The L Life: The L Word and Narrating Biographies

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Abstract

This thesis examines the reception of the television series *The L Word* by young adult lesbians in Melbourne. It shows the influence of the series as a media object that is significant to three aspects of these women's lesbian lifestyle construction: coming out, lifestyle development, and integration into the lesbian community. This thesis argues that, as a media object, the series helps these lesbians narrate their own biographies as they negotiate their life transitions into adulthood.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

i. this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters

ii. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used

iii. this thesis is less than 40,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices

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Date: 9-11-15
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 2
Declaration ............................................................................................................................................... 3
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................................. 4

Chapter One: Reception of *The L Word*, Lesbian Spectatorship and Conceptual Framework ............................................................. 8
1.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 8
   *Aims of this Thesis* .............................................................................................................................. 9
1.2 Literature Review ............................................................................................................................... 12
   *The L Word: Critical Discourse* ......................................................................................................... 12
   *Examining The L Word: Audience Scholarships* ............................................................................. 20
   *Audience/Reception Studies* ............................................................................................................ 21
   *Lesbian Spectatorship* ..................................................................................................................... 25
   *Homosexuality in Melbourne: From Activism to Indifference* ...................................................... 30
   *Modern Identity Construction* .......................................................................................................... 36
1.3 Methodology ..................................................................................................................................... 40
   *Participants* ...................................................................................................................................... 42
   *Obstacles* ......................................................................................................................................... 47
1.4 Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 51

Chapter Two: Coming Out in an *L Word* Era ..................................................................................... 53
2.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 53
2.2 Literature Review: Coming Out ........................................................................................................ 54
   *Theories of Transition* ..................................................................................................................... 54
   *Rite of Passage/Ritual* ..................................................................................................................... 57
   *Influence of the Media* .................................................................................................................... 59
Chapter Three: Lifestyle and *The L Word* ........................................... 90
3.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 90
3.2 Literature Review: Lesbian Lifestyle .......................................... 91
   ‘Lesbian’: A Brief History .................................................................. 91
   *The Gayworld* .............................................................................. 93
   *Lifestyles and Consumer Culture* ................................................. 96
   *Lesbian Lifestyles* ....................................................................... 99
3.3 Lifestyle Development – Influence of *The L Word* .................. 104
   *Role Models* ............................................................................... 105
   *Dress and Embodiment* ................................................................ 109
   *Lesbian Sexual Practice* ............................................................. 115
3.4 Conclusion ................................................................................... 120

Chapter Four: Finding and Defining Community and the Influence of *The L Word* ................................................................. 123
4.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 123
4.2 Literature Review: Lesbian Community ...................................... 124
   *Community: A Brief Overview* .................................................... 124
   *Lesbian Community: Global and Local* ........................................ 128
   *Homonormativity* ....................................................................... 132
4.3 Finding Lesbian Communities in the Modern World: The Impact of *The L Word* ................................................................ 135
   *Common Ties* ............................................................................. 136
Chapter One: Reception of *The L Word*, Lesbian Spectatorship and Conceptual Framework

1.1 Introduction

Television constantly punctuates, articulates and manipulates the world around us, presenting us with highly constructed and artificial images that inevitably inform and influence our everyday lives and perceptions (Creeber, 2006, p. 1).

Within the lesbian community of Melbourne you would be hard pressed to find a woman who has not watched all or part of the television series *The L Word* (Chaiken, 2004), or who does not have an opinion one way or another on it. Despite not being aired on network television in Melbourne for over 5 years, it is still very much in the circulation of the lesbian community. Beginning in 2004 and culminating six seasons later in 2009, *The L Word* was undoubtedly successful not only in America but on a global scale. It was distributed worldwide by MGM Worldwide Television across no less than 45 other countries, as well as downloaded (both legally and illegally) across many more. Its distribution was supported by a robust online following, which included websites such as *The L Word Online* (thelwordonline.com), *Showtime: The L Word* (sho.com/sho/the-l-word/home), and the immensely popular lesbian popular
cultural website *After Ellen* (afterellen.com). The popularity of the show was encapsulated by its longevity, as well as the online fan culture that surrounded it. Indeed it even spawned a briefly successful spin-off series entitled *The Real L Word* (Chaiken, 2010), which utilised the popular faux-documentary style to depict the lives of a group of lesbians in Los Angeles.

The significance of Showtime series *The L Word* within the (relatively small) pantheon of lesbian representations in television is undisputed. The representation of lesbianism that it portrays is highly disputed. Too femme, too white, too rich, too vanilla, shout the critics. But in fact it is the very plethora of voices straining to be heard in the diverse and burgeoning critical discourse, which make the series a significant one. While much of the critical discourse surrounding the series concerns itself with the politics implicit in its representations of lesbianism, perhaps a more important question to be asking is this: How is *The L Word* received by lesbians?

**Aims of this Thesis**

This thesis employs a qualitative research approach to argue that young lesbians, as elucidated by my research participants, utilize *The L Word* as a media object in the process of narrating their individual biographies as they transition into adulthood. *The L Word* can be understood as a media object in that it has become, for this specific audience, greater than merely the text itself. Several theorists have noted that the audience relationship with a televisual text has
changed with the introduction of DVDs (Hills, 2007; Kompare, 2006). Others, such as Williams (2015) have examined this new era of technological saturation as a ‘post-object period’, wherein fans of television programmes seek different forms of pleasure from different forms of viewing. I posit that these television programmes, which were once viewed as television texts, have now become media objects, to be used and re-used in a multiplicity of new ways. I define media object as more than merely a television text, but the program in all its forms. This means as it exists on broadcast television, as a physical object on DVD or Blu-Ray, as a virtual object in the form of a media file on a computer. As both a physical and virtual object, the media object can be utilized with a greater sense of agency and mobility by the audience. This is true of The L Word, which has been used by young lesbians to shape their sexual identities within the broader social environment.

This thesis will show how my participants’ mediated experience of The L Word provides them with an introduction and initiation to lesbian lifestyles. The term ‘lesbian lifestyles’ here denotes the ways in which lesbianism is distinguished as a distinct lifestyle choice in contemporary society. Whether through behaviours, practices, stylistic markers or other, lesbian lifestyles refer to the diversity of options available in how lesbians conduct themselves and present their sexual narratives in broader society. This is distinct from the term lifestyle, which refers to the concept of how an individual forges their sense of self.

This thesis posits that young lesbians use this knowledge of the lesbian lifestyles to narrate and construct their own biographies during the period of transition
marked by their youth status and their coming out as a lesbian. The narration of one’s own biography is a sociological concept investigated by Anthony Giddens (1991). It refers to the ways in which an individual makes active choices about their life, and in doing so consciously constructs a narrative of their own biography. In terms of my participants, this is most clearly exhibited through their use of *The L Word* in three key aspects of their biographical construction: coming out, sexual identity development, and integration into the lesbian community.

This thesis addresses disciplinary fields surrounding queer television in examining a television series with predominantly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (hereafter LGBT) characters. It is the first study to examine *The L Word* from a media object approach, examining the series as more than just the text. It also intervenes in discourses in the field of audience and reception studies in analyzing the impact and influence of this series on a specifically lesbian audience. It draws from sociological concepts concerning self-identity construction to draw conclusions about the reception of *The L Word* by a demographic of young Melbournian lesbians.

This chapter will provide an introduction to the critical discourse surrounding *The L Word*, arguing that the persistent focus on representational politics has undersold the potential impact the series has had on its audience. It will then move on to review the relevant literature surrounding audience reception studies, and specifically theories of lesbian reception, to ascertain whether this is an effective way to examine the audience relationship with the text. It will
provide a contextual background on Melbourne’s history of homosexuality, including how the contemporary environment impacts upon young people in particular. Finally it will detail the fieldwork I undertook, providing an introduction to my participants and the specific challenges faced by this form of research.

1.2 Literature Review

_The L Word: Critical Discourse_

The presence of _The L Word_ in the media landscape has been cause for much response from the academic world. Although many remain preoccupied with questions of representation within _The L Word_, several have noted and researched the significance of the text to a broader audience. The most significant text when it comes to discussing critical responses to the series is Kim Akass and Janet McCabe’s _Reading The L World: Outing Contemporary Television_ (2006), which compiled a variety of critical responses to the show, as well as interviews with writer Guinevere Turner, and actors Katherine Moennig and Erin Daniels. Akass and McCabe’s collection reflects the dominant trend in writing about the show, which concerns itself with value judgments over the representation of lesbians as not truly reflective of the lesbian community’s diversity. Several chapters, however, acknowledge the importance of spectatorship in understanding the significance of the series.
Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2006) provides the foreword to the collection, and offers several thoughts on the viewership of the series. She suggests that the impetus to produce the series lay in “its potential appeal to non-lesbian viewers (which rested) on the understanding that lesbian sex, girl-on-girl, is a whole cottage industry for heterosexual men” (Sedgwick, 2006, p. xix). However Sedgwick goes on to suggest that in fact, the way that the first season of the series is structured is such that the true demographic may be straight women, due to the positioning of character Jenny Schecter as the young, ‘straight’ girl whose life gets turned upside down upon initiation to the world of lesbianism. She notes that Schecter “seems poised in these early episodes to offer an invitingly unformed conduit for the lesbian fixations of a variety of viewers but maybe in the first place, non-lesbian identified women” (Sedgwick, 2006, p. xx).

Several others have noted the audience factor in their discussions on the series. Diane Anderson-Minshall remarks that “like most of lesbian America I was jubilant about the pioneering nature of a television show that was made by, for and about queer women – a show that could imbue our lives with the same glitz and glamour (and all its inherent artificality) that straight characters on other TV programs experience” (2006, p. 12). For Anderson-Minshall, the significance of the burgeoning lesbian audience lies in how this audience reacts to a series depicting lesbianism when all of the actresses portraying said lesbians vehemently deny any queerness on their own part (despite several rumours to the contrary) rather than in any kind of empowering mediation of the text itself by the lesbian community. This focus on the negative or insouciant impact of the
series on the lesbian community is similarly explored by Paula Graham (2006), who remarks upon the lack of impact the series had upon a British audience. Graham claims that *The L Word* was received with “little more than a cocked eyebrow among the British chattering classes, gay or straight – and it would appear to be the less-than-reconstructed straight men who have most taken the show to their hearts here” (2006, p. 15). Graham suggests that this lack of interest in the series from a British audience is due to the ‘abundance’ of representations of homosexuals in British television, coupled with the British public's relationship with subscription television. Graham is a sole voice amongst the canon of *The L Word* researchers who denies or moderates the impact of the series on a lesbian audience. It is interesting to note her theory that there has been a saturation of this style of representations in British media, particularly in light of the creation of television series *Lip Service* (Braun, 2010), which is very much a descendent of *The L Word*, portraying a group of lesbians living in Glasgow, Scotland. Perhaps this is yet another example of British culture not translating for the American audience, and vice versa, because the success of *Lip Service* has been limited in America and Australia.

Despite the negative nature of Graham’s perception of the reception of the series, the dominant view amongst critical literature discussing *The L Word* notes its significance amongst the lesbian community, and the close, although at times problematic, relationship between the audience and text. Much of this discussion centers on the representation of lesbians within the series, with many suggesting that this is a cause of concern and anxiety amongst the lesbian audience (Wolfe & Roripaugh, 2006). Others, such as Samuel Chambers (2006), argue that the very
significance of the series demands a thorough examination of the norms portrayed. Outside of Reading The L Word: Outing Contemporary Culture, there are several theorists who have chosen not to delve into the representational debate. Kellie Burns and Cristyn Davies (2009) explore the series in terms of the way it constructs what they term a “cosmopolitan sexual citizen” out of the audience. Burns and Davies “offer an alternate strategy for reading lesbians in image-based media and popular culture that attends to the ways in which lesbian subjectivities are produced within neoliberal consumer and lifestyle contexts that establish the limits of who the sexual citizen is, and the possibilities of what or who they can become” (2009, p. 176). Despite this alternate approach, Burns and Davies focus most of their attention on the production of this type of viewer from the text down, rather than from the viewer up, exploring plot devices and characterization which reflect this cosmopolitan neo-liberal aesthetic. It is intriguing that throughout much of the body of work relating to The L Word, only a few view it from a lesbian spectatorship perspective.

One such critic is Sarah Warn, founder and editor of After Ellen (afterellen.com), a website for lesbians which focuses primarily on lesbians within the entertainment industry (both fictional and real). Warn provides the introduction to Akass and McCabe’s collection, and champions the series in terms of its impact and appeal to the broader lesbian community (2006). She notes how, even prior to the airing of the first episode, interest in the series had provided a swarm of traffic to her then fledging website, on which she had documented what little was known about the series. She describes how “[she] continued to write about the show as more information became available, and [her] traffic doubled, then
tripled, and finally skyrocketed when *The L Word* finally aired in January 2004” (Warn, 2006, p. 2). Well placed to understand the lesbian public’s interest in the series, Warn notes that AfterEllen.com “is a business that has literally been built on the lesbian community’s interest in *The L Word*” (2006, p. 2). This preoccupation with the series from the lesbian community is put down to a single factor. According to Warn, the interest in the series from the lesbian community can be attributed to the way in which the series presents a community of lesbians, rather than an individual character. Warn states:

> But love it or hate it, this series represents the first – and so far, only – attempt to make lesbians, and to a lesser extent, bisexual women, the centre of attention. Instead of being forced to settle for one or two lesbian characters among a sea of heterosexuals, lesbians finally get to see their lives and relationships front-and-centre on *The L Word*, with the heterosexual characters and relationships on the periphery for a change. We finally have a group of people on television whose lives resemble ours (2006, p. 3).

What Warn herself places front and centre is the prevalence of a lesbian audience, one which embraces the lesbian community presented within the series. Furthermore, in a keen appraisal of mediated viewing practices, Warn suggests that “for many (lesbians), consuming *The L Word* is as much about discussing, analyzing and re-enacting the series with friends and other viewers as it is actually watching the episodes” (2006, p. 7). What Warn foregrounds
here, and what I will explore more exhaustively in my later chapters, is the myriad ways in which the series provides a model of lesbian lifestyles which informs its audience's own lifestyles.

Curiously, and perhaps significantly, Sarah Warn, an Internet journalist, is the only contributor to *Reading The L Word: Outing Contemporary Culture* who makes notes of the significance of this relationship between text and lesbian audience in any significant manner. Becky Walker (2009), in her study entitled 'Imagining the Future of Lesbian Community: The Case of Online Lesbian Communities and the Issue of Trans' used *The L Word* as a centralized point of reference for the broader lesbian community. Walker investigates online *The L Word* fan groups and discussion pages, and examines the way in which their participants discuss controversial issues, such as transgenderism, as a tool for understanding lesbians’ interaction and formulations of community in a vastly technological-based world. Walker examined the online groups as examples of “lesbian political communities that engaged in confrontations and debate (which) will have an effect on the future shape and constitution of lesbian communities and norms” (2009, p. 924). Despite the fact that Walker does not discuss the series in any great detail, the fact that she uses online *The L Word* fan communities as representatives of the lesbian community underlines the significance not only of the series to a lesbian audience but of the interactive relationships between audience and community.

More recently, upon completion of the final series of the show, another anthology of critical responses was released. Edited by Dana Heller, this followed
on from Akass and McCabe’s *Reading The L Word: Outing Contemporary Culture*, and offered a variety of opinions on the impact and success of the series. Heller argues:

This volume proceeds from the recognition that *The L Word*, for good or ill, transformed the lesbian television landscape as we knew it and reshaped the discursive communities that follow queer television, talk about it, and care about the narratives and characters that drive it. It fulfilled a long-neglected, visceral desire for lesbian stories and images, and served as a critical flashpoint of cultural anxiety and debate about the wages of lesbian stories and images in mainstream media… (It also) proceeds from the understanding that while *The L Word* ended in 2009 it manages to live on. Imaginatively, it lives on in the aforementioned discursive communities that continue to generate dialog, gossip, fan fiction, and buzz (2013, p. 6).

As in the first anthology of critical writings on *The L Word*, there are some legitimate criticisms of the show’s representational politics (Ficera, 2013; Beirne, 2013; Davies & Burns, 2013) as well as some applauding the representational capacity of the series (Renshaw, 2013). Interestingly, there is a much greater focus on the show from an audience standpoint in this volume.
Faye Davies (2013) explores the audience reaction to the series’ final season, claiming that “what became apparent from an analysis of postings and responses is that any enjoyment of the series came from non-traditional viewing perspectives that embraced the openness of the storyline or a celebration of the lesbian culture the show generally portrayed” (p. 37). She lauded the audience as active, and suggested that the lesbian audience prioritized visibility over representational or narrative shortcomings. Significantly, she suggests “the pleasure for lesbian audience members was not just in the watching of the show, but also in its impact and integration into their own lives” (Davies, 2013, p. 42). This supports my own hypotheses about the series, and is a pivotal factor to the forthcoming discussions.

Heidi Schlipphacke similarly discusses the aspect of community and audience pleasure in her exploration of how the series represents and deconstructs traditional understandings of lesbian monogamy (Schlipphacke, 2013). Winnie McRoy (2013) explores the community of *The L Word* in comparison with the Toni Morrison novel *Sula* (Morrison, 1973), suggesting each bind together their own community through the representation of a common enemy. Deborah Hanan (2013) examines the audience of the series from a commodification perspective, arguing that the integration of transgressive content into the narrative reflects an attempt to corner another niche market. She states “by portraying (and potentially catering to) queerly transgressive and culturally unrecognized consumers through a product that presented identity as highly unstable and situationally contingent, the series worked to both reinforce and undermine contemporary cable network strategies centered on niche marketing.
models” (Hanan, 2013, p. 153). Finally, Tara Shea Burke (2013) examined how the series, and its reality style spin-off *The Real L Word* produced a community in the form of a dedicated and active audience who engaged in discussion and criticism of both of the series.

All of these researchers who discuss the significance of *The L Word* to a lesbian audience do so understanding that the relationship is significant and interactive. Despite this, there exists a gap in the scholarship wherein an empirical study of lesbians’ mediated experience of the series should exist: a gap which this thesis addresses.

**Examining *The L Word*: Audience Scholarships**

There are two key areas of scholarship that frame my audience-study of *The L Word*. The first is an audience or reception studies framework, a branch of television studies which takes the audience as a starting point for the examination of a televisual text. The second is the concept of lesbian spectatorship, a scholarship derived from film studies, which examines the lesbian viewer and her context in conjunction with the text itself. These two fields of study are significant to my own work as they examine the relationship between the audience and the visual object: something I also seek to explore. Where this thesis differs is in how it utilizes a media object approach to this audience reception discipline.
**Audience/Reception Studies**

As is echoed throughout the critical discourse surrounding the television series *The L Word*, the concept of audience or reception studies has often been ignored or relegated to inferior importance in studies of the televisual text. Matt Hills (2006) provides a historical analysis of the significance of audience studies within academic discourses on television. He argues that, whilst latter-day television studies scholars have taken the audience as the initial point in their research into texts, that initially the academic focus was more on the text itself rather than the socio-cultural contexts produced by audiences. Hills divides television audience studies into three main schools; the ‘effects’ tradition, the ‘uses and gratifications’ tradition, and the ‘encoding and decoding’ model. He also foreshadows a fourth emerging strain of criticism, which he defines as the study of the televisual audience within the contemporary media culture. Hills argues that television audience study is largely influenced by the contextual academic environment, suggesting that different phases in audience and reception studies are inherently linked to different methodologies, which in turn create different conceptual assumptions. This historical aspect is most clearly defined in the methodological differences between quantitative research and the more contemporary favoring of qualitative or ethnographic studies (which this thesis falls into the category of).

The effects tradition of television studies is, arguably, borne out of the era of moral panic about the power of the visual image over the audience. This is most clearly demonstrated by the ‘video nasties’ debate of the 1980s, wherein
tumultuous debate ensued over the potential impact of films, particularly horror films, on those who watched them given the relative availability of them given the new technology of video cassettes (Barker, 1984). The debate ensued between those who wanted some form of censorship on these films, and those arguing for freedom of expression and the right to choice in film viewing. The constant refrain from pro-censorship activists was that the ‘effect’ of the often graphic depictions of violence (particularly that which was sexual in nature) was unknown, and that these images could surely disturb and disrupt ‘naïve’ and ‘impressionable’ minds such as children or intellectually challenged adults. Indeed the debate surrounding the video nasties reflects the kinds of questions and contentions, which were explored in the effects tradition of audience studies. Effects research focused on the power of the televisual image – and its impact on an audience. It assumed a passive audience, vulnerable to the infiltration of ideas and beliefs from observing them on television. There is a variety of criticism of this approach, such as that the behaviourist paradigm deals with television in an artificial setting, removed from its social context, and that the alleged impact of these television programs were only visible on ‘others’ and not on the researchers themselves. The usefulness of the ‘effects’ tradition is complicated however, by the fact that some kinds of pro-social behaviours, such as consumption of products advertised, were used as evidence of possibility for other kinds of anti-social behaviours such as those feared by the pro-censorship activists in the video nasties debates.

As often occurs, the next wave of audience studies posited itself in almost direct opposition to the effects tradition. What Hills designates as the ‘uses and
gratifications’ tradition was in effect the inverse of the effects tradition in that it assumed the audience actively used television in order to derive specific psychological gratifications, such as belonging to a community of viewers, or building up a cognitive knowledge of the world. While this theoretically could be useful in understanding the audience’s use of the televisual text, the assumption that the television audience can be divorced from their social contexts and analysed as purely psychological individuals was never adequately explained.

Perhaps the most significant of the traditional models for audience studies is pioneered by Stuart Hall (1980) in his study ‘Encoding and Decoding’ (from which this tradition takes its name). Hall argued that there were three potential possibilities from an individual reading a televisual text: they could produce a preferred reading that fitted the meanings ‘encoded’ into the text, they could reject this entirely to provide an oppositional reading, or they could reject some aspects and accept others, creating a negotiated reading of the text. This approach differed markedly from previous models of audience research in its ethnographic methodological basis. The audiences were studied by observing their practices in naturally occurring environments, then seeking to relate these practices to issues of cultural power. The encoding/decoding model is particularly significant for studies of fan culture, and has been utilized by scholars such as John Fiske (1992), who have championed the ability of the fan community to actively resist preferred readings. The limitations of the encoding/decoding model, however, lie in its applicability to multiple levels and genres of television texts. As television programs become more diverse and
multifaceted, it becomes more difficult to determine what constitutes a 'preferred' and 'oppositional' reading.

The final approach, which Hills posits as being an 'audience and media culture' model, is a fairly recent trend and has emerged from the contemporary landscape of new media and multi-level engagement with that media. The primary difference between this approach and those that have preceded it is that the media culture approach deals with the entire environment of media as a patchwork quilt of audience relationships that is constantly being informed and evolved. This, in effect, implies that each audience study is undertaken with a cognizance of not only the relationship between the audience and a specific text, but pays attention to the textual environment inhabited by the audience: the range of texts that are open to an audience. This move towards a broader understanding of the textual environment is brought about largely by the saturation of media in the contemporary technologically based society. The in-depth access to media once afforded only to a dedicated fan is now available for all consumers, and indeed is utilized by a much broader audience than ever before. Hills suggests that, just as televisions are no longer a “bounded object of study”, neither are audiences (Hills, 2006).

These television studies traditions are significant in shaping the landscape of audience/reception studies, as they examine the function and action of the audience. Despite their position within the scholarship of television studies, it is possible to view these traditions in conjunction with film studies ideas around lesbian spectatorship, which explores the ways in which a lesbian audience
interprets a screen text in order to create and sustain their own viewing pleasure.

**Lesbian Spectatorship**

The discipline of lesbian spectatorship shares with latter concepts of television audience studies an acknowledgement of the social context of the viewer. This is an important notion when considering the influence of a series such as *The L Word* on a uniquely lesbian audience. This section will examine lesbian spectatorship and its potential applicability to an audience-based investigation of *The L Word*.

Audience interactions with texts have been identified as a key strand of feminist media investigation in the past twenty years (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Byerly and Ross suggest that the conceptualization of the audience has moved “through an arc from passive to active to interactive, so the embodied audience has become fragmented as the media industry tries to deliver niche audiences to particular advertisers” (2006, p. 56). They identify the rise of digital television and the Internet as a key tool in reformations of audience research, meaning “the viewer really can exert influence over how she watches, listens to, and reads popular media” (Byerly & Ross, 2006, p. 57). Byerly and Ross suggest that, while significant scholarship exists which discusses the soap opera as a women’s genre, and the gendered audience it implies, there is somewhat of a gap in terms of discussing the possibilities for social interaction based on being a viewer of a
soap opera. They also argue that “the vast majority of feminist scholarship on women as audience has tended to focus on women’s appreciation and understanding of particular ‘female-oriented’ texts, what they mean to them and their lives, and how they work with content both on their own and with others” (Byerly & Ross, 2006, p. 69). However more contemporary study has begun to explore the ways in which technological advancements have altered the relationship between audience and text/object. They point to the proliferation of fan sites on the Internet, and the subcultural fan practices which occur, as well as the accessibility of television programs in the home through online downloads, or DVD purchases. The power and active agency of the audience has similarly been acknowledged by media institutions, who adapt programming to suit the preferences of their audiences. This reflexive relationship between producer and consumer reflects the modernist paradigm inherent in self-narration of an individual’s biography.

The power of the female audience in shaping the reading of texts is mirrored in understandings of lesbian spectatorship. As with the critical discourse surrounding The L Word, much of the academic debate surrounding lesbian media centers on the representation of lesbians within film and television texts. This increased scrutiny has accompanied an increase in representation from the 1990s onwards. However, some scholars have acknowledged that the lesbian audience and the ‘lesbian reading’ of texts, is equally as significant as understanding the representational politics inherent in lesbian texts. The concept of a lesbian reading of a text is not dissimilar to the televisual tradition of encoding and decoding. For the lesbian viewer, to read lesbianism into a text
in which it is not overtly situated requires an *oppositional* reading. This is framed within a lesbian spectatorship perspective as an interpretive strategy.

Cheryl Dobinson and Kevin Young (2000), in their research into lesbian spectatorship, note, “research examining the relationship between lesbians (and gay men) and the media has tended to focus on issues of invisibility and lack of accurate or positive representation, rather than on the exploration of an *active* lesbian audience” (p. 98). In conducting an empirical study analyzing lesbian viewing strategies, they argue that their research reflects a tendency within the lesbian community to derive pleasure from popular (Hollywood) cinema through an array of interpretive strategies (Dobinson & Young, 2000). These strategies enable lesbians to identify with certain types of women who exhibit qualities of strength, self-reliance, resilience, and deviance or defiance. These qualities attract lesbian identification due to the ‘outsider’ nature of these characters, allying them with the traditional ‘outsider’ status of the lesbian. Dobinson and Young also suggest “films depicting female bonding, friendships, or associations are also considered prime sites for lesbian identification” (2000, p. 101). This is due to what they identify as the “blurring of friendship and sexuality in the lesbian community that allows women’s friendships in film to be appropriated by lesbian viewers” (Dobinson and Young, 2000, p. 101).

Another aspect to these interpretive strategies is “the existence of extra-textual information, such as rumour or hope that some of a film’s participants are lesbians, and can also be a source of lesbian pleasure in viewing, or can at least assist in reading ‘against the grain’” (Dobinson and Young, 2000, p. 101). This is a
key factor in the popularity of website *After Ellen* (afterellen.com), which provides content on individuals who have not publicly come out, but are rumoured to be lesbians. Interestingly, Dobinson and Young note in their work the significance of the lesbian audience is aiding these interpretive strategies. They eschew the traditional notion of film viewing as a single objective experience in favour of a model wherein the impact of an engagement with the lesbian community holds significance for interpreting popular film. For example, strategies which rely on extra-textual information may only be accessed through knowledge of these extra-textual rumours, many of which originate and are circulated through lesbian community networks.

While Dobinson and Young investigate interpretive strategies through empirical research, others have examined concepts such as lesbian appropriation of screen texts in a more theoretical sense. Clare Whatling (1997) is one scholar who explores appropriation as a significant lesbian interpretive strategy. Whatling, in her discussions of lesbian films, suggests that it is not necessarily those few and far between examples of lesbian representation in mainstream Hollywood cinema that had the most appeal for her as a lesbian. She argues for the power of appropriation, suggesting “interpretation lies largely (though not exclusively) with the desire of the spectator” (Whatling, 1997, p. 6). If the desire of the spectator is a lesbian desire, then that appropriation means, quite often, a reading of the text that goes against the grain of its intended meaning. For Whatling, the act of appropriation is an empowering or subversively profitable one. She argues,
The new appropriative criticism opens up a fantasy space between film text and interpretation, reasserting the potential for a variety of audience responses, ensuring that the multiplicity and scope of women’s viewing pleasures can be registered and explored (Whatling, 1997, p. 15).

Although Whatling claims that appropriation is a practice that is always available to a viewer, there are several strategies or factors which enable appropriation more so than others. Whatling suggests that, rather than being driven away from Hollywood cinema by the lack of representations, “lesbian spectators have long been intent on appropriating the Hollywood scene to our own agenda… rather than bemoaning the fate of filmic lesbians who are variously represented as sick, sinful, narcissistic, psychotic or dead, lesbian spectator are able to turn the cinema of abjection into a perverse pleasure in looking” (1997, p. 7). Whatling’s theory of appropriation can also be understood as akin to the television studies model of encoding and decoding. For Whatling, the power of the lesbian spectator lies in the ability to ‘negotiate’ the text, reading their own desire into the text through a range of strategies.

The significance of these strategies of appropriation lie in what they suggest about an audience’s ability to gain meaning from a text. In relation to The L Word, where much of the discourse focuses on the representation of lesbianism, the power of appropriation suggests that an audience can gain significant meaning despite the representational factors. It essentially highlights how the audience is able use a text as a media object for their own purposes: a key aspect of my
thesis. Despite the possibilities, there is yet to be a thorough exploration of *The L Word* from a lesbian spectatorship perspective. This thesis will add to this field by attempting to address this gap.

**Homosexuality in Melbourne: From Activism to Indifference**

Whilst my study is based on a text that circulates globally, its local context cannot be ignored. This study is based in Melbourne, and examines a specific expression of lesbianism unique to the Melbourne culture. Like much of the Western world, homosexuality held a pejorative place within the broader society for much of the twentieth century. It was derided through discourses of law, medicine, religion and media. What community did exist was underground, away from the public society, fearful of stigma and rejection.

Melbourne historiographer Graham Willett (2000) charts the transformation of the homosexual subculture in Australia from this period of persecution through to the turn of the century, and the emergence of a vastly different climate for homosexuals. His claim is that it was the emergence of political activism that enabled this transformation, effectively putting homosexuality on the map in a way it could not have been prior to this.

It was the gay and lesbian movement, beginning in the 1970s, that allowed homosexuals to become gay, to be proud of their sexuality, their courage and their capacity for love and lust. It
allowed gay people to be visible and articulate, reasonable and angry, demanding and celebratory. It found ways to explain social hatred and ways to confront it. It offered gay people both a history and a future and a means of moving from the darkness of the one to the brightness of the other (Willett, 2000, p. x).

Willett insists on the significance of activism as a force for social change for homosexuals, arguing that it not only mobilized the homosexual community towards a common goal, but also created a voice for homosexuality, giving it a place within the plethora of social minorities in the Australian cultural landscape. The objectives of the homosexual activists, as well as the form that their activism took, changed throughout the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s a variety of groups sprung up, many of which were directed to the decriminalization of homosexual acts between consenting adults. Others, such as the Australian charter of the Daughters of Bilitis, were more dedicated towards information and education than specific targets.

The effect of this culture of activism was that homosexuality became a topic for discussion and debate. Despite it still retaining its controversial and subjugated status, the homosexual community in Australia was now acknowledged. The activism gained momentum during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. The new atmosphere of social tolerance was challenged by the AIDS crisis, instigated by a political campaign in Brisbane, which laid the contraction of the disease by four newborns at the door of a homosexual man who had donated blood. Suddenly,
according to the anti-homosexual movement, homosexuality was no longer a
conversation about basic rights, but the path to disease and deviance. This led to
an increase in activism amongst the homosexual community, seeking to maintain
the gains that had been made in the previous decades.

Willett notes that the most intriguing thing to come out of this new direction of
activism in the wake of the AIDS crisis was the relative success of it in an
Australian context. Whilst the struggle with homosexual backlash in the wake of
AIDS in America has been well documented, Willett argues that in Australia, “it
came when many savvy political activists were available and when a fresh new
government was in power” (2000, p.169).

The success of homosexual activism in the face of the AIDS crisis created a
climate in which radical social change had taken place, and the embodiment of
this social change had begun to commence. Described as a movement from gay
activism to gay community, the new atmosphere reflected an increased
confidence of the homosexual wherein a rejection of their identity by their
families and friends was more an exception than a rule (Willett, 2000). The
protests and demonstrations of the 1970s and 1980s had been replaced by a
celebration of homosexual culture via such events as the Mardi Gras parade in
Sydney, and the Midsumma Festival in Melbourne. Gay men and lesbians spent
more time in coalition, sharing common goals and ideals. The explosion of gay
culture extended to media, with publications such as the Star Observer
(commencing in 1985) and Lesbians on the Loose (1989) joining community
radio station Joy FM in celebrating homosexual culture.
The celebration and proliferation of homosexual culture was echoed in the 1990s by the rise of the significance of the homosexual market in commodity culture. The importance of the “pink dollar” as it came to be known, was in the perception of the gay consumer as one with a high disposable income. Gay men in particular, but also lesbians, were seen as leaders in lifestyle trends, and thus the attainment of the homosexual market became seen as pivotal to the commercial success. This was adopted by several major Australian companies, such as Telstra, who created entire marketing campaigns directed at capturing the pink dollar. While this trend eventually calmed, it represented the relative ‘normality’ of the homosexual within the society at that point in time.

The newfound acceptance attained by the homosexual community in the mid to late 1990s brought with it a range of challenges as well as benefits. Willett argues “on the one hand, this community, while visible, is losing its remarkability, becoming simply one of the many elements of Australia’s multicultural mosaic, conforming to core values but taking advantage of the scope provided for any amount of variety at the fringes” (2000, p. 238). The unifying activism that had characterized the homosexual community was no longer at the forefront, and without that catalyst, the dynamism of the community had disappeared.

Whilst the period of homosexual activism had carved out a space for the homosexual within the broader social culture, this relatively seamless integration meant that a distinct community was not visible or identifiable to
lesbian and gay youths. Coupled with this is the emergence of queer, a term that was utilized to define a variety of non-heteronormative gender and sexuality types which did not fit neatly into the bracket of homosexuality. Although undoubtedly an achievement for the more diverse sexual community, the emergence of queer further pushed homosexuality from the mainstream agenda.

This change in the atmosphere around homosexuality had arguably the largest impact upon the homosexual youth, who still had to manage their own sense of difference, despite their sexual identity no longer holding such a significant place in the social or political landscape. Willett argues that the vulnerability of this particular group lay in their distinction from the remainder of their community.

Trapped in schools that can be hell if their peers decide they are poofers and lezzos, at the mercy of parents whose attitudes to sexuality may be very hostile, and isolated from a community that relied heavily upon licensed venues for its social life, young lesbians and gay men are extraordinarily vulnerable to homophobic self-hatred (Willett, 2000, p. 253).

Without a recognized community to ground or influence them, homosexual youth relied heavily on the visibility of homosexuality within mainstream popular culture. Both media representations and the outing of well-known celebrities were enormously important for homosexual youth struggling to find a point of identification and influence. The Minus 18 program attempted to address this through its under-18 events, and this provided a space for some
homosexual youth. However only a select amount of homosexual youth who were aware of their sexual preference, and comfortable with exploring it, had access to these programs, leaving the more vulnerable section bereft.

This was the era in which *The L Word* was born. First available for viewing on free-to-air television in 2004, on the Seven Network, it was watched by Australian audiences primarily through DVD (available for sale in Australia from 2004 onwards) and through illegal downloads. Its availability on free-to-air television was limited both by timeslots (the vastly unpopular 10:30pm on a weeknight) and scope, as it was dumped by the network after the second season and moved to pay TV channel Arena. None of this, however, inhibited its viewership throughout Australia. Its ability to represent a community that felt inaccessible in reality was particularly significant for lesbian youths, who, as aforementioned, felt segregated from their adult counterparts. It provided positive depictions of lesbianism, as well as affording a model for lesbianism and community that may have been absent from many lesbian youths.

Due to the environment for lesbian youth in Melbourne of the time, *The L Word* had a significant impact on various facets of lesbian life. From coming out, to modeling their own sexual identity and finding/establishing community, the young lesbian audience learnt about lesbian lifestyles from the series. Through my qualitative study of the reception of *The L Word*, I seek to explore the impact of the series on my participants’ active choices about their biographies.
Modern Identity Construction

Given the inherent nature of lesbian visibility, the act of constructing one's lesbian identity becomes even more crucial to the individual, particularly when attempting to engage with other lesbians, and finding a space within the broader society. Identity construction, in particular that of the modern day homosexual, is a concept which has been broadly theorized by a variety of scholarships including cultural studies, anthropology and sociology. I will be utilizing the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) in understanding identity construction as part of the overall process of building a personal narrative, or biography. Despite the fact of Giddens' work being chronologically placed in the early 1990s, its impact is perhaps even more significant when examining the modern world as incorporating new media technologies and all that has meant for explorations of sexuality and identity.

Giddens' focus is on the changing nature of identity construction in an era of modernity. He highlights “the emergence of new mechanisms of self-identity which are shaped by – yet also shape – the institutions of modernity” (1991, p. 2). Giddens argues that the impact of modernity and its globalizing effect has changed the social landscape within which an individual constructs their identity, meaning a more diverse and comprehensive range of social forces and influences to negotiate.

Modern institutions are in various key respects discontinuous with the gamut of pre-modern cultures and ways of life. One
of the most obvious characteristics separating the modern era from any other period preceding it is modernity’s extreme dynamism. The modern world is a ‘runaway world’: not only is the ‘pace’ of social change much faster than in any prior system, so also is its scope, and the profoundness with which it affects pre-existing social practices and modes of behaviour (Giddens, 1991, p. 16).

One significant feature of this modern world is the proliferation of an inordinate number of social influences, particularly in the form of various media, which impact an individual’s identity construction. Effectively, this means that “the more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectic interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options” (Giddens, 1991, p. 5). In contrast to Dennis Altman’s work of the 1970s, which describes a clandestine ‘gayworld’ in which there existed strict types of identities and places those identities could occupy, Giddens opens up the opportunities for individuals, even those of diverse sexual orientation, to be able to construct their identity based on a much broader range of influences (Altman, 1971; Giddens, 1991).

One key aspect of this environment of modernism that Giddens portrays is the multiplicity of various forms of media available to the individual consumer. This is particularly significant in the contemporary society, where the available media is not limited to television and film, but encompasses everything that the Internet has to offer in terms of social media, a diverse range of different cultural
sources and the opportunity for interaction between those who do not share a geographic locale.

The effect of this changing media landscape is the greater impact of mediated experiences upon the process of identity construction. Giddens suggests that “characteristic of mediated experience in modern times is a second major feature: the intrusion of distant events into everyday consciousness, which is in some substantial part organized in terms of awareness of them” (1991, p. 27).

This global environment has significant consequences for identity construction. If we are to accept Giddens’ hypothesis that an individual’s identity is constructed in the environment and under the influence of mediated experiences, the more diverse and accessible media becomes, the more scope exists for identity construction of a varying nature. In this atmosphere of copious media influences, Giddens argues for a form of identity construction that demands a sense of purpose and self-awareness.

The ways in which one constructs their own personal biography or identity are multifarious, however a significant aspect of this is by the creation of a lifestyle.

In conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose. A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian
needs but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity... Lifestyles are routinized practices, the routines incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favoured milieux for encountering others; but the routines followed are reflexively open to change in the light of the mobile nature of self-identity. (Giddens, 1991, p. 81)

Through this understanding, aspects such as dress and embodiment can be seen as the visible manifestations of identity. Making active choices about one’s own dress and embodiment are a key part of creating a biography. Many of the choices made to conceive of an individual’s particular lifestyle are conscious and influenced by the broader society. It is through these active lifestyle choices that we begin to see how an individual begins to construct their own identity narrative.

This is where we begin to see the importance of the mediated experience in identity construction. As Giddens suggests, “the selection or creation of lifestyles is influenced by group pressures and the visibility of role models, as well as by socio-economic circumstances” (1991, p. 82). In a world of even greater proliferation of available media sources than existed during Giddens’ writing, the potential for diverse role models and societal influences far exceeds that ever seen before. Giddens writes that “with the increasing globalization of the media, a multifarious number of milieu are, in principle, rendered visible to anyone who cares to glean the relevant information. The collage effect of television and
newspapers gives specific form to the juxtaposition of settings and potential lifestyle choices” (1991, p. 84). This notion that there exists a store of information and representation of a broader variety of social lifestyles is exemplified in the current technological age, where the majority of individuals have to means to access information they may never become privy to in their individual geographical community.

Another aspect of this mediated experience lies in the forms of social interactions it enables, and thus social influences upon an individual’s identity it creates. Whilst in previous eras, social interaction was dictated by geographic, familial, professional or class distinctions, contemporary society greatly expands upon the available options for social interaction.

In a contemporary context it is possible to further expand these notions to include the diverse possibilities of interactions afforded by online communication. When a closeted lesbian adolescent from rural Australia can access a world of lesbian-related popular culture and information through her mobile device, the possibilities for individuals in creating their own biographies are undoubtedly far greater than at any other point throughout history.

1.3 Methodology

In order to examine the relationship between lesbian youths within Melbourne and the popular lesbian television series *The L Word*, I decided to utilize a
qualitative research approach. As has been explored throughout the history of television studies, qualitative approaches to reception studies have proved a more effective method of examining the relationship between a specific audience and a media product they have consumed. This is due to the scope and breadth of possible responses afforded by a qualitative research approach. The form that my qualitative research took was in two parts: a background questionnaire to determine biographical details, and an open-ended interview (see Appendix A).

I chose to pursue a qualitative research methodology for several reasons. Qualitative research is, by its very nature, focused on the complexities of people’s cultural and social relations. As Merriam (2009) states, “qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their world, what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 14). The four primary characteristics of qualitative research are a focus on process and meaning, a process that induces a particular kind of response, the position of the researcher as the tool of data collection and analysis, and a final product that is multifaceted and vivid (Merriam, 2009). These attributes are conducive to producing an exploration of The L Word that explored how lesbians had interpreted and been influenced by their consumption of the series.

The particular focus of this research was to evaluate the influence of the series over the identity construction of lesbians, as well as the broader community. The study investigated how the participants were introduced to the series and examines the ways in which the series was consumed. It sought to position the series amongst its viewership within the broader discourse of lesbian cultural
perception. It also sought to investigate which aspects of the series were the most influential, delving into stylistic, thematic and diegetic elements. Ultimately it asked participants to evaluate the role of the series within their own experience and the broader lesbian community, and what its contribution and legacy was and will be.

Participants

Once I had established my methodology, I sought to find participants who fit the category of young people who identified as lesbians. My recruitment strategy was firstly a circulation of my proposal amongst my own social networks of friends, students and work colleagues. This was coupled with a circulation amongst other lesbian community networks. I relied on snowball sampling, and recommendations from those I had approached already. Ultimately I came up with a sample, which was six participants in total, whose age ranged from 19 to 26. All six participants identified as homosexual, and reported that they were ‘out’ as homosexual amongst their familial and close social networks. Four of the participants were currently in a committed relationship, and all four shared their residence with their partner. All participants are referred to in my study using pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

The process of gathering my data was twofold. Firstly, participants were asked to complete a brief one-page double-sided questionnaire relating to their biographical details, for the purposes of background information and
classification. This was followed by a recorded interview, which I conducted either in the participants’ home, my own home or at an office within the University of Melbourne campus. These interviews ranged from 21 to 51 minutes in length, and covered a minimum of twenty-five targeted questions covering four key sections. As well as having targeted questions, they interviews were guided by the responses of my participants. The first section aimed to determine the participant’s viewing practices, seeking to ascertain the initial introduction to the series and practices of viewing thereafter. The second section investigated the participant’s relationship and identification with primary characters, and overall emotional engagement with the show. The third section canvassed a range of thematic issues pertaining to the series, gauging their relevance and impact on the lesbian communities of the participants. The fourth section addressed the position of the series within the broader lesbian community and cultural context.

Upon completion of the interview, the audio files were then transferred onto a computer and the interviews transcribed into word documents. These word documents were accompanied by an excel spreadsheet listing the biographical information of all participants (see Appendix B). My approach to the data was based on a grounded theory method, which sought to organize the data based on the varying themes that were discovered. The coding process in a grounded theory method “is the process of attaching concepts to the data, for the purposes of analyzing that data” (Urquhart, 2013, p. 2). I utilized this grounded theory method because it enabled me to organize the responses to generate a theory about the impact of The L Word amongst young lesbians. Based on the responses
I received, and the directions that my interviews took, I made the decision to organize my results into three categories of examination: coming out, sexual identity construction, and community. Each of my participants addressed these areas as significant in their overall relationship with *The L Word* and how the series introduced them to the lesbian lifestyle.

The interviews were conducted in a variety of different spaces. Three of my participants (Ava, Rita and Julie) found it most convenient to come to an office space I had been allocated on the Parkville campus of the University of Melbourne. Two of my participants (Marci and Dianne) invited me into their homes to conduct the interviews. My other participant (Greta) was invited into my home to participate in the interview. Interestingly, I found the interviews conducted on the University campus to be the longest, and most revealing. It is possible that the neutral environment of the University enabled my participants the critical distance required to speak more expressively and expansively about their relationship with the series.

I made a conscious attempt to target participants with an involvement, in some way, with the lesbian community within Melbourne. Two of my participants (Marci and Rita) were sourced from my own social networks, and several others were recommended to me by other people I had approached within these networks. Greta, Ava and Dianne were all suggested to me because of their relationship with the series, or their involvement within the lesbian community. Julie was the only participant I found via the University network. Although
several others had expressed interest, they did not quite meet the parameters for the study, for example, identifying as lesbian.

Ava

Ava, at 19, was my youngest participant, and was at the time working casually in the hospitality industry after finishing a TAFE course. She had identified as lesbian for several years, and was actively involved in the lesbian community. She was single, and lived with her parents. Her parents had struggled to come to terms with her homosexuality initially, but she described them as being more accepting now. Ava’s appearance tended towards a more stereotypical ‘butch’ look. She wore men’s or unisex clothing, and her hair was quite short in an unconventional style. She came from an Anglo-Saxon family, and resided in the South-Eastern suburbs.

Rita

Rita was a 24-year-old PhD student, working part time within a University environment as a tutor and lecturer. She came from an Anglo-Saxon background, and was in a long-term committed relationship with a woman who she shared a house with in the inner Western suburbs. She had come out to her parents and friends at an early age, and felt accepted within her family. Her appearance was quite ‘femme’: at our interview she wore a skirt and shirt, and had long hair and make up on.
Greta

Greta, as 26, was my oldest participant. She was working as a nurse but intended to go back to University to pursue a different career. She came from an Anglo-Saxon background, and lived in the outer Western suburbs with her partner, who was almost 15 years older. Similarly to Rita, her appearance came across as more femme. She wore tight-fitting clothing and had long hair, which she wore out. She was out to her family, and expressed no dissatisfaction with how they had accepted her sexuality and her relationship.

Julie

Julie was someone I had met through the University course, and at the time of our interview she was still completing her degree. She was quite femme in appearance, sporting bright red lipstick and heels for our interview. She came from a heavily religious Anglo-Saxon background, and expressed that her family’s religious nature had been the source of some contention during the process of her coming out. She suggested that, although she felt her family had accepted her sexuality, it was not acknowledged and had only very rarely been spoken about, even in private. She lived in a share-house in the inner North, and was 26 years old.
Marci

Marci was a 23-year old, who lived in the inner North-Western suburbs with her partner. She came from an Anglo-Saxon family in country Victoria, and was the only one of my participants with a sibling who also identified as gay; her older brother. She expressed that her family were very supportive, and had also been so for her brother. Her appearance also tended towards femme, although she presented as quite athletic in sporting attire at our interview. She taught at the local secondary school, and had been in a long-term relationship for several years at the time of our interview.

Dianne

Dianne was a 26-year-old Accounts Manager of Italian-Australian heritage. Her family had quite conservative views, and she expressed that coming out to them had been difficult, however they now had accepted her sexuality and remained an important part of her life. She tended towards femme in her appearance and hairstyle, although perhaps not to the extent of Julie or Greta. At the time of our interview, she lived with her partner in the inner-Northern suburbs.

Obstacles

Any research methodology is bound to face its own obstacles, and in the case of qualitative research, I approached it with the understanding that "what happens
in research is real and often untidy and any analysis procedure is prone to be affected by the context, how the data was collected, the circumstances of the field, who was carrying out the analysis and many other factors” (Urquhart, 2013, p. 2).

One of the most significant factors to be understood in my interviews with participants was my relationship with said participants, and our shared social identities as being lesbians. Despite the fact that it is becoming more common for researchers to investigate groups with whom they share a cultural or social identity, it is not without its concerns (Liamputtong, 2010). This is not limited to sexual identities, but racial, ethnic and gender identities as well, and can be understood as having an ‘insider’ status. This is discussed within qualitative research discourse using the terms ‘emic’ and ‘etic’. LaSala (2011) defines this in the following terms:

The emic perspective is the viewpoint of the member of the group or culture being studies. Behaviour and events are described strictly in terms of what they mean to the informants. From the etic or outsider standpoint, behaviour is explained using theories that are thought to be applicable to all groups and cultures (p. 16).

The positioning of a researcher as an insider is not necessarily detrimental to the research. As Liamputtong suggests, “insider researchers have the privilege of knowing the lifeworlds of people whom they wish to learn about” (2010, p. 119).
I observed this as the case several times throughout my interview process. As another member of the lesbian subculture, several of my participants would reference a concept or stereotype that existed within that culture, which may have been unknown to an outsider. An example of this would be the manner in which several of the participants referred to ‘Shane’, not as a character within *The L Word*, but as a type of person within the lesbian community. They did not explicitly explain their understanding of a ‘Shane’ as a concept, understanding that any lesbian with knowledge of the series would inherently understand the notions behind this. This is an example of Michael Polanyi’s concept of tacit knowledge, wherein the knowledge these participants have of these lesbian tropes cannot necessarily be explicitly told, but relies on implicit understanding (Polanyi, 1958). For the record, within my own understanding and experiences within the lesbian community, the term ‘Shane’ is often used to refer to a lesbian with a reputation for ‘sleeping around’, who is generally accepted to be desirable (predominantly with a somewhat ‘butch’ style, although this is adaptable) and who engages primarily in short flings with other lesbians, rather than significant relationships.

Another potentially beneficial aspect of having this emic perspective is the impact it has on the ability of the researcher to create a rapport with their participants (Seidman, 2006). Participants may be more willing to share their experiences and stories with someone who they feel an affinity to because of a shared social identity. They may feel willing to be more open and honest with an insider researcher because they may feel the researcher “could be trusted to accurately portray their lives” (LaSala, 2011, p. 18). There also exists within an
emic researcher the potential to identify beneficial directions for the interview process, due to their unique understanding of cultural phenomenon. I believed this aided my interview process as, due to a greater cognizance of lesbian culture, I was able to further interrogate certain aspects of my participants’ responses.

However, the insider researcher faces unique issues, which could potentially have a deleterious effect on the complexity and specificity of the responses gleaned during the interview process. LaSala suggests that, “when inside researchers excessively emphasize the emic perspective over the etic, they may fail to notice what is unique and informative about their own group or culture” (2011, p. 19). The dangers of insider research also extend to a concern over anonymity. This is particularly prevalent within the gay and lesbian community as, even in large urban areas, the community is smaller in number and thus more likely to overlap. The concern over anonymity could be due to a reluctance to admit certain responses, which the participants may believe would paint them in a negative light. Similarly, LaSala notes that “it is possible that gay or lesbian respondents might want to impress gay men or lesbians of high status by giving socially desirable, rather than honest, responses” (2011, p. 22).

These are all legitimate concerns, and ones that I acknowledge exist given the parameters of my own research, however they need not jeopardize the results of my research. As LaSala argues, “by maintaining awareness of their insider and outsider roles, and by balancing emic and etic perspectives, lesbian and gay male
researchers can ensure that the inherent benefits of the insider position are maximized” (2011, p. 27).

It is also prudent to note that one of the participants’ initial introduction to the series happened with me, and that my interview with her is more self referential because of this relationship. I do not believe that my personal relationship with this participant renders the results gleaned from my interview any less valid, but understand that it does impact the direction and dynamic of the interview process. I would suggest that the prior relationship enabled for a more complex understanding of the responses of the participant, and in fact enabled a more vibrant interviewing process.

1.4 Conclusion

Overall, this thesis will seek to evaluate the relationship between the television program The L Word and the lesbian youth who make up a significant part of its audience. Whilst the series has been pilloried for its representational politics, its importance to an audience, particularly to one made up of young lesbians, has not yet been thoroughly explored. Both audience research and lesbian spectatorship discourse proffer ways in which the audience can be understood as utilizing the text to create their own forms of meaning. Using a qualitative methodology, this thesis will seek to explore how young lesbians engage with The L Word as a media object to enhance their understanding of lesbian
lifestyles, and enable them to make active choices about their lives, and in doing so, narrate their own biographies.

In the following chapter, I will examine how the participants engaged with *The L Word* during their coming out period. This period of transition coincides with the transition from a youth status into adulthood, and this chapter analyses how *The L Word* has assisted them in the coming out transition, and how it has been utilized as a part of the coming out ritual. In chapter 3, I will examine the lifestyle development of my participants in relation to their engagement with the text. This chapter will assess how *The L Word* provided specific role models and a general model of lesbian lifestyling to my participants, and the ways in which my participants consciously invoked the series in the development of their own lifestyles. Chapter 4 will examine the role of the series within the lesbian community, both in terms of its function as a media object, and its influences upon the community. This chapter will investigate how young Melbournian lesbians, as epitomized by my participants, form a community that congregates around the series, and the power and motivations of that community.

Ultimately what this thesis will argue is that the importance of *The L Word* is not merely in its representation of lesbianism, but in the ways in which it has become a media object for these young lesbians to cultivate and narrate their lesbian lifestyles during the period of their transition into adulthood.
Chapter Two: Coming Out in an *L Word* Era

2.1 Introduction

One of the more significant results to come out of the qualitative interview process was the emphasis placed by participants on the significance of the series for them during their process of coming out. The coming out process and period of transition that accompanies it is one of great importance to identity development, and the role played by the series in this process is significant to understanding the role and significance of the series within the broader community.

In this chapter I will outline the concept of coming out as it pertains to the modern lesbian, as well as how this process of coming out is part of a larger process of social identity construction and transition for youth. I will then explore the role *The L Word* played in this process for my participants, and how we can view its overall importance to lesbian identity construction and development.
2.2 Literature Review: Coming Out

Theories of Transition

To generate an understanding of identity development and the role played by media in that process, we must first understand that “homosexual, gay, lesbian “identities”, formulated as identities rather than strictly as behaviours, have been predicated on a speech act: coming out” (Creet, 1995, p. 182). The process of coming out has been defined as “the sequence of events through which individuals come to recognize their sexual orientation and disclose it to others” (Bohan, 1996, p. xii). Interest in the process of homosexual identity formation, and in turn the act of ‘coming out’ emerged in the 1970s. Early on it was discussed and theorized as an individual and isolated event, however later thinking reexamined this assumption. Bohan suggests “although the term may imply a single event, in reality coming out is a prolonged, perhaps even an unending process” (1996, p. 112). Despite several differences, the theories of coming out which I will examine in this section are all based on coming out as a transition.

The conceptualization of the coming out process has been theorized broadly in terms of models of homosexual identity development. One such scholar, Richard Troiden (1989), provides a four-stage process of homosexual identity formation, which largely synthesizes the majority of previous models. This process model
exists in various forms and models, but the defining characteristic is that “the journey toward identity is portrayed as moving in an identifiable pattern from a sense of confusion through an emerging clarity about one’s sexual orientation to a growing desire to express one’s identity in more and more settings and to make public the formerly concealed sense of self” (Bohan, 1996, p. 102).

Whilst models such as Troiden’s can be useful in understanding and charting the concept of homosexual identity formation, it is important to note some key critiques of these models. One prominent critique is the neglect of bisexual identity formation from these models (Rust, 1993; Bohan, 1996). The essentialist identity formation model suggests a process by which only two sexual identities are understood: heterosexuality and homosexuality. This often denies the significance and validity of bisexuality, and posits further stigma onto an already stigmatized sexual identity. Another significant critique of these models is that they position the process of homosexual identity formation as a linear and sequential process, whereby success is judged on the degree of progress through the stages. As Rust (1993) suggests, “homosexual identity formation is not orderly and predictable; individuals often skip steps in the process, temporarily return to earlier stages of the process, and sometimes abort the process altogether by returning to a heterosexual identity” (p. 51). The other primary critique is of the value judgment inherent in what these models define as ‘progress’. For example, Bohan contends that “involvement in the community is portrayed as an early step in LGB identity formation, whereas for women, close relationships appear to be more common early, with involvement in the broader community a relatively late event” (1996, p. 111). Bohan also calls into question
the assumption that ‘commitment’ to a homosexual lifestyle, as defined by Troiden as the final stage in his model of homosexual identity formation, should be the epitome of this identity formation. A variety of economic, professional, personal or political factors could make this step implausible or impossible, but this does not necessarily detract from the individual’s own personal sense of identity (Bohan, 1996).

As these older models of homosexual identity formation are called into question, new theories begin to emerge which, by and large, attempt to address the disparity between the essentialist discourse inherent in these models and the contemporary concepts of sexual identity (Rust, 1993). As Rust notes, “the developmental paradigm has been challenged by symbolic interactionists who view sexual identity formation as a process of creating an identity through social interaction rather than a process of discovering identity through introspection” (1993, p. 54). This harkening towards a growing constructionist influence is promoted by Rust, who suggests:

The developmental model must be replaced by a social constructionist model of sexual identity formation in which variation and change are the norm... Social constructionism teaches that self-identity is the result of the interpretation of personal experience in terms of available social constructs. Identity is therefore a reflection of sociopolitical organization rather than a reflection of essential organization, and coming out in the process of describing oneself in terms of social
constructs rather than a process of discovering one’s essence (1993, p. 68).

One theorist who synthesizes the various theoretical perspectives is Phillip Hammack (2005), who provides “a new paradigm for the study of human sexual orientation” (p. 268). Hammack’s paradigm is useful to this discussion as he incorporates “the social ecology of development... the totality of contextual systems to which the developing individual is exposed” (2005, p. 268). Perhaps the most significant understanding Hammack exposes is the influence of context and culture on homosexual identity development. Hammack highlights the significant differences inherent in those developing their homosexual identities during periods of increased antipathy towards homosexuality, as opposed to those in a contemporary, more accepting context. He states “culture offers the landscape in which sexual orientation develops – the physical setting, the normative structure, the customs and symbolic practices, the behavioural possibilities and constraints” (Hammack, 2005, p. 282). This acknowledgement of the role played in the formation of identity by cultural factors, such as media, is crucial to this study’s understanding of the influence of The L Word on its lesbian audience.

Rite of Passage/Ritual

As well as the transition model, another way that coming out has been theorized is through the notion of coming out as a ritual, or rite of passage. Anthropologist
Gilbert Herdt (1997) examines the notion of ritual and rite of passage in terms of how they apply to young homosexual people constructing their own sexual identities. Herdt discusses coming out as “an implicit rite of passage for people who are in a crisis of identity that finds them 'betwixt and between' being presumed to be heterosexual and living a totally secret and hidden life as a homosexual” (1997, p. 130). Herdt extrapolates upon a variety of coming of age rituals in non-Western cultures, wherein young people, typically boys, are initiated into their sexual life. For him, these rituals bear resemblance to the process of coming out as gay or lesbian in Western societies. Herdt states “coming out is another form of ritual that intensifies change in a young person’s sexual identity development and social being” (1997, p. 126). He identifies this as being a critical stage in sexual identity formation – one that enables a person to become a member of the gay or lesbian global community. He suggests that “the rituals of coming out are a way of unlearning and creating new learning about living with same-gender desires and creating a positive set of relationships around them” (1997, p. 134).

This idea is significant in that it aligns with this thesis’ contention that The L Word functions as a way for young lesbians to learn about and self-narrate their lesbian lifestyles. Furthermore, Herdt’s work is a significant influence on my own findings due to his assertion of coming out as a rite of passage containing many rituals. Throughout my fieldwork it became clear that my participants viewed The L Word as a key text to advance in this process of coming out. His understanding of the role of ritual in creating sexual citizens is echoed in my findings. Similarly, the significance he places upon the ritual of coming out as
coming to an understanding of lesbian lifestyles is a prevalent theme throughout my interview process. For my participants, coming out was as much about the internal transition, as it was about an exploration and understanding of what it meant to be lesbian in a modern context. This will be further elaborated upon in section 2.3 when discussing my responses.

**Influence of the Media**

The role of the media in the coming out process has been explored by several theorists. For example, Hammack (2005) asserts that “the effects of this far more appealing social climate (eg, gay/straight alliances, popularity of gay male representations in mainstream media) for gay identity on today’s youth remain to be seen, but it is difficult to argue that their development trajectories will not diverge considerably from those coming of age during Stonewall or AIDS” (p. 276). This highlights the potentially uncharted significance that contemporary media has on homosexual identity development. Sarah Gomillion and Traci Giuliano (2011) are two who have explored the impact and significance of media on homosexual identity. Gomillion and Giuliano contend that “media experiences contribute to individuals development of their sense of self and these experiences remain salient into young adulthood and possibly beyond” (2011, p. 332). Their work investigated the influence of the media on gay, lesbian and bisexual identity formation and development through a variety of means including qualitative research, suggesting that “empirical attention on the
relationship between the media and GLB can be justified by the role of contextual factors in GLB identity development” (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 331).

The significant finding that emerged was the utilization of media role models and the influence this had on individual participants own self-realization. They found that “GLB adolescents with successful GLB role models may have greater sense of self-efficacy in terms of coming out and achieving a fully developed identity” (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 332). Their research into influential television figures suggested that real LGBT media figures such as Ellen DeGeneres were significant in that they represented shared characteristics with participants. They also found a relationship between participants and fictional television characters, whose diegetic struggles garnered sympathy and identification. Gomillion and Giuliano suggest that “when participants described how the characters, shows, websites and other media influenced their coming out process, the most frequent response was that these media forms inspired participants to feel pride in their identities” (2011, p. 336). This sense of pride and validation felt at seeing examples of GLB role models in turn endorsed the acceptability and legitimacy of participants’ own non-heterosexual identities. This is significant to note because it heralds the very existence of ‘realistic’ LGBT figures within the media environment as being critical to identity development and formation. This is reinforced by Kivel and Kleiber (2000), in their examination of the role of leisure activities in the development of lesbian and gay identity formation. They similarly identified qualitative research as being central to understanding the impact and influence of external societal factors, such as the media, on identity formation. Kivel and Kleiber note that “several participants
spoke about the influence of television and movies in their lives and they seemed to use media as a way of understanding the world at large” (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000, p. 223). This understanding of media reflecting the broader societal discourse is reasserted in the suggestion that “images of self were sought privately in the lives and activities of other individuals they assumed to be like themselves with respect to sexual preference and being ‘outside’ mainstream culture” (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000, p. 226).

Further research into the process of identity development in homosexual people has explored the significance of the Internet in this process (Gray, 2009; George, 2011). Much of this research has centered on how the Internet is utilized by those in the coming out stage as an introduction to a LGBT lifestyle.

Mary Gray (2009) is one such theorist who saw merit in exploring the utilization of the Internet by queer youth, and conducted an ethnographic study to determine its influence. She argues that online representations of LGBT lives are more pivotal in identity development than fictional representations in popular culture. She terms these online representations “narratives of authenticity”, and argues that whilst “fictionalized representations of LGBTQ people in popular culture have long been theorized as a potential remedy to LGBTQ cultural marginalization and a cause for LGBTQ people to celebrate” that these narratives of authenticity “provided the grammar for a (queer) identity” (Gray, 2009, p. 1163). She argues for the significance of an introduction into the LGBT lifestyle as pivotal in the coming out process, but disputes that fictional representations can adequately provide this, rather privileging these narratives of authenticity.
These representations translate queer identities and give them a proper locale, typically the city. As such, media are the primary site of production for social knowledge of LGBTQ identities... In other words, media circulate the social grammar, appearance and sites of LGBTQ-ness (Gray, 2009, p. 1167).

Youth engagement with the media, particularly when it impacts on areas such as identity development, is rarely able to be quantified, but rather exists as one part of a larger picture. This aligns with Gray’s view that “far from being the reflection of an inner drive... youth identities are cultural assemblages that work with the materials on hand” (2009, p. 1168). While Gray champions these “narratives of authenticity” as superior forms of media identification for LGBT youth, I would argue for the significance of such mainstream fictional media (such as The L Word) due to their ability to permeate the cultural consciousness. It is not solely the fictional narrative itself, but the manner in which it articulates a point of difference or similarity, and in doing so, gives an individual a point of reference within the LGBT world. The significance of “storytelling” is as applicable to the circulation of stories around The L Word, as it is with autobiographic accounts of coming out and queer lifestyles.

The emphasis on authenticity in new media narratives is a sentiment echoed by Craig and McInroy (2014), who argues for the positive impact of new media on contemporary coming out processes. Craig & McInroy suggest that the benefits of
new media were in how it “enabled participants to access resources, explore identity and digitally engage in coming out” (2014, p. 95). Their argument is based on the premise that new media, by which she refers to “Internet-based media including websites, web-based TV, web-based news, social media, social networking and video sharing” provides participants with a place to explore their identity in a lower risk environment (2014, p. 95). Craig and McInroy’s hypothesis is significant in that it posits the exploration of identity through various forms of new media as being ‘safer’ than the relatively confronting experience of coming out in ‘real life’. The concept of utilizing a form of new media to explore complex issues surrounding identity is one of the key frameworks underpinning my own research, and will be explored further in the next chapter.

It is also interesting to note Craig and McInroy’s assertion that “the traditional dichotomy of the public sphere and the private sphere is in many ways an archaic concept for contemporary adolescents whose lives exist both online and offline, and for whom online participation is a fully integrated aspect of their social life” (2014, p. 97). This conflation of the traditional binaries by the advent of new media is something that I will explore later, in terms of the utilization of The L Word as more than merely a media text, but as a media object.

The concept of the Internet providing a place for gay and lesbian youth to explore their sexuality is also taken up by Lynne Hillier and Lyn Harrison (2007). Their exploration into new media is similarly framed by its promise of ‘safety’, as they suggest of a participant, “the Internet allowed the exploration of parts of
him that he felt unable to risk in his immediate physical world” (Hillier and Harrison, 2007, p. 89). Hillier and Harrison frame these interactions in the form of practicing: that is practicing sexualities, interactions and engagements. They also suggest that the Internet is utilized as a tool for learning about sexuality and community. The terms with which they discuss the Internet and its role in the identity development process can be utilized for a discussion of the role of *The L Word* amongst its young lesbian audience.

Bradley Bond, Veronica Hefner and Kristin Drogos (2009) provide another investigation into the use of new media as a site for youth exploring their sexualities. They assert that “technology has changed the media landscape but it has not diminished the importance of media during the sexual self-realization of LGB individuals” (Bond et al, 2009, p. 34). They conducted a study into the experiences of LGBT individuals with new media during their coming out process. Whilst their hypothesis was based upon the premise that the Internet has the capability for more positive influence than traditional forms of screen media, which can complicate identificatory practices, they do acknowledge that other forms of media can be as significant during this process. They found in their research that “without being prompted to discuss the media, almost three quarters of the sample reported using some kind of media as their primary means of gathering information during the coming out process” (Bond et al, 2009, p. 40). Further to this, they found “frequently, the participants noted how they positively identified with media characters” (Bond et al, 2009, p. 41). One of the most significant concepts that emerged from their study was that, contrary to their heterosexual peers, youths dealing with coming out as LGBT most
commonly turned to media for information and support. Meanwhile heterosexual youths most regularly engaged with their peers during these times. The significance of the media, and in particular *The L Word*, during their coming out is reflected by my participants in their responses.

**Youth Specificity**

Despite the fact that the process of coming out often occurs in the stage of a person’s life generally known as their youth, it is not always so. However, for my participants, their various experiences of coming out all occurred during their youth. Thus it is pertinent to examine the concept of youth studies and identity, and how this impacts, if at all, on the contexts of their coming out.

The term ‘youth’ has been variously defined across academic discourse, but is generally considered to represent the developmental phase between childhood and adult autonomy. As Furlong (2013) states, “it is essentially a period of semi-dependence that falls between the full dependency that characterizes childhood and the independence of adulthood” (p. 21). As for a definitive answer on this category, “in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the age-bound notion of youth must be re-assessed in the light of the transformations of socio-cultural and economic contexts and regarded as an extended period of semi-adulthood” (Heinz, 2009, p. 6). Many varying age definitions exist of what the category of youth is, however I will follow the Australian Bureau of Statistic categorization, which defines youth as between the ages of 15-24 (‘Using Children and Youth
Statistics’, 2013). Although several of my participants are now outside this range, their initial introduction to *The L Word* and primary engagement with it occurred during the period of their youth status.

**Transition**

The one facet of youth that is universally acknowledged is that it is a period of transition (Furlong, 2013; Irwin, 2013; Heath et al, 2009). As Heinz suggests, “for youth research, the concepts ‘transitions’ and ‘pathways’ are of special importance because they refer to the timing and duration of the passage to adulthood and stimulate investigations on how life chances, institutional regulations and individual decisions are related” (2009, p. 3). From a pragmatic standpoint this refers to the transition from living with and being dependent on parents or other family, to living outside of the domestic environment and attaining economic independence. Much of the research into youth transitions has focused on this goal of economic independence, and how it has been impacted by changing social and economic conditions (Irwin, 2013).

The notion of youth transition into adulthood had similarly been theorized using a biographical approach (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Henderson et al, 2007). Utilising Giddens’ work on biographical narration, this approach examines the way youth transitions can be understood as a time in which young people begin to construct their biographies.
They (youth researchers) moved away from a pre-eminent focus on structural factors such as social class, gender and ethnicity to place greater emphasis on a biographical approach that investigated the role of young people themselves in the process of transition to adulthood across time (Cieslik & Simpson, 2013, p. 11).

This approach to theorizing periods of youth transition into adulthood gives significance to what it terms ‘critical moments’. Critical moments “represent interactional moments which leave marks on people's lives, altering their fundamental meaning structures” (Henderson et al, 2007, p. 20). Young people, in this period of instability and evolution that characterizes youth transitions, are influenced by these critical moments to the point that they shape their biographical narrative.

Young people today must make themselves into adults in a relatively piecemeal way. By looking at their ‘projects of self’ within which there are ‘critical moments’ – points at which it is possible to change and rework the stories we tell about ourselves – it becomes possible to understand the work that young people do in the here and now in order to claim a sense of adulthood (Henderson et al, 2007, p. 32).

These critical moments of deep influence become all the more important when they involve youth who are the subject of social exclusion (Cieslik & Simpson,
2013). These concepts are particularly prevalent when examining the influence of *The L Word* during the process of youth transition that is coming out. My participants’ mediated experience of the series can be understood as a critical moment in the biographical narration of their coming out transition.

**Sexuality**

The other aspect to the narrative of transition that dominates youth studies is the concept of transition in identity. This has often been explored through the concept of a moratorium, described as “a period of exploration in which a young person may experiment with a range of lifestyles, behaviours and identities until they find a way of being with which they are comfortable” (Furlong, 2013, p. 234). Although this refers to a variety of identity factors such as employment, education, domestic status etc. it is also significant in that youth is an era encompassing the greatest transition in terms of social/sexual identity. As Furlong suggests, “sexual development and the maturing of sexual identities are often regarded as being at the heart of adolescence” (2013, p. 247). The period of youth transition is marked by an introduction to the sexual world, and involves a moratorium of sexual exploration.

Although these youth transitions in terms of sexuality have occurred across generations, different historical contexts impart various effects. The impact and role of new media technologies has played a significant role in the contemporary youth transition landscape, creating an era distinct from any that came before
(Collin & Burns, 2009). As well as the change in these information technologies, a variety of other contextual factors have marked a change in conceptualisations of youth transition. As Côté suggests:

The nature of the formation of social identities can be understood in terms of the structuring of the transition to adulthood in each historical period. In pre-modern societies where the transition is short and ritualized, social identities tend to be ascribed and identity formation is relatively linear from childhood to adulthood. In early modern societies, where the transition becomes extended, but still has certain social markers, the norm is increasingly that social identity is to be accomplished on the basis of the increasing choice. Finally, in late/post-modern societies, where the individualization process is more extensive because of the virtual disappearance of social markers for adulthood for young people in secular societies, people are more likely to find themselves faced with the continual management of social identities as they are formed, and thereafter once they are formed (2009, p. 380).

This understanding of the current era of socio-sexual identity construction aligns with the understanding of the relationship between coming out, and the construction of a homosexual identity. Whilst the construction of a homosexual identity is a constantly evolving process, the notion of coming out can be
understood in terms of the broader youth transition discourse. Coming out as a youth transition concept is further complicated by the role and understanding of homosexuality within the broader society, creating a more complex and fraught transition than may exist for those exploring their heterosexuality. Many scholars have recognized the significance of role models during this period of youth transition (Heath et al, 2009; Furlong, 2013) and the potential absence of these examples can enhance the difficulty of the transition process for youth homosexuals.

For each of my participants, their initial introduction to *The L Word* occurred during the period which can be understood as the period of their youth. Given the acknowledgement that this is a period of great transition, it is not difficult to understand how the series can have a significant impact. Posing as perhaps one of the few models of identity to which they aspire, *The L Word* can and does have a significant impact on these impressionable minds.

### 2.3 Coming Out: Acknowledging the L Word

Many of my participants discussed their relationship with the television series *The L Word* as being particularly significant during the period of their coming out. They spoke about this for varying reasons, ranging from feelings of isolation and disengagement from the rest of their social and familial networks, to recommendations from friends and results of online explorations. What is clear is that *The L Word* provided these subjects with the material and place to explore
many aspects of their burgeoning sexuality. The following responses are organized into three categories. The first section examines how my respondents emphasize the importance of *The L Word* during the period of transition associated with coming out. The second section investigates the responses that consider the consumption of *The L Word* as a ritualistic process inherently tied to their process of coming out. The final section explores how the respondents considered their engagement with *The L Word* as a kind of rite of passage that provided an introduction to the lesbian lifestyle.

**Transition and Validation**

For several of my participants, the act of watching *The L Word* during the period of their coming out was significant because it provided them with a validation of their desires and identities during a period of transition accompanied by anxiety and isolation from others. The act of coming out not only signifies the transition to a non-heteronormative sexual identity, but also oftentimes occurs during the period of youth (as is the case with all of my participants). As previously discussed, the period of youth in itself is defined by transitions of professional, educational or economic natures. The transitional nature of the status of youth is also referenced by my participants, and signifies the importance of validation during this period of their biographical construction.

26-year-old Dianne spoke of the way in which *The L Word* provided her with an outlet to explore her sexuality when she felt bereft of people to talk to. She stated
“it was significant because when I was coming out there wasn’t anyone else in the family, I didn’t really have any family or friends of anybody I knew who was gay”. For her, The L Word was much more than entertainment, but something that she could relate to and connect with because of the shared emotions of female homosexuality. She recounts watching the show with her first partner, and doing so purely because of the fact of its lesbian characters.

I mean, I’ve watched it over and over again, and it’s because you’re talking about issues that are similar to your own real life issues, you’re talking about dealing with relationships, dealing with breakups and all the similar stuff that you go through (from a lesbian perspective). These characters are doing that. You look at television and the (non-lesbian) characters on television and yes you watch them for entertainment, but yet you can’t fully connect with any of them because they’re not like you.

It is interesting to note that Dianne distinguishes between watching television for the purpose of entertainment, and her consumption of The L Word, which has a more emotional and empathetic element. Partially this is due to her being isolated from other lesbians, and feeling like an engagement with the series provided her with a connection to the lesbian world.

Another participant, Ava, recounts having a similar kind of experience with watching The L Word for the first time. She had heard of the series before, having
an older sister who had watched it, but recalls that it gained a greater sense of importance during the period of her coming out.

When I got a bit older and was questioning (my sexuality) it was an easy thing to put my attention to while I was in the closet, and a way to explore, because I didn’t have my own community yet as I do now, to kind of see what it was like, even though it was a television show, (it was) a big community of lesbians as friends.

Ava’s response belies a sense of identification with *The L Word*, prior to her even engaging with the series. The series is posited as a vehicle through which she can explore the world of lesbian sexuality, the lesbian lifestyle, albeit at arm’s length. In this way, it is possible to draw comparisons with research exploring the importance of the Internet for youth during the coming out process. As Hillier and Harrrson argue, “the Internet does not replace the immediate physical world for same-sex attracted young people, rather it allows them to gain confidence online in a space which they argue is easier to negotiate when they are exploring their sexual feelings” (2007, p. 95). Ava’s recollection of her relationship with *The L Word* during her coming out process is comparable to Hillier and Harrison’s conceptualization of the Internet in that they represent a space where the homosexual world can be explored. *The L Word* is unique in this aspect because, unlike other television shows, which merely depict one or two homosexual characters within a heterosexual world, it depicts a distinctly lesbian community. This will be further examined in chapter four.
There are obvious divergences between an engagement with a television series and an exploration of homosexuality online, the most obvious being the perceived passivity of watching a constructed television drama as opposed to the active nature of negotiating an online world. However, the manner in which *The L Word* is spoken about by both Ava and Dianne suggest that the act of watching the series is simultaneously a passive immersion in a televisual world, and an active investigation of this lesbian environment from the safe distance of their private space.

The concept that engaging with the series is an active investigation is also reinforced by the fact that both Ava and Dianne found the series as a result of online exploration. When asked how they first came to be aware of the series, Ava responded that: “No one really told me about it... I think I was online, and obviously a lot of people talk about it, so I thought I should watch it.” Similarly, Dianne recalled that her introduction to *The L Word* came via her explorations of online lesbian communities.

Just being online, being connected (is how I discovered the series). It was when I was actually coming out, so there was a lot of surfing the net, wanting to be in communities and that sort of thing and I just heard of it there.

Both Dianne and Ava profess being profoundly influenced and impacted by their discovery of the series online, and this comes despite the proliferation of
“narratives of authenticity” available in that online environment. This is a strong theme amongst my participants, many of whom engaged with the online world during their coming out phase, but still identify The L Word as being pivotal to their identity development and acceptance. These findings stand in contrast to those who posit the Internet and the resources available through that as being far superior and influential than those of entertainment media (Bond et al, 2009; Gray, 2009). Whilst those kinds of value judgments may be more prescient with regards to screen media products containing one or two lesbian characters, The L Word’s representation of a lesbian lifestyle distinguishes it.

University student Julie recalls watching the first season and being deeply influenced by the plight of Jenny, whose story arc seemed to mimic her own personal life at the time.

I hadn’t come out yet, and I had been in a relationship with a guy for like a year, and I had been thinking about my sexual orientation and had been kind of curious. Then, when I watched it… it just seemed really profound, and like I was watching my own story.

For Julie, an engagement with the series had a profound meaningful impact on her sexual identity development. Her private consumption of it was the result of her private questioning of her own sexuality, and how it was mimicked by the first season’s diegesis. She recalls her interest in the series being piqued by a bisexual friend discussing it, and her seeking it out the result of her questioning
her own sexuality. Here again we see the disruption of the supposed heightened status of authenticity in coming out narratives impact on those coming out themselves. Despite the fictitious nature of Jenny’s storyline, Julie found it close enough to reality to have it validate her own experiences.

Not all of my respondents were drawn to the series because of social isolation. Rita had a small group of friends, all of whom went through the coming out process at similar times, so she had an established peer network with which to share and confide in. However the viewing of *The L Word* provided something that could not be gained from these social connections. For Rita, this was a validation of her sexual desire in mainstream media.

It was really important, given that we were coming out, to see part of ourselves reflected in mainstream media. That was really comforting. To think that if it was on a mainstream TV show then its not totally weird, there are other people like us out there.

The validation of lesbian existence in mainstream media is acknowledged to be a small, but significant step in the process of identity development, and it was no doubt significant for Rita and her friends during the early times of their personal sexual development.

Two participants whose initial introduction to *The L Word* came in a somewhat different fashion were Marci and Greta, both of whom were introduced to the
series by the first woman they had intimate relations with. Greta recounts her first experience with a woman, and being introduced to *The L Word* the following morning. She suggests that her interest in the show was heightened because of her burgeoning expression of lesbian sexuality; “I was having my first experience, and then this show got put on and it was like this whole other world, and I really liked it. I thought ‘I think this is for me’.”

Marci recalls a similar introduction to the series, being introduced to it by her first girlfriend at the beginning of their relationship. For Marci, who was in the process of coming out, *The L Word* acted as a link to the lesbian community that she was only beginning to become aware of.

For many of my participants, their initial introduction to the series came during a difficult transitional period, and was thus infused with a great sense of importance. Many of my participants expressed how the series gave them a sense of validation of their non-heteronormative identity. Their introduction to *The L Word* during this period of transition can be understood as a critical moment in affirming their sexuality and the subsequent choices made in shaping their biographies.

**Viewing as Ritual**

Inasmuch as the introduction to the series provided a critical moment in the philosophical acceptance of their sexuality, many of my participants also
explained the importance of the actual act of viewing the series for the first time. The acknowledged importance of the act of viewing *The L Word* infused these acts of viewing as having a ritual-like quality to them. This is acknowledged in how my participants recount these ritualistic introduction.

Several of my participants expressed feeling alienated and isolated from those around them, and thus the act of watching the series alone, in a covert manner, functioned as a way of reclaiming the isolation in the name of privacy and independence. For example, Dianne, whose family didn't approve of her sexuality, recalls that she couldn't watch the show at the time of its broadcast, but instead she taped it and watched it later in private. This practice of watching the series in a clandestine manner infused it with a greater importance and meaning than had it been something she had merely stumbled across. Furthermore, it attached a sense of ritual to watching the series, because the viewing of the series had to happen under certain circumstances, in a certain way, and with a heightened significance.

Ava also made specific mention of the need for privacy and secrecy in her initial consumption of *The L Word*. She describes a memory of trying to rent the series on DVD whilst with her father, and being rebuffed:

> I went to Blockbuster with my Dad and tried to slip it in to his movies, and when he asked what it was I replied that it was just a drama TV show set in LA. He read the back of the case and then put it back, so I never tried that again.
She later recalls watching it at home on her laptop, and closing the lid of the laptop whenever either of her parents walked in. Despite her acknowledgement that her parents were ultimately supportive of her sexuality, she felt the need to explore the series in a covert fashion.

This concept of *The L Word* being a product that is consumed in a clandestine fashion, and thus infused with a greater sense of importance and ritual is also touched upon by Rita, who details her first encounters with the series:

I think there was a slight feeling of scandal to it, like it was a bit naughty to be watching this show. I mean, it was quite graphic, and we were quite young, and it was about lesbians. It was kind of a bit of a cheeky secret between us.

Rita’s recollection of watching the series with a group of friends, all of whom identified at the time as lesbian or bisexual, gives her a sense of the use of *The L Word* as more than just for the purpose of seeking information. Rather this ritualistic act of viewing provided a space whereby she and her friends could totally immerse themselves in the lesbian lifestyle provided by the series. Sharing the act of watching something taboo also created a further bond between her and her lesbian friends, which was no doubt significant in terms of her sense of belonging and community during the coming out process.
For Marci, the ritualistic element to watching *The L Word* was inherently due to it often being a precursor for intimacy between herself and her girlfriend. This notion of the aphrodisiac effect of *The L Word* is something that was not raised by any other participants, yet it is something that I have encountered in my own lesbian circles, as an established ritual. Marci describes this as being something that was discussed by other friends of hers also. She recalls talking to friends in new relationships and asking whether they had watched the series together yet, and whether they had made it through a whole episode, the implication being that it serves as a powerful catalyst for sexual exploration.

It is significant that Marci understands this use of *The L Word* as being a widespread ritualistic form of viewing. She speaks about it as being something that she did, but also something that was engaged in by other friends. It is also interesting to note that it is inherently linked to the coming out process. Marci explains how, when a friend entered into a relationship with a woman who was going through the process of coming out, Marci’s advice to her friend was to give her new girlfriend an introduction to *The L Word* and all its amorous impetuses.

Some of my friends got together, and they started watching it together because one of them had never been with a girl before, so we all told her it was a thing she had to do.

For many of my participants, the act of watching *The L Word* for the first time was infused with a sense of great importance, highlighted by the fact that the first act of watching was often clandestine, or occurred at a significant juncture.
in their process of coming out. I suggest that this initial introduction to *The L Word* was, for many of my participants, engaged with in a ritualistic sense during their coming out process.

**Rite of Passage**

The influence of *The L Word* during the coming out process is multilayered. Not only did the fact of watching the series provide a sense of validation, but also the act of watching the series gained importance in and of itself as a ritualistic event. What the series provided for my participants, as well as both of these aspects, was an introduction to a lesbian lifestyle that functioned as a rite of passage. As Gilbert Herdt writes:

> Coming of age and being socialized into the sexual lifeways of the culture through ceremonies and initiation rites are common in many cultures of the world. These traditions help to incorporate the individual – previously a child, possibly outside of the moral rules and sexual roles of the adult group – into the public institutions and practices that bring full citizenship (1997, p. 109).

Herdt goes on to consider the ways in which rituals and rites of passage are echoed within gay and lesbian culture.
The transition out of presumptive heterosexuality and secrecy and into the active process of self-identifying as gay or lesbian in the western tradition bears close comparison with these rites of passage. In the process of "coming out" - the current western concept of ritual passage - as gay or lesbian, a person undergoes emotional changes and a transformation in sexuality and gender that are remarkable and perhaps equal in their social drama to the initiation rites of small societies in New Guinea and Africa (1997, p. 110).

It is possible to understand the viewing of The L Word through the conceptual apparatus of rites of passage. First, there is their introduction to the series, primarily occurring through small and tenuous established ties to the lesbian community. For Ava and Dianne that is their exploration of lesbianism online. Julie and Rita became acquainted with it via friends who had ventured further into exploring their non-heteronormative sexual identities. Finally, Marci and Greta were introduced by the women with whom they shared their first intimate lesbian experiences. All of these recommendations stem out from the already existing lesbian community, an olive branch or welcome mat. Their subsequent ritual consumption of the series indicates a further introduction to the lesbian lifestyle.

Several of my participants noted that their experience of viewing the series enabled them to see a representation of lesbian lifestyles. For them this functioned as a rite of passage, where they learned they could make active
choices to narrate their own biographies in this fashion. This function of the text was significant for many of my participants, including Dianne, who recalled her sense of affirmation.

I think it was because of *The L Word* that it illustrated to people the point that you can be normal. You can have a normal life, you can have a successful professional life, and you can have a beautiful relationship and still be seen as normal.

Her sentiments are echoed by Ava, who notes that, “(*The L Word*) was something to feel a part of.” Rita suggested that it was the very fact that it was based around a group of lesbians that provided her validation.

It was pretty exciting, most of us had only discovered our sexuality recently, and were at varying levels of outness to the people we knew, so it was pretty exciting to see lesbians on television. And lesbian sex depicted quite graphically too. And, you know, lesbians leading normal lives, and doing the kind of things that people on TV dramas and sit-coms did. And it wasn’t bizarre or weird, it wasn’t *the* lesbian character or *the* lesbian storyline, it was more like ‘Here are these people. Let’s follow their lives and do all the normal dramatic TV things that we do.’ So I think it was pretty cool in that respect.
This sense of validation and edification can be understood as being what Herdt describes as an introduction to a lesbian lifeway.

Not until they enter into the gay or lesbian lifeway or the sexual culture of the gay and lesbian community will they begin to learn and be socialized into the rules, knowledge and social roles and relationships of the new cultures. For many people, this experience is liberating; it is a highly charged, emotional, and dramatic process that changes them into adult gays or lesbians in all areas of their lives - with biological families, with coworkers, with friends or schoolmates, and with a sexual and romantic partner of the same gender, possibly for the rest of their lives (1997, p. 111).

The lesbian lifeway is both an affirmation of the participants’ experiences, as well as the beginning of an education into the lesbian lifestyle. Furthermore, this rite of passage of introduction to the series is central to overcoming the negative stigma attached to homosexuality. Herdt describes this in the following way:

Why people who desire the same gender require a ritual when others in our society do not is painfully clear. Ritual is necessary because of the negative images, stigma, and intense social contamination that continue to exist in stereotypes and antihomosexual laws of our society (1997, p. 111).
This induction into the lesbian community reminds the participants that, despite the negative connotations associated with their sexual orientation, they are entering into a culture and community that is shared. For Rita this happened in a very literal sense. She shared the experience of watching the series, this induction ritual, with a group of her own lesbian friends. For the other participants, however, this rite of passage is possibly more significant.

Greta recalls thinking to herself, upon first watching *The L Word*, “this is for me.” Her inner monologue is reflective of the sense of belonging she feels. Despite it not being attached to a physical local community, this rite of passage introduction to the idea of a lesbian lifeworld via the vessel of *The L Word* functions as the beginning stages of Greta being initiated into the culture of the lesbian lifestyle. It is a key stage in her coming out process because it allowed her to acknowledge not only the fact of her homosexuality, but the jubilation she felt at being a part of this community. She recounts thinking that “she was in the greatest place in the world right now” at the time of her introduction to the series. Although she later became critical of the diegetic depth and representation of lesbianism in the series, she still maintained that sense of euphoria at her first engagement with *The L Word* during the period of her coming out transition.

Julie, who admitted being intrigued by the series because of her confusion about her own sexuality, has a similar reaction to that of Greta upon her own introduction to the series. She recalls thinking that “it was pretty mind blowing”, and that “this is my life”. For Julie, the ritual of watching the series became
multiplied, as she begun an intense identification with the character of Jenny, who was herself going through the rite of passage of coming out in the diegesis of the series. Julie's own crisis of identity highlights another important function of the ritual induction into the series. Herdt argues of sexual identity formation, that:

These transitions may create a "life crisis" that requires a social solution - and this is the aim of initiation ceremonies and rites of transition. Rituals may provide for the individual the necessary means to achieve difficult changes in sexual and gender status. Particularly in deeply emotional rituals, the energy of the person can be fully invested or bonded to the newfound group (1997, p. 110).

Julie's acknowledgement that her identification with the character Jenny was pivotal to her own sexual identity development is indicative of this very facet of Herdt's concept. Through the rite of passage of engaging with The L Word, Julie is faced with her very own life crisis: her identification with Jenny forces her to examine and explore her own identity more thoroughly, and perhaps inspires her to embrace the lesbian lifestyle. Thus we can see how the function of The L Word as a shared experience can also be understood as sharing that experience with the characters, despite their fictional nature. Herdt understands this as being a comfort found in shared experience, suggesting that "The mechanism of ritual helps to teach about the trials and ordeals of passages in other times and places, which in itself is a comfort, for it signals something basic in the human
condition” (1997, p. 112). The ability of the series to present to Julie a rite of passage through which she herself may endeavor to undertake provided an emotional comfort in what is a turbulent period of transition.

For Marci, whose initial engagement with the series came via an introduction to it by her girlfriend, this rite of passage was less about euphoria at finding her place within the world, and more of an understanding that this was an essential, and enjoyable, step in her own coming out. As aforementioned, Marci’s concept of the series was very much aligned to the notion that this was a rite of passage for budding lesbians. The act of watching the series not only functioned as a catalyst for sexual intimacy, but also formed a strong bond with like-minded individuals. Around the same time that she was coming out, she had friends who were also in a similar stage. A shared engagement with the series functioned as an important rite of passage, as well as opened up the possibility for social connections. As Herdt suggests, “through these ritual steps of disclosure all kinds of new socialization and opportunities emerge, including entrance into the gay and lesbian community” (1997, p. 127). The disclosure of the fact of their shared sexuality, as well as the common familiarity with the series created these initial social ties. It is through this commonality that watching *The L Word* can be understood as being a key shared experience: something that they did not take as gospel, but which was a significant factor in being introduced to the lesbian lifestyle.

This aspect was also significant for Ava, whose introduction to the series provided her with an understanding of a lesbian community, both textually and
in reality. She suggested that part of the draw of *The L Word* was that “it was something to feel part of”. The series provided for Ava a rite of passage that gave her a sense of belonging, or a sense that there was a place where she belonged. It also afforded her the cultural capital to begin to engage with the lesbian community online, however passively, with the shared experience of watching the series.

## 2.4 Conclusion

As I have discussed in this chapter, the television series *The L Word* held great significance for my lesbian participants in the process of their coming out. The series delivered a sense of validation to many of my participants who were in difficult stages of their identity development. Not only did *The L Word* depict the lesbian community, it did so without the negative bias often reserved for depictions of homosexuality. The very fact of a primetime television series depicting a lesbian community provided a great sense of endorsement for several of my participants.

What *The L Word* provided, far more substantial than any entertainment value, was an introduction into a sense of a lesbian ‘lifeway’. This can also be understood as an introduction to the lesbian community, or the lesbian culture. For several of my participants, the fact that this lesbian community existed and was represented within popular culture was important for their own coming out. For others, it was the ritual of watching the series that gave them an “in”, a sense
of cultural capital, with the lesbian community. Again, this will be explored in more depth later.

The most significant aspect of an introduction to *The L Word* for my participants was that it functioned as a rite of passage; an experience they shared with many other lesbians. Gilbert Herdt's writing on ritual in gay and lesbian coming out processes was pivotal to my understanding of the ritualized nature of watching *The L Word*. For many of my participants, an engagement with *The L Word* can be understood as being a ritual that aids them during their difficult period of transition, not only to a lesbian sexual identity, but into the adult world. Particularly significant during the period of sexual identity development, the rite of passage of introduction to the series is pivotal in providing these women with a sense of belonging, within both the lesbian community, and the broader society.
Chapter Three: Lifestyle and *The L Word*

### 3.1 Introduction

Creating and constructing a lesbian identity is more than simply the cathartic process of ‘coming out’. Once an individual has accepted and acknowledged their own homosexuality, the onus is on them to construct a lifestyle that reflects or embodies this practice. A major aspect of them constructing their homosexual identity lies in the way they shape their LGBT lifestyle. This is a significant step in the process of an individual shaping their own biography.

In this chapter I will explore how the individual shapes their lifestyle, particularly with regards to the construction of a lesbian lifestyle. The first part will chart the brief history of the term lesbian, as well as the position of the homosexual within society in the 20th century. This will lead into a discussion of the influence of consumer culture in making active choices about lifestyle development. This discussion of lifestyle development will then move on to explore these factors in a uniquely lesbian context. The second half of this chapter is devoted to examining the ways in which my participants utilized *The L Word* as a media object in the process of through making active choices in constructing their own lesbian lifestyles.
This chapter examines how young lesbians, influenced by the television series, make active choices about elements of their lifestyle. Whether this is through the choice of role models, the style of dress and embodiment, or the exploration of their sexual activity, my participants consciously utilize these aspects of lifestyle development in the continual narration of their own biography.

3.2 Literature Review: Lesbian Lifestyle

‘Lesbian’: A Brief History

Although female homosexual desire is not a new concept, it is important to differentiate between apparently lesbian practices that may have occurred throughout much of history, and the concept of lesbian as an identity, a notion that has only become evident in contemporary society within the last century. For example, a woman in the early 20th century may have a female lover, despite being in a heterosexual marriage, but whilst this arrangement may have included what we now consider lesbian sexual practices, it did not constitute lesbianism as an identity (Jenness, 1992). As Jeffrey Weeks notes:

You can have sex with someone of the same gender and yet have no sense of being a ‘homosexual’. Contrariwise, you can have a strong gay identity and live an asexual life (2014, p. 120).
Cognisance of homosexuality as more than merely a practice came to the fore in the late nineteenth century when some sectors of the medical community began to investigate differences in race, sexuality and criminal behaviour by utilizing a comparative anatomy model, comparing the anatomy of these ‘deviants’ with those they considered ‘normal’. In this context, normality was represented by white, upstanding, heterosexual citizens. The finding of those utilizing this model came to the conclusion that homosexuality was an inversion of the norm of heterosexuality. Female homosexuals were understood as having masculine qualities, and vice versa. This cast homosexuality, not only as an unwanted characteristic, but as an aberration from the remainder of society. As Lisa Walker (2001) suggests, these “medical studies of sexual deviance often produced homosexual bodies as visible, but perpetuated the social isolation and invisibility of lesbians and gays” (p. 2).

This concept of homosexuality as a deviant identity was reinforced by the fact that many of those who identified as homosexual throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century maintained that identity in a manner hidden from much of the rest of society. They were forced to express and explore their homosexuality within certain social situations, often within underground bars and clubs distinct from their everyday lives. It was not until the 1970s that it became more common to invoke “the absorption of the various types of homoerotic experiences into a total way of life” (Weeks, 2014, p. 136). It is in this period that the emergence of Gay Liberation became prominent.
The Gay Liberation movement, which found its place amongst the social activist era of the civil rights and women’s rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, signaled the first stirrings of homosexuality as a social category within the broader society. The Stonewall Riots of June 1969 are often noted as the catalyst for the Gay Liberation movement, which implored all homosexuals to come out to their families and live their lives as openly homosexual individuals.

**The Gayworld**

During this era, there developed what Dennis Altman (1971) describes as the ‘gayworld’. This gayworld encompassed a range of places where an individual could find like-minded people. Altman states “many homosexuals who live in large cities will move almost exclusively in gay social circles which offer a continual round of bars, dancing, theatre-going, and, always present, the opportunity for sexual encounter” (1971, p. 16).

By its very nature, however, this gayworld existed on the margins of the social consciousness. Despite having these places around which to congregate, the gay and lesbian community remained beneath the surface. This was partially due to the legal obstacles that still existed, but perhaps more commonly due to the societal attitudes towards homosexuals in general. The impact of attempting to construct one’s identity in this environment of oppression is that the gayworld effectively became a microcosm of the stereotypes and affectations of broader society (Altman, 1971). Altman argues that the class system present in
contemporary culture was reflected in the gay world, and that “beyond class there are other critical characteristics of gay life that seem to me to epitomize and often exaggerate the larger society” (1971, p. 23). These societal concerns are reflected in Altman’s querying of “whether the aging or the ugly or the lonely homosexual is basically any worse off than the aging or the ugly or the lonely heterosexual” (1971, p. 24).

These basic human anxieties are of course exacerbated by the stigmatization homosexuals encountered on a daily basis, and thus their experience is fundamentally different from their heterosexual counterparts. The other important aspect of these gay worlds is that the smaller a subculture or division of society is, the less scope there exists for diversity. As Altman states, “far from being a genuine community, providing a full and satisfying sense of identity for homosexuals, it consists predominantly of a number of places that facilitate making contacts with other homosexuals” (1971, p. 29). Thus, not only is the diversity of the gay world limited by its scope, but its purpose, far from being an environment to enable the healthy construction of homosexual identities, was primarily for sexual encounters.

Those gay worlds which existed to facilitate sexual encounters, predominantly for male homosexuals, were matched in their stifling nature by the early lesbian communities, many of which congregated around the political impetuses of feminism. It effectively became the lesbian-feminist way or the highway (Goleman Wolf, 1979). Secondarily to that, many of the lesbian feminists were not lesbians in practice, but chose to assume a lesbian identity for political
reasons. This impacted heavily upon early notions of lesbianism, often distancing it from the sexual practices of homoerotic desire.

What the Gay Liberation movement did create, however, was a social environment in which gay men and lesbians could and did come out and lay claim to a position within the broader society. This has been theorized as a reclamation of the term ‘gay’.

Homosexuals became gay when they rejected the notion that they were sick or sinful, claimed equality with heterosexuals, banded together to protest second-class citizenship, created a subculture, and came out in large numbers. (Cruikshank, 1992, p. 3)

Although gay and lesbian individuals in contemporary society has largely moved away from the kind of gay ghetto culture which dominated the early years of gay liberation, much is owed to this period for fostering a sense of identity to which many could embrace or engage with. Undoubtedly lesbianism was still an immensely marginalized identity, and one that has and continues to struggle for visibility, but it remains a distinct identity within society, something which it could not claim to in the decades and centuries preceding.
Lifestyles and Consumer Culture

Given the evolving nature of social acceptance and status of lesbians within contemporary society, it is pivotal to examine how the current modern world functions in terms of the development and construction of lifestyles. As noted in chapter 1, the construction of one's lifestyle is a key part of the overall creation and narration of an individual biography. The importance of understanding lifestyle construction and how it functions in the overall project of the self lies in the understanding that lifestyles represent a range of active choices about how an individual wants to live. Giddens notes that “all such choices... are decisions not only about how to act but who to be” (1991, p. 81).

In contemporary society, many of the choices made about lifestyles are dictated by consumer culture. Consumer culture refers to the way in which consumption practices dominate the behaviour of society. In contemporary times, the consumer culture is a crucial element of society, influencing everything from style to behaviours. Wherein previously individuals had little choice about how to style themselves, modern society and consumer culture allows for people to make active choices about the construction of their lifestyle. The influence of consumer culture on lifestyle choices is critical, as those consumption practices come to articulate much about the lifestyle of individuals.
Not only does consumer culture indicate the capitalist tendencies of contemporary life, but it impacts upon lifestyle choices, primarily through fashion and style, but also through practices. The ability of the modern world to provide this consumer culture enabled people’s consumption practices to dictate their lifestyle choices. These lifestyle choices were not only significant in terms of individual’s own lifestyle construction, but also to differentiate themselves from others within society. Fashion and style, in particular, came to be seen as indicative of one’s lifestyle, and denoted their status within society. As Nita Mathur notes:

The emphasis on lifestyle choices influences even seemingly inconsequential decisions taken on an every day basis such as what a person would wear, eat, do in leisure time, how s/he would conduct herself/himself at workplace, etc (2013, p. xv).

These lifestyle choices are a significant part of the overall biography of the self. Lifestyle choices surrounding appearance, or dress and embodiment, dictates much about the visible identity of an individual. However, also significant are the choice of role models, and modes of behaviour.

The significance of these elements of lifestyle construction in relation to my study lies in how The L Word influences lifestyle choices made around dress and embodiment, role models and behaviours. The influence of The L Word is symptomatic of the globalized nature of consumer culture in the modern world. As Rattle notes:
At the consumption end, Internet and communication technologies facilitate access to a new universe of opportunities to satisfy the consumer culture: online shopping, access to information that can be used to imagine identity through trends, fashion and news outlets, and a vast universe of personal, professional and social contacts that can be used to enhance and express identity (2013, p. 124).

This is not to say, however, that lifestyle choices and stylings remain fixed. Indeed, this is a constantly evolving process requiring new choices to be made every day. This is significant for my own study, as it asserts the significance of mediated experience at any stage of an individual’s life. Although in the previous chapter, I have highlighted the significance of The L Word as an influence on the coming out process, this model of lifestyle construction, which promotes a constantly evolving and shifting paradigm of identity, allows for the influence of the series at a variety of points throughout the individual participants’ identity development. This is echoed in ‘The Role of the Internet in the Sexual Identity Development of Gay and Bisexual Male Adolescents’, which argue that:

Regardless of when identity development occurs, it is important to understand that the construct of adult identity is not unidimensional. It is actually composed of a mosaic of multiple identities within various realms of the adolescent’s life (Harper, Bruce, Serrano and Jamil, 2009, p. 297).
This highlights the notion that an individual’s self-identity construction is a constantly evolving process. This process involves an interrogation of a variety of societal influences, not the least of which is mediated experience. This is perhaps even more pivotal to active lifestyle choices as they exist for marginalized identities, namely lesbian identities. I will now explore how theorists have delved into the concept of lifestyle development from a uniquely lesbian perspective.

**Lesbian Lifestyles**

While Giddens’ model of identity construction will form the basis for my analysis of the influence of *The L Word* on my participant’s self-identity construction, it is important to look at the work of those who have explored lifestyle and identity construction from a specifically lesbian standpoint, as this may face its own specific and unique challenges.

As I have discussed earlier, the concept of lesbian lifestyle construction is a fairly new one, given that the concept of a unique lesbian identity has only existed in general understanding for less than a century. As Valerie Jenness notes, “if a woman is not aware of the social category, she cannot assess her experiences in terms of that social construct and its affiliated identity” (1992, p. 67). Jenness formulates her model of lesbian identity construction on the basis of what she
terms ‘typification’ and ‘detypification’. She extrapolates upon these understandings, suggesting:

Not surprisingly, prior to the adoption of a lesbian identity, the meanings associated with the term lesbian derive from cultural typifications. Typifications are cognitive representations of a supposed banal group; in this case, the woman’s image of lesbians ‘in general’. As a function of our stock of common knowledge, typifications are unexamined understandings that represent oversimplified opinions and images. Thus, by definition, typified understandings abstract from the concrete uniqueness of objects (Jenness, 1992, p. 67).

Based on Jenness’ interpretation of typification, it can be understood as the sum of a lack of substantial knowledge. Or perhaps it can be better understood, taking Giddens into account, as the arena prior to an exploration of mediated experiences, when all that is known is the marginalized and barely visible lesbian stereotype. It is also a form of oppositional discourse, the kind of which my participants do engage in during their experience of constructing their own biography.

Jenness suggests that “identities emerge from the ‘kinds’ of people it is possible to be in society” (1992, p. 66), highlighting that the ability to discover role models from a broad range of societal influences is a key aspect of the lesbian
lifestyle construction. Typifications, as Jenness argues, do not allow for the construction of identity for several reasons.

First, understandings of the social category lesbian are relatively vague and derive from sources fairly removed from direct experience. Second, with rare exception, the connotations associated with the term lesbian are at best neutral and usually negative. Third and finally, the imagery associated with what it means to be a lesbian is perceived as incongruent with individual lived experience, and thus prohibits self-categorization (1992, p. 67).

For Jenness, the process of beginning to construct a lesbian identity involves a complex re-working of the very concept of the term lesbian itself, as it has been traditionally (and derogatively) understood.

The adoption of a lesbian identity – the difference between ‘doing’ and ‘being’ – fundamentally hinges upon a process I refer to as detypification. Detypification is the process of redefining and subsequently reassessing the social category ‘lesbian’ such that it acquires increasingly concrete and precise meanings, positive connotations, and personal applicability (Jenness, 1992, p. 66).
This concept of creating a new understanding of the very term lesbian is integral to my suggestion of the importance of the unique lesbian visibility enabled by the television series The L Word. Following the model laid out by Jenness, the woman searching for a positive understanding of the very concept of lesbianism in order to construct and validate her own sexual identity need only look as far as mainstream television to begin the process of detypification. Wherein previously mass media had been home to marginalized and stigmatized, or stereotypical and unidimensional, representations of lesbianism, it now afforded a greater visibility and diversity of style of lesbianism, as well as a depiction of a lesbian lifestyle. The importance of media representations is reinforced due to the proliferation of the media in contemporary consumer culture. The relative proliferation of lesbian representations provides a variety of lesbian role models in a positive and relatively diverse fashion. Whilst the majority of heterosexual people develop their individual lifestyle with input and influence from those around them, Harper et al suggest:

This presents a challenge for gay and bisexual youth, who are often developing their sexual identity without supportive individuals, institutions and communities to assist them... these youth often learn about gay culture and its accompanying language, rituals, symbols, and normative behaviours and practices from non-familial adults, peers, mass media, and the Internet (2009, p. 301).
This concept of a cognizance of the ‘gay culture’ is a significant point in understanding the importance of *The L Word* to the identity construction of my participants. If, as Harper et al suggest, “part of developing an LGB sexual identity also involves learning about the larger gay culture and its traditions, rituals, symbols, norms and ways of being, acting, and knowing” (2009, p. 321), then it possible to see how the series offers a model of lesbian lifestyle which may be previously undiscovered, and may provide a basis for viewers’ own lifestyle construction.

Another exponent of the significance of visibility to lifestyle formation is Lisa Walker (2001), who suggests “identification is central to issues of visibility and identity because it is an aspect of subject formation located in the field of vision” (p. 142). *The L Word* is central to this as it not only represents an individual, marginalized lesbian, but a relatively diverse community of lesbians, and the inherent features of lesbian lifestyles expounded upon within that realm.

The ability for *The L Word* to provide a model for lesbian lifestyle development is also significant in that it affords the very sexual identity it presents a sense of validation and affirmation. As Mary Read suggests:

Another important aspect of the life cycle is finding appropriate role models to assist in the development of the self-concept. The lack of lesbian role models left many baby boom lesbians unaware of their identities as they developed, which led to a feeling of isolation (2009, p. 355).
This is an important function of *The L Word* not just during the period of coming out, as has been previously discussed, but in the overall development of a lesbian lifestyle. The discovery of aspects of lesbian lifestyles, and the subsequent recognition of those aspects within their local lesbian communities is influential in the active lifestyle choices made by my participants. Not only does it provide models and standards for their lifestyles but it affirms their lesbian identities. As Barbara Ponse argues “the repetition and acceptance of gay terms within the subculture inherently serves to normalize and legitimate that world for its members” (1978, p. 247). I will now move into an exploration of my participants’ responses to *The L Word* in terms of their respective lesbian lifestyle development.

### 3.3 Lifestyle Development – Influence of *The L Word*

In my interviews, it became clear that my participants utilized *The L Word* in their own lifestyle development through a variety of means. In this section I will explore how my participants have expressed the influence of *The L Word* in three key areas. Firstly, it will explore how my participants adopted specific characters as role models to learn from and aspire to. In the second section it will examine how *The L Word* influences my participants’ lifestyle development in terms of their dress and embodiment. Finally, it will delve into how the series’ depiction of lesbian sexual activity influenced the sexual behaviour of my participants.
Role Models

As has been explored previously, the importance of positive role models for the individual and their sexual identity construction cannot be understated. As lesbians, the majority of my participants did not have these role models available to them via the traditional routes: parents, friends, close adults etc. Rather, many of them had to seek out these role models, invariably through the media. This is where *The L Word* came into play for many of these young lesbians: as a place where they could find ideals to aspire to, or craft their own lifestyles around.

Many of my participants, after the initial excitement that was seeing their own sexual desire replicated in mainstream media, formed attachments to specific characters as a model for whom they could aspire to. For Ava that apotheosis was Dana, with whom she identified due to their shared athletic endeavours. Ava states,

> I really liked Dana, I thought she was really funny and being in the closet and being an athlete, the struggles she had dealing with it... I found it easy to identify I suppose because most of my life is involved in sport.

Dana was also the source of identification for Marci, for very similar reasons. Marci stated that she identified with Dana “because she was sporty and closeted”. This is a common theme among my participants: they chose a role model with whom they shared more than simply a sexual desire. For example,
Julie identified primarily with Jenny, whose story arc mimicked her own. She describes it as something she acknowledged but also something that she aspired to.

When I watched it (I realized) that I was Jenny, like, that was my life, I was gay and I wanted to come out, I wanted the life that she was leading to mirror my own life, I wanted to take the steps. That was the first time that I’d kind of seen on screen, somebody doing what I was thinking about doing.

Conversely, Dianne described her identification with Bette based largely on her status as a successful professional woman, and how that did not require a sacrifice of her sexuality.

I think I probably looked up to Bette the most, I was at University at the time, I was going into my professional life so looking at somebody in a suit who was very successful and knowing that you can live your life and you don’t have to live it hidden away somewhere, that you can be out and be successful.

In all of these cases, the women chose characters whose identities within the series they recognized and admired. The active choice of adopting specific role models often was undertaken because the characters with whom my participants identified with all held a particular characteristic that my
participants found to be something they themselves wanted. As is described by Giddens, “response to mediated experience cannot be assessed purely in terms of the context of what is disseminated: individuals actively discriminate among types of available information as well as interpreting it in their own terms” (1991, p. 199). So, for instance, when Ava and Marci speak of their identification with Dana, they isolate the aspects of her identity with which they feel most replicates their own character, and aspire to the aspects of her identity that they want to achieve.

What this displays is also an evolution of the process of detypification as Jenness describes it. All of a sudden the media provides not merely a source of lesbian visibility which is positive and appealing, but in varying forms with varying achievements and abilities. As Jenness suggests “as our understandings of the meanings associated with the kinds of people it is possible to be in society undergo substantive changes, we continually reassess the personal applicability of any given category” (1992, p. 69). Thus as my participants understood that they could be, not just a lesbian, but a sporty lesbian, or a successful professional lesbian, their range of lifestyle possibilities is broadened.

This is most clearly evident with Julie, who openly states her desire for her personal story to mimic that of the character Jenny. As previously discussed, Jenny’s story is significant for Julie during the process of her acceptance of her sexuality, yet it also provides a guide by which to frame her own personal lifestyle trajectory. This is also the case with Rita who, despite professing not to
identify with any one particular character, perhaps finds a source of identification in Bette. She states:

Bette wore power suits and pretty incredible fashion, but you know, I wasn’t going to wear that to school tomorrow. It didn’t fit my lifestyle, but I did look at it and think it was cool. And sometimes I looked at it and thought, yeah I want to dress like that when I’m 30 and have a good job.

Although not modeling her own lifestyle upon her consciously at the time, Rita does acknowledge a desire to tailor her own narrative to reflect the achievements of Bette as a character. This confession shows how her own lifestyle development is influenced by her adoption of a role model, as she perhaps unconsciously tailors choices around her lifestyle development to that which she sees in The L Word.

Each of these participants finds within the series a role model whom they identify with and are influenced by. This is an essential aspect of lesbian lifestyle development as it provides a model of lesbianism to aspire to which they may not have access to within family or social circles. The presence of these role models allows for my participants to make active choices about their lifestyles based on their newfound aspirations.
Dress and Embodiment

Another significant factor in understanding how *The L Word* works to assist in the process of lifestyle development is to explore how it introduces and ingratiates its audience to the lesbian lifestyles depicted within the text. Despite its contextual specificity, the lesbian lifestyles represented within the series are highly influential. Many of my participants consciously model their lesbian lifestyles with the information gleaned from the series about what exactly that means. So much so, I would argue, that the lesbian lifestyles which exist for many of my participants directly influence and are influenced by the series. Giddens expands upon the notion of lifestyle, suggesting,

Each of the small decisions a person makes every day – what to wear, what to eat, how to conduct himself at work, whom to meet with later in the evening – contribute to such routines. All such choices (as well as larger and more consequential ones) are decisions not only about how to act but who to be. The more post-traditional the settings in which an individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity, its making and remaking (1991, p. 81).

Giddens’ concept of lifestyle is intrinsically linked with concepts of identity construction. This is true for many of my participants, whose lifestyle decisions inherently relate to their building of their own self-identity and construction of their own narrative.
As previously discussed, one of the key concepts of lifestyle development is that of appearance. Giddens argues that “appearance, to put the matter bluntly and in terms of ideas discussed so far, becomes central element of the reflexive project of the self” (1991, p. 100). How an individual constructs their appearance, and in that I refer to the aspects of appearance that are open to variety in expression (eg. hairstyle, clothing, makeup, etc.) is a large part of how they embody their identity within the broader society. The notion of appearance for lesbians is also linked to traditional anxieties about visibility and invisibility. Whilst in the early years of burgeoning lesbian identity, the focus was on ensuring that lesbians were an acknowledged part of society, in more recent years the focus has shifted to ensure that a more diverse spectrum of lesbian identity is recognized than the traditional construct of the feminist, ‘butch’ lesbian.

Many of my participants consciously utilized The L Word as a source for their decisions about embodiment of a lesbian lifestyle. For Ava, The L Word gave her a model upon which to replicate her own appearance styling choices. She states that “things like tattoos, hairstyles, piercings, I think is definitely mimicked,” recounting a story of when she consciously and specifically imitated a style she had seen on the series.

When I was 17 I wanted my hair short, but I didn’t want to attract attention from my family and friends, and I was going to a girls school at that stage, so I cut it off probably every two month, and it was a bit shorter each time, up to a point where
it was really quite short at the back and long at the front. I even took a photo of Shane to a hair-dresser once.

Her homage to the undisputed sex symbol of the series is indicative of her broader desire to represent her lesbianism through lifestyle choices. Ava’s experience differs from my other respondents as she constructed her appearance as closer to what would be termed ‘butch’ in the contemporary lesbian culture. Thus she chose the most easily identified ‘butch’ character within the series to draw upon. For many of my other respondents it is the very nature of the show’s feminine characters who provided models for their own embodiment of a lesbian lifestyle.

As aforementioned, the issue of visibility for lesbians pertains to more than simply their presence within the greater society. Whilst the readily identifiable, ‘butch’ lesbian was traditionally assessed as the negative typification of the identity, that changed in the wake of the gay liberation and other movements. Lisa Walker notes that “in the 1980s and 90s, butch lesbians and drag queens who had been anathemized in the fifties and sixties and much of the seventies for contributing to negative stereotypes of lesbians and gays, have been refigured as both the forerunners and vanguards of the contemporary pride movement” (2001, p. 2).

With these archetypal understandings of lesbianism held aloft, it is easy to see how the femme lesbian is constructed as the ultimate figure of exclusion (Walker, 2001). Her sexual identity is arguably unidentifiable simply by looking
at her, and she suffers from the accusation that she appears as such to 'pass' for a heterosexual. One aspect of lesbian representation which *The L Word* has been roundly criticized for is its depiction of many of its key protagonists as being too femme (Wolfe & Roripaugh, 2006; Chambers, 2006). However, for many of my participants, it was the very fact of this femme representation that assisted in their sense of validation and in the construction of their lesbian lifestyles.

Whilst the criticism of representation in *The L Word* is valid, the inverse effect of this femme representation cannot be understated. One respondent, Greta, states that it was significant to her that “I could be femme and still fit in”. For Julie, having these femme lesbian role models was significant in validating her own personal lifestyle choices.

Yeah definitely, because I’m quite femme, and that’s been something that I’ve struggled with, and I’ve tried on different identities, and I’ve tried to do the more butch look and tried other different things. I think having those really femme characters, that’s something that *The L Word* has been criticized for, having all these really femme women and saying that’s not realistic, but for me it was actually really good because it helped me be ok with being femme. Obviously there is a problem with what they represent and what they leave out and stuff, but for me, like I said, the (social circle I move in) is quite anti that femme-ness. If you’re performing femininity, you’re performing ridiculous femininity. Its kind of
not acceptable to be a femme lesbian in this part of Melbourne, so getting back to The L Word its kind of good to see those characters represented.

Similarly, Rita notes:

I think in a way it legitimized and made it cool to be femme. Before that there was the occasional femme in amongst a sea of more ‘butch’, I mean butch is quite an extreme term, but that sort of more ‘masculine appearance’. So I think in a way The L Word made it sexy to be a femme lesbian, and made it cool to be a femme lesbian. It sort of gave that as an alternative to what was already there.

Likewise, Dianne suggests:

Yeah, well they’re femme girls, and I was even though I’ve got short hair now. But at the time I had long hair and dressed similarly to them. I know at the time when it came out the more butch community didn’t feel like they got represented, but I think they did adapt, and the show went for six years so it did adapt and there was a couple of butch characters and trans characters. But for me personally, I could relate just the same. They looked like the sort of girls that I would be attracted to as well. I think a lot of the butch community
looked at the show and didn’t think it was accurate, but it’s just the other side of the coin.

The fact that these responses all carry a very similar tone suggests the significance for these individuals in terms of helping to construct and validate their personal embodiment lifestyle choices. Although these individuals all are working to construct their lifestyles in an era where the social context around lesbianism is not as overtly negative as in previous times, they still find an environment where their particular lifestyle is not as accepted and visible as others. What is provided here by *The L Word* is another understanding of lesbianism which aligns with my participants’ sartorial style. As Jenness acknowledges, “with the help of the gay and lesbian movement, as well as the women’s movement, there has been and continues to be a proliferation of understandings of what it means to be lesbian (adjective) or a lesbian (noun)” (1992, p. 72).

The importance of the visibility within mainstream media of femme lesbianism is a significant factor for these women, although it is undoubtedly critically unpopular. As Giddens suggests, “the selection or creation of lifestyles is influenced by group pressures and the visibility of role models, as well as by socio-economic circumstances” (1991, p. 82). If the various group pressures seem to specify an unwillingness to engage with the concept of femme lesbianism, as is indicated by Julie in the above quote, then the significance of those role models becomes compounded.
For many of my participants, *The L Word* provided models of lesbian lifestyles that heavily influenced their own lifestyle choices. Whether consciously mimicking exact stylistic models, or affirming choices made around their lesbian lifestyle embodiment, the series afforded my participants a blueprint for the visible embodiment of their lesbian lifestyles.

**Lesbian Sexual Practice**

One important factor to remember is that, despite being diverse in terms of appearance, that the role models visible in *The L Word* are still undeniably lesbian, and engage in the lesbian behaviours with other lesbians despite differences in their appearance. Part of this, as previously alluded to, is the particular behaviours of the lesbian lifestyles they depict. I will go into a deeper exploration of behaviours and how they are utilized within the broader lesbian community in chapter four, but for this section I will focus on one key aspect identified by all of my participants as being key to their identification with the series – the exploration and representation of lesbian sex.

Despite the concept of sexual desire and sexuality as an inherent aspect of an individual’s experience, the introduction to many of my participant’s lives of a depiction of lesbian sexuality had a profound impact. Mary Read argues:

> There is a socio-developmental aspect to sexuality across the life span, reflected in individual’s self stories. Women of the
baby boom cohort related some gaps in terms of their life experience and knowledge of sexual development as a lesbian, attributing this partly to a lack of supportive models for women’s sexual identity in general, and lesbian identity in particular (2009, p. 362).

It is an important and unfortunate fact that women’s sexual agency and desire has long been denounced, avoided or dismissed. This is doubly so for lesbian sexual agency. Even in the halcyon days of lesbian feminism, the emphasis was on lesbianism as a political mechanism, rather than an organic and deeply inherent sexual need. As Dana Heller laments, “lesbians are sexual beings, after all, and we’ve too often been neutered and desexualized by pop culture myths that depict us at cat-loving victims of “bed death” desiring little more than herbal tea and a cuddle at night” (2013, p. 11).

The roles played by contemporary popular culture, in particular television and film, in representing the “kinds of people it is possible to be” within society can be extended to include these sexual categories. As Beatriz Oria argues “our views of what is permissible and/or desirable in sexual terms is largely influenced by the general beliefs and assumptions disseminated by the media, which have traditionally functioned as a public forum of debate for different social issues, including sex and sexuality” (2014, p. 98).

Lesbian sexuality and sexual practice is one aspect of lesbian lifestyles which the series does not shy away from. Depictions of lesbian sex throughout The L Word
are frequent and lavish. They have also come under fire for being all manner of things from solely included for the objectifying male gaze, to suggesting a need for male-incorporation in sexual acts (Wheeler & Wheeler, 2006). Despite the many negative things they may be, the representation within The L Word of lesbians as sexual beings engaging in erogenous acts, and upholding these acts as erotic and appealing, is a facet of the series lauded by my participants. It also stands in contrast with much of the hegemonic norms of the parent class, wherein heteronormativity triumphed over any kind of different sexuality.

Ava, in her discussion of the character Shane, notes “her sex scenes were always the best sex scenes”. Inherent in this comment is the understanding that there exists a certain amount of pleasure taken in witnessing these lesbian sex scenes. It is interesting to note also that she earmarks Shane as the character with the “best” sex scenes, as she is diegetically constructed as the character that has the most erotic engagements, with a veritable cavalcade of beautiful and diverse lesbians.

For Rita, the acknowledgement of the vivid sexuality presented within the series is inherently attached to a feeling of scandal. She states:

It was a bit exciting, a bit scandalous, a bit grown up, and we sort of got into it for those reasons in the same way we might get into another similar drama that was heterosexual, but of course it had that added layer.
In Rita’s view, the somewhat racy nature of the representation of sexuality played a major role in her relationship with the series. Interestingly, she draws a comparison between *The L Word* and another female-oriented drama with a focus on women’s sexuality, *Sex and the City* (Starr, 1998). Like *The L Word*, *Sex and the City* has been a lightning rod for depictions of female sexuality. As Oria suggests, *Sex and the City* “was a groundbreaking show not merely for its open depiction of sex but, more precisely, for its specific focus on female sexuality” (2014, p. 102). It has been lauded for its potential for female empowerment as much as it has been critiqued for its representation of women belonging to the dominant race and class. It has contributed greatly to an era wherein female sexual agency is seen in a different light than previously.

This is the same argument that could be made about *The L Word* and its hitherto unprecedented depiction of lesbian sexual agency. The significance of Rita’s comparative view is the aspect of empowerment it inherently details. *The L Word* provides the same kind of empowering possibilities for lesbian sexual agency as existed for the audience of *Sex and the City*. This is arguably even more significant because it creates an empowering model of a sexuality that lacks such models within the mainstream media. As Giddens argues, “sexuality became doubly constituted as a medium of self-realisation and as a prime means, as well as an expression, of intimacy” (1991, p. 164).

This aspect of self-realisation is apparent in Julie’s initial response to the series also. As has been previously mentioned, she discusses how watching the first episode, she immediately formed an identification with Jenny due to their
shared position as a women in a heterosexual relationship on the cusp of delving into their own lesbian sexuality. This is significant from a sexual perspective as one of the key scenes in the first episode involves a wide-eyed Jenny watching through her fence as her new next-door neighbours Bette and Tina have an erotic sexual encounter. The position Julie places herself in, consciously alongside Jenny in that voyeuristically longing position, betrays a fascination and association with lesbian sexual experience.

For Greta, whose introduction to the series came on the heels of her first ever sexual experience with another woman, the concept of lesbian sexuality and *The L Word* are inherently linked. Her experience of lesbian sexuality, coupled with her introduction to lesbian culture via the series, together make up a pivotal aspect of the mediated experience which she consciously or subconsciously uses as influence for her own identity construction. Similarly, Dianne's introduction to the world of visual representation of lesbian sexuality has launched her into a continual search for examples of lesbian sexuality on screen. She recounts this habit as both vicariously erotic and affirmative of her own sexual identity.

Marci describes how the lesbian sexuality depicted within the series empowered lesbian sexual practice in reality. She suggests:

(Watching the series) seems to often be a thing to do when you have a girlfriend, it's a couple thing to do. And it can be an aphrodisiac for new relationships. It was sorta like this thing that you never really saw lesbians having sex in movies or tv
or anything. Then all of a sudden you watch The L Word and there are heaps of sex scenes and they're really hot too.

The erotic representation of lesbianism with the series being a catalyst for sexual activity is often mentioned within my own experience of the lesbian community. This is emblematic of the other aspect of sexual identity construction that *The L Word* helps to enable. While it is significant to adopt and adapt a lesbian lifestyle in one’s appearance, the behaviours enacted upon are also an integral part of the process of constructing a lesbian lifestyle. Lesbians are sexual beings, and seeing them presented as such assists the lesbian audience to behave as such, contributing to their understanding of how to “be a lesbian”. Engaging in lesbian sexual acts is, as mentioned above, one significant aspect of lesbian lifestyles which individuals engage in for the furthering of their biographical construction as lesbians. Not only does *The L Word* display lesbian sex, but it celebrates it as a vital aspect of an overall lesbian identity, and thus allows for its audience to do the same.

3.4 Conclusion

As discussed in the previous chapter, the ability to see lesbianism depicted in the mainstream media was significant for many of my respondents during the period of their growing awareness of their sexual inclinations. In this chapter I have expanded upon that notion in exploring the impact of *The L Word* on the construction of lesbian lifestyles.
Although *The L Word* forms only one part of the overall mediated experience which ultimately influences an individual’s lifestyle development, these responses reflect that it is a significant component of that experience. The series provided my participants with a diverse array of lesbian role models, to whom they aligned themselves and aspired. These role models were significant not only in the further development of my participants’ sexual identity, but also in validating that identity.

The ability of the series to depict lesbian lifestyles allowed for the viewers to be introduced into those lifestyles, and narrate those aspects of lesbian lifestyles into their own lifestyle development. Whether through dress and embodiment, or a variety of other ways, my participants utilized the influence of *The L Word* and self-narrated these aspects into their own lifestyle development in the form of their appearance. This physical expression of their lesbian lifestyles may not have stood the test of time, but it was a significant aspect of their acceptance of, and acceptance into, their own lesbian biography.

The other prominent factor discussed in this chapter is the series’ focus on lesbian sexuality, and its ability to influence my participants’ own sexual attitudes. For my participants, the presentation of lesbian sex within *The L Word* was stimulating, erotic and cathartic. It aligned sensuality with lesbianism, rather than female same-sex acts performed for a dominant patriarchal audience, for the first time in mainstream media. This representation of lesbian sexuality both validated and stimulated my participants’ own sexual practices,
and became a key part of them learning the behaviours and expectations of the broader lesbian lifestyle.

Although *The L Word* constitutes only a small portion of the overall media open to my participants, its representation of lesbianism has proved so significant that it has become heavily influential in the process of lifestyle development. It has provided a model of the broader lesbianism, which has been pivotal to my participants’ exploration and construction of their own lesbian lifestyle, and by extension the narration of their biographies.
Chapter Four: Finding and Defining Community and the Influence of *The L Word*

4.1 Introduction

As previously discussed, the defining characteristic of *The L Word*, as distinct from many other televisual depictions of lesbianism, is its ability to depict more than simply lesbian characters, but a lesbian community and lifestyle. Although undoubtedly popular amongst women and men, queer and straight alike, the series has become a significant tool in creating and informing a lesbian community, both in a global and local context. As has been noted, the impact and significance of community for minority groups such as lesbians is vital (Crowley, 2010; Heath & Mulligan, 2008).

In this chapter I will explore how my participants utilize *The L Word* as a media object in the process of community building. I will examine theoretical concepts of community, and its importance in societal relations. I will then move on to a brief exploration of theoretical concepts of lesbian community, including the critique of homonormativity amongst LGBT communities. Following this will be a discussion of my participants’ responses, identifying how *The L Word* is used as a tool for community building. Finally, I will examine how this community built around *The L Word* can be understood as a counterpublic, and all the possibilities that entails.
4.2 Literature Review: Lesbian Community

Community: A Brief Overview

To understand the construction of a lesbian community, it is first pivotal that we are cognizant of how community has been theorized in academic discourse. Theoretical models of community are not as advanced and have not been as thoroughly explored as the empirical work on communities (Elias, 1973). Indeed Bell and Newby (1974) suggest that the many examples of empirical work on communities are limited in that they “steadfastly resist most attempts to synthesize their findings (to the extent that) there has never developed a theory of community, nor even a satisfactory definition of what community is” (p. xliii). Early concepts of community had a distinct nostalgic tone and associated it with “solidarity and harmony, unity of purpose and cooperation...The community-association polarity, in other words, like the folk-urban polarity, has romantic undertones. It reflects, at least in its initial version, the discontent and suffering connected with increasing urbanization and industrialization” (Elias, 1973, p. xi). As Elias suggests here, these early concepts of community recalled a past time, or a simpler time. This is echoed by Bell and Newby, who suggest that “community simply stood for what an almost endless group of thinkers...believed to be what society should consist of” (1974, p. xliii).

In Elias’ view these early communities were primarily organized around geographic locality, being “a group of households situated in the same locality and linked to each other by functional interdependencies of the same kind with
other groups of people within the wider social field to which a community belongs” (1973, p. xix). These geographic communities, whilst bound together by these interdependencies around trade, agriculture, procreation etc., are also signified by their “common traditions, such as ancestor worship... common rituals and festivals, involvement in communal balance of power tensions and conflicts and in common gossip circuits” (Elias, 1973, p. xxi). The insistence upon locality as the base defining quality of a community is at the heart of many discursive debates over the nature (and by extension, definition) of community. Bell and Newby identify the reaction to this problem as being split between those who “attempt to discontinue the use of the term ‘community’ and replace it with another which avoids the incorporation of value judgments – ‘locality’ for example”, and those who “abjure the community as an object of sociological study at all, but to use it instead as a method of obtaining data” (1974, p. xliv).

Elias draws a distinction between communities in differentiated societies (in which the hierarchy of power works upward from the community level) and those in village states, where the community is the primary hierarchy. Whilst Elias focuses on the more primal communities, he acknowledges that the development of new technologies has enabled groupings of communities across geographic localities (Elias, 1973). Writing in 1973 of course, Elias does not and cannot comprehend the vast technological advances, which have led to global communities. The advent of the Internet is the most significant factor in the rise of non-geographic communities.

Dennis Poplin defines community as one of three varied meanings:
First, it is often used as a synonym: at one time or another prisons, religious organizations, minority groups, members of the same profession, and even military establishments have been referred to as communities. Secondly, the word community is often used to refer to a moral or spiritual phenomenon. Today men and women the world over are supposedly engaged in a “search for community” i.e., a quest for unity and involvement with other human beings. Finally the word community is used to refer to those units of social and territorial organization which dot the face of the earth and which can also be called hamlets, villages, towns, cities, or metropolitan areas (1972, p. 1).

Poplin goes on to state the sociological perspective of community theory, which defines community as including three components, “a territorial variable (geographic area), a sociological variable (social interaction), and a psychocultural variable (common ties)” (1972, p. 9).

The extension that I would make to this definition concerns the territorial variable, which I would argue is less about geographical spatiality and more about the congregation of like-minded individuals in real or virtual spaces. In an age of increasingly technological interaction, whereby face-to-face contact often takes a back seat to one of the other multitude of forms of communication, the issue or geographic spatiality is no longer as prevalent as it was at the time of
Poplin’s writing. Rather, what is clear is that these spaces still exist, whether they be online or in specific geographic areas. This is a significant defining characteristic of contemporary communities.

Another of the primary defining characteristics of social organization is what Poplin describes as the psychocultural variable – that of common ties. This can be further understood through the differentiation between the gesellschaft (social relationships defined around rational or impersonal ties) and geimenschaft (social relationships based around close interpersonal ties) as is defined by sociologist Ferdinand Totties (Halewood, 2014). The notion of geimenschaft is prevalent in understanding the formation of the lesbian community built around The L Word.

One key theorist in the theoretical discourse of community is Benedict Anderson, whose seminal work on the ‘imagined community’ is significant in understandings of the community as a non-geographically delineated social group. Anderson foregrounds the concept of nationalism, suggesting that “nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (1983, p. 3). In his definition of the nation, however, Anderson isolates the idea that “it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (1983, p. 6). The use of the term ‘imagined’ lies in the fact that “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even heard of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). This ‘imagined-ness’ is a characterization not only of nationalism, but all communities. His suggestion
is that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). Anderson utilizes the concept of community, because, he suggests “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (1983, p. 7). Anderson also explores the religious community, suggesting that these communities “had a character distinct from the imagined communities of modern nations. One crucial difference was the older communities’ confidence in the unique sacredness of their languages” (1983, p. 13).

What Anderson’s writings on the imagined community provide to us is an understanding of a community as a group inherently tied together, not through physical space, pre-existing relationships or any other superficial characteristic, but through this sense of ‘horizontal comradeship’ defined by a shared and inherent characteristic of each member of that community. It also identifies the significance of the media, in Anderson’s case the print media, in being the catalyst for the creation of horizontal comradeship.

**Lesbian Community: Global and Local**

Similar to many other minority communities, the lesbian community can also be understood through Poplin’s three vital characteristics of community: the sociological, psychocultural and territorial. Traditionally, the lesbian community was founded around the social exclusion of lesbians from the broader society.
Brought together by the common tie of their shared stigmatized identities, lesbians formed communities in which they were able to find financial and emotional stability. These communities were geographically based, often in the form of communes. Gradually, the horizontal comradeship of these groups were lent an activist bent, mobilizing in the face of a culture of social unrest to fight for their rights and freedoms. However, the unity found in their shared goals was simultaneously solidifying and exclusive. Led by a militant feminist streak, there existed within these lesbian communities a very strict concept of what it meant to be lesbian, and those who did not live up to these ideals were excluded from both the community, and the broader society. This was further complicated by changes in LGBT paradigms during the post-AIDS period, wherein the queer movement was challenging traditional understandings of lesbianism. There was no longer a unifying goal as many lesbians found acceptance and understanding within the society that had previously derided them. That is not to suggest that a new form of lesbian community could not, and did not exist.

Even in a world of hitherto unforeseen acceptance and recognition, the significance of belonging to a distinct community for lesbians cannot be understated. This was particularly true for lesbian youths, who were negotiating their transitions into adulthood as well as their lesbian identities. Numerous studies have shown that many lesbians feel a greater sense of isolation and disconnection from the broader community than their heterosexual counterparts, and this often leads to them seeking a sense of belonging amongst the lesbian community (McLaren, 2009; Heath & Mulligan, 2008). As Heath and Mulligan state, "community engagement which contributes to, rather than
threatening, well-being is an active process” (2008, p. 291). Heath and Mulligan, whose research is based on the relationship between community and mental health, suggest that “the capacity for community membership to counteract social marginalization was especially important when coming out and simultaneously discovering a new identity, a new community and a new social status as a marginalized person” (2008, p. 294).

As traditional formations of lesbian community predicated on financial support and political activism have somewhat dissolved in the contemporary landscape, the forms that these new communities take are quite diverse and distinct from those of previous generations. I argue that the evolutionary lesbian community falls into two diverse but potentially intersecting categories: the global and the local. On a local scale, women’s groups such as women’s circuses, women’s sporting clubs and others provide a platform for lesbians to connect with like-minded women. Whilst these groups are not exclusively lesbian, nor do they (in general) market themselves towards a lesbian audience, they generally have a large lesbian component and represent a safe space for lesbians to congregate. There also exists within the local lesbian community, a nightlife scene. Although not as prominent as its predecessors, the various contemporary lesbian clubs and bars provide a space for lesbians to congregate and meet other lesbians. This provides a further obstacle for lesbian youths, to whom the nightclub scene was not available.

Conversely, the Internet offers the scope for minority groups to congregate and find community in hitherto unimagined ways (Tsang, 1996). Via a variety of
vehicles such as lesbian dating sites, blogs, popular culture sites and more, the ability for disparate lesbians to engage with a broad lesbian subculture is greater today than it ever has been. As is discussed by Fran Martin in her study of Chinese language lesbian cyberspaces, “the responses to this survey thus notably did not indicate a widely shared idea of a singular or cohesive Chinese cultural identity, in contrast, many of the responses to questions about people’s subjective experiences of ‘sexual’ identity did reveal a strongly globalist discourse” (2008, p. 296). This is echoed by others who have examined the role the Internet plays in queer community building, providing a space to explore identity (Campbell, 2004) and engage with like-minded others (Chaplin, 2014; Tsang, 1996). A significant aspect of lesbian online communities is that they are accessible for youths seeking community ties despite difficult familial or social environments.

Heath and Mulligan found in their qualitative research that “some (participants) felt that they were part of a sisterhood and identified themselves with a lesbian culture. Even when they did not attend events, they felt that the lesbian community was available to them” (2008, p. 297). This is particularly notable given that the argument has been made that with the proliferation of online forms of communication, as well as a growing acceptance within broader society and the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture, that the lesbian community is a relic of a bygone era (Ellis, 2007). What Heath and Mulligan’s research indicates is that, despite what may be perceived as a physical disparateness, that the lesbian community remains prevalent in the minds of its participants.
Homonormativity

Despite these accounts of the positive influence of community on the lives of gay and lesbian individuals, there have been some significant criticisms of LGBT communities as they exist in contemporary society. Perhaps the most prevalent of these is the concept of homonormativity. As Lisa Duggan defines it, homonormativity refers to:

A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (2002, p. 179).

Homonormativity is defined in obvious relation to the more commonly utilized heteronormativity, which refers to the conviction that heterosexuality is the ‘natural’ or ‘given’ state of any and all individuals within a society, and that gender is distinct and innate (Warner, 1991). Much of the rhetoric surrounding coming out and constructing a minority sexual identity is done in the cognizance of this heteronormative environment, and concerns the struggle that LGBT people face in a culture of assumptive heterosexuality. This is expounded for youths who are not only negotiating the transitions associated with being homosexual, but also the myriad other transitions inherent in transitioning into adulthood. The innate accompanying assumption is that, when introduced into a gay or lesbian community, these struggles are mitigated.
The idea of homonormativity, however, challenges this assumption in asserting the constricted nature of contemporary LGBT community. Homonormativity implies that the modern homosexual is “expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride” (Seidman, 2002, p. 133). The impact of this is, in essence, the production of a palatable version of homosexuality which does not threaten or contradict the dominant social norms at the expense of furthering the exclusion of many (Cover, 2012).

The homonormative politics that attempts to sell a ‘safe’ queer culture in order to make legislative, policy and social gains does so only for a select few who fit the homonormative criteria of white, affluent and attractive, thereby reinforcing disadvantages and inequities within queer community on the ability of persons to gain participation and belonging (Cover, 2012, p. 124).

Perhaps the primary culprit for the evolution of homonormativity is the mainstream media, which utilizes what has been termed the ‘normal gay’ in film, television and other forms (Seidman, 2002). It has been argued that this can be particularly damaging because of its scope for consumption. This factor is significant because, as previously explored, for a young LGBT audience to view themselves being represented in mainstream media has a substantial impact. As Cover suggests, “a homonormative queer culture is also understood, viewed,
witnessed or otherwise becomes recognizable among younger persons who, sometimes by virtue of age alone, are too young to be physically accessing queer community and thereby able to see the extent to which diversity of attitude, taste, behaviour and lifestyle are, in fact, normative” (2012, p. 129).

Indeed abiding by these characteristics of homonormativity is an accusation which has been leveled at The L Word from several critics, who argue that its depiction of lesbianism predicates a distinctly homonormative offering. As I have discussed earlier, however, the representation of lesbianism and in particular femininity inherent within the series’ representation in fact had the effect of appealing to several of my participants who viewed themselves as more feminine than their stereotypical understandings of lesbianism allowed for. Although undoubtedly The L Word in many ways conforms to the homonormative ideals, this does not always have the effect of excluding the viewer seeking a space of identification. What the debate surrounding homonormativity within the contemporary homosexual community does suggest is that the community is no longer a singular, easily defined entity, but a splintered group, comprising of diverse and plentiful segments. At a macro level, the imagined community held together by a shared sexual identity is still a relevant concept, however on a micro level the need exists for an explanation of these groups within the larger community.

These understandings of community are central to understanding how the lesbian audience of The L Word can be understood as functioning as a community. Despite its position within the mediated world, The L Word as a
media object can be understood as playing a significant role in building communities and empowering those communities in making active choices about their aims and goals.

4.3 Finding Lesbian Communities in the Modern World: The Impact of *The L Word*

Whilst an important characteristic of the series *The L Word* is the fact that it depicts a lesbian community, rather than a single character or couple within a heterosexual world, I would argue that, based on the responses I have gleaned from my research, it also functions as a community building tool, in that it creates a community out of the audience it finds. This community is diverse and dispersed across Melbourne, but it nevertheless has all the attributes of a community as it has been theorized in academic discourse. In order to examine the ways in which my respondents painted a picture of a community formed out of an engagement with *The L Word* as a media object, I will utilize Poplin’s understanding of the three main pillars of community: social interaction, common ties, and spaces (Poplin, 1972). Ultimately this will examine community building in the sense that Anderson understood it, the creation of a community built on horizontal comradeship around a consumed and circulated form of media.
Common Ties

A key factor is identifying the lesbian audience of The L Word as a community is in the common ties shared. Within my respondents, these common ties are most readily identifiable through two factors. The first is the position of these respondents within the broader social milieu, and the second is the tastes they share, specifically with regards to media consumption. Both of these factors in conjunction create an understanding of this group as a community.

My participants, coming from similar socio-economic backgrounds and areas, share many common ties through their position within broader society. They range in age, but that range falls within the specific category of youth, and as such are going through similar periods of transition. They all reside in and around the inner suburbs of Melbourne, and are influenced by the urban culture that suggests. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, they all readily identify as lesbian. These factors in conjunction with one another position my participants as within the same broad social grouping, but more than that, they indicate a level of connectedness that comes with those who share community bonds.

These ties are all shared, but they can also be understood as shared ties that are dispersed. Each individual respondent may have similar or identical traits, but they are disparate until brought together by a media object. The form of sociality, which I will discuss in the next section, provides a platform for the people who share these common ties to come together, whilst the common ties they share allow them to easily form bonds and relationships within this new sociality.
Whilst those social factors are one indication of the shared common ties binding my participants into a community, there is another significant element that suggests communal relationality. Each of my participants has a deep knowledge and affection for *The L Word*, and it is in this affinity that we can also understand them as a social category in and of themselves.

This concept has its roots in Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of tastes and the social categorization that tastes imply (Bourdieu, 1979). For Bourdieu, tastes function as an indicator of class and the hierarchy implicit in class distinctions. Where my participants sit on this hierarchy is in a dichotomic position. Being, for the most part, white and of Euro-Anglo origins, residing in and around the inner city and surrounding suburbs, and being upper-middle class reasonably educated people, my participants fall into one class category. Their self-identification as lesbians, however, positions them in a place of inferiority to the dominant order of heterosexuality. I would argue that it is possible to understand their position as a distinct social category, with a distinct set of tastes and common ties. Bourdieu argues, “a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (1979, p. 2). This is not true of only the fine arts, but of media objects such as *The L Word*, which provide a specific form of meaning for those who have ingratiated themselves into the lesbian lifestyle.

An example of this is evident in how Ava describes cognizance of *The L Word* as a tool engendering social interaction.
I think it always comes up in random conversations where you might be like ‘oh that’s so Shane’ or something like that. It’s fun to kind of give people roles, we used to do that all the time. Other than that, its just kind of around, I don’t think we all talk about it a lot but if it came up, everyone would know what you’re talking about.

In this response it is evident that Ava utilizes her knowledge of the series, and implicitly the position of the series within the broader lesbian community, to form and further social bonds. This is similarly evident in Marci’s responses, which indicated that watching The L Word was something she recommended to all of her friends who had only just, or were still in the process of coming out. Marci’s desire to ‘spread the word’ about the series implies a way for her to create new bonds with those friends around this media object.

It is possible to see how a shared understanding and appreciation of The L Word distinguishes this group, and in doing so, binds them together. These shared ties can also be understood as a form of social capital (Putnam, 2000). Social capital refers to the connections between individuals and the possible value gleaned from those connections. Within the notion of social capital there exists some variation.

Of all the dimensions along which forms of social capital vary, perhaps the most important in the distinction between
bridging (or inclusive) and bonding (or exclusive). Some forms of social capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organisations, church-based women’s reading groups, and fashionable country clubs. Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organization (Putnam, 2000, p. 22).

In this context it is possible to conceive of how the shared ties my participants exhibit, and the communal connection they suggest, function as a mode of bonding social capital. This is critical to understanding the duality of this group’s position within the broader society. Social capital does not always yield positive impacts for its holders (Putnam, 2000). Whilst the bonding social capital exhibited by my participants enables them to find validation and empowerment in their biographical narration, it also marks them as socially outside the norm.

This notion is expanded upon by Frow, Bennett and Emmison, who argue:

The social pattern of cultural tastes in contemporary Australia is enmeshed within complexly interacting forms of social and cultural power by means of which differences in cultural preference are used as markers of social position and, in some
circumstances, as a way of unequally distributing cultural life chances (1999, p. 1).

Although the taste distinction is here equated to social position and agency, the more significant facet of it is the way in which these cultural tastes work to define a cultural group in and of itself. In their shared affection for, and understanding of, *The L Word*, young Melbournian lesbians as exemplified by my participants, define their own status within the social spectrum.

**Social Interaction**

As I have previously alluded to, another key aspect to the community-building possibilities of *The L Word* lies in how it creates a specific form of sociality. Without social interaction, the members of a community are not inherently linked to each other on a micro level. In the case of the community formed around a shared experience of *The L Word*, this social interaction is bi-fold in its manifestation. It occurs in the way that the audience talks to each other about *The L Word*, and the way they use slang or lingo that is derived from the series.

The first aspect of this social interaction is that which occurs through a discussion of the diegesis of the text, and the subsequent issues that raises. One of the more interesting factors about *The L Word*, and something which distinguishes it from many other television programmes, is the way that it engenders conversation. This form of interaction is more than simply the ‘water-
cooler’ rehashing of plot twists, but rather an active and vibrant discussion about issues raised by the series. This characteristic of the series was remarked upon by most of my participants. Ava noted:

In season 5 there is an episode where they’re around a campfire and they’re discussing their different ideas of what cheating meant. I think that certainly enabled a discussion amongst us who were watching the show. I think we probably talked about it all night about the different ideas and what people feel is cheating.

Similarly, Greta acknowledged that discussion about the show punctuated her viewing experiences. She remarks that “an episode would finish and there would be discussion about it, why it’s ridiculous or why it’s good”. It is interesting to note that she divorces the discussion-making impetus of the show from value judgments, thus opening the discussion up to a broader audience.

For Rita, the conversation engendered by The L Word was symptomatic of its standing within the broader lesbian community.

At the time, when it first came out, it was huge. You’d talk about it heaps... I think in the later seasons people began to get cranky with it, in terms of storylines and in terms of maybe people were developing their own politics and their own ideas and were questioning the ideology behind the
series to a greater extent. But, I mean, it was still *The L Word* and every lesbian worth their skin had seen it and would be able to converse about it.

Significantly, Rita notes the community that exists around the series is a uniquely lesbian one, a point that I will examine in further detail later. This point is also noted by Marci, who recalls conversation around the series “only (with) other lesbians... some friends of mine started watching it together, so I talked to them about how they found it.” Similarly, Dianne found that it was inevitably discussed with “anyone new to the community. It was like, have you watched this show yet?” Julie also echoes how the series functions as a topic for discourse, recounting that she “spent endless hours discussing *The L Word* with my queer and lesbian friends.” Through these responses, it is clear that *The L Word* functions as a catalyst for social interaction between lesbians, if only from the perspective of discussing diegetic concerns.

It is not merely the utilization of the text as a starting point for conversation, however, which identifies the social interactivity of the community created out of *The L Word’s* audience. The social interaction is also defined by the use of specific language or phrases between members of this community. These phrases and words are unique, and their meaning is ascribed by their use in *The L Word*. This can be understood as an example of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). Subcultural capital, coined by Sarah Thornton, refers to the knowledge acquired by members of a subculture used to identify what is ‘hip’ and what is not.
Subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being 'in the know', using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles (Thornton, 1995, p. 203).

This is exemplified by my participant’s responses when they identify two specific phrases that are inherently understood and utilized solely by those who have experienced an engagement with the series. The first of these is ‘Shane’, functioning here not as the specific character within the broader diegesis of the series, but as a concept referring to a lesbian who shares the same style of dress or lothario-like tendencies.

The term ‘Shane’ is referred to by Julie, who notes “I feel like I had lots of conversations about ‘Who’s your favourite? I’m a Shane... and stuff like that, with just about everyone I met.” Similarly, Dianne recalled a similar kind of experience:

I think the whole Shane character and the way she dressed was a huge thing. Not saying I did it personally, but going out at the time you definitely saw it. Like, look over there, its another Shane-girl trying to look like Shane and act like Shane.
Implicit in her description of the ‘Shane-girls’, its clear that Dianne has an understanding of Shane as a concept, and that this understanding is shared with the rest of this specific lesbian community. This is also reinforced by Ava, who notes “I think it always comes up in random conversations where you might be like ‘Oh that’s so Shane’ or something like that.” Marci recalls thinking that “it seemed like younger lesbians tried to be like Shane,” with the implicit understanding of that as more than merely a stylistic or motivational impetus.

Also employed in a similar fashion throughout my interviews is the concept of the Chart. Within the series, the Chart is a firstly physical, then virtual, map of all the romantic entanglements of the main group of characters. It is utilized as a plot device, but has taken on new dimensions within the audience. For example, Rita recalls making her own Chart with friends:

We probably did one the first time we watched it together, and then whenever anyone hooked up with anyone or you found out about someone hooking up with someone or cheating on someone, you’d draw a new one and like, work out all the little connections. Even if you met new people, you’d be like ‘Oh so this person is connected to that person, who hooked up with the other person, which comes back to this person that I know…’

Rita is not the only respondent who refers directly to making, or knowing of, this use of the Chart. Marci also recalls that she did not personally make one, but
friends did. Similarly, Dianne notes that “I haven’t done one, but I’ve been in conversations with numerous people who have done them.” Julie admitted to having participated, noting “I’ve done one with a couple of friends. I think it’s pretty common.”

Ava recounts that her and her friends “have one at a friend’s place. A very big one....I know a few girls on there but not many other than the big girls, like the Shanes.” Ava’s weaving together of these two concepts comes naturally and further heightens the notion that they are two aspects of the same subcultural language, in which meaning is clearly inscribed and understood by all participants.

The couched definition and utilization of Shane and the Chart as concepts throughout the interviews can be seen as examples of subcultural capital. Although this sociality revolves around a media object, the interaction can be seen as a form of geimenschaft in that this form of interaction is inherently personal. The use of slang, as well as the position of the plot as a catalyst for discussion, define and characterize social interactions between members of the audience of The L Word and are examples of how this can be understood as a community.

Spaces
The concept of a territorial aspect inherent in community is already a hotly contested one. As many have noted, with the proliferation of new media and information technology, communication is no longer restricted to occurring within the same geographic constraints. In fact, for minority communities such as the lesbian community, interaction and connections made via the Internet can be just as significant given the potential constraints of age, finances or accessibility to contacting real world communities. Mariano notes that the online world “serves as a haven and sanctuary for many lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders in Asia living under repressive regimes” (2009, p. 167). Virtual spaces such as chat rooms, popular culture websites and blogs are evident in my participants’ responses, as are physical spaces such as bedrooms and living rooms. Their interaction within these spaces is defined by their experience of *The L Word*.

The potential of the online world for the purposes of community building is alluded to by my respondents, several of whom utilized the online content surrounding *The L Word* in their experiences of the show. For Julie, it was something she discovered when searching online. Along with British lesbian-themes drama series *Lip Service* (Braun, 2010), she watched it online in an effort to connect to a lesbian world.

Similar recollections come from Dianne and Ava, who both came across the series online and engaged with it as a product of a lesbian world they did not belong to yet. For Dianne, it was the product of a quest to find likenesses:
[My first engagement with the show came from] just being online, being connected. It was when I was actually coming out, so there was a lot of surfing the net, wanting to be in communities and that sort of thing, and I just heard about of it there.

Conversely, Ava's experience of the show and the online world surrounding it was more of an extra-textual pursuit. She recalls:

I always used to go on afterellen.com and there was always a big half a page devoted to what was going on in *The L Word*. I stayed off that for a bit because I didn't want to spoil it for myself before I watched it all, but I was always reading about it on that and involving myself in the comments and messages and that. I never really had anyone to talk to about it as a 16 year old.

Both of these responses specifically posit the Internet as a place of potential congregation and engagement, both for specific audiences of the series, as well as for the lesbian community more broadly. The introduction of online interaction into this community further strengthens our understanding of it as representative of the imagined community (Anderson, 1983). Despite never meeting in person, or maybe even conversing one on one, Ava and others enjoy a belief that their shared interest, in this case an investment in *The L Word*, afford them access to a sense of belonging in this community. It must be noted that
access to these online worlds are enabled by their social conditions, living with freedom of expression and the economic opportunities to explore their identities. These social conditions are specific to their position as upper middle-class Melbournians. It would be interesting to note the availability of these virtual spaces to those living outside of these particular social conditions.

Whilst the online world and its potential for community relations is significant, particularly in this digital era, the responses of my participants indicated that there still exists a physical community grounded in experiencing *The L Word*. Whether with a partner or group of friends, there is undoubtedly a trend towards watching the series as a shared experience. Three of my respondents recounted watching the series with a partner, viewing the series in a uniquely shared environment.

Greta recalled watching the series with her girlfriend at the time, in the house they shared. Similarly, Marci watched the entire series with her partner, who had already seen it all, within the bedroom of their shared house. Her experience, despite her partner’s previous knowledge of the show, was intrinsically tied up in the notion of a shared viewing experience. Dianne also watched the series with her partner, with their discussions of the series being a significant aspect of her viewing experience. These viewing experiences all took place predominantly in the respective bedrooms of my participants. The bedroom, a traditionally private sphere, is imbued with the possibilities of shared experience, all whilst still remaining an intimate environment.
The notion of the shared experience of watching the series is echoed by Rita, whose recollections include “being at a friend’s place... and we got a group of us (lesbians) together to watch it. I remember that some or all of those people had already watched it”. Julie had a similar experience of shared consumption, recalling “I introduced it to another friend, and the girl who introduced it to me and this other friend used to watch it together. For years we had done that... so it was like our new version of that”. For Ava, it was something that her friendship group engaged in from time to time, often engendering discussion about plot points or thematic elements. My participants’ congregation around these domestic spaces (bedrooms, lounge rooms etc.) is significant because, as youths, there is a dearth of other spaces available to them. Without the financial and domestic privileges of adulthood, they must make use of whichever space they can in their search for community.

The domestic sphere represents a place of retreat, as well as a place where they can explore and consume what Ken Plummer (1995) refers to as the culture of sexual storytelling. The L Word, as a device of sexual storytelling, works to bond community together in this way. As Plummer suggests, “the stories of the community are a crucial part of this world – feeding into it, strengthening it, but very much dependent on it for a space where they can be said and heard” (1995, p. 95). The ability of my participants to find these domestic spaces in which to congregate and consume the series is a pivotal aspect of their community building.
Whether it was watching it with a girlfriend, or a group of like-minded friends, it is evident from my participants that the act of watching *The L Word* was something innately social, demanding an audience that shared the same physical space. If this was not possible, as was the case for several of my respondents who were isolated in their sexual identity, they utilized the Internet as a virtual place for socialization and engagement with others around the series. The series operates as the product of mass media, which joins together those it reaches, both far and near, to engage them as part of this subcultural imagined community.

4.4 *The L Word* Lesbian Community as a Counterpublic

One way of understanding a specific form of community group is through what Michael Warner refers to as ‘publics and counterpublics’ (Warner, 2002). The public, as it is imagined by Warner, can refer to “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (2002, p. 66). In this section I will examine the concept of the counterpublic, and argue that the community built around *The L Word* can be characterized as a counterpublic.

Before understanding the definition and functions of a counterpublic, we must first establish what a public is and how it is constructed. Understanding the public in this context cannot always be discrete from other understandings of a public, but it is unique in that it relies upon the globalized world and its environment of media consumption for its existence:
A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed (Warner, 2002, p. 67).

The public, in this sense, can exist concurrently with the broader social public as a group within that public, co-ordinated by discursive relations (Fraser, 1990). It has the ability to traverse geopolitical boundaries, even language barriers, and it does so through the aforementioned circulation of media texts. As Warner states, “without the idea of texts that can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people, we would not imagine a public as an entity that embraces all the users of that text, whoever they may be” (2002, p. 68).

As is implied in its name, the term counterpublic utilizes the traditions of a public as termed by Warner, whilst incorporating several factors which articulate that it run in counterpoint to the dominant social culture.

Over the past three centuries, many such scenes have organized themselves as publics, and because they differ markedly in one way or another from the premises that allow the dominant culture to understand itself as a public, they have come to be called counterpublics (Warner, 2002, p. 113).
These counterpublics can be understood as having the same traits as a public, with the same defining characteristics. However a counterpublic must at all times be aware of the factor that distinguishes it from the dominant regime. The norms which exist for a counterpublic are often inverted to those which are understood for a public. For example, “within a gay or queer counterpublic... no one is in the closet: the presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended” (Warner, 2002, p. 120).

The other significant aspect to counterpublic participation is the understanding that membership of a counterpublic requires an aspect of difference to be socially marked and undesirable.

Like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers. But counterpublic discourse also addresses these strangers as being not just anybody. They are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene (Warner, 2002, p. 120).

It is for this reason that queer or gay groups have often been theorized as counterpublics. Their social identity is perceived as unfavourable, and thus their public in inherently a counterpublic. An example of this is found in Suzanne Fraser’s exploration of the queer audience of television series *Queer As Folk*.
(Davies, 1999) as a counterpublic (Fraser, 2006). Fraser argues that the queer audience of the series operates as a counterpublic, reflexively engaging with the series through the circulation of the text itself, and the range of commentary that surrounds it in the form of reviews, website discussion etc. Fraser suggests “the process of specification the public discourse such as Queer As Folk attempts incorporates a range of strategies such as the use of specific speech genres, idioms, stylistic markers, citational field, lexicon and other elements” (2006, 157). What is significant about this is the way in which the lifeworld of the text engages reflexively with the lifeworld of its counterpublic.

The L Word can be understood as public speech, as it is understood by Warner, in that it is an example of public discourse. It is a television series that is available to be consumed freely through the media of television and the Internet. It is addressed to each individual audience member, as well as the infinite others. The very nature of its public address implies that its audience, or public, is made up on infinite strangers. This has the effect of “bring[ing] together strangers through participation rather than identity” (Fraser, 2006, p. 155). The participation in the circulation and consumption of The L Word is also evident in understanding its poetic world making possibilities: the possibilities of “shaping perspectives and constituting understandings of society” (Fraser, 2006, p. 157). As Warner suggests:

Public discourse says not only ‘Let a public exist’ but ‘Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way’. It then goes in search of confirmation that such a public exists,
with greater or lesser success – success being further attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world understanding it articulates (2002, p. 114).

*The L Word* indeed aligns with this, articulating a lifeworld in its text. Through the aforementioned factors it is possible to understand *The L Word* as constituting public speech, and thus the audience as a public. In exploring a uniquely lesbian audience, however, it is possible to understand that public as a counterpublic. One critical aspect of a counterpublic that comes into play here is the position of the counterpublic within the broader society. As well as an awareness of their subordinate position within society, a counterpublic is also innately oppositional, challenging mainstream assumptions and discourse. Counterpublic discourse can be a fruitful way of examining youth community as youths have often been theorized as oppositional to broader society. It is through this oppositional nature that it is possible to understand how the young Melbournian lesbian community that exists around *The L Word* can be understood as a counterpublic.

**Oppositional Discourse**

As I have previously explored, the responses from my participants indicated a way of understanding lesbians who have an experience of *The L Word* as a community in and of themselves. I would like to further this point, to suggest that this community can also be understood as a counterpublic. As a group
congregated around a media text they fulfill the role of a public, however they identify more readily with a counterpublic understanding due to the oppositional discourse they exhibit. With regards to my respondents, I will discuss the ways in which their mediated use of *The L Word* challenged mainstream public discourse in three pivotal ways. These are lesbian visibility, same-sex erotic pleasure, and challenges to traditional stereotypes.

**Lesbian Visibility**

Lesbian visibility within mainstream media has been a bone of contention for many throughout the history of mass media. Whilst the first lesbian characters appearing in television occurred during the late 1980s and early 1990s, this has not necessarily led to a breadth of representation. Prominent LGBT organization GLAAD revealed in its annual report on LGBT representation within television that during the 2014 season, LGBT characters made up 3.3% of all primetime broadcast television characters, down from the record of 4.4% in 2012 (“GLAAD Where We Are On TV”, 2014). Given that these statistics include gay male, transgender and bisexual characters, it is significant to note that lesbians made up less than 25% of that number. Although they have arguably progressed from being totally invisible or subordinate, to being represented in superficial or postscript sense, many still feel the dearth of lesbian representation in mass media keenly. Much of this is due to the representation of lesbianism as being inherently negative, whether through depression, violence, invisibility or freakishness (Peele, 2007). Given this, it is possible to understand how a series
such as *The L Word* and its inherent celebration of lesbian visibility represents an opposition to mainstream media discourse in the eyes of its audience.

Even in this brave new world of greater visibility for subordinate minorities, the kind of lesbians seen in television and movies were still highly one-dimensional, neutered and divorced from any kind of uniquely lesbian context, except for the purposes of comedic relief. For example, popular medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2005) depicted a lesbian couple, Callie and Arizona, but depicted their lesbianism in a watered-down fashion, distanced from any kind of lesbian lifeworld or lifestyle. Popular sit-com *Will & Grace* (Kohan & Mutchnick, 1998), despite having two gay men as central protagonists, only depicted lesbianism through stilted stereotypes, placed strategically to provide comedic value.

One of the key aspects of *The L Word*, and one that is noted by my participants as being key to their relationship with the series, is the way that it brought lesbian visibility to the forefront. It eschewed the traditional discourse of lesbianism as de-sexualised, negative or superficial, and produced rounded and measured characters in a lesbian context. For Greta, much of the appeal of the series was in its scope. She noted:

> There’s a limited amount of lesbian-based TV shows to watch. Even movies, I mean, *The L Word* is not the most amazing storyline, it got a bit out of control sometimes, but some of the movies out there are really crap. It’s kind of the best option
(when) you just want to see something that reflects how you feel.

This opinion is echoed by Dianne, who celebrates the lesbian lifeworld depicted within the series:

My initial response was that it felt like it was the first thing I could actually relate to properly. There wasn’t any hint of gay characters on television at the time, let alone a show entirely for lesbians, so to me it was something I could relate to for the first time on television.

For Rita it was the simple fact that “it was pretty exciting to see lesbians on TV”. Implicit in her celebration is the acknowledgement that many other depictions of female same-sex relationships were not what she considered ‘lesbian’. 20-year-old Ava suggests a similar feeling, noting:

I think it really interested me in that it was a big community of lesbians as friends, it was something to feel a part of and (it was significant) seeing female relationships on television. Solely female relationships rather than other shows which might have the one.
Julie also comments on the lesbian visibility so celebrated among my participants, suggesting that “to see a positive image of lesbians, even if it wasn’t exactly what your life was life, was sort of encouraging, positive and affirming.”

What all of these responses share is a celebration and affirmation of the representation of lesbians and lesbian lifestyle in mainstream media. This can be understood as oppositional discourse in two ways. Firstly, as aforementioned, the position of the lesbian within visual media has been lamented and discouraged, and to openly laud the positioning of lesbians as positive and primary characters in a big budget, high production value television series can be seen as oppositional to much of mainstream media. Secondly, and further to the initial point, my participants applaud the fact that the series provides a community of lesbians, existing in a lesbian context. This is not merely groundbreaking in a historical perspective, but celebrates a minority group in a manner rarely seen, even within those series that do offer lesbian representations.

**Same-Sex Erotic Pleasure**

Another aspect of the way in which my respondents display their oppositional discourse is in the manner with which they discuss and celebrate same-sex erotic pleasure as it relates to *The L Word*. As has been thoroughly explored, most notably in Laura Mulvey’s seminal work ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, traditional cinema posits the audience as a heterosexual male, typified by the
‘male gaze’ (Mulvey, 1975). Although this has been heavily critiqued, the premise remains prominent that in visual media the primary objectification taking place is that of the female body, by the heterosexual male gaze. Within contemporary discourse, even contemporary lesbian discourse, Rebecca Beirne notes that “the majority of lesbian commentary appears to be disturbed by overly sexualized depictions due to their potential to be pornographically consumed by heterosexual men” (2008, p. 48). These assumptions fall under the umbrella of what is termed ‘heteronormativity’, identified by Michael Warner as the ways in which society operated under the assumption of heterosexuality and all the normative associations that it implies with regards to gender, sexuality, lifestyle and other factors (Warner, 1991).

Whilst the kind of male fantasy that Beirne makes mention of may be the more common discourse surrounding representations of lesbian sex, the responses I received suggested an appropriation and celebration of the erotic possibilities of the text. For instance, Ava, when discussing the new Australian television drama Prisoner, refers to it as having “one of the most realistic lesbian sex-scenes” since The L Word, and that this would be a pull to the show from a lesbian audience. The very notion that a lesbian audience would be drawn to a series because of the pleasure in watching same-sex eroticism is counter to traditional patriarchal viewing pleasure paradigms.

This facet of The L Word’s pull for my respondents is confirmed by Marci, who concedes that the series functions as an aphrodisiac for several of the lesbians within her inner circle. She admits that during her initial introduction to the
series, her and her partner utilized the series as a catalyst for their intimate relationship. Greta alludes to this also, suggesting that the engagement with the series, and her sexual relationship with her previous partner were inherently linked. Rita extrapolates upon this point, suggesting that one of the key draw cards of the series was its ability to show “lesbian sex depicted quite graphically.”

The notion of a mainstream television series promoting, or even targeting itself towards, same-sex erotic pleasure, as is purported by several of my participants, is clearly a manifestation of the kind of counterpublic bent of the group. The celebration of lesbian sexuality goes against the kind of compulsory heterosexuality that has defined social interaction, particularly within mainstream media (Rich, 1980). If we are to accept, as Rich suggests, that “lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life” (1980, p. 239), then any group that celebrates the erotic possibilities of lesbianism must undoubtedly run in opposition to notions of heternormativity which govern so much of societal relations.

**Challenges to Traditional Stereotypes**

One other key area in which my respondents offered a discourse that diverged from traditional public discourse, was in the way they addressed notions around lesbian stereotypes. As has been discussed:
The heterosexist bias in society, which assumes the heterosexuality is the only ‘natural’ alternative, promotes negative attitudes and stereotypes by emphasizing the ways lesbian behaviours, experiences, histories, and value systems differ from those of the dominant culture (Eliason et al., 1992, p. 42).

Because of the subordinate position of the lesbian within broader society, and due to the need to differentiate them from the ‘norm’ as mentioned above, lesbian stereotypes have been prominent throughout media. Perhaps the most pervasive of these is that of the ‘butch’: the woman “who dressed and acted in ways previously considered reserved for men” (Gibson & Meem, 2002, p. 3). This ‘masculinity’ may extend to sartorial embodiment, hobbies and interests, and even body type. Traditionally, this kind of stereotype is associated with being undesirable, particularly to heterosexual men.

Contrary to this traditional stereotypical understanding of the lesbian as butch, The L Word’s representation of lesbianism is far more feminine and desirable. Much is made of The L Word’s representation of femme lesbians: lesbians whose appearance and sartorial sense is more akin to traditional notions of femininity (Harris & Crocker, 1997). Rather than rejecting this as an example of homonormativity (as discussed previously), my participants instead championed the potential of these ‘femme’ lesbians. Rita argues that The L Word’s representations “legitimized and made it cool to be femme... it gave that as an alternative to what was already there”. Dianne echoes this, suggesting that not
only did it provide her with a style of lesbian she felt she could relate to, but that “they looked like the sort of girls that I would be attracted to.”

The sense of legitimacy achieved by the series’ femme representation is also acknowledged by Greta, who posits that the show gave her hope that she could fit in with the lesbian community despite her pre-conceived notion that she had to more exemplify the stereotypical ‘dyke’. She suggests “I never really went through a butch phase, but maybe if I hadn’t watched the show, I might have thought I had to, to fit in.” This notion was reinforced by Julie, who noted:

I think having those really femme characters, that’s something

*The L Word* has been criticized for, having all these femme women and saying that’s not really realistic, but for me it actually really good because it helped me be ok with being femme.

Another way in which my respondents critiqued the traditional stereotypes associated with the ‘butch’ lesbian is in their understanding and thoughts on the character of Shane. Positioned as the token ‘butch’ lesbian within the main cast, Shane most closely embodies the traditional understanding of the lesbian, albeit a watered down version. However, the positioning of her within my respondents’ understanding as highly desirable and attractive is contrary to previous notions of the butch as an unattractive figure.
This is most notably discussed by Ava who, as a self-identified ‘butch’, utilized Shane as a role model and point of identification. However, her consideration of Shane extends beyond that, as she notes:

I think everyone, even lesbians who haven’t seen the show, know about Shane. I think she’s the universal kind of one, because lots of people think she’s really attractive, they like the actress and her sex scenes were always the best sex scenes, she was just the universally loved one.

This sentiment is echoed by Rita, who suggests:

I remember before watching it everyone had said that Shane was so hot, that was the general consensus. Everyone was talking about her voice and everything, and I remember thinking at first that I’m not sure I agree with everyone... but then I did grow to love her and totally jumped on the bandwagon.

The very fact that universal admiration of an ostensibly butch character was a bandwagon to jump on is somewhat revolutionary. Between the privileged position Shane holds within the lifeworld of my participants, and their insistence on the positive impact of feminine representations of lesbianism, their discourse directly opposes many traditionally held ideas of public discourse, once again providing a manifestation of their counterpublic potential.
4.5 Conclusion

In assessing the responses of my participants in relation to their viewing experiences of *The L Word*, it is possible to characterize their congregation around the series as being a community-building experience. This community, whilst fragmented across real and virtual spaces, shares common ties and the kind of horizontal comradeship, which has defined contemporary communities. Furthermore, this community has the potential not only to exist for the means of sociability amongst members, but to challenge many traditional notions of heteronormative public discourse. Thus it is possible to understand how *The L Word* has engendered the creation not just of a community, but of a counterpublic.

Admittance to this lesbian counterpublic community occurred purely through my participants’ utilization of *The L Word* not merely as a text but as a media object. Their membership of this counterpublic community is a further example of how their mediated experiences influenced them in making active choices about their lives and identities, and in doing so furthered the narration of their own biographies.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

No doubt soap operas, and other forms of media entertainment too, are escapes – substitutes for real satisfactions unobtainable in normal social conditions. Yet perhaps more important is the very narrative form they offer, suggesting models for the construction of narratives of the self (Giddens, 1991, pp. 199).

In this thesis I sought to examine and evaluate the importance of seminal television series The L Word from the perspective of the young lesbian audience in Melbourne. The series, although examined reasonably comprehensively in terms of representational politics, had not been explored from the perspective of the audience impact and influence. This appeared to be a clear gap in the theoretical discourse surrounding The L Word, and one which is significant in understanding the overall impact and legacy of the series.

Summary

By using a qualitative research and grounded theory method approach, I aimed to examine the impact of the series on this group. By using this approach, I was able to gain a more comprehensive overview of how this group had engaged with the series. Through my fieldwork, I found that young Melbournian lesbians
engaged with *The L Word* as more than merely the televisual text. Rather they utilized the text as a media object that enabled them to create their own biographical narratives, as is suggested in the quote above.

The results of my fieldwork indicated the influence of *The L Word* was particularly prevalent in three main areas: the period of coming out, the process of sexual identity development, and the integration into the lesbian community. These three areas are all fundamental components of an individual’s social life and identity, and form a key part in dictating the person they are to become within the broader society. The active choice to utilize *The L Word* in narrating their own biographies in each of these facets indicates the impact of the series on the young lesbian’s experience.

In terms of their experiences of coming out, my participants’ introduction to *The L Word* represented a critical moment that provided them with a sense of validation about their sexuality. Not only did the series provide validation of lesbianism, but provided it during the turbulent period of transition of their youth. The act of viewing the series became about more than simply the diegesis of the text. The act of watching was about shared experiences with like-minded individuals, and the capacity to congregate around these shared experiences. What the text offered for these women was an introduction to the lesbian lifestyle. My participants spoke of how the act of viewing it became a rite of passage for young lesbians, an introduction to the lesbian lifestyle and its possibilities. This was the first point at which many of them acknowledged a move to make conscious choices about constructing their lesbian biographies,
congregating around the series as it began to impart influence on the narrative trajectories of their stories.

In the wake of this initiation into the lesbian lifestyle offered by *The L Word*, my participants began to look more deeply into the lifestyle proffered by the text. It became a map of lesbian lifestyles, which was utilized in the further construction of my participants own lesbian lifestyles. The storylines were aspired to, the characters held aloft as apotheoses of lesbian possibilities. My participants mimicked styles and behaviours, all in the name of embodying the lesbian lifestyles they saw represented in the series. Furthermore, the innate sexuality of the text empowered my participants to an exploration of their own sexuality. All of these modes of lifestyle development were, in their own way, engendered by the utilization of the series as more than merely a text, but as a media object. The utilization of the text in this manner provided a significant point of introduction to the lesbian lifestyle for my participants whilst navigating their own life-making during the transition into adulthood.

The final examination I made was into how *The L Word* functioned in the process of community building. Not only did the series introduce my participants to the possibility of a lesbian community, but effectively created one from the audience. Through traditional concepts of community such as social interactions, common ties, and shared spaces, *The L Word* allowed for its participants to engage with each other as a community would. Furthermore, this community not only served to create another aspect for my participants’ personal biographies, but gave them a political impetus in its oppositional discourse. Through its values and
actions, this community positioned itself as a counterpublic, opposing traditional constrictive notions surrounding lesbian visibility, sexual pleasure and stereotypical understandings of lesbianism.

**Research Limitations**

Any research has its own limitations, and this study is no different. The primary potential limitations of this thesis centre on the use of a qualitative theory method to explore the question of the impact and significance of *The L Word* on the young lesbian community within Melbourne. The main potential limitations of this study are in the in-depth interview approach, and the size and makeup of the sample.

A qualitative method approach to research has many implicit limitations. Perhaps the most significant, and most prevalent to my own study, is the potential for biases within the interview process. As aforementioned, I had prior relationships with several of the participants, which I believe enabled me to gain a greater understanding of their experience, but which also potentially limited their responses. Given previous relationships with the participants, they may have felt the need to provide responses they felt were what I wanted, rather than responses that were an adequate representation of their position.

During the interviewing process, I made a conscious effort not to ask leading questions, or betray anything that might suggest the direction of the interview,
so as to try and counteract this. I also attempted to structure the interviews as closely as possible to one another, so as to avoid any potential biases in interviewing those participants whom I had a previous relationship with. However, as is the case with the qualitative interviewing process, this could not always be adhered to strictly, as the responses I gleaned dictated, to a certain extent, the direction of the interview.

The other potential limitation of my research methodology lay in the makeup and size of my sample. Although initially slated to conduct 15 interviews, the scope of my thesis demanded a reduction on this to allow for the responses to be reasonably discussed. However, having only 6 participants, whilst beneficial in the depth it allowed for exploration of their responses, did limit the diversity of my participants. This is particularly true of diversity in terms of ethnic background, as well as in embodiment of diverse lesbian styles. My participants all came from a Euro-Anglo background, and primarily, with the exception of Ava, identified with a more femme embodiment of lesbianism.

The scope and diversity of my sample size was also impacted by the demands of my research, which dictated self-identified lesbians as the target. Several diverse options for participants were explored, but withdrawn from contention due to their identity politics. Whilst this may not have altered the size of my participant group, it would have impacted upon the ethnic and stylistic diversity of the sample.
Despite these potential limitations, I maintain that a qualitative approach was the most prudent to apply to adequately gauge the relationship between young Melbournian lesbians and *The L Word*. With a view to further research, one method for reducing the potential limitations this style of study could be to work collaboratively on the interview process, so as to avoid any prior relationships to have an impact on the interview process. In terms of sample size, the collaboration with another researcher would allow for a larger scope for interview, and thus a more diverse and distinct sample size and makeup.

**Further Research**

The landscape of television distribution in contemporary society has changed dramatically, even in the time since the beginning of my research. In the early 2000s, the only way to view television content was on broadcast television or through DVDs, however the proliferation of online content and streaming has forever altered the way that television texts are produced and consumed. It has been suggested that, “screen media distribution has undergone a veritable revolution in the twenty-first century, overthrowing institutional relationships, cultural hierarchies, and conventional business models” (Curtin, Holt & Sanson, 2014, p. 2).

Within Australia, Subscription Video-On-Demand (SVOD) services such as Netflix, Presto and Stan have emerged in early 2015 to provide an online cloud-based alternative to broadcast television, DVDs, and Internet piracy. The ability
of these services to provide relatively affordable, high-quality content, has contributed to this environment where traditional viewing practices and forms of consumptions are essentially extinct. This has lead to a certain level of anxiety amongst distributors about the potential for changes in audience behaviours.

This current climate has meant the traditional audience paradigm is fragmented, perhaps shattered altogether. As Curtin, Holt & Sanson suggest, “whether it is a more open dialogue between producers and consumers or highly personalized interfaces, the upside of fragmentation, it seems, is the ability to create screen media that connects with audiences on a more fundamental level” (2014, p. 89). This new model of distribution and content availability shifts the power even further toward the audience, in giving them control over the form of viewing they can engage in.

The first way this has come about is in terms of platform. Through the advent of smart phones, tablets and other communication devices, a variety of web-based content can be accessed easily and remotely. As Dixon notes, “audiences have adjusted to viewing moving images in a variety of different ways” (2013, p. 12). Secondly, the temporality of viewing practices has been forever altered with cloud-based streaming. The audience rarely waits for a specific time for the ritual consumption of their favorite program, rather they chose the time, place, and structure of their viewing experience. Often this comes in the form of binge-watching, the practice of viewing multiple episodes of the same series consecutively with little or no break in between. Binge-watching undoubtedly creates a different form of audience relation to a text: one which is noted by
industry officials as significant. Curtin, Holt and Sanson note that “audience engagement, rather than size, is the current zeitgeist, but no one knows for sure how to quantify it” (2014, p. 3).

In this new era of cloud-based distribution, a fruitful area for possible study would be to use The L Word, or another queer television text, as the starting point for a reception-based analysis, given the changing digital landscape. How does the proliferation of television texts available through new forms of distribution change the importance of a single text? How are audience relationships with texts changed by new viewing platforms and practices? These questions are prevalent when examining the targeted content of these streaming programs, with the ability to assess viewing practices and adjust suggested content accordingly. Streaming company Stan, for example, offers a section of its media entitled ‘LGBT’. Whether an individual program can have any significant impact in this multi-layered textual interface is an interesting topic for further research.

This thesis focuses on how The L Word is utilized as a media object. Specifically, how it functions as an object, perhaps in the form of a DVD, which is borrowed, lent, and shared between young lesbians. With cloud-based media texts becoming the norm, what is the effect on considerations of the media object? Can a single television text still be considered a media object, even if it no longer has a physical presence, nor relies upon a shared experience of watching? These questions may be relevant to further researching the influence of television texts, particularly in the canon of queer television.
Throughout this thesis I have argued for the significance of *The L Word* to a uniquely youthful, Melbournian lesbian audience. Whilst questions circulate about the deconstruction of traditional viewing practices, and the function and makeup of the audience in a changing televisual landscape, I would still argue that, for a select group of people, introduction to *The L Word* is a critical moment in their life-making and transition into adulthood and the lesbian world.
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## Appendix A

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SECTION B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

1. Do you, or have you ever, watched *The L Word*?
2. Why did you first watch the show?
3. When was your first viewing experience?
4. In what format did you first watch it? (eg. DVD, commercial television, online etc.)
5. What was the first thing you did after watching the show for the first time?
6. What was the first episode you watched?
7. Did you identify as homosexual before you first watched the show?
8. Do you talk whilst watching the show? With whom?
9. Who have you generally watched the show with?
10. Were there any characters that you immediately identified with? Why?
11. What generally happens after you watch the show?
12. Did you find any of the behaviours/dress/language used by the lesbians on the show familiar?
13. Did any of the clothes/hairstyles/language influence what you said/wore?
14. Did you discuss any of the clothes/hairstyles/language with friends?
15. *The L Word* deals with quite a few issues pertaining to lesbians, such as marriage, adoption, parenthood, drug taking etc. Did you identify with any of these issues?
16. Do you feel like any of the views expressed in the show reflected/shaped your own views?
17. Did you discuss the issues above with friends or other lesbians?
18. One of the things that differentiates *The L Word* from many other shows is the fact that it presents a lesbian community, rather than just one or two characters – did you feel like you recognized the kind of community they represented?
19. *The L Word* had special episodes dedicated to ‘lesbian events’ such as the Olivia cruise, the Dina Shore Weekend – have you ever participated in any organized lesbian holiday like these?
20. In the series, the main group congregates at the café ‘The Planet’ – do you and your friends have a café that works as your Planet?
21. One of the key things which connects the lesbian community within the show is the Chart – have you ever done a chart?
22. The city of LA is a big part of the series – how do you think the city of Melbourne compares to LA?
23. In the series, the lesbian community is discussed as a family-type group. Do you find this echoes your own lesbian community?
24. When you meet other lesbians, do you ever discuss *The L Word*?
25. What kind of place does TLW hold within the lesbian community you know?
## Appendix C

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>131</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>Phrasing – replace ‘of’ with ‘for’</td>
<td>Changed as per the suggestion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>136</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>Need continuity with references to socio-economic status of participants</td>
<td>Deleted ‘although from different’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>148</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>Amended to ‘upper middle class’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>Quoting Warner on definition of public without reference to other sources</td>
<td>Added reference where appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>153</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>Phrasing – change ‘mediums’ to ‘media’</td>
<td>Changed as per the suggestion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>155</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>Phrasing – change ‘identity’ to ‘identify’</td>
<td>Changed as per the suggestion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>159</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>defines heteronormativity by Warner but not when defining homonormativity (which derives from</td>
<td>Added earlier reference to Warner (p.132)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Author/s: Caluzzi, Leah

Title: The L life: The L Word and narrating biographies

Date: 2015

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/56511

File Description: The L Life: The L Word and Narrating Biographies