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McKee, Alan (2000) Images of gay men in the media and the development of self esteem. *Australian Journal of Communication* 27(2):pp. 81-98.

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Images of gay men in the media, and the development of self esteem

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Abstract

This paper addresses the role played by the media in the formation of social identity and self-esteem in young gay men. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with a small number of gay men in Perth, Western Australia, in order to investigate their memories of television images of gay men, and the impact these images had on them. The men were interviewed either individually or in couples. These interviews were used for qualitative analysis. The research discovered that the media were by far the most important source of information about gay identity for these men in their youth. Most could recall very few images of homosexual men. However, those few images – mostly from fictional programs – were remembered as having a very strong impact, particularly in making the men feel happier with themselves and their feelings, providing information, and offering identities to which they could aspire. The paper concludes that the media – including fictional television programs - should acknowledge the vital role they play in creating a sense of what is normal and accepted in the Australian community, and thus in forming the self-esteem and social identities of Australian citizens. As such, they also need to recognise their potential role in overcoming the low self-esteem and suicidal tendencies of young gay men in Australia. It seems that in attempts to lower the rates of suicide attempts in young gay men, fictional entertainment media may have an important role to play.

Self esteem and suicidal tendencies in young gay men

Between 20 and 35% of gay youth have made suicide attempts, the best available statistics show ... Youthful gays often internalise negative stereotypes and images of themselves. And when you have been told that you are 'sick, bad, wrong for being who you are', you begin to believe it¹

This paper emerges from a concern with the disproportionately high rates of suicide and attempted suicide in young gay men. Studies have shown depression and suicidal tendencies can be linked to self-esteem. It is now generally accepted that 'low self-esteem is associated

with depression and may contribute to suicidal behaviour². Given that the high rates of suicide attempts in young gay men are of concern, and that considerable attention is now being paid to ways in which these rates might be lowered, it is important to examine the ways in which self-esteem is constructed. Crocket and Petersen cite "acceptance by peers" as one area³. This paper explores another important aspect.

The formation of an "identity" is an important part of self-esteem, allowing individuals to find a place for themselves within a culture⁴. Identities are not innate, Camfield and Wells suggest, but are learned⁵. As the media historian John Hartley has noted, in modern Western culture most information about society is received through the media⁶. It is thus important, in understanding how young gay men form identities and gain self-esteem, to examine the role of the media.

Previous work in the area of self-esteem of gay men has gestured towards this question in a variety of ways. For example, Herdt suggests above that the presence of "stereotypes" in culture contributes to low self-esteem⁷. Brown worries that there are "no gay role models" or "messages of acceptance and support" in our culture⁸. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes the need for "cultural objects" to which "lesbian and gay teenagers" can use as a "resource for survival"⁹. None of these works, however, centrally addresses the relationship between various kinds of representation, identity and self-esteem. The issue is rather mentioned in passing as something intuitively understood to be important.

This paper attempts to provide a detailed analysis of these claims, and to use their general calls for more 'positive images' as a springboard to examine exactly *what kinds* of images are important for the creation of identity and self-esteem - a project which has not previously been attempted in such terms.

Methods

This paper draws on qualitative research, based on semi-structured interviews conducted with sixteen gay men (see Appendix A). The sample was drawn from two gay community groups in Perth, Western Australia. One is a youth support group for young gay men (aged under 25) in the process of coming out. The other is a social group for gay men aged over 25. The men were interviewed either individually, or in couples, but not in larger groups. Participants were told before the interviews started that this was a research project looking at the way that gay

men used television, and the part it played in their lives. Issues of self-esteem were not explicitly raised, in an attempt not to lead the interviewees. Interviewees were aged from 17 to 43, and from a range of cultural backgrounds (including non-indigenous Australian, indigenous Australian, Singaporean, Brazilian and British).

As all participants were accessed through social groups, this results in a particular bias: towards men who involve themselves in the gay community socially, not just sexually. In this, the subjects may have different attitudes towards their sexuality and identity from people who would identify as 'men who have sex with men', or from those gay men who are primarily 'scene' oriented. In the case of 'men who have sex with men' (the classification used by the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations to describe those men who engage in same sex acts, but identify as, and live as, straight men), their identities do not involve a self-understanding as 'gay'. In the case of those gay men who are primarily identified with the gay 'scene' (the network of gay bars, nightclubs and sex-on-premises venues in a city) rather than social groups, it might be expected that a different attitude would be displayed towards belonging and identity. Differences such as these may inform media use more generally, and lead to particular attitudes being displayed by the subjects of this study.

Discourse particles have been removed from the transcription without ellipsis. Where other material has been removed, this has been indicated by ellipsis. The numbers appearing in brackets after quotations refer to the identities of interview subjects. I have used code numbers in order to preserve the anonymity of the subjects.

It must be noted that the gathering of information is never an innocent process. Simply in asking these questions, participants were asked to think about things in particular ways - ways in which they might not otherwise have thought of them. For example, participants knew beforehand that they were going to be interviewed about 'gay men and media use'. Several made reference during the interviews to the fact that they had been thinking about these questions before the interview: 'I was thinking about that this afternoon' (16).

Results

The first question asked of participants was to remember back to a time before they knew other gay men socially, and to say what they had thought about gay men at that time. At this point, they were not specifically asked from where they had gained that information.

However, many spontaneously offered the media as a source of images. Those who did not offer sources were then asked to think from where they had gained that information. Many then offered television as a source when prompted. Other questions elicited the fact that few other sources of information were available (see below).

Many of the interviewees stated that they, before they 'came out', they had believed that gay men were "girly guys" (2), "very camp and stuff" (5); exhibiting "girliness" (6) a "high-pitched voice and very sleazy, very sexual" (7); "I guess I had an image that all gay men are feminine" (8); "limp-wristed, lisping" (13) – in short, "a really feminine kind of gay guy" (11). Others referred to their images of gay men before they came out as being "stereotypes" (1, 5, 7, 10, 11, 13, 16). The interviewees gave the impression that such an image of gay men was an unattractive one. One referred to "the vile, disgusting things that I imagined would go on at gay nightclubs ... I suppose from watching television programs" (4).

Several pointed to specific television programs as providing them with this information. Programs referred to were *Are You Being Served* (3, 5, 7, 10), and the Mardi Gras broadcast (3, 9, 11).

This point was followed up with questions about other possible sources of information about gay men. Of the 16 interviewees, only four knew any gay men before they came out and joined the gay community (3, 4, 15, 16). There was little sense that parents had provided any information about homosexuality. In fact, most interviewees made the unprompted point that parents had either never given any information, or had given very negative perspectives on homosexuality. One interviewee recalled that "My dad was a preacher, so if anything I would have heard the negative message through the church ... [classed with] murderers, drug addicts, prostitutes" (6). Another recalled that "I can remember mum saying something once ... but you shouldn't really talk about it was her view, you don't want to influence people" (9).

None of the participants had been presented with any information about homosexuality at school. The only way in which homosexuality was raised at school was as a non-specific insult. One participant recalls: "I wore glasses and I remember being put down at school because I wore glasses ... the kind of names you were called were poofter kind of names ..." (6) Others remember "jokes" (7), or the word "poofter" being used "as an insult" (9). Some participants specifically remembered "homophobic comments" being made at school (13). Another noted that: "Even in religious education, there was no mention of homosexuality ... They didn't [even] mention it to put it down, there was no mention at all" (14)

These first questions established that the media were in fact the most important place for gaining information about homosexuality for young gay men.

Isolation

The dominant feeling in young gay men tends to be isolation. This is suggested by Troiden and by Brown¹⁰, and is supported by the current research. When asked directly whether they had experienced any sense of loneliness or isolation before they came out, most interviewees replied in the positive (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16). One recurring phrase permeated these comments: "I did go through the 'I'm the only gay person on earth' stage" (4); "I thought I was the only one in this whole world" (8); "I thought I was the only person in the whole world who felt that way" (15). This image of the young gay man, unable to gain any information from parents, peers or school, sure that he was the only person who felt this way on the whole planet, is a powerful one. This is the situation which is created when the media fails to present accessible images of gay men. Young gay men are left feeling isolated, with no access to an identity or a community.

Particular images

Having dealt with the general impression the interviewees had of gay men in the media, questions were asked about specific images which had made an impression on them when they were in the process of coming out. If there was a general sense of unease with the images which are generally presented, this question allowed participants to remember those images which had been useful for them. In contrast with the general feeling of isolation articulated in the answer to the first question, answers to this question tended to provide specific examples which had obviously made an impact on the interviewees. The importance of these images can be seen in the recall they presented of the images, and the language in which they talked of them.

The interviewees were not specifically asked to provide good memories or bad memories – only those which had 'made an impression'. But while a few talked about 'negative' experiences (3, 9, 13, 15, 16), the vast majority of interviewees gave examples of particular very good experiences.

Importance of the images

The interviewees discussed the images of gay men which they remembered most strongly.

The first thing which became obvious in the answers to this question was the vital importance of images of gay men to the interviewees. Several used strong language to describe their reactions to these images:

I remember once there was this ad on channel two, after one of the Mardi Gras ... a safe sex ad ... there was this guy going out with another guy, and this girl going out with another girl ... it was so natural ... it did have a little bit of an impact on me (1)

The language is of "impact". Another interviewee remembers that:

I saw *Philadelphia* with some friends and that was very full on ... it actually reduced me to tears ... looking for the interaction between the two characters, and seeing just the momentary attraction, that was really groovy ... the time when I saw the movie is really distinct in my memory, I saw it with some friends, and I just remember walking out and not talking very much about it all, but just feeling very changed ... I remember seeing an episode of *The Flying Doctors* with a gay couple once ... there was this war hero and he was sick ... I can remember being totally captivated by it, that was actually when I was still at home (9)

This interviewee is "changed" by the image of a gay man; it is "really distinct in [his] memory"; and he was "totally captivated" by another image.

It is also important to note the recall of these scenes, in some cases from many years in the past. These images were so important to the interviewees that they are still able to recall and describe them in detail. The interviewees described the lengths that they would go to in order to be able to view gay characters:

I tried to sneak in late and watch things, so I remember things like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* was just around that time when I was meant to be in bed, and I'd pretend I was in bed and I'd sneak back out into the passage and just creep open the sliding door and just look through the crack, so I was sort of trying to watch that, and when there was that gay character [in *Dynasty*], that did sort of get me going a bit, and I was always hoping that I'd see something ... because that was there, I was curious, hoping to find out more about it ... there was nothing really else that had anything like that (6)

Number 96 was banned in my house, but I could hear it on, I could hear the folks listening to it and watching it ... I think it was about '76 or '77, and I had tonsillitis, and I was in hospital

for two weeks and I discovered Number 96 while I was in hospital watching tv till all hours of the night, and I saw these two characters ... (14)

This interviewee goes on to describe the scene he saw while in hospital, describing it in detail which (more than twenty years later) makes very clear the impact which this image had on him:

[T]he guy was coming out of the shower, they'd been to the beach during the day, they'd both been sunburnt, and as he's coming out of the shower, there's another guy sort of leaning over, drying himself, and one guy's naked and the other guy's got a towel around him, and they come together really closely, and you don't see anything except feet and faces, and then you just see the scene with both feet, and the other towel dropping to the floor ... I thought, hang on, these are two sort of guys who don't look as if they've come out of *Benny Hill*, or *Carry On* type characters, they both had reasonably normal jobs, they spoke normally, they didn't sort of mince or anything like that I can't remember if it was in the same show or the following day, they're in bed together, the morning after reading the paper, sort of dozing and chatting, and I thought, that's nice ... I can remember it quite clearly. I can almost remember the furniture in the room ... It think it was the confirmation that it was OK to be gay and not feminine (14).

Another interviewee demonstrates the importance of these images by his recall of a scene, long after the event:

I can very clearly remember the gay character in *Number 96*, and he was very non-camp, he was very straight acting, they had a very camp gay character as well ... to start with we weren't allowed to watch it ... the gay side of things [in *Number 96*] was a very minor kind of subplot ... I remember this scene where one of the characters got himself into the gay character's bed, and the gay character comes in, and there's this man in his bed, and it was like, 'Oh, he's gay too'. And Don, the main gay character says, 'Get dressed'. I remember that, and a discussion, they used the word 'poofter', and I asked, 'What does that mean?', and we had a discussion ... (16)

The need of the interviewees to find some identity or community they could embrace in the media can be seen in other stories. One says "I used to go to the [Perth] *Sunday Times* personal columns and look for 'gay'" (16); another says "I used to leaf through dictionaries [looking up "homosexual"] ... classifieds. The best sort of information was the male section of women's magazines ... *Woman's Own*"(15). Another says that: "when I came to the city and started to find things at newsagencies ... I started to find things like *Playgirl* ... there was nothing else" (6).

The importance of these images can also be seen in the responses to a later question: "Would you make an effort to watch a program with gay characters?". Responses included: "Oh absolutely, anything" (15).

If there's a hint that there may be some sort of gay character in any program, we'd be interested in seeing it. Like when Colin first came into *EastEnders*, you always wanted to watch to see what was happening, to see if he would actually come out, whether his sexuality would actually be disclosed, and there were lots of rumours about this gay character and we were just waiting to see it happen, and to see this character unfold ... to see other gay people, to see other gay lives (16)

In '88, I'd just got to Australia, and I moved in with [interview subject 16], and this was the first night back, and we didn't have a tv set, apart from this little black and white Sinclair tv, and the screen was no bigger than that [about two inches], and it was a freezing cold night, so we jumped into bed and we were cuddled up close, and we were trying to watch this ... *Sebastiane* ... trying to read the subtitles ... we were dead keen to watch the movie (15)

Use of these images

It can be seen from the above comments that for most of the interviewees, images of gay men in the media have been very important. But why have they been important? Several made the point that these images helped them to discover an identity – and thus, improve their self-esteem, and overcome feelings of loneliness. On the simplest and most imprecise level, these images made the interviewees feel good: "*Beverley Hills 90210*, I think there was a gay episode ... I felt quite good after watching it, really" (7). But the uses they made of these images can be described in more detail.

Identity

I used to watch *Melrose Place* .. because it had a gay man in it, I suppose anything that had some sort of gay content in it, because when you're first coming out, you want to know as much ... because you're stuck in this awkward position [in the heterosexual world], you want to just get an identity with something (2)

I wasn't out first time I saw *Philadelphia* ... part of it was pretty cool ... I was always a big *Melrose* fan, just because of Matt [the program's gay character] ... It was always good watching it ... he was always portrayed as a good guy, so I thought, well, gay boys must be nice, very positive (4)

A film, on video, called *Maurice* ... it really opened my eyes quite a bit, and made me realise about myself ... made me realise that it's not totally wrong, who you are or whatever ... it made me realise that I was a little bit more eccentric than most people at my school (5).

These images made it possible for the interviewees to realise that not only are there gay men in the world, but that to identify with these characters is not a bad thing. They allowed the interviewees to, as the above subject states, "realise about myself".

It is noted above that many of the interviewees suggested that most images of gay men in the media were effeminate. Further comments made clear the difficulties this created for them as they attempted to form identities for themselves. One interviewee made explicit his difficulty with trying to discover a social identity when the only images presented in the media had been there for ridicule:

I had no direction, didn't know where I was going ... I knew that I didn't want to be this mincing queen, limp wristed ... I felt very strengthened and liberated when things like *Priscilla* came out, *The Sum of Us*, it was more than what I'd seen in the past (7)

Another participant makes the same point about trying to form a social identity when the only images which are available are unattractive ones:

Carry On type movies [had] the guy who'd run around like a little girl, and everybody would laugh at him like he was the clown. I didn't want to be the clown. I thought of myself as being average, slightly above average intelligence and ability, I didn't want to be the class clown, I didn't want to be the butt of jokes ... These images I was getting until I was fifteen, and I didn't like myself a great deal up until I was fifteen ... I was going through phases where I really needed to label myself, I needed that clarity ... that was what I was searching for (14).

This interview makes explicit the link between a lack of suitable images with which to identify, and low self-esteem– "These images I was getting until I was fifteen, and I didn't like myself a great deal up until I was fifteen". He notes that:

I found it very difficult with all the images I'd had before of what it was to be gay, I didn't like it, and I couldn't see myself in that role ... And to see this image [in *Number 96*] of two reasonably normal acting – what I think was normal acting – male characters, having a physical relationship, I think sort of confirmed to me that, that's the category that I thought I was heading towards (14)

Again, the difficulty of finding a 'role' in society if media images as well as other sources of information are withheld, is obvious in these comments:

The *GP* episode with the gay doctor, that was on TV just before I came out... I was very intrigued by what was going on ... it felt strange to see it, but it felt good to see it at the same time ... after that I watched it till he [the gay character] left. The gay subplot was so buried in those few episodes, but knowing that he was [gay] ... I suppose it enabled me to identify with a character (3)

What the interviewees found here was images to 'identify' with.

Information

Another important use of images was simply in providing information:

There was one about a prison on Channel Two, Channel Two, that's where I got most of my information on, *Corelli* ... *GP*, considering I watched it kind of hidden, it was good, I was paranoid that someone would walk in ... I'd read up, and I knew that that was going to happen ... that's how I could get some information, because I didn't have [phone] numbers, I didn't know who to contact (10)

Overcoming isolation

The media images that the interviewees remembered also helped to overcome the feeling of isolation which made them feel like the only gay men in the world:

It's good to see other gay people, especially if they're in positive relationships, if it's a love story, it makes you feel good, it doesn't make you feel as if you're the only one, you know you're not, but I suppose it's that feeling (16)

Just to see other people out there. You don't see it very regularly on tv (15)

What kind of images are most useful?

Fictional

This study found that many of the subjects recalled particular images as being particularly important to them in forming a sense of identity. This fits with the findings of previous researchers on identity¹¹. From this research, it is possible to trace in some details the ways in which different kinds of images functioned in this respect.

In this unprompted question (they were not asked about particular genres of television), it is remarkable that none of the interviewees cited a non-fictional example of television programming as serving the positive functions listed above. Where non-fictional programming was cited, it was usually in order to criticise. For example, one interviewee

stated that: "I remember a lot of things that were to do with stories on the news, to do with diseases like HIV or stuff ... always mentioned in such a clinical, negative way" (6). Another suggested that "the comments politicians make [are] negative most of the time ... it doesn't help my self-esteem or self-perception ... it just adds a little to the burden I'm carrying" (13).

By contrast, fictional programs were celebrated. As can be seen from the comments quoted above, *Number 96* was recalled by some interviewees; Matt from *Melrose Place* was also a popular character (1, 2, 4).

The importance of entertainment media in the promotion of health is now well recognised. Although it is still the case that the majority of the research in the disciplines of Health Promotion and Social Advertising addresses the dissemination of health-related information in non-fictional media such as advertising and other forms of publicity, other research addresses the vital part entertainment media can play in communicating information and disseminating ideas¹². Calvert and Cocking, for example, note that:

Dramatic television programs can convey information that results in viewer decisions to inhibit negative patterns of behaviour. For instance, popular television characters can be cast in roles where they die of lung cancer because they smoke cigarettes ... the potential for altering behaviours makes them obvious candidates for intervention strategies¹³

Egger, Donovan and Spark have argued at length that entertainment media are a vital part of any health promotion work:

In recent years the concept of edutainment has been adopted in developed countries such as Australia and the United States ... In Australia, soap operas have dealt with the following kinds of health issues: AIDS and discrimination against HIV-positive persons, immunisation, alcohol abuse, mental health, sexually transmitted diseases, sports injuries and cigarette smoking ... Even though edutainment has been subjected to little formal or adequate evaluation, there is some evidence that this use of media does have an impact¹⁴

But perhaps the most important factor to be taken into consideration when addressing the efficacy of fictional television forms in promoting self-esteem is their capacity to promote feelings of community: precisely the kind of feelings which young gay men are lacking. Work by media researchers confirms that this is one of the functions served by soap operas. Cantor and Pingree's review of research on soap operas finds that the "gratifications" for their viewers include "reality exploration" - "items such as 'It helps me to understand what is

happening in my own life", and "companionship"¹⁵. Fictional television forms allow viewers to form a sense of the community in which they live, and their place in it.

Suzi Hush, ex-producer of *Coronation Street*, is quoted in a woman's magazine as saying "the sense of community is a basic human requirement. It feeds our need for gossip, curiosity, belonging" ... The notion that the life of soaps "is defined as community" seems a commonsense evaluation of the ... soap's appeal, something of which the viewer's themselves are as conscious as the critic ... togetherness [and a] sense of belonging¹⁶

This is not, of course, to suggest that the viewers of fictional programs are unable to distinguish between fiction and reality. David Buckingham notes in his research on the viewers of soap operas that:

speakers constantly shift back and forth between two positions - at certain points they appear to be judging the programme and the characters from outside the fictional world, while at others they seem to accept the reality of that world, and make their judgements, as it were, from inside it. In each case, they use different types of evidence to support their arguments¹⁷

The interviewees for this project obviously did not believe that Matt or Don were real people: but the fact that the characters were present in these fictional programs allowed them to feel that there were other gay people in the world. As for the uses made of these particular characters, they made them "feel good", gave them something to "identify" with, or a "role" to play. Fictional programs seem to offer possibilities for identification and the sense of community which are not present to such a degree in non-fictional forms of television.

The ordinary and the normal

The terms which are used by the interviewees to describe the programs which have had most impact on them are very similar: "*Melrose Place* ... that was a very surprising character ... showing that they maybe are like normal people" (10). "I thought, hang on, these are two sort of guys who don't look as if they've come out of *Benny Hill* or *Carry On* type characters, they both had reasonably normal jobs, they spoke normally" (17). This terminology is also present on in the responses offered by the interviewees when they were asked what kind of images they would have liked to have seen when they were coming out:

I would have liked to have seen, I suppose, more gay people, obviously, but showing more sides to what a gay person is. All the gay people were either hideous freaks, or really nice people that don't lead very interesting lives. I would have liked to have known what gay

people did on their days off, or when they were working ... Showing kids that weren't out or that were exploring their sexuality, that gay people lead normal lives (4)

... just a gay character that would just be a part of the story and nothing more, nothing less, and interacting with their partner in a realistic way, and the only thing that I've actually seen that did was *Drop the Dead Donkey*, and Helen, the lesbian assistant editor ... they had one that was specifically aimed at her, where we get to meet her girlfriend ... they go around to her place and have dinner ... she's just another character, and she has flaws, and she has problems with her relationships, and they're seen as being just the same as everyone else's ... she's no more dysfunctional than anyone else in the office ... (3)

Too much time has been wasted in debates about gay images arguing about the concept of "positive images". As debates in feminism have made clear, the term is a very prescriptive one – for, after all, who gets to decide what is 'positive'¹⁸? Does it mean that it would never be possible to show an effeminate gay man, because that would be a 'stereotype'?

Although some speakers did use the term "positive image" (5, 6), more interesting are the calls for the 'normal' images, which – as the comments above make clear – are calling less for a normative attempt to control the way that gay men should behave, than looking for a *range* of images, all of which are presented as acceptable. This is not 'normal' as opposed to 'deviant': it is 'normal' in the sense of being unexceptional. This is obvious in the comments of the interviewee who wants images of: "just more sort of everyday, run of the mill gay man," (7). Another interviewee wants:

People like me, young people ... in a very normal, very everyday setting. If I'd seen gay characters in the soaps, that would have made it a lot easier ... just in terms of actually getting me to think about it. I didn't have the concepts to associate with it for a long time ... images of couples, images that don't involve being dying of AIDS or being bashed up (9).

Another speaker wants to see:

Just like an everyday person who ... it's like they live a lifestyle of, a gay lifestyle, but it's not a focus, it just happens to be that, it's nothing that's focussed on, it's just how it is ... *Melrose Place*, at least they could give the guy good boyfriends. It would be really good if it was a main character, and they weren't in the background, and it wasn't really important ... (11)

All of these interviewees, independently and without prompting, use the same word to describe the images they would like to see: "everyday". This is not to say that the only images that should be shown are 'positive images' of straight-acting, middle-class men. The interviewees in this project want to see images of gay men which are central to the narratives

of these programs, but are not exceptional. They want "to see gay people portrayed as ordinary, normal members of the community" (13).

As noted above, research in media studies suggests that one of the central purposes of fictional television is to create communities, with which viewers are invited to feel identification. The characters which are most strongly remembered by these interviewees are Matt and Don – two of the few characters on television who have been central characters in soap operas. Television drama tends to be structured so that problems and threats come from outside the community:

the most significant forces of disruption come from the world outside the community ...
serious crime is seen to derive exclusively from outside the community¹⁹

The interviewees remember gay characters coming in as visiting characters, and turning out to be "child molesters".

But sometimes soap operas have gay characters coming in so that the community can preach tolerance: what producers refer to as the "Fags are people too" stories". This is not what has made the impact on these interviewees. Because, in the structure of television drama, the characters who are 'everyday', who are 'ordinary', are the *regular* characters. These are the people – whether they are straight-acting or effeminate, flamboyant or boring – who are presented as 'ordinary' simply because they are on every week, they are part of the fictional community, and the audience is invited to identify with them.

Conclusion

Young people grappling with same sex attractions face enormous isolation and stigma in making sense of their feelings ... The main reason for not contacting someone about sexuality was a lack of information ... Uribe and Harbeck found the turmoil most people pass through during their teen years is greatly compounded by negative stereotypes and lack of information about same sex attractions²⁰

It must be noted that this work is based on a very small sample, and represents only a pilot study. However, the stark results suggests that this is an area which would repay further investigation and a more extensive study.

In combating suicidal behaviours in young gay men, attention to associated risk factors (isolation, depression etc) via the promotion of self-esteem is a promising strategy. This

paper argues that television has the possibility to provide information, and to promote acceptance by providing characters with which young gay men can identify. The enormous impact which such characters can have is amply demonstrated by the interviewees in this paper.

Of course, television producers can argue – with some justification – that their job is to entertain and to make money, rather than to serve a social purpose. This paper aims to demonstrate that in doing so, they should also be aware of the vital importance placed by audiences on the programs that they produce to entertain us and to make money from us. The media are a very important place for people to find out about the society in which they live. If young gay men are systematically excluded from that media, it is not surprising that they experience feelings of isolation, cannot develop social identities and feel excluded from communities. Such a situation contributes to low self-esteem. And, as noted above, research suggests that low self-esteem can be linked to suicidal behaviours.

This research suggests that media producers have a particular responsibility. When they produce images of gay men which are recognisable to the audience, they contribute to the formation of identity and therefore self-esteem in a vitally important way. As was suggested above, the examples of, particularly, *Number 96* and *Beautiful Thing* have proven to be vitally important to the interviewees, profoundly influencing them and providing them with images and ideas which have remained with them. This potential must not be ignored. It is important that media professionals are made aware of research such as this, and of the tremendous potential and responsibility which is involved in their work. The exciting possibility of health researchers and media practitioners working together might allow for an important intervention to be made in the rates of suicide and attempted suicide of young gay men in Australia.

Appendix A

Interview Schedule

1. How old are you?
2. Have you come out?

IF ANSWER IS YES, FOLLOW STRUCTURE ONE; IF NO, FOLLOW STRUCTURE TWO

STRUCTURE ONE

3. Before you came out, what did you think gay men were like?
4. Did you know any gay men?
5. Where did you image come from?
6. When you were thinking about coming out, did you see anything on television that made an impact on you?
7. What images of gay men can you remember seeing on tv before you came out?
8. How did they make you feel?
9. What did you enjoy watching on television around that period?
10. Why?
11. How has your image of gay men changed since you came out?
12. How much was loneliness/isolation a problem before you came out?
13. Did you ever watch images of gay men in front of your parents?
14. As a gay man, do you feel like you're a part of Australian society?
15. Who are your role models?

STRUCTURE TWO

3. Before you joined [the relevant group], what did you think gay men were like?
4. Did you know any gay men?
5. Where did you image come from?
6. Thinking about your sexuality, can you think of anything on television that has made an impact on you?
7. How did they make you feel?
8. What do you enjoy watching on television?

9. Why?

10. How has your image of gay men changed since you joined [the relevant group]?

11. How much was loneliness/isolation a problem before you joined [the relevant group]?

12. Have you ever watched images of gay men in front of your parents?

13. As a gay man, do you feel like you're a part of Australian society?

14. Who are your role models?

Notes

¹ Herdt, G. 'Introduction: gay and lesbian youth, emergent identities and cultural scenes, at home and abroad', in G. Herdt (ed), *Gay and Lesbian Youth* 1989 New York and London: the Haworth Press, 1-42, p31.

² Brown, G. 'Sexuality issues and risk taking behaviour amongst WA gay and bisexual male youth', unpublished paper, School of Health Promotion, Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia, 1996, p14, citing Crocket and Petersen, 1993

³ Cited in *ibid*, p 14

⁴ Troiden, R. R., 'The formation of homosexual identities', in G Herdt (ed), *Gay and Lesbian Youth*, 1989, New York and London: The Haworth Press, 43-74, p45.

⁵ Camfield, J. and H. Wells, *100 Ways to Enhance Self Concept in the Classroom*, Prentice Hall International, 1976, p2.

⁶ Hartley, J. *The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media*, 1992, New York and London: Routledge.

⁷ Savin-Williams, R. C. 'Parental influence on the self-esteem of gay and lesbian youths: a reflected appraisals model, in G. Herdt (ed), *Gay and Lesbian Youth*, 1989, New York and London: the Haworth Press, 93-110, p96.

⁸ Brown, *op cit*, p30.

⁹ Sedgwick, E. K. *Tendencies*, 1993, Durham: Duke University Press, pp1, 3.

¹⁰ Troiden, *op cit*, p52; Brown, *op cit*, p4.

¹¹ See Troiden, op cit, pp49-53.

¹² See, for example, B. Parnell, What do they want us to do now? The use of health communication campaigns and social marketing in the response to the HIV epidemic amongst homosexually active men in Australia, 1996, Sydney: Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations.

¹³ Calvert, S. and R. Cocking 'Health promotion through mass media' *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 1992 13, 143-149, p145.

¹⁴ Egger, G., R. Donovan and R. Spark *Health and the Media: Principles and Practices of Health Promotion*, 1993, Sydney: McGraw-Hill Book Company, pp141, 143.

¹⁵ Cantor, M. and S. Pingree *The Soap Opera*, 1983, Beverley Hills, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, p128.

¹⁶ Geraghty, C. *Women and Soap Opera: a Study of Prime Time Soaps* 1991, Cambridge: Polity Press, p85.

¹⁷ Buckingham, D. *Public Secrets: EastEnders and its Audience*, 1987, London: BFI Publishing, p172.

¹⁸ Waldman, D. 'There's more to positive images than meets the eye', in P. Erens (ed), *Issues in Feminist in Feminist Film Criticism*, 1990, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 13-18.

¹⁹ Buckingham, op cit, p92

²⁰ Brown, op cit, pp4, 6, 8.