$ ) indicating a moderation effect. It is then possible to disprove the null hypothesis and confirm that there is a role of social support in the relationship between exposure to positively perceived media representation and LGB identity (H2).

Finally, the results showed that several aspects of the participants' background correlated significantly and as expected with their positive LGB identity (Fig.5):

- identifying as bisexual/pansexual/polysexual is correlated with a lower score on the LIB-PIM scale compared to identifying as gay/lesbian or queer ( $B=-0.193$ ,  $p<0.01$ );
- coming from the Netherlands ( $B=0.131$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) or the United States ( $B=0.289$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) is significantly correlated with a better LGB identity compared to the rest of the world;
- reporting that religion or spirituality is important in one's life is negatively correlated with positive LGB identity ( $B=-0.151$ ,  $p<0.02$ ).

***The mechanisms of the impact of media representation.*** Among the different items designed to explore some potential mechanisms of the impact of positively perceived media presentation on a positive LGB identity, only one was significant: a higher perceived impact of the representation on self-esteem (as reported by the participants) is correlated with a higher score on the LGB-PIM scale ( $B=0.274$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) (Fig.5). This variable has an even better correlation with positive LGB identity than the exposure to positive representation after 18 years old ( $B=0.153$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

## Qualitative Results

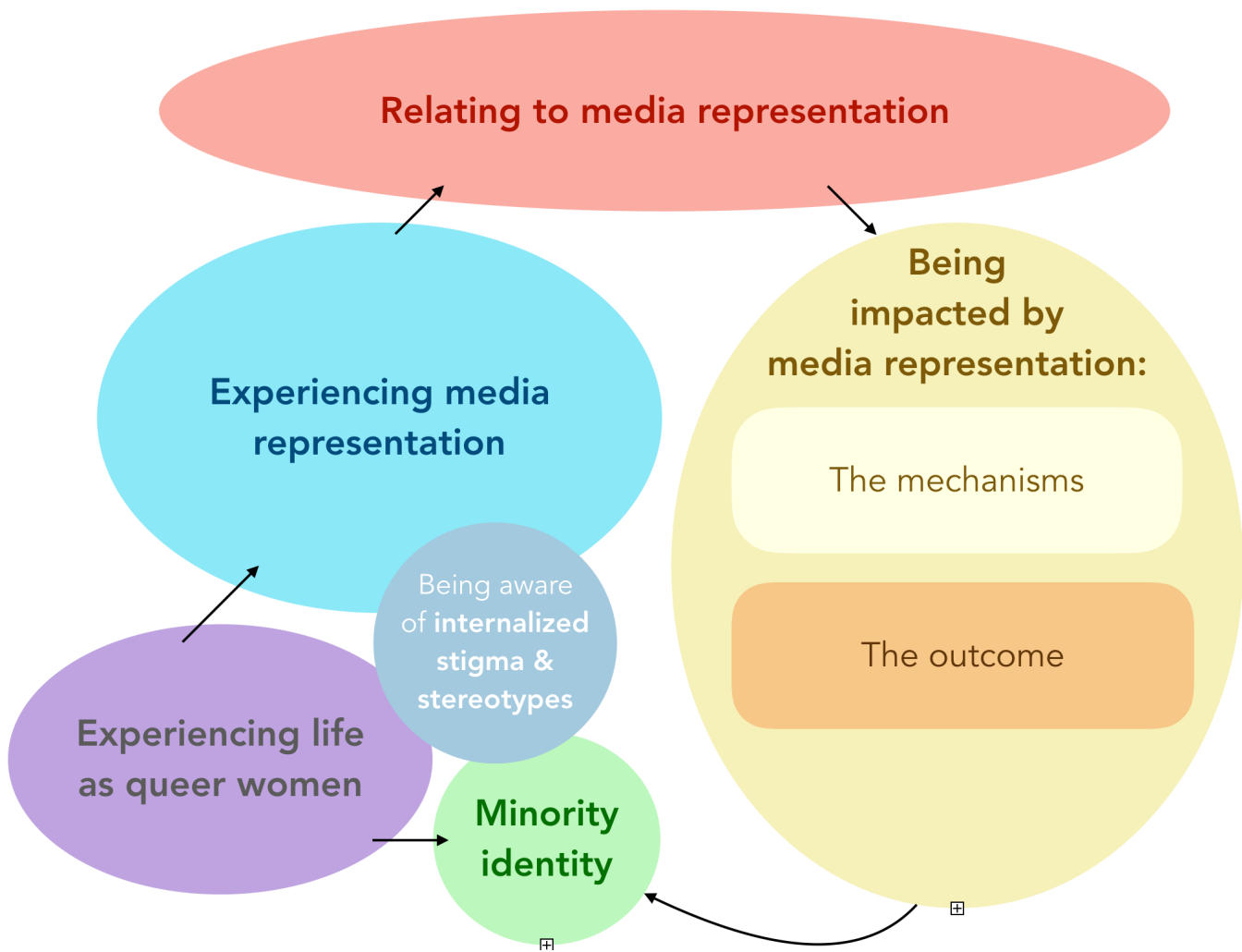


Fig. 4 Map of the qualitative themes

Three in-depth semi-structured interviews were realized with Alicia, a 20 years old white Dutch gay woman, Stephanie, a 21 years old Dutch lesbian of mixed ethnicity, and Rebecca, a 31 years old white American bisexual woman. Alicia and Stephanie were both students and Rebecca was a store manager at the time of the interviews. The themes that emerged from the analysis of their stories can be connected as shown in the map presented below (Fig. 6). A more detailed version of the map can be found in Appendix L.



### **Experiencing life as queer women.**

*Hurdles and struggles.* The three interviewees reported common hurdles and struggles. While Stephanie grew up in an open-minded family, Alicia and Rebecca had to face a more conservative and religious environment:

"I was in this very Christian.. well, first kindergarten (laughs), then middle school. And there's like, there's sexual education and everything is done from a Christian perspective. You can't have abortion. Homosexuality is a... well they don't say it's a sin, but it's not an option, it's okay to be gay but you just have to abstain and everything. I remember it's the first thing I had my own opinion about because I was thinking: "well, it's just love, so why are you denying the right?" And then I went to high school, I went to a very christian high school, like wearing skirts and everything. And they basically said that if you're gay, you go to hell. So, even if I wasn't out yet, it felt like a attack. So, I think I was, yeah, it wasn't a good experience" (Alicia).

Furthermore, all of them stated that they had to repress their sexual orientation and were confronted with compulsory heteronormativity. Rebecca explained that when another girl first developed an interest in her, her reaction was: "there's no way I can possibly be into women. My family will never tolerate it because we're catholics." Stephanie, who grew up in a more progressive family, reported that the possibility of being gay was always in the back of her mind, but she "didn't take it seriously" before she was 18 years old.

Alicia's interview revealed that she had experienced depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation as a teenager, which she explicitly connected with the repression of her sexual orientation and the social stigma that she had to face at school:

"In high school I was very unhappy. Now I know it's because of this. But I was always tired, always [pretending] , and when I got home, I was so tired, I was just... I wanted to be alone in my room, with my laptop, which wasn't very good for my relationship with my parents because they wanted to see me as well. I was, I don't know, not suicidal... I didn't want to do it, but I thought about it... I don't know if I was depressed because I've never been formally diagnosed but it sounds like it. [...] I didn't have emotions really as well. It

was all one straight line, never happy, never really sad, I didn't really cry that much, I wasn't that happy. Just numb."

***Social support in real life.*** All three participants benefited from a form of social support in their life, beginning with their parents in Stephanie and Alicia's case, or, for Rebecca, through the presence in her life of an older gay man who served as a queer reference. Nevertheless, it is among their peers that they have felt the safest. Having queer friends has helped Alicia by making being gay "more normal." Stephanie summarized a similar feeling: "I'm pretty lucky that I live in the Netherlands, and in a progressive and accepting area [with] an accepting and progressive bubble of friends, because I don't really have to think about being accepted." Rebecca also underlined the importance of the support provided by her "amazing and spectacular" long-term girlfriend. She described how her partner helped her to deal with a recent encounter with a homophobic customer in the store that she managed.

***Coming-out experiences.*** The participants' coming-out stories reflect both those positive and negative influences. Alicia was accepted by her parents and has a group of supportive friends in the city where she studies. However, she also kept some devout Christians friends to whom she is not out and who do not appear LGBTQ-friendly: "They never talk about it positively, just as a joke, or something negative, or stereotyping, or being downright homophobic without them knowing." Being open with this group of people seemed very difficult for the student who did not feel ready to deal with the consequences of a potential coming out, especially how this new piece of information could affect the way others perceive her:

"You have to deal with everything that comes after. You can't just take it back. And I'm afraid. [...] Because I don't change in my opinion of myself (*sic*),

but there's a whole other perception of me that they'd have and I don't know if I want to face that."

Rebecca also expressed fears about coming out back when she had her first relationship with a woman, which preceded her reflection about her sexual orientation, but also in her current every day life where she is wary about her safety and even more about her partner because of what the political climate, but also her own work environment:

"I got actually really worried about my partner, and I don't list her on my facebook and I don't connect things to her. And she got very hurt. We had very long conversations about our public context. I mean, New York is very liberal but there are Nazis here, there are people who get beaten up here, there has been a bunch of hate crime on the rise. She's very affectionate in public and she wants to be... I hide a lot because I get worry that we're gonna get attacked or we gonna get bothered. And she gonna go be a teacher, so she can't be in any trouble or she'll lose her license."

In the meantime, Rebecca also benefited from favorable circumstances when she came out at her work place. She waited almost ten years to do so and was inspired by her leader, who was a lesbian who was out to her team but not her boss: "we kind of all got through that together, like I watched her finally confront that issue publicly and then felt that I could be public about it because I had someone behind me."

*Bisexuality and coming-out.* Rebecca worded the specific questions that were hers when she first came out as bisexual :

"I wasn't really sure when I got into my first relationship with a woman. Does it mean that I'm fully gay now? Was I not just on that side of the pool? Where was I... it took time to really figure out and I've decided I'm bisexual, so I wouldn't limit any options."

Stephanie also first identified as bisexual before realizing that she was not truly attracted to men:

"When I came out to people at first I just said I like girls too even though I still like men, I just want to experience... I'm gonna to find out about this new

part of me... I just don't want to be with guys at the moment and I'm going to figure out what it's like to be with girls and what's it all about... and that thought just slowly faded away.. and at one point I realized that that feeling of wanting to be with a guy again someday is never going to come back..."

**Minority identity building.** Throughout their interviews, the three participants gave several explicit and implicit clues about the strength of their positive minority identity. Rebecca appeared to be the closest to what Cass (1979) described as an integrated identity (as cited in Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). She summarized her personal journey in those words:

"I was probably angry and upset and thought I was a badass because I was trying to figure things out. I didn't know what that was. When I figured things out, I felt a lot more open and stable because I knew where I was going."

Yet, the question of identity integration could have been even more important for Alicia and Stephanie, who might have had to reconcile their sexual orientation with her Christian identity for the first, and her mixed ethnicity as well as bi-national heritage for the second (Stephanie's mother is white and Dutch, her father is African and lives in his birth country). However, Alicia explicitly said that she never felt the need to look "for validation of Christianity in line with being gay." As for Stephanie, her ethnic background did not seem to occupy a prominent part in her identity. She explained: "I can go on for days without realizing that I have a different skin color than my friends."

Both Stephanie and Alicia were not out yet in some aspects of their life. However, Alicia seemed to be the one more affected in her identity, as some of her statements and non-verbal communication could indicate. For example, she explained: "I think it's a big part of me, and the fact that some people don't know, that feels like lying because I like being gay... I think," and punctuated her sentence with

some nervous laughter. She also never used the word "lesbian" once in about an hour of interviewing, which can easily be associated with the phenomenon described by Stephanie:

"In the beginning, they're scared to say the word lesbian. They always say "I'm gay" or "I like women", they're scared of the word lesbian because they kind of, people kinda have a negative feeling about that word and about the stereotypes."

***"I don't want to be that tragic backstory all the time": being aware of internalized stigma and stereotypes.*** Indeed, the participants were aware of some of the internalized stereotypes they might have developed about themselves and other LGBTQ individuals, which helped them to gain insight about their identity. They also specified that this internalization had been influenced by media representation.

"The stereotypes that I had of lesbians was kind of negative I think," reported Stephanie before explaining that positive portrayal helped her to overcome those ideas. Rebecca mentioned her identity development had been impacted by the negative depiction of queer characters. She felt the need to distance herself from this image: "I wanna love someone no matter who they are, but I don't want to be that tragic backstory all the time."

*Representation the most often cited by the participants*

<u>TV</u>	<u>YouTube</u>	<u>Cinema</u>	<u>Video Games</u>
The 100 (Clarke & Lexa)	Hannah Hart	Carol	Life is Strange
Supergirl (Alex & Maggie, Kara & Lena)	Shannon & Cammie	Blue Is the Warmest Color	Mass Effect
Wynona Earp (Waverly & Nicole)	Rose & Rosie		
Brooklyn 99 (Rosa)			
Orphan Black (Cosima & Delphine)			
The L Word			

*Table 3 Representation the most often cited by the participants*

**Experiencing media representation.** The three interviewees also present strong similarities in their experience of media representation.

*"Never a happy ending": tropes and clichés.* As already mentioned above, the negative portrayal of queer characters was described by the participants as something that affected them. Alicia and Rebecca specifically addressed the Bury Your Gays trope and its consequences. Rebecca explained: "every gay character was killed off, brutalized or tortured, traumatized and like broken." The death of Lexa in the television show *The 100* and the circumstances that surrounded the event were also experienced as a violent by both women. Alicia detailed:

"It felt like such a stab in the back. Because there were these characters that I could finally really relate to or had a connection with, and they finally got together. It was a reality and then it was taken away. And the same with "Supergirl", where you had Alex and Maggie, and then they broke up. It feels like you never get a happy ending. It's really disappointing. It's sad."

Other types of hurtful tropes and clichés perpetuated by the media were identified. Stephanie pointed out the sexualization and fetishization of sapphic characters. Rebecca also detailed her perspective on some toxic narratives in the way lesbians are portrayed on screen:

"I know that Jackie in 'Roseanne' became... was outed as a lesbian and had these creepy lesbian characters that kind of gravitated to her. And it felt so weird to watch as a young adult. To be like 'you don't want to be a lesbian, they're super creepy and they're gonna push you in their arms and their clutch.' It felt so strange and predatory."

Additionally this negatively perceived representation, the interviewees' experience was also unsatisfactory in their formative years (childhood and adolescence.)

*"I wish I had them when I was younger": growing-up without representation.* This regret of not having been exposed earlier to some positive

representation is not a singularity of Rebecca's story despite the age difference with the other participants (early thirties vs. early twenties):

"I didn't really experience it growing up, like seeing programs. It only.. well, I've only been seeing it for a couple of years now. And it really interested me before I came out. It was... I've always thought it was really interesting, even before I thought I was gay. So, that really helped me. But I would have... It would have helped me more if I had seen stuff like that from the beginning" (Alicia).

"I think when I was younger I didn't see as much. But when I got older I saw more LGBT representation in the media and I think that is because of a combination of because there are more out there, and also because when I realized that I was gay I started looking for that kind of things" (Stephanie).

Thus, both younger women underlined the helpful effect of representation, but also a drive towards queer representation, whether unconscious or conscious

***"It's like a migration": representation-driven media consumption.*** Rebecca recalled that the feeling that there were an "unofficial curriculum of content" that she had to watch when she came out. It prominently featured the show *The L Word*, which "follows the lives and loves of a small, close-knit group of lesbians living in Los Angeles as well as the friends and family members that either support or loathe them" (IMDb, n.d.). She also explained that LGBTQ women tend to regroup and watch the same content: "It's like a migration, the community goes from show to show to show because there are so few options."

Alicia and Stephanie confirmed this behavior of looking specially for content featuring queer women. They both reported doing so when searching for YouTube videos, but also for fiction. "I knew there were gays from fandoms<sup>1</sup>, from the Internet, it made me really excited to watch it" said Alicia when talking about *The 100*.

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<sup>1</sup> "Fandom" designates the fans of a show, sport, art or artist, as well all as the state or attitude of being a fan (Meriem-Webster, n.d.).

Stephanie confided: "I have these phases where I would just watch lesbian movies, like go on line and google 'best lesbian movie,' even though most of them are really shitty."

***"There are so many signs": enjoying subtext representation.*** Alicia also explained that she had started to watch the show *Supergirl*, featuring the well-known DC Comics character, because of Katie McGrath, an actress who joined the cast during the second season. This show features the coming out of Alex, the protagonist's sister. Alicia really appreciated this storyline: "I liked her speech about how she's always thought she was different, that she never really thought about it, but it was still there. I really related to that." This character also had a love storyline with another woman named Maggie. However, the participant revealed that she was a lot more invested in another relationship, the one between Supergirl, Kara Danvers, and Lena Luthor, played by the actress that Alicia had followed to the show: "It's strange because you have this perfectly fine gay couple and you still seek two women who are, well maybe not canonically straight, but they're shown straight. And you're like, yes, I want that." She connected it to the larger phenomenon of seeing subtext queer representation in mainstream media:

"There are so many signs. That's the thing because everything is not heteronormative. People don't even... only gay people see this.. others just think 'oh they're friends' and because you know and you look for these things, it's so easy to find them. And it's really easy [in Supergirl]."

**Relating to representation.** Stephanie stated that good representation "celebrates being gay", but, according to all the interviewees, it also has to be relatable, which the content featuring heterosexual protagonists is not. Alicia explained:



"With romantic comedies, I always thought they weren't for me, they weren't for me, because they are so sappy... and... the guy always get the girl blah blah blah... Then I started watching lesbian romantic movies and I really like that.. I think it's about being able to relate..."

***"I liked to see that it was realistic": the realistic enough representation.***

Alicia and Rebecca talked at length about how much they liked Lexa from the show *The 100*, which takes place in a dystopian post-apocalyptic world. The latter also detailed her interest for *Wynona Earp*, a fantasy series that is set in a semi-realistic universe where the main antagonists are demons. Yet, she failed to connect with several characters of *The L Word*, who live in a supposedly realistic version of Los Angeles. Stephanie also described some of women portrayed in this show as stereotypes.

Thus, it seems that representation becomes relatable for the interviewees when the way the characters and their relationships are written is realistic enough. No matter how nonsensical their world is, they have to make sense and feature believable complex identities. That is how Stephanie perceived the lead couple of the movie *Blue Is the Warmest Color*: "It wasn't really a perfect relationship. [...] Especially the beginning of it was pretty... it's just very real. I think it's the thing that I liked to see, that it was realistic." Rebecca had a similar impression about *Wynona Earp*:

"They have Wynona's sister who's dating a woman, and from what we understand, that had not happened previously in her life. So, she's dealing with all these new emotions, and that made sense. They just didn't skip over that part and go 'okay, she's dating Nicole and everything's fine.' That would be unusual. There would be confusion, there would be kind of growing pains of that relationship, while they figure each other out. You know. I'm so glad that they built that, that it just wasn't cookie cutter, happy... like they kiss, they're happy. Like real life relationships, they are like that. Like you meet someone, you're happy, then you fight for awhile, then you're happy again. You're not gonna agree about everything."

The fact that *Wynona Earp* subverted the Bury Your Gays trope by having the lesbian character shot but survive thanks to a bullet proof vest was only a nice added bonus for Rebecca.

This need for realistic characters can be connected with the crucial role played by YouTube for the two youngest participants. "The things on YouTube and stuff, it's a lot of positive representation," reported Stephanie who justified her statement by explaining: "I think simply because the people on YouTube are actually just lesbians, not acting, were just being themselves rather than acting..." Alicia shared her perspective:

"I think YouTube helped me more because they were are real people... and ... they ... only have the camera to hold onto. There were no intention to make them beautiful, and to make it more romantic, they just told it like it was. Also, a lot of the people that I watch weren't just gay, they were... their storyline wasn't just that they were gay. It was a part of them, that's what really inspired me. I think that's why I didn't necessarily watch just coming out videos. I watched people who did something and were gay. And that's what would help me."

***"I looked up to them": representation as role models.*** The participants' interest for realistic representation can be also seen as part of the way both fictional characters and celebrities have become role models for them:

"I think, perfectly, when I get excited over a lesbian couple it's because I look up to them. So they can have that... have bad habits, they don't have to be perfect. But I would probably like it if it's something that I can aspire to be" (Stephanie).

Alicia specified that she liked the show *Orphan Black* because of Cosima's character, who is one of the clones of the main character. She is a lesbian and a brilliant scientist:

"Cosima was the person that I could see myself be. 'Cause she had... Well, She didn't have a normal life... (laughter) but in terms of her identity she knew what she was and what she wanted. And she had a normal, well, she had

a stable relationship at some point. So, it was really nice to see that happening."

Rebecca underlined the importance of real life representation as role models. She presented Stephanie Beatriz, the out bisexual actress, as being in that position: "I don't put the same idealization into actresses like kids might or younger generations, but I still have the respect for what she does." She also explained that the YouTuber Hannah Hart played a important role by taking the risk of coming out:

"I'm a fan of Hannah Hart, so I watch... I got into My Drunk Kitchen when she first started it and the videos were low quality and she got wasted and they were really funny. [...] But when she started coming out, it was like this very interesting process because YouTube is a different format entirely and it's all based on ads, and, you know, your partnerships with people. So, it could really make or break. It's not like Hollywood where there's a contract with a show. So, if it didn't go well, she would have lost everything. So, she's started to kind of edging on that topic and then she got a little bolder and now she makes whole videos about it. I think she wrote a book about it and I haven't picked it up yet. It was really fascinating to watch someone really gambling their livelihood in a way that, you know, she could have lost it all. And the fact that it didn't happen was so inspiring."

Alicia also evoked Hannah Hart and how important she was to her during her teenage years:

"I remember writing a letter to Hannah Hart saying 'I don't know if I'm straight, I don't know if I'm a christian, help me!' And I never sent it. I was 15, I think. [The YouTubers] really were my role models."

***"Translating it into your own experience": appropriation of the representation.*** As Rebecca stated, "how we engage with media has changed." She mentioned the possibility of exchanging with show runners and writers. Both she and Alicia addressed the intense online activities of the people engaged in fandoms and the creative spaces associated with it. As Alicia explained, relating to representation is not only "putting yourself into their world but translating it into your own experience." Rebecca talked about how the fans of Lexa (*The 100*) and her

relationship with the lead character Clarke managed to build a community after their favorite character was killed on screen.

Rebecca also mentioned how Clarke and Lexa's on-screen relationship mirrored in some aspects her own relationship with her partner, and how it translated into their life:

"I saw myself a lot in the characters tropes and in the design of their personality. It's like my partner is a teacher. [...] I work in retail. So, we have different views. [...] We fight back and forth and [...] we very much related to Clarke and Lexa, where she is rational, and 'for my people'... and I'm like 'you have to do what you have to do', for the greater good, and for the company, and all that... So we really kind of related to that fact, to what they each represented in terms of what they thought important. For example, Lexa's betrayal of her, I've never heard the end of it. [...] So we kind of related over arguing what's the greater good. "

Rebecca reported similar interactions about video games in which it is possible to play with a queer woman avatar, when the couple would discuss and make decision together about who their character should romance in the game (*Mass Effect*). This type of media also challenges the nature of the relation to representation: "It's different because it's engaging, because you're actually part of it, you're choosing your actions."

**Being impacted by media representation.** All three interviewees confirmed that media representation had had a very concrete impact on them, even if they were not completely aware of it before. Stephanie's answer when she was asked if media representation had any concrete effect in her life is very telling in that regard:

"I think that if you had asked me this before this conversation I maybe would have answered no. But now, I'm thinking about it and I think 'so, yeah', like it gave me more confidence and it's like the realization that you can be both cool and a lesbian."

Several common mechanisms but also outcomes of this impact were identified through the data analysis process.

***The mechanisms.***

*"I wasn't alone anymore": representation as social support.* Besides finding a form of community in the fandoms, the participants described how it made them feel, in the words of Stephanie, "like there are more people like [them] out there":

"I definitely feel less alone in the world, I feel less... it's almost like a darkness when you get lost in those emotions of whether or not you are with the right person and if this is right for your life and all those feelings about what you should be. I've been out for so many years, but there's still in that, like, not quite impostor syndrome, where I'm like 'Am I sure? Is this right? Is this comfortable?' [...] So, having these role models, these media outlets to relate to, it gives my mind a kind of place to rest, [...] like you know someone that will come no matter what you do, like you're not alone in the world. And seeing that on the big screen, finding community in that, whether in fan groups or boards, or people debating on twitter and all that, just connect to so many more people... It gives me hope for the new generation" (Rebecca).

For Alicia who grew up in a mainly unsupportive environment, seeing LGBTQ women in the media was a ray of hope:

"I didn't really have anyone to talk to back home. So it's really nice to not maybe engage with the characters, but at least see a glimpse of what maybe you might be. That's what did it for me, I think. Not feeling like the only one."

Rebecca even connected this feeling of finding support through fictional characters to a direct protective effect for LGBTQ youth, especially to prevent suicidal conducts:

"Every time a LGBT kid ends up dead because they feel alone in the world, I think that if you had more exposure, if they felt they could see themselves in characters... It sounds silly but it's not 'cause that connection that's here even a fictional one, is a connection to a world, THE world that they're trying to leave. So, the more we can connect people including myself... you know I didn't have those things in high school. I had to battle through the teens years and figuring stuff out without, you know, those representations, but, as an adult, I definitely feel empowered now, at work especially, to be open about who I am and have the support."

This notion of feeling empowered by media representation was also reported by both Alicia and Stephanie.

*"They were strong, they were independent, they were beautiful, they were smart": empowerment and improved self-esteem.* Alicia explained that she had always be drawn to female characters in fiction: "they were strong, they were independent, they were beautiful, they were smart." She added: "I didn't really have any power, so maybe that why I was drawn to them. Because I always fell for the tuff strong women. 'Cause they were, I think, they were what I was not or what I wanted to be."

Stephanie mentioned the same interest for "cool and smart and hot" characters, and, as Alicia, associated exposure to positive representation with an improvement of her self-esteem.

Rebecca expressed being inspired by both fictional characters and people who are in the spotlight in real life. She recalled the impact that the character of Beth (*The L Word*) had on her in the context of social stigma against LGBTQ individuals:

"But Beth, like, she knew everything about what she did. She was pretty good had it. She had the respect, or at least, the intimidation of everyone around her. [...] People were loyal to her. And I was like 'that's the kind of leader I wanna be in this world' and you already have a disadvantage as a woman, you already have a disadvantage as an LGBT woman, so you've got to be strong."

Rebecca also reflected on the effect of celebrities' coming out and standing their grounds:

"They stand up when they have all that to lose, when they have their lives at stake, and go 'you know what, I'm gay, I'm bi, I'm pan, I'm whatever portion of the gender spectrum they're on, and here's my partner, and here's the book about it'... That's so empowering and emboldening because I can go out and tell my bosses' boss tomorrow that I'm gay and he's gonna have to deal with that now."

*"I'm not gonna lie, I teared up": engaging emotionally with the representation.*

All three participants also reported that they engaged emotionally with the representation. Alicia explained that watching romantic comedies featuring lesbians for the first time made her feel "content." Stephanie described that she felt "relieved" the first time that she watched *Blue Is the Warmest Color* because it made the idea of a relationship between two women "more real."

They also mentioned much more intense emotional reactions. Alicia talked about "obsessions" that she had with different shows growing up, especially during her adolescence: "when I said that I didn't really feel any emotion in my personal life, all my emotions were directed towards TV shows and books and characters, that's what I was really passionate about." Furthermore, Stephanie explained that she used representation to cope after a bad break-up:

"I remember I watched like a bunch of video of this couple that I didn't even know [...] That was emotional. I cried my eyes out. And I didn't even know them.

Interviewer: Yeah, you didn't watch them before...

Stephanie: Yeah, Shannon and Cammie.

I: They broke up, and you didn't watch their videos but you watched their...

S: their breakup video, yeah.

I: And you cried, which makes sense. And do you think maybe it was close, closer to you?

S: yeah, yeah, cause if it were a boy and a girl breaking up, I would probably not [have cried].

I: it was also a clean break up. And it was something that was healing in that situation?

S: Oh yeah, definitely, yeah, I remember thinking this is the way that I should do it too."

Rebecca even shared her belief that "that personal connection is definitely what makes [the representation] more impactful." She also talked about her own reaction to the coming-out of Rosa, one of the characters of the show *Brooklyn 99* to whom she relates particularly:

"I'm not gonna lie, I teared up. It was like so emotional to watch her go through the coming out with her family, the job and the fears... I've done that with my peers and I changed stores, I changed states, so I had to do it over and over and in numerous areas where you tell everyone and then you have that awkward, quiet moment when you look around like 'is everything alright? Is it gonna be okay?'... like.. so it's definitely... it was so relieving to see all these people celebrating that."

*"I immerse myself into their world": escapism and daydreaming.* The use of media representation as a coping strategy to escape the struggles of her reality was mentioned several times by Alicia, both with YouTube ("I was so obsessed with YouTube. I watched it to calm down, I watched it to escape") and fiction, when she is really passionate about one or several characters: "when I'm feeling down, [...] I immerse myself into their world."

Rebecca did not report the same kind of escapism, but she acknowledged building bridges between the representation and her life while daydreaming. When confronted to a homophobic client, she used characters of the show *Wynona Earp* in her daydream about what she would have wanted to do to that person:

"I can, kind of in my mind, imagine her getting kicked out by Wynona Earp and her sister and Nicole yelling at her for being terrible. So it helped kind of making it likable in the end, and I can get through it quicker, instead of it hauling me for weeks on end and be annoyed by this petty person, who I don't even care about."

When talking about this incident, Rebecca also confided that she had considered what some of strong characters that she related to would have done:

" I had that moment when you think about how Rosa would handle something or Lexa would handle something... well, Lexa would kick her out the door. But, like, that's not the best solution for all answers. And, for this situation, you know, it was to be calm and quiet and let it go. But, so, you take those voices into consideration for a minute and, like, after the fact, I can, like, kind of daydream about it, if I had thrown her out and what if it would have made me feel better. But in the grand scheme of my employment continuing, it was probably not the best plan to create a confrontation in front of so many people on the weekend before Christmas. So, it's... those voices helped cope."



*The outcome.* Besides the feeling that positive representation helped them, the interviewee evoked three more specific outcomes to its impact.

*"It's just part of life": representation normalizes the queer experience.* Among the reasons that emerged to explain the interest of the interviewees for the show *The 100* and the romance between the characters of Clarke and Lexa, the participants mentioned the fact that their sexual orientation was never an issue. It's not even discussed, as Rebecca pointed out: "they just were a thing and nobody thought it was strange or unusual." This normalization of queerness seems to be one of the key positive effect of representation:

"What I experience as positive? When it's just a fact about a person, when it isn't made a big deal, when someone is just gay, just dating someone, and, it's really... when it isn't dramatic, when it's just part of life. I really like that" (Alicia).

This attraction for a form representation that banalizes same gender relationships is coherent with Stephanie's wish that, ideally, seeing lesbians in the media would not make her feel anything "because it would like any other couple."

Thus, the impact of normalizing representation takes another dimension for individuals who have to face an unsupportive environment and higher levels of social stigma, as was the case for Alicia:

"I haven't had the representation in my immediate surroundings... So, it makes me feel like I'd be able to live that life as well and start being; I don't know, not having to hide. It's a good world, where I could just be gay without it being a big deal."

In Alicia's case, the effect of her sense of self is explicit and helped her to silence the doubts that she still had: "it made me feel normal, I think. And it made me feel like it was a real thing and not something that I had imagined for myself."

*"I'd be able to live that life": representation reassures about the future.* All three persons interviewed mentioned that positive representation gave them hope for the future, provided them with a picture of what a happy life could look like for them, in a world where being queer would not be an issue. It's because good representation made her feel like she'd "be able to live that life" and "not having to hide," that Alicia reported liking storylines featuring what it is like after the "discovery" part, showing people who know who they are, like Cosima in the show *Orphan Black* or the British YouTubers Rose and Rosie, who are a married couple:

"I think that's why I started watching these people and why I've been so drawn to these characters. Because they've seen struggles but they're beyond it. They've already had these things but they're still here and they have kind of their happily ever after... no really but they have but they've coped with it. That's ... I think that's why I watched."

*"From a thing that I didn't want [to be] into something that I'm proud of being": representation alleviates stigma and facilitates self-acceptance.* The experiencing of the three interviewees showed that exposure to some positive representation in the media can facilitate the initial coming out process and reduce internalized stigma. Stephanie explained that, thanks to positive and realistic portrayals in the media, she changed how she saw lesbians from *"a thing that [she] didn't want [to be] into something that [she] is proud of being."* In that regard, Alicia's story is very telling:

"If media representation wasn't there I might never have discovered myself that quickly, and it wasn't really quickly because it took a long time. But it might have taken more.... And it made me... it made me... it enabled me to deal with it on my own terms and not because I was forced to. Because I could just question it for bit, watching that, and then shut it out, not watch it anymore. [...]"

I: Because you could just watch it whenever you wanted.

A: And it was also more conscious because I watched so many lesbian YouTubers before I even began to really doubt myself. I might have helped me unconsciously be more okay with it, as opposed to if I had never seen it."

Rebecca perceived negatively the representation that she encountered in her teenage years. The lack of positive portrayal of queer women in her experience comes as a negative echo to the support that Alicia found in the media, especially online. Rebecca explained that an earlier contact with positive representation would have made things easier for her:

"I think that the confusion that I had, the denial I had through my teens would have been alleviated significantly, because I could have found a voice I could really see myself in and a world that would make sense, instead of these kind of demonized roles that made it scary for me to [come out]."

Thus, positive media representation matters and has positively impacted the identity of the interviewees as LGBTQ women, as well as their sense of self. The decrease of the participants' thirst for representation after the initial self-discovery stages and outside of crisis situations is a testimony of this effect, as summarized by Stephanie:

"I always liked just watching a movie with lesbians. [...] It's just 'any kind of representation, please come to me' and now I'm older, and have accepted myself and I don't need that much representation anymore."

## **Chapter 4: Discussion and conclusion**

### **Discussion**

**LGBTQ experience and identity.** The life experiences of the interviewees as well as some of the quantitative results appear to confirm several already known facets of the LGBTQ experience and identity.

The survey results showed that the participants coming from the United States ( $B=0.131$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and even more from the Netherlands ( $B=0.289$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) had, on

average, a more positive LGB identity than respondents coming from other countries. The Netherlands is the highest ranking European country in the acceptance of homosexuality (Kuntz, Davidov, Schwartz, & Schmidt, 2015). As described by Rebecca in her interview, the acceptance towards LGBTQ individuals in the United States has decreased in 2017-2018 (GLAAD, 2018), but from a baseline that was among the highest in the world (Pew Research Center, 2014). People from these two countries are less likely to experience the distal stressors associated with social stigmatization of sexual minorities, which puts this first quantitatively significant result in coherence with the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003, 2015).

The LGB identity of the survey respondents who declared that religion or spirituality were important in their life was also, on average, less positive than the others ( $B=-0.151$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). The stigmatizing effect of a religious environment that rejects sexual minorities was also very present in Alicia's narrative of her upbringing and coming-out process. She even associated this stigmatizing environment with the mental health issues (depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation) that she experienced during her adolescence herself. Both results are coherent with previous research about internalized stigma in a non-affirming religious context (Barnes & Meyer, 2012). Moreover, Alicia formulated explicit doubts about her religious beliefs. She showed some ambivalence in her answers about her devout Christian friends, who are still important to her but to whom she is not comfortable coming out. Alicia's situation illustrates how religion and spirituality can play a complex role for lesbians, from impeding their self-discovery to being part of a self-affirming process (Hinojosa & Medina, 2016).

Another significant quantitative result was the association between identifying as bisexual, pansexual or polysexual and a less positive LGB identity compared to the other sexual orientations (gay/lesbian and queer) ( $B=-0.193$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This result was expected given the specific difficulties associated with bisexual identity building (Hoang, Holloway, & Mendoza, 2011) and the higher risk of mental health difficulties faced by bisexual women compared to other sexual minorities (Steel et al., 2017). The doubts formulated by Rebecca about her bisexuality, as well as the longer period of time that she had needed to come out also confirm the preexisting research (APA, 2012; Calzo et al., 2011; Hoang, Holloway, & Mendoza, 2011).

Furthermore, the coming out trajectories of the three participants to the in-depth interviews presented some of common previously described characteristics. Two were experimentation-centered (Stephanie and Rebecca), whereas Alicia's was more identity-centered (Calzo et al., 2011). The interviewees were also confronted with risks of incomprehension, rejection and stigmatization for Alicia, as well as discrimination for Rebecca. However, all three of them benefited from the liberating effect of not having to conceal their identity (which is a proximal stressor in the minority stress model) or having to deal with the consequences of suppressed emotions (Meyer, 2003; Cox, Dewaele, Van Houtte, & Vincke, 2011.) Alicia and Stephanie also found a better social support among their queer friends.

The importance of this notion of social support was confirmed on different levels. From a quantitative perspective, as hypothesized (H2), a moderating effect of social support was found on the relationship between LGB positive identity and exposure to media representation in the fourth model of the regression ( $B=0.139$ ,  $P<0.05$ ). From a qualitative point of view, it was also showed that positive

representation provided a form social support that participated in impacting the participants' identity and sense of self.

**Positive media representation, identity and sense of self.** Both the survey and the interviews brought together elements that confirm the existence of an impact of positively perceived media representation on the participants' sexual minority identity. Both sources also showed that exposure to portrayal of LGBTQ women was generally scarce in the respondents' and interviewees' childhood and adolescence, but that the representation they accessed later actually mattered.

It should be underlined that past censorship, such as the Motion Picture Production Code (1930), had long-lasting effect, as highlighted in the interviews. Not only do hurtful tropes remain, perpetuating the idea that people with a different sexual orientation do not deserve their happy ending, so does the culture of subtext representation, condemning queer women to cracking the codes of storytelling to see themselves painted in a favorable light.

As previously mentioned, some of the salient results of this study showed the importance of social support. It is not only a mediator of the relationship between positive media representation and LGB identity, but also both a mechanism of this impact of positive representation on LGBTQ women and a corollary of the way people relate to representation through fandoms. The interviewees mentioned this phenomenon of mainly online interactions that lead to the creation of communities and provide a sense of support. This type of support had already been observed as early as 1998 by McKenna and Bargh in their work about identity "demarginalization" through online group participation, which, at the time, took the form of internet newsgroups.

The way exposure to positive representation helped Alicia, Rebecca and Stephanie feel less alone, as well as the sense of community found in fandoms, could be explored as part of the minority coping and community resilience theorized by Meyer (2015) as protective factors against minority stress and its consequences.

Furthermore, the experience of Alicia, Rebecca and Stephanie with positive media representation was associated with outcomes of normalization, reassurance and self-acceptance. These findings are very close to what McInroy and Craig (2017) showed in their study about how LGBTQ emerging adults perceive LGBTQ media representation and its impact. They found that their participants felt validated and legitimized in their identities by media representation, but also that they tended to seek queer content to understand their identity before and/or just after coming out, just like Alicia and Stephanie. McInroy and Craig (2017) also underlined the crucial role of online media in a way that is consistent with the younger interviewees' use of YouTube while building their identities.

However, the mechanisms that involve directly the sense of self, i.e. the subjective part of a person's identity, might actually be of even more interest in this present exploration of the effect of media representation on LGBTQ women. It seems that the main ways media representation strengthens minority identity by providing reassurance, normalization and supporting self-acceptance required to impact the individual's sense of self.

Indeed, a significant correlation was found in the quantitative section of this study between positive LGB identity and the perceived effect of media representation on the respondents' self-esteem ( $B=0.274$ ,  $p<0.01$ ): feeling that being exposed to positive media representation improved one's self-esteem is associated with a more

positive LGB identity. Thus, even if the moderating effect of self-esteem on the relationship between sexual minority identity and exposure to positive media representation could not be verified, it seems that this aspect represents a crucial part in the impact of media representation on LGBTQ women. When asked directly, the interviewees confirmed that positive queer portrayal had improved their self-esteem. The analysis of the qualitative data also revealed that, as already suggested by McInroy and Craig (2015), characters that present an integrated LGBTQ identity and are complex enough to be more than the token gay were the most relatable for the interviewees. The participants were especially drawn towards strong and independent figures; they drew a sense of empowerment from the exposure to this type of representation.

Therefore, it appears that, when the representation is positive and realistic enough, it encourages emotional engagement and can provide role models that can be emulated in real life. Queer women seem to refer directly to those empowering figures to protect themselves against real life struggles, as illustrated by the way Rebecca relies on fictional bisexual characters to cope with biphobic stereotypes:

"When I explain to people, tell people I'm bi, whether it's work or personal, they always, you know... you're scared whether there's going to be scrutiny, if they're gonna give you like 'you're just greedy' or 'you can't decide' or any of that non sense... So when you have these character who are... they're bi and they are accepted in their fictional universe... you know... that can happen, that could be a real interaction that I could have with someone, and you can emulate this in real life. So, that's a motivating moment where you see these interactions happen and go 'men, you could just tell someone or you could just kiss a girl, and that's it'."

The bridges built by the queer women interviewed between their lives and representation in the media, the emotional connection and daydreaming in particular, can be seen as a phenomenon close in nature to the "dramatic reengagement with many of their own experiences of life" that texts of literary merit encourage in the



readers (Madigan, 2011, p. 35). In both situations, like in Alicia's case or even Stephanie's, when she used a video of the YouTubers Shannon and Cammie to help her grieve the end of a romantic relationship, the sense of self is impacted and strengthened with a potential therapeutic effect. Those findings are in coherence with Meyer's work (2003) that showed that, when it comes to minority identity, higher self-acceptance and self-evaluation are associated with lower mental health risks.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations that can impact its generalizability. The quantitative sample was a sample of convenience, international but with a strong overrepresentation of North America and Europe and no African respondents. Furthermore, the socio-economic status of the participants as well as their ethnic background are unknown. The type of platforms used to recruit the respondents could suggest that they were mainly educated and white. I had decided not to ask about their ethnic identity or profession/level of education because the absence of geographical exclusion criteria would have made such variables impossible to analyze, both similar social or economic position and ethnic heritage having very different meanings and implications depending on the country.

Another limitation was linked to the scale chosen as dependent variable since it was limited to sexual minority identity. The participants to the interviews were also all cis-women. Thus, the gender dimension of the queer experience and identity could not really be explored (24.5% of the survey respondents identified as genderqueer or trans women but no significant correlation was found between gender identity and positive LGB identity).

The sampling for the in-depth interviews was purposeful, which led to limitations related to the participants' demographics additionally to the lack of gender

identity diversity as mentioned above. The interviewees were from countries that are among the most accepting of sexual minorities in the world, as confirmed by the statistical results of the study. They were also educated since Alicia and Stephanie were pursuing a bachelor's degree and Rebecca already had a master's degree and was studying for another one at the time of the interview. Even if they did not all grow up in a favorable environment, more diverse backgrounds might have brought another perspective and made the results more generalizable.

The time constraint inherent to a master's thesis also constituted a major limitation, especially to performing a thorough thematic analysis as prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Furthermore, the statistical analysis of the data collected through the online survey was run before the thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews. If combining the two sources of information for the interpretation of the results provided greater insight, being aware of the quantitative findings has necessarily influenced my coding of the interviews despite my efforts to give full and equal attention to each data item (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). The coding process might also have been biased by my previous knowledge of one of the interviewees. If two of them were strangers prior to the interview, one was already an acquaintance.

## **Conclusion**

The Motion Picture Production Code (1930) stated that "mankind has always regarded the importance of entertainment and its value in rebuilding the bodies and soul of human beings." The original purpose of this text was certainly not the affirmation of LGBTQ identities. However, it does capture how self-perception is shaped by what is shown in the media and, therefore, not without irony, that positively

perceived queer representation can support LGBTQ individuals in their journey towards self-acceptance. Representation does matter.

The findings of this study are globally consistent with the preexisting research framework about queer identity and experience, which tends to support the original results presented here about the way that media representation impacts LGBTQ women's identity and sense of self. A general positive effect of the exposure to positive representation on sexual minority identity was found. The importance of social support in its different forms and dimensions was also confirmed. Furthermore, it was identified that relatable positive media representation was contributing to strengthening minority identity by providing normalization, reassurance about the future and supporting self-acceptance. These outcomes appear to be reached through mechanisms that impact the sense of self, the self esteem in particular, when the emotional engagement with the content encourages its appropriation.

This work begs for the continuation of existing efforts to improve representation of LGBTQ women in the media since reinforcing a positive sexual minority identity is a protective factor against the mental health issues that are particularly prevalent among queer people. It could contribute to reduce the struggles of numerous young (and older) individuals who are uncomfortable with their sexuality or gender identity. This study also opens doors for further research on the mechanisms at stake, but also to determine if these results could be generalized to the LGBTQ community as a whole or even to other minorities. Finally, the question of the clinical use of media representation should be considered to prevent or perhaps even treat mental health difficulties associated with minority stress, especially for people who are still struggling with their initial coming out process.

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Appendix L

Map of qualitative themes

