

What is the young LGBTQ audience's perception on queer programming?

INTRODUCTION

When analysing whether queer programming has become so mainstream that it no longer has the same appeal and popularity within the young LGBTQ community, it is vital to conduct accurate and professional research on the target audience. There is a clear gap in academic research and knowledge regarding the LGBTQ audience's perception of queer programming, in particular discussing whether this active audience has become resistant to the dominant readings and meanings of TV shows such as 'RuPaul's Drag Race' and 'Queer Eye'. This project will use qualitative research over quantitative research as gathering subjective data via ethnographic means allows for a better interpretative analysis of the audience's opinions. Influenced by my own consumption habits, I aim to design a research proposal that will successfully observe audience behaviours, interview participants for a deeper understanding of their opinions and views and utilise many elements of ethnography to come to a final conclusion regarding the young LGBTQ audience's perception of queer programming.

CONTEXTUALISATION OF PROJECT

This research project aims to fill the research gap surrounding studies into how the young LGBTQ audience may oppose certain aspects of queer programming, in particular reality programmes. There have been previous studies conducted that have analysed the way queer programming addresses and relates to the queer audience, however, there has been no research which links this audience to the theory of the resistant audience which is what this research project aims to do. A resistant audience can be defined as readers of media texts that "resist, engage with and create their own meanings" (Brooker and Jermyn, 2003) as a result of not identifying or agreeing with the dominant message of said text. This challenge of dominant societal ideologies often equates to the resistant audience being categorised as a subculture, which are typically youth-orientated and regarded as beneath the cultural ideas of normality. The resistant audience theory is the best to use when

analysing this audience as it will emphasise how overtime the shift from cult to mainstream queer programming has impacted the opinions of the young LGBTQ audience.

Studying the young LGBTQ audience is important as previous studies have mainly focused only on how queer programming has had a positive impact on the community due to rising representation, rather than also investigating the negative impacts that have caused some to become resistant. Waggoner (2018) identified that despite the increase in representation, there is a real problem with the way the LGBTQ community are represented as being one dimensional, stating that television programmes can have “potentially harmful effects on LGBTQ persons seeking identification through television characters”. Waggoner conducted research by interviewing a group of women who identified as lesbian or bisexual and asked them how well they relate to or feel represented by five LGBTQ characters from different TV shows. Her final observations found that more often than not, the participants of the study did not identify with the characters who were playing stereotypical LGBTQ characters. However, as this study was purely on fictional programming some participants did suggest that the representations didn't bother them as it would with reality programmes, which is where this research project will fill the gap.

Another useful study was conducted by McInroy and Craig (2017) in which they investigated how consumption, representations, and messages on digital media platforms affect young LGBTQ media audiences. By using a mix of interviews and focus group discussions the participants were asked five open ended questions to elicit detailed answers about whether they believe social media impacts young LGBTQ people in a positive or negative way. Results found that active social media users believed that digital media platforms were a force for good when campaigning for LGBTQ equality, but all participants did highlight that the downfall was the inaccurate representations of queer people in digital spaces which left them feeling unrelatable. The key trends and findings from this study will be important to my research project as I believe there will be a similar participant response in regard to the impact of queer programming as there was to the impact of digital media on LGBTQ audiences.

The final media audience research study that I will be drawing upon is Holmes' (2004) study into the rise of the resistant audience of reality TV programming. This study found that there are "increasing criticisms made of the active/resistant audience paradigm" highlighting that many viewers no longer feel reality television is an accurate representation of reality. This research is very similar to the theory I will be using with the key difference that my research project will focus the resistant audience group down to the LGBTQ audience, and also focus on queer reality programmes only such as 'RuPaul's Drag Race' and 'Queer Eye'.

Despite all of this previous research into the LGBTQ audience, academics have failed to link these representational flaws to the rise of young LGBTQ resistant audiences. Similarly, no research has been conducted to primarily look at queer programming as it is assumed that, as these programmes are specifically targeted to a queer audience, there would be no reason for the audience to oppose the way the programmes are made, distributed and the representations in the narratives. Therefore, this research project will draw upon the previous scholarly research whilst investigating new areas of study which will link the young LGBTQ audience to the theory of the resistant audience within queer programming.

STATEMENT OF PROPOSED PROJECTS

This research project aims to analyse how overtime fandoms of previous queer cult reality TV shows such as drag race and queer eye have evolved to become a resistant audience as the genre has become more mainstream. Conducting this qualitative research will allow the young LGBTQ audience of TV shows such as 'RuPaul's Drag Race' and 'Queer Eye' to express their opinions and actively participate in the discourse surrounding the popularity of queer programming. Similarly, it will determine whether the LGBTQ audience still believe they are the intended target audience of these shows. This project aims to fill in the research gap surrounding the LGBTQ audience as media consumer group and ultimately answer the question, what is the LGBTQ audience's perception on queer programming?

EXPLANATION OF AUDIENCE RESEARCH METHOD

For the purpose of this study, participants will be required to identify as part of the LGBTQ community and be between ages eighteen and thirty as this is an important factor in understanding the resistance within the young LGBTQ audience. Similarly, Crabtree et al (1993) point out that location is the most vital factor in a successful focus group as participants need to be able to easily access the location of the research study, but at the same time needs to be carefully chosen so that the participants are not all from the same geographic area. Therefore, I propose this research be conducted in London so that there are multiple transport links to diversify the location, class, and backgrounds of the participants.

In order to obtain the most accurate and insightful data, this research project will use a combination of focus groups and individual interviews. This is to elicit natural conversations amongst members of the young LGBTQ community in which the researchers can observe the interactions as a component of ethnography. There will be a total of 8 participants as this is a healthy number for group conversation, and also enough people to get varied opinions and data from the interviews. The study will begin with a screening of the latest episode of 'RuPaul's Drag Race' and 'Queer Eye'. It is important that all participants watch the programmes together even if they have already seen them as to refresh their memories, and so all individuals are participating on a level playing field. Once the screenings have ended, the participants will then discuss amongst each other how they felt watching the shows and share if they could relate to the contestants on the TV shows. During this period the researchers will take a step back and observe the participant interactions as a more holistic approach to ethnographic research. There is a potential weakness with focus groups in that one or more participants may dominate the conversation or try to push their opinions on others, essentially silencing other participants. To avoid this the researchers, need to be ready to intervene at any moment to avoid power dynamic issues within the group by starting a new line of questioning regarding the TV show screening.

This will then be followed up by individual interviews which will step away from the screenings of queer programming and focus heavier on the impact that queer programming

and representations have on the participants in society and how this links to the theory of the resistant audience. Each participant will be asked four questions in a semi-structured interview which allows the participants to be more comfortable in a free-flowing conversation and not be restricted by closed questioning. The 4 pre-prepared questions are (1) Do you think queer reality programming is an accurate portrayal of the LGBTQ community? (2) How well do you relate personally to LGBTQ representations on reality programmes? (3) Would you consider yourself a resistant audience member to these representations? (4) What could the media industry do to better represent young LGBTQ audiences? Due to the lack of structure interviews will last between 45 minutes to 90 minutes depending on the flow of dialogue. The interview allows each participant to delve deeper into their own opinions and interpretations of queer programming, allowing them to speak freely on their own terms which may not have been possible in the group discussion. Using this methodology will help this study achieve its aims of exploring whether the young LGBTQ audience relates to queer programming.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

This study will conduct research with integrity and professionalism by firstly ensuring confidentiality amongst the participants. Barker (2013) states that there are four pillars of conducting transparent ethical research which every study should follow. These include “(a) privacy and confidentiality; (b) informed consent; (c) protection of vulnerable groups; and (d) the avoidance of harm”. No names or personal data will be shared in the findings of this research, and the study will also give the participants the choice to not share their name with the other participants as this is not important information that will affect the outcome of the research conducted. Safeguarding is vital for strong research ethics and this includes protecting the participants privacy with the data that is collected from the study. Whilst no personal details are required in questioning, answers to the interview questions may include personal experiences or sensitive issues that need to be carefully disposed of after the data has been analysed and collated into findings. Another ethical concern to take into consideration is the potentially vulnerable nature of the participants being young people and part of a marginalised group in society. To minimise any concerns the study will ensure that all individuals are comfortable at all times and make sure that no line of questioning

upsets or brings up bad experiences when discussing how the participants personally relate or not to representations of the LGBTQ community on queer reality programmes. Similarly, there needs to be no coercion into eliciting responses by neither researcher, nor other participants in the focus group section of the study.

WHAT GROUPS WILL BENEFIT

Qualitative media audience studies provide useful insights into what groups and industries will benefit from the research, allowing proactive changes to be made. From the conclusions of this study both the LGBTQ audience and the media industry will benefit from the findings. The most important group that will benefit from this audience research is the LGBTQ audience themselves. Research tends to result in changes to the area of study as a way of improvements, especially when the findings prove to be negative like the theory of the target audience becoming resistant to the message and narrative. Sedgman (2019) argues that the main benefit audience research provides is the “ability to deepen understandings of cultural value” and this shift in cultural values amongst queer programming is what will ultimately benefit the LGBTQ audience from this study. Changes that may be implemented from the conclusions of this study could include the LGBTQ audience being prioritised when the television industry is discussing a new show, focusing on including wider representations that all members of the LGBTQ community can relate to, not just a select few who fit the stereotype. This study will highlight how the LGBTQ audience have started to resist the messages and ideologies of shows such as ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race’ and ‘Queer Eye’ as a result of many queer shows now entering the mainstream space and targeting a much wider audience than just the LGBTQ community. This will inevitably benefit the media industry as they will be able to adjust the production and circulation of queer programming to retarget their main audience and better the representations within the show as a result of the opinions of the participants of the study. Similarly, the industry can improve the way they market queer programming to ultimately gain a wider audience which will boost ratings and viewing figures. Another group that will benefit from the findings of this research project are academics. Just as this study drew upon previous research in similar fields to compare and contrast findings, future researcher’s will be able to use this study and its conclusions to

conduct even more extensive research into the representations and reactions of queer reality programming and fill in other research and knowledge gaps. There are many studies and theories surrounding the idea of the resistant audience but little connecting this to the LGBTQ audience highlighting the scholarly benefit and impact that this study has.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion this research project aims to fill in the research gap surrounding young LGBTQ perceptions of queer programming by conducting qualitative ethnographic research which consists of interviews, focus groups and participant observations. Young LGBTQ individuals are the most important and distinct media audience for the researching perceptions of queer programming which is why it is so important to investigate why this group are slowly but surely resisting mainstream queer programming. I hypothesis that the young LGBTQ participants of the study will engage with each other in the focus group and share opinions and experiences of how over time they have shifted from supporters and members of fandoms of shows such as 'RuPaul's Drag Race' and 'Queer Eye', to resistant audience members as the tv shows became more mainstream. Feeling that not all members of the LGBTQ community are represented in these shows will be a key factor in these discussions, and this will provide a useful insight into how the intended target audience of these tv shows are moving away from the stereotypically narrative of queer programming. The interviews will uncover in detail how representations affect LGBTQ individuals in all aspects of culture and society and ask the participants what they believe can be done to rectify these representational inequalities within queer programming. Ultimately, this research will investigate young LGBTQ perceptions of queer reality programmes such as 'RuPaul's Drag Race' and 'Queer Eye' and use the findings to make improvements to tackle the rise of the young LGBTQ resistant audience in queer programming.

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