

Unveiling the Dynamic Impact of Queer Celebrities on School Youth's Perceptions of Gender and Sexual Diversity

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Abstract:

This study explored the disruption of queer celebrities on the normalisation of heterosexuality and cisnormativity amongst school youth. Qualitative research was employed with a phenomenological research design to conduct semi-structured interviews with seven high school learners between the ages of 16 and 17 in the town of Kroonstad in the Free State Province of South Africa. The findings highlight the symbiotic relationship between queer celebrities and school youth gravitating between self-identification, challenging stereotypes, visibility, and advocacy. Bigger platforms for queer celebrities should be created in schools to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ issues and equal rights. This will contribute to a more inclusive society, making its way to educational settings, and leading to more inclusivity of gender and sexual diversity in the school system.

Keywords: Cisgender; Heterosexual; Queer Celebrity; Sexual and Gender Diversity; School Youth.

1. Introduction:

Croteau and Hoynes (2014) contend that the media, primarily social media, and broadcasting, play a crucial role in identity formation. The influence of queer celebrities and celebrity idolisation has been of significant research interest over the past decade in the United Kingdom (Brooks, 2021). Our framing of the concept of queer celebrity resonates with how Guilbert, (2018, p. 2) defines this term as "someone famous or found in popular media who is also proudly part of the LGBTQ+ community." For example, sports champions, film, and television actors and actresses, broadcast personalities, music icons, and spiritual figures are all idolised by school youth because they come from various walks of life, establish gender and

sexual diversity, as well as goals in life (Kimathi, 2013).

According to Brown (2015), queer celebrities possess a significant influence as catalysts for societal attitudes towards gender and sexual diversity, significantly influencing the perceptions of the younger generation. In recent times, South Africans have started to acknowledge and support counter-normative celebrities such as Somizi Mhlongo; celebrated Gay Pride Parades in cities such as Johannesburg and Cape Town; witnessed same-sex relationships on renowned recurrent shows such as "Generations"; and listened to music from counter-normative performers within the music industry.

Nichols (2021) asserts that young individuals primarily acquire knowledge about gender and sexual diversity through the informal curriculum, as opposed to the formal curriculum in South African schools. This brings forward a paradox – numerous progressive policies and legislations, such as the South African Schools Act (SASA), 1996 (Act No. 84 of 1996), and White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education (2001), have been implemented to provide access to education for all school youth including the LGBTIQ+ minority group. Nevertheless, there is a prevailing lack of knowledge and education among school-aged individuals about gender and sexual diversity allowing schools to normalise hetero and cisgender learners. School youth observe and consider queer celebrities portrayed in media platforms as a means to shape their understanding of gender and sexual diversity.

The present study focuses on the impact that queer celebrities have on the perspectives of youth on gender and sexual diversity. This article addresses the key question: Do queer celebrities disrupt the normalisation of heterosexuality and cisnormativity amongst school youth? As we examined our participants' responses, we aimed to understand their lived experiences and explore the meaning they attach to the influences of queer celebrities. This study is significant in that, as far as our knowledge extends, no studies have explored the influence of queer celebrities and their representations on school youth in South Africa.

Queer celebrities, including musicians and other public figures, possess a distinct advantage in society because of their influence and authority. They have the ability to question and disrupt established social standards via their expressions, behaviours, artistic presentations, and public presence, which tend to draw more scrutiny towards unconventional ideas and behaviours (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011).

2. Literature Review:

2.1 Navigating Identities: Unpacking the Impact of Queer Celebrities on Youth Perspectives of

Gender and Sexual Diversity Through the Lens of Jagose's Queer Theory

In the following sections, we briefly explain the intersections between queer representation in the media, queer celebrity visibility, social change and queer celebrities advocating for gender nonconformity. In addition, we outline the theoretical framework which underpinned this study.

2.1.1 Queer representation in media

Representations of gender diversity via incorporating the internet, have contributed in bringing gender and sexual diversity to the mainstream domain (Driver, 2008). A primary concern with social and queer media is that contemporary school youth spend more time with media than they do at school (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Given this assertion, it is not surprising that school youth are actively engaging in self-education about gender and sexual diversity through utilising queer representation in various media outlets. For example, in a study conducted by Valkenburg and Piotrowski (2017), they found that the school youth had never been capable of educating themselves on such a large amount of information related to the development of intimacy and gender and sexual diversity - they argue that school youth can look up information about queer celebrities and find supporting self-help groups on social media and queer media.

Research shows that there has been a notable transformation in the media, characterized by an increase in visibility and representation of queer celebrities across various media platforms (Brooks, 2021). Queer celebrities use their status in media to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, disclose their own experiences of coming out, question societal conventions about gender and sexuality, and serves as a pedagogical medium to impart knowledge to young people about matters of gender and sexual diversity. This assertion is occurring on a worldwide scale, for instance, in an article published by Forbes magazine in the United States, American queer superstars are challenging societal

preconceptions around heterosexuality and cisgenderism (Robhemed, 2017).

Fox and Ralston (2016) analysed the influence of queer representations in media on the teaching experiences and informal learning of school youth and how it can affect the process of building one's gender and sexual diversity, as well as personal identity. Indeed, the above studies demonstrate that queer media representations are crucial in defining who and how school youth can be in sexed and gendered terms. However, none of these studies focused on the intersection between queer celebrities and gender and sexual diversity among school youth.

An additional stratum on the influence of queer representation in media is the Suicide Prevention Resource Centre (2008). They found that increasing the visibility of queer celebrities, through various media outlets is advantageous to the epidemic of suicide among LGBTIQ+ school youth. This is apparent in the findings of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) 2016 study in the United States, which revealed that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth ponder suicide at almost three times the rate of heterosexual youth and 40% of transgender individuals reported having attempted suicide, with the bulk of these attempts occurring before the age of 25. Numerous Queer celebrities have a sense of duty to openly address these issues, even if it means compromising potential career prospects (Grey, 2009).

2.1.2 Queer celebrity visibility and social change

According to Marwick (2010), a celebrity has an influence on gender issues and a high status among school youth. It is unsurprising that school youth who are undergoing the process of shaping their sexual identities, tend to observe and take interest in queer celebrities. Additionally, Marshall (2006, p. 6) adds that "celebrity discourse in contemporary culture allows us to explore the articulation of identity, individuality, values, and norms, whether seen in the real world or online".

Queer celebrities serve as a significant influence on school youth, acting as a "super peer" (Strasburger, Jordan & Donnerstein, 2010). This suggests that

teenagers may seek out queer celebrities as a source of information and standards around gender and sexual diversity, that may not be accessible within their immediate peer group or the formal curriculum. Additionally, the media may reinforce and solidify pre-existing notions and norms surrounding sexuality within their peer group. Moreover, a handful of researchers contend that queer celebrities have the potential to have positive effects on the sexual development of school youth (Duits & Van Zoonen, 2011). This assertion is evident in light of Asia Kate Dillon, a queer celebrity who presented the first gender neutral acting award at the 2017 MTV Movie & TV Awards, said, "I am given the opportunity to be visible in order to provide people with options; there is not a single heteronormative way to exist at all times." (Robhemed, 2017, p. 4).

This visibility has allowed for more scope of imagination outside the conventional gender framework, accommodating diverse identities that transcend the spectrum of the gender continuum (Driver, 2008).

In general, the literature indicates that exposure to queer celebrities influences the sexual cognition and gender and sexual diversity of school youth (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Although there are still risks associated with engaging in social media platforms, the internet, and social media platforms, in particular, provide several opportunities to explore gender expressions, as well as to question established gender standards. However, several research also have consistently shown that users often conform to existing conventions of gender and sexual diversity (Duguay, 2016). Nevertheless, exposure to queer celebrities can also influence school youths' beliefs about gender and sexual diversity roles in what is seen as "normal" or "abnormal" enforcing the binary system.

2.1.3 Queer celebrities actively promote and support sexual diversity

Queer celebrities exemplify individuals who identify with non-binary gender and sexual diversity identities. The phrase 'gender non-binary' serves as an inclusive category that encompasses

several identities within the wide range of gender diversity such as a-gender, bi-gender, post-gender, gender-queer and gender fluid, all of which indicate nonconformity to gender stereotypes (Beemyn, 2011; Green & Maurer, 2017; Richards et al., 2016). Recent societal advancements indicate that gender may extend beyond a binary categorisation and may manifest in many ways.

Over 12% of millennials in the United States identify as transgender or gender nonconforming. Approximately half of this demographic see conventional notions of binary gender as obsolete, instead recognising gender as a continuum. (Kenney, 2021). Halperin (2003, p. 339) attributes the changing fields of gender and sexuality norms in postmodern culture to "new age of sexual radicalism and fluid gender possibilities."

Although there has been an increasing recognition of gender minorities, queer individuals continue to face challenges such as harassment, assault, and discrimination (Grossman et al., 2009). As a response to the dominant binary system and the problem of stigmatisation, queer activists, including queer celebrities, are actively involved in various practical identity politics initiatives. These include the establishment of organisations such as educational programmes, interventions, as well as engaging in advocacy and promoting 'queerpowerment' (Eleftheriadis, 2015).

In the academic realm, academics in the field of queer studies have addressed and challenged existing norms and binary identities by using deconstructivist methodologies influenced by Derrida and Foucault (Butler, 2004). In order to challenge the prevailing construct of hetero-cis-normativity, a number of researchers advocate for the concept of "de-gendering" or the deliberate dismantling of gender norms.

2.1.4 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework that addresses identity, sexuality, and the consequences of defining one's identity is necessary for a rhetorical analysis of the influence of queer celebrities on school youth's perceptions of gender and sexual diversity. The

concept of performativity in Queer Theory corresponds to the idea of celebrities as active actors in questioning societal norms. For this article, we engaged with Jagose's (1996) idea of the Queer theory which underpins the whole study. Jagose's (1996) theory emphasises the need of confronting and transgressing heteronormativity, the binary nature of gender and sexuality, and resisting dominant systems of gender and sexuality. Butler (1993) labels this phenomenon as "the heterosexual matrix." Jagose also recognises that queer theory aims to dismantle the persistent use of classifications and designations that perpetuate stereotypes and cause harm to those occupying marginalised positions, such as those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT). As found in the study by de Lauretis (1991), queer theory offers a more flexible understanding of gender and sexuality in order to improve comprehension of human diversity.

Queer celebrities defy normative norms, utilise their platforms to fight oppressive institutions, and campaign for LGBTQ+ rights, affecting the school youth. The Queer theory questions fixed categories which reveals power systems and examines societal norms that lead to the marginalisation of non-heteronormative and non-cisnormative identities. School youth are in constant interaction with queer media representations where the boundaries of gender and sexual diversity are destabilised, where hegemonic cisnormativity on various media outlets needs to be queered, and where gender fluidity among their peers is present. Secondly, celebrities in the public eye act as agents of visibility, which is an important theme in queer theory. People who challenge heteronormative and heterosexist narratives help create a more diverse media environment. The growing visibility of queer celebrities challenges the normalisation of dominant identities, providing alternative narratives to school youth and questioning hegemonic, normative, and oppressive systems.

This phenomenon resides in the fact that school youth are exposed to binary frameworks that are pervasive in both school environments and media

platforms. These frameworks provide a challenge and disrupt the conventional belief that gender can only be classified as either masculine or feminine. As found in the study by Gorin and Dubied (2011), queer celebrity media influences the societal, traditional, gender, and sexual diversity aspects of one's life and is a site for the negotiation of ethical and social standards and values.

3. Methods:

This study explored the dynamic impact of queer celebrities on school youths' perceptions of gender and sexual diversity and questions the normalisation of heterosexuality and cisnormativity amongst school youth. This study utilised qualitative phenomenology, a research approach that seeks to explore and understand school youths' perceptions of gender and sexual diversity regarding queer celebrities. The narratives of the school youth served to analyse, describe, and understand their perceptions of gender and sexual diversity in terms of queer celebrity influence. I

In this study, an interpretative phenomenological method was used to explore the influence of queer celebrities on seven grade ten learners. The narratives of the learners were collected through semi-structured interviews. These interviews aimed to capture the personal experiences and reflections of the participants regarding the influence of queer celebrities on their perceptions of gender and sexual diversity. There were however strict criteria for these learners to participate in the study:

- Permission to do research was requested in writing to the principal
- A parental assent form was issued to participants to give to their parents to sign
- A Child Assent form was attached for the learners to sign
- A letter from the registered school counsellor, to assist learners in case they need it was also attached to the parents' form.

The study was conducted in Kroonstad in the Free State province at a private high school. We gathered qualitative data using a non-probability random and convenience sample of learners who had the opportunity to ruminate, share, and, ideally, broaden their understandings in order to acquire new information on these topics. The school was easily accessible for me for time and financial reasons, thus making it convenience sampling. The seven participants exhibited a range of cultural backgrounds, linguistic abilities, and life experiences. Table 1 presents a summary of the participants' biographical information. The data analysis technique followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) theme analysis, which included a phased approach. The data underwent a rigorous process of six phases of analysis, commencing with a comprehensive study of the interviews conducted with the seven participants. This study aimed to identify common themes and repeating patterns in the descriptions and perceptions of learners and their experiences with queer celebrities. Subsequently, themes were discerned.

4. Result and discussion:

The findings affirm the intricate and dynamic nature of gender expression within a culture that upholds traditional heterosexual and cisnormativity norms. Therefore, these discoveries enable researchers in the field of school youth and media to engage in more profound contemplation on the potential utilisation of queer celebrity platforms to promote alternative discourses, including queer rhetoric, with the aim of disrupting the prevailing narratives prevalent in our society.

Alternatively, the findings gave deeper insights into the influence of queer celebrities on school youth's perceptions of gender and sexual diversity. The learners shared their thoughts, scenarios, and beliefs on a range of issues pertaining to queer celebrities' influence on school youth's perceptions of gender and sexual diversity. The findings gravitate between gender and sexual diversity identification, challenging heterosexual and cisgender stereotypes, visibility, advocacy and being educated on various media platforms rather

than the formal curriculum at school. The data obtained from the participants were examined and analysed, and the following themes arose from the collected data: “queering” diversity of gender and

sexuality; the interconnected relationship of queer celebrities as an educating outlet; and lastly, resisting stereotypes of heterosexism and cisgenderism.

Table 1. A summary of participants’ biographical information.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Home language	Sexual Orientation	Race/country of birth
1. Wendy	Female	16	Afrikaans	Bisexual	Coloured/South African
2. Kea	Male	17	Sotho	Straight	Black/South African
3. Divya	Female	17	English	Straight	Indian/South African
4. Leo	Male	17	Sotho	Cisgender	Black/South African
5. Zwane	Female	16	Zulu	Queer	Black/South African
6. Tumelo	Male	17	Sotho	Straight	Black/South African
7. Rethsi	Male	17	Sotho	Gay	Black/South African

4.1 Theme 1: Acceptance and Uniqueness

When the participants were asked: “Do you know any Queer celebrities”? Each of the seven participants demonstrated knowledge of at least three queer celebrities, including both local and worldwide figures:

“Miley Cyrus; Jaiden Smith; Sam Smith; Mohale.” (Wendy, Female).

“I know some, which is Lasizwe who I follow even on Instagram, uhm who’s this one bathong, I like some of the lesbians, I follow them, Big Prince, she is like the American lesbian that I follow, I follow Xoli from Jo’burg, she is a transgender, I follow them, like their lifestyle, how they generate money.” (Rethsi, Male).

“I’m exposed to LGBTQ celebrities via social media. I can name a few from Hollywood which are Sam Smith; Matt Danner and Nathan Ray.” (Tumelo, Male).

“I can name a few. Harry Styles, James Charles, Somizi and Ellen DeGeneres.” (Leo, Male).

These results indicate that young students are being exposed to and tolerant of queer celebrities, both within their local communities and on a worldwide scale. In order to assess the extent to which queer celebrities are seen as distinct from one's own gender or sexual orientation by school-aged individuals, we posed the following question to them: "Do you perceive queer celebrities as being different to your own gender or sexual

orientation?" It is important to mention that the respondents had a same perspective on perceptions. Most of them saw queer celebrities as indistinguishable from those who share their own gender or sexual orientation, and two of the seven participants classified them as unique. This signifies the acceptance and visibility of queer celebrities:

"No, I don't feel like they are different in a way that we shouldn't be accepting of them or it's a taboo, I just feel like they are different and diverse and unique in their own way." (Divya, Female).

"No, not really. I don't know, for me I find it as a normal thing, yes they are unique, I'd say they are unique, they not different." (Zwane, Female).

"No, they are not different from mine. The only difference between me and them is what type of people or genders they are attracted to and what I'm attracted to. So, that's the only difference that I see between me and them." (Tumelo, Male).

Leo, a Black cisgender male, reported a difference in gender and sexual orientation towards Queer celebrities. A possible explanation for this might be that he categorises himself as cisgender and that he mentions his father's influence and also a form of Christianity. The response to the questions included:

"Yes, as they have chose to go against, I'll say tradition and they have decided to date only their type of gender such as Harry Styles, Harry Styles only dates men and James Charles, he identifies as a gay men." (Leo, Male).

4.2 Theme 2: Hegemonic Institutions

Two interviewees explicitly said that their schools are oppressive institutions, which is a significant observation to consider. This might be a reason why queer celebrities are crucial and serve as a resource in educating school-age individuals about gender and sexual diversity:

"No. My school does not provide support, do you understand and I would say my school is also a discriminatory environment for gender diverse children. One of my peers, I've seen one of my peers actually being bullied by an educator. Because they fall under the LGBTQ, yeah thingy." (Wendy, Female).

"So they need to change the curriculum, teach, teach us, and involve teachers minds because some teachers would be homophobic inside and shoving it than saying it because they would say showing it would be abusing you verbally." (Rethsi, Male).

One participant emphasised that she finds queer celebrities educational:

"I feel like uhm, the way celebrities express themselves and stuff are only help us to be more educated about the LGBTQ community instead of changing, it will make me grow in a way and increase my knowledge." (Zwane, Female).

Kea's answer mentioned that suicide can occur if they are not taught about gender and sexual diversity. Furthermore, the response to the question correlates with the Suicide Prevention Resource Centre (2018) who found that increasing visibility through social media and schools of marginalised groups such as LGBTQ is beneficial under the epidemic of suicide among LGBTQ school youth.

These observations suggests that the younger generation heavily depends on informal curriculum as a means of acquiring knowledge, given its limited coverage within the conventional educational curriculum. The most notable answer was when Leo explicitly said, "I learn and educate myself about this."

These narratives underscore that school youth turn to the media and queer celebrities for answers to educate themselves on gender and sexual diversity due to hegemonic institutions. These findings further support the idea of Valkenburg and Piotrowski (2017) who argue that nowadays school youth spend more time on social media than they do at school. This finding agrees with Bhana and

Msibi's (2012) findings, which showed that South African schools are homophobic, and that teachers view queer learners as invisible.

4.3 Theme 3: Resisting the normalisation of gender and sexual normativity

In what ways do you think exposure to Queer celebrities can influence your perception or opinion on gender and sexual diversity?" The overall response to this question was very positive. The participants highlighted how queer celebrities disrupted stereotypical gender and sexual norms. They spoke of how these celebrities had helped them question and break down rigid boundaries, leading to a more inclusive perspective on gender and sexuality. This demonstrates that queer celebrities are challenging traditional ideas of heterosexuality and cisnormativity among pupils since all of these learners, with the exception of one, do not question or critique queer celebrities:

"Overall, the influence is self-realisation, pride, and confidence. This helps changing people's opinions and perceptions. Many people in SA are homophobic, but many have become comfortable with having members of the LGBTQ around." (Wendy, female).

"... I think I became more accepting of other people when I saw celebrities owning their sexuality, so I feel like they had a lot of perspective, they influence my perspective and opinion on anything." (Divya, female).

Leo was the only participant to critique queer celebrities:

"Celebrities can positively or negatively impact our lives, as for example on the news recently, there has been this celeb, Dylan Mulvaney who is a man and now identifies as a woman and he was, he was advertising for women's underwear for Nike, so it could impact young children to see that underwear is for... that underwear... I would say that since he was wearing female underwear it could, I don't know lead young children in the wrong direction about where they fit in, in society and it could allow people to, aah, I would say question

themselves about what gender they are and if they would like to identify as part of the LGBTQ community."

The findings of the study indicate that queer celebrities play a crucial role in raising awareness about LGBTQ+ issues, including discrimination and the fight for equal rights. Moreover, the findings revealed that queer celebrities disrupted notions of compulsory heterosexual and cisgendered beliefs. This awareness among school youth will inspire some to become more socially and politically active in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights. Queer celebrities have the potential to foster views that are more inclusive and tolerant, so serving as a catalyst for inspiring activity aimed at promoting social change.

De Wee (2021) argues that some South African celebrities are happy to represent and speak out about their gender identity and sexual orientation. Learners believed that queer celebrities do have an influence on a person's perception of gender and sexual diversity, and they feel connected to queer celebrities. It is encouraging to compare this result with that of Kimathi (2013) who found that role models such as celebrities, influence the attitudes and behaviours of many people, especially school youth. This can determine what kind of person they become, including their appearance, attitudes, gender and sexual diversity, as well as goals in life:

"Celebrities are very influential, especially members that are with the LGBTQ society, celebrities can have a positive influence on youth, in fact they can serve as role models too." (Kea, Male).

5. Conclusion:

The presence of queer celebrities significantly influences the attitudes and perceptions of gender and sexual diversity among students in educational settings. Through the act of sharing personal experiences, questioning established cultural norms, and pushing for equitable rights, these individuals serve as catalysts for fostering empathy, comprehension, and engagement among the younger cohort. The use of their platforms by these

prominent individuals for the sake of advocacy and representation serves to foster the development of a society characterised by fairness and inclusivity, whereby the celebration of gender and sexual diversity takes precedence over its stigmatisation. The study highlights the significance of commemorating and providing assistance to queer celebrities, as they serve as catalysts for empowering forthcoming cohorts to accept diversity and strive towards the establishment of a more inclusive global society. The impact they have on the perspectives of young individuals at educational institutions serves as evidence of the significant role that visibility and representation have in developing the attitudes of future generations.

6. Recommendations:

We acknowledge the small sample size with limited responses. Therefore, the findings can't be generalised. We do, however, recommend a larger sample size for future research, which might include a mixed-method approach. Given the findings, it is recommended that future research be conducted on the impact of queer celebrities on school youth, considering that queer celebrities disrupt hegemonic heterosexuality and cisgenderism, raise awareness about LGBTQ+ issues, including discrimination and the fight for equal rights. Furthermore, queer celebrities use their platforms for advocacy and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society where gender and sexual diversity is celebrated. This inclusivity can make its way to the educational setting, leading to more inclusivity of gender and sexual diversity in the school system. Furthermore, we recommend that future research analyse why school youth asserted that queer celebrities educate them on gender and sexual diversity. It is noteworthy that the influence queer celebrities have on school youth remains relatively nascent within academic discourse, thus warranting further comprehensive exploration to foster critical contemplation of the influence of queer celebrities on the gender and sexual diversity of school youth within educational settings.

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