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PANEL 10

**MEDIA NARRATIVE AND
(SELF)-REPRESENTATIONS
OF LGBTQ+ AND NON
BINARY IDENTITIES**

Chairs:

Gaia Peruzzi (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy)

Speakers:

- Laura Treglia (Independent researcher)
- Fabiana Battisti, Maddalena Carbonari, Aida Picone, Fabio Virgilio (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy)
- Carolina Farina (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy)
- Giuseppe Masullo, Marianna Coppola (University of Salerno, Italy)
- Arianna Bussoletti (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy)



‘Switching on’ the telly: enquiring into the latest drive for an LGBT+ conscious, inclusive, diverse and gender-equal Italian television

Laura Treglia (Independent researcher)

Abstract

Popular media cultures can be said to have made decisive steps towards inclusivity in terms of a more diverse representation of sexualities, genders, bodies and ethnic backgrounds, particularly over the last two decades. Italian media cultures constitute no exception in relation to this—if with their own pace and peculiarities (Panarese 2014). Even in light of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development goals, it is undeniable that a new visibility has gained momentum of narratives evidencing a heightened sensibility for inclusivity, diversity and gendersexual equality (variously understood).

This last year, millions of people have been forced to overindulge in media consumption. This paper thus presumes that it is increasingly important to reflect upon the extent to which the mainstreaming of these ideas may remain a cosmetic improvement. In order to do this, the paper will address a series of instances within some recent commercials and TV shows that seemingly champion a commitment to raise awareness about discrimination and stereotyping while celebrating diversity, inclusion and gender equality.

Following Rosalind Gill’s approach of mapping a constellation of “uneven feminist visibilities” (2016), this paper will analyse the latest commercials for sanitary pad and other brand products (e.g. Lines and Nuvenia, Zalando, Vinted, JustEat, Barilla), which appear to embrace an intersectional approach to gender mainstreaming, become more vocal about stereotyping and daring in the representation of women’s body parts. A reflection will ensue about effective cultural transformation and the mainstreaming of more critical views on gender and other intersecting inequalities (Walby 2005), when the latter are coopted by neoliberal capitalism to entice a younger class of consumers. Such discussion will also be grounded on parallel observations made on short-lived shows such as *Stato Civile* (2017) or *Storie del Genere* (2018). Both aired on the national television network RAI 3 in the wake of the legal recognition of same-sex couples’ marriages in 2016. However, their format and narrative style has resulted in much less ‘visibility’ with respect to comparable storylines being told in shows such as *Primo Appuntamento* (Real Time) and *Uomini e Donne* (Canale 5).

For all the progressive ferment that can be seen to pervade Italian television and thus appear to spearhead cultural change, the news highlights an escalation of femicides, domestic violence, cyberbullying, physical attacks against LGBT+ persons and political stonewalling of a draft bill urging harsher measures against hate crimes (i.e. Ddl Zan). In conclusion, television (among other media cultures) fully incarnates a crucial place for critical media and feminist cultural analysis that may be seen to justify Gill’s call for caution against overenthusiastic readings, even with regards to the case studies under discussion in this paper. In fact, as she has eloquently demonstrated, it is imperative that we examine the many forms that ‘hip’ feminism, inclusivity and diverse representation may take within popular media together with continued backlash, racist and antifeminist boycotts and violence hampering the complex and non-linear road to cultural transformation.



LGBTQ+ representation on Netflix Italia. Between traditional stereotypes and new narratives

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Abstract

Over the last decade the LGBTQ+ issue has been increasingly covered in the media (Chu, 2017). The amount of LGBTQ+ audiovisual contents, as well as the range of portrayals on the topic, have risen in Italy too. This is significant given that Italy is one of the most problematic countries in Europe in terms of LGBTQ+ discrimination (Worthen et al. 2018). Nevertheless, it has been argued that these representations tend to re-propose forms of discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community (Heim, 2020). It's noteworthy that the misrepresentation of characters (Chambers, 2017) depicts them LGBTQ+ individuals as socially isolated, bullied (Marcoux, 2020), one-dimensional (McInroy & Craig, 2017), afflicted by identity crises or split personalities (Raley & Lucas, 2006). This imbalance may stem from the persistence of gender stereotypes and sexual prejudice (Jacobs & Meeusen, 2020) in societies still largely heteronormative (Martinsson, 2007; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Examining the role of the media in the production and reproduction of gender identities and ideologies (Goffman 1976; Kohrs & Gill, 2021), as well as the possible reconfiguring of prejudice and acceptance in heterosexual audiences (Bond & Compton, 2015; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Park, 2012; Sink & Mastro, 2017), this study intends to explore the main LGBTQ+ portrayals and narratives in Netflix Italia.

The aim of the analysis is to investigate the extent to which the most widespread stereotypes emerge in Netflix content, and if and how the platform – a leader on the national scene (Altroconsumo, 2020) – overcomes them through less stigmatised representations. The research takes into account movies produced by Netflix and available in the first quarter of 2021, tagged with the keyword LGBTQ+, in order to verify by means of in depth examination whether the platform promotes a more inclusive depiction of LGBTQ+ community, as it explicitly declared (Netflix, 2021).

Content analysis was chosen as the method of investigation. Building on previous studies (Buonanno, 1983, 2020; Raley & Lucas, 2006; D'Amato, 2007; Corfield, 2017; Dye, 2020), the content-analysis form was (re)structured to identify the salient features of LGBTQ+ characters (social relations, status, ways of communicating) and detect «the border between the worlds of social inclusion and exclusion» (D'Amato, 2007).

The first outcomes highlight a willingness to overcome traditional stereotypes, albeit with differences related to the socio-cultural context of the country of production. Moreover, it is worth pointing that a greater visibility of lesbians compared to what has been found so far (McInroy & Craig, 2015; Vanlee et al., 2018) was observed. Nonetheless no portrayals of other categories (BTQ+) were found.



Queering the selfie. The political use of digital self portrait by LGBT+ activists in Italy

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Abstract

The contribution investigates the political dimension of the photographic self-portrait as a queer practice in the digital space, focusing on the self-representations of LGBT+ Italian activists on Instagram.

Developing a qualitative research, the research aims to study the ways how these visual productions become devices to a queer reading of the traditional representations, to problematize hetero/cisnormative identity politics and naturalized systems of oppression (Barker & Scheele, 2016). The photographic self-portrait is considered as a cultural production and social practice that has historically assumed, in Western societies, a significant role in the construction of imaginaries on identity, establishing itself as a political tool for both dominant power systems and counterpowers. The re-emergence of conservative perspectives in the present Italian political debate regarding civil rights, control over bodies and gender-based violence, has raised a new wave of queer and intersectional transfeminist activism that uses digital technologies, as social network sites, to express its instances and to spread counternarratives. Contemporary studies underline the increasingly incisive role of these social media in identity constructions (Turkle 2005; Papacharissi 2011, 2018),

highlighting how those based on visual content have become a visibility and advocacy tool for LGBT + users (Duguay, 2017). How much do these people exploit the subversive potential of selfies, considering affordances and constraints of social network sites?

Following these assumptions, this study involve a small number of Italian LGBT+ activists, selected on the basis of the theoretical framework and for the significant presence of self-portraits on their Instagram profiles. The collection and analysis of these images intend to highlight recurrences and peculiarities in terms of themes, discourses, iconographies, aesthetics and languages of these representations. The qualitative interview is used to investigate the thoughts behind their visual self-narrative practices. It also wants to outline the different queer activism forms developed online, pointing out the negotiations engaged with digital devices and the correlations with offline political practices.



Digital migration: transgender sexuality between self-determination and new discrimination processes

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Abstract

The increase in the use of social media and the different apps for dating is starting a process of migration from offline contexts to online contexts of socialization processes to sexuality, representing a new resource and a new way to meet people, establishing new interpersonal and sexual relationships.

While the migratory process from face-to-face socialization to online socialization has represented for several subcultures, such as the LGBTQ community, an opportunity to experience new forms of experiences relative to their sexuality, on the other hand it raises quite a few concerns in the same LGBTQ movements to the extent that spaces of homosexual sociality (cafes, bars, gay clubs) go hand in hand reducing, as well as the extent of the visibility of the LGBTQ community in public space. Sexuality, also thanks to the spread of these new tools, becomes more and more a private, personal affair, failing, for LGBTQ people participation in the "moments" associations that in the past have determined the achievement of some important objectives in terms of recognition and protection of sexual citizenship.

In line with Laumann and Gagnon's Sexual Markets theory (2004), social media and the various apps for dating and socialization would redefine and rework the boundaries and coordinates of contexts, opening to more fluid forms of socialization, immediate and interchangeable communication contexts and spaces in which migrations from one sexual market to another are planned (Bacio, Peruzzi, 2017; Rinaldi, 2018; Masullo, Coppola, 2021).

The aim of this research has been to analyze the use of virtual social environments as social and relational spaces, and the psychological, emotional and experienced aspects within the virtual communication spaces. To analyse these aspects have been formulated some research questions: focusing attention on people Transgender - on which at the moment the Italian studies are limited -: what are the main digital sexual markets used among transgender people? How do these "communicative and intersubjective spaces" influence, orient and determine the definition processes related to gender expressivity and the construction of sexual scripts? To what extent do these channels constitute spaces to satisfy emotional and sexual needs; and if these spaces reflect the same discriminatory dynamics that T people experience in offline reality?

In order to answer the research questions put forward, research was conducted, with a qualitative approach, and 40 transgender people (20 Ftom and 20 Mtof) between the ages of 20 and 35 were interviewed, residents in Italy and who have embarked on a gender transition path.

The results showed that the choice of the digital sex market for transgender people relates mainly to some socio-demographic features, the gender transition process, and sexual desires, as well as the role played by "erotic capital" that transgender people put at stake in these areas (Laumann, Gagnon, 2004; Masullo, Coppola, 2021); it has also emerged that while these new fields of communication are an important means of socializing with sexuality and the processes of identity self-determination, At the same time, these can represent new forms of social discrimination and intra- and inter-group exclusion processes, thus opening research to the potential offered by intersectional analysis.



Pursuing a Gender Non-conforming “Hellscape:” Investigating Non-binary User and Fan Practices on Tumblr

Arianna Bussoletti

Abstract

Digital communication technologies have undoubtedly offered new spaces to marginalized voices (McCracken et al., 2020; McLean, 2014; Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019), while simultaneously complicating traditional understandings of gender and media (Krijnen, 2020). A frequently used concept to understand feminist engagements through different social medias is that of platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015), which are modes of communication that emerge from the affordances of social media platforms and the ways they are appropriated and performed. Platform vernaculars can thus aid a platform in catering to certain categories of users. In particular, according to Cho (2015), Tumblr’s platform vernacular produces affective engagements among queer users thanks to the platform’s ‘sociotechnical’ affordances, first and foremost its anonymity (Cho, 2015 and 2018; McCracken et al., 2020, Neill Hoch, 2020, among others), which makes it popular among marginalized groups such as BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ people, and women (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019). Gender non-conforming people, in particular, have found a home on Tumblr, where they feel ‘safe(r)’ (cf. Sharp & Shannon, 2020) to explore their identities.

While the relationship between gender and media is moving past binary, heteronormative approaches (Farris, Compton, Herrera, 2020; Gill, 2007; Krijnen, 2020; Ross, 2012), literature on non-binary people is still in its explorative stage, with different disciplines having conflicting opinions on the gender binary and those who exist outside of it (Richards et al., 2016). Drawing from literature on social media affordances, platform vernaculars, gender and queer studies, and fan and audience studies, this research wants to explore non-binary people’s identities and practices as full-fledged social media users and fans. The methodology comprises the thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2014) of semi-structured interviews (Bartholomew et al., 2000; Leech, 2002; McIntosh & Morse, 2015) to Tumblr members of a particular group, the Houseki no Kuni (HnK) fandom, whose object of fandom features an almost exclusively gender non-conforming cast. The findings investigate how non-binary fans of HnK utilize Tumblr’s affordances and culture to navigate and narrate their identity as gender non-conforming individuals (RQ1) and manage a safe(r) fandom where to express their true selves (RQ2).