

## Chilean Gays and Lesbians and the Televisual Representations of Homosexuality: Interpreting Changing Images as “Packages” of Information

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This article offers an analysis of the ways in which 25 Chilean gays and lesbians interpreted national television’s representations of homosexuality. Through a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, it is shown that participants were highly critical of this visibility as they considered that national TV has historically depicted homosexuality in a limited and simplified manner formed by a set of fixed patterns of representation. With the help of examples of how participants described these patterns, it is argued that they not only interpreted representations as limited but also as polarized as they organized them in two opposed groups in which certain features—for instance, a working-class position and a gender nonconforming behavior—are naturally and necessarily connected, making other intersections unthinkable and thus revealing what emerges as possible in terms of a gay/lesbian existence in contemporary Chile.

*Keywords: TV representations, Chile, TV audiences, gays and lesbians, sexuality and media*

Over the last decades, Chilean viewers have had the opportunity to watch an increasing number of gay and lesbian figures on TV programs produced in the country. This growing visibility has taken place in telenovelas, series, reality shows, talk shows, and several other formats broadcast on both private and public free-to-air national TV networks. This has been particularly the case since 1990, when Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship ended; a political change that implied not only the consolidation of a rating-driven commercial television system (Ashley, 2019), through the enactment of a new law regulating the television business, but also the inclusion of “new” topics—such as homosexuality—in a now not directly censored television. Studies analyzing this visibility have described a televisual environment that has progressively diversified its gay/lesbian representations but, nevertheless, is still marked by the presence of stereotyped images (Amigo, Bravo, & Osorio, 2014; Bravo, Amigo, Baeza, & Cabello, 2018; Ramírez, 2020).

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Chilean television's representational range has been described as formed by the persistent depiction of gays and lesbians as gender-nonconforming<sup>2</sup> objects of laughter, victims, or villains, such as the funny and fashionable Enrie-André in the telenovela *Pituca sin Lucas* (López, 2014–2015), the violent inmate Raco in the series *Cárcel de Mujeres* (Goldschmied, 2007–2008), or the playful TV personality/makeup artist Gonzalo Cáceres. These images have coexisted with newer representations that generally reproduce normative values of "good" citizenship—family, monogamy, privatized consumption (Doran, 2013)—conflating "acceptable" gay/lesbian identifications with privileged identity markers, such as Whiteness, gender conformity, and an upper-class belonging, as, for instance, embodied by the rigorous journalist Juan Manuel Astorga or telenovela characters like the serious doctor Ariel in *Machos* (Saquel, 2003) and the mothers-to-be Daniela and Carla in *No Abras la Puerta* (Kri, 2014–2015).

In the country, however, no studies have explored how these representations are received and interpreted by gay and lesbian viewers. This is also the case more generally in Latin America as the majority of studies analyzing gay/lesbian viewers' responses to TV have focused on audiences located in Europe or North America. This study aims to cover this area, offering an analysis of the ways in which Chilean TV's portrayals of homosexuality are assessed by gay/lesbian members of the audience and the interpretative strategies they use when decoding these images. This study focuses on Chilean programs because most shows that are aired on national TV are locally produced. These productions, furthermore, tend to be favored by audiences (Vassallo De Lopes & Orozco, 2015), having a stronger impact and enhanced popularity.<sup>3</sup> This does not negate the fact that Chilean viewers now have a growing access to international productions on different platforms, which exposes them to a wide variety of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) representations; however, it does highlight the fact that on free-to-air national TV, Chilean productions are indeed favored, which makes relevant exploring the ways in which gay/lesbian viewers relate to the images that have appeared there over the last decades.

To do so, audiences are here conceived not as a "mass of people who are all essentially identical" (Fiske, 1987, p. 16) nor as simply formed by isolated individuals, but as consisting of complex and interconnected social groups and subjects who do not merely respond to media messages but also interact with them "in a variety of different ways" (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p. 5). The interaction between audiences and different forms of media can then be characterized as a site of *negotiation* (Livingstone, 1998) where the meanings that are made available are put into conversation with the "voices that audiences will encounter in everyday life" (Briggs, 2010, p. 10). In this sense, audiences face media representations equipped not only with the normative values of their culture but also with their potentially divergent interests and subcultural belongings, which are used to decode media messages and create new meanings out of them.

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<sup>2</sup> Gender nonconformity is, according to Sandfort, Melendez, and Diaz (2007), "the expression of characteristics that are socially and culturally associated with the opposite gender" (p. 182).

<sup>3</sup> Historically, in Chilean TV, there has also been a great presence of shows, particularly telenovelas, produced in other Latin American countries. Likewise, more recently, Turkish telenovelas have also become a constant presence. Generally, however, international programs do not have the same impact or popularity that Chilean programs do.

This potential complexity at the point of reception does not erase the marks that the dominant culture's discourse leaves, the salience of the viewer's sociocultural milieu and its normative values, or the ways in which representations relate to the social context that engenders them. As Dyer (2002) explains, we are restricted by "the viewing and the reading codes to which we have access [. . .] and by what representations there are for us to view and read" (p. 2). In this way, the present study follows a tradition of media studies that conceives the consumption of television and other media "as a site of cultural struggle, in which a variety of forms of power are exercised" (Ang, 1996, p. 35).

### **TV Representations of Homosexuality and Gay/Lesbian Audiences**

International reception studies have shown that gay/lesbian audiences are particularly interested in watching television programs that include LGBTQ characters and/or storylines (Dhoest & Simons, 2011; Pratt, 2012). These images, however, are regularly evaluated in a critical manner: Although viewers recognize the existence of affirmative changes, they mostly describe a TV environment that is still marked by the sustained presence of stereotypes (Annati & Ramsey, 2022; Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009; Sanz, 2018). For instance, studies have reported that gay/lesbian audiences are critical of stories that frame the development of a nonheterosexual identification only as a "struggle" (McInroy & Craig, 2017) as well as of the persistent presence of storylines focusing on the process of coming out (Sanz, 2018). Consequently, participants of some of these studies (Dhoest & Simons, 2011, Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Peters, 2009; Sanz, 2018) express that they do not feel represented by what they see on TV and that the depictional possibilities should be altered, specifically through the production of images that portray gay/lesbian lives in a "realistic" or "normal" way.

Accordingly, it has been shown that these audiences establish relations of positive spectatorship with figures whose identity and role are not defined by their sexuality alone (Dhaenens, 2012; McInroy & Craig, 2017). These positively evaluated images are received as affirmative sources of information, purveyors of role models, and tools for social connection that can have a positive impact on gay/lesbian viewers' well-being, facilitating resilience and the emergence of feelings such as comfort and pride (Bond & Miller, 2017; Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015; Gillig & Murphy, 2016; Winderman & Smith, 2016). These affirmative forms of reception have also been associated with critically evaluated images, revealing that gay/lesbian audiences establish complex and sometimes ambivalent relationships with the televisual images of homosexuality. Viewers, in this sense, celebrate some elements and criticize others while developing profound emotional connections with figures who are, many times, followed for years, even if also critiqued (Gorton, 2009; Peters, 2009; Pratt, 2012).

In general, it has been shown that gay/lesbian viewers ascribe substantial importance to the televisual representations of homosexuality. This is an evaluation that is marked by the understanding of TV as "the dominant purveyor of media messages" (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 38), which are variously received not only as devices that can have a positive impact on gay/lesbian viewers' well-being and on the advancement of a social context of respect toward homosexuality but also as tools complicit in further marginalizing gay and lesbian lives.

Given these observations, it is particularly important to analyze the relationships between TV representations of homosexuality and gay/lesbian people's interpretations in contexts where nonheterosexual lives are markedly susceptible to different forms of marginalization. One such context is Chile, where political gains regarding LGBTQ rights have been noticeably hard to achieve (Díez, 2015), consolidating an environment of un-recognizability that translates into everyday experiences of discrimination and victimization (Barrientos & Bozon, 2014; Hiner & Garrido, 2017). At the same time, however, the social support for some "emblematic" LGBTQ political aims has increased significantly over the last decades. For instance, according to the *Bicentenario* surveys, the percentage of people who say that they are in favor or strongly in favor of marriage equality rose from 28% to 67% between 2011 and 2022.

In the country, then, political advancements and mainstream social support for certain gay/lesbian rights are placed within an environment where homophobic violence is a constant possibility. This situation has been associated, among other factors, with the ways in which rights and identifications have been mainstreamed by the country's bigger LGBTQ organizations, such as Movilh and Fundación Iguales, which have been built from a discourse of normalization and extension of rights (Núñez, 2010; Obando, 2017). Through an emphasis on equality over difference and the possibility of "normalized" homosexuality, these institutions have mostly followed a *homonormative* strategy "that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them" (Duggan, 2002, p. 180). As a result, only certain identities have emerged as "worthy" of rights and respect, making homosexuality "acceptable" only when it is associated with certain values that are already defined as respectable, then further marginalizing those who do not comply with these norms.

Similar logics have extended to gay/lesbian individuals: Studies have shown that some features such as gender nonconformity or a "too visible" homosexuality are deemed inappropriate and rejected by Chilean gays and lesbians themselves (Astudillo, 2015; Barrientos, Gutierrez, Ramirez, Vega, & Zaffirri, 2016; Figueroa & Tasker, 2014). This study therefore also aims to understand the ways in which this context is integrated into how Chilean gay/lesbian viewers interpret national TV's representations of homosexuality.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study based on the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Thornberg, 2012) as it seeks to gain a deep and nuanced understanding of the ways in which individuals perceive and give meaning to a specific area of their social reality. Data were empirically generated in fieldwork and interpreted in an iterative process that paid permanent attention to participants' observations, the research aims, and the considered theoretical lenses.

Participants were recruited online, through ads on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which were posted on the researcher's profiles and then shared by other individuals. The requirements for participation were to currently identify as gay or lesbian, be 18 years old or older, and have watched Chilean television regularly throughout their life. Also, participants needed to be available to be interviewed in Santiago as time and economic restrictions made traveling to other cities of the country impossible. This is undoubtedly a limitation as it means that all participants were located in Santiago or its surroundings, thus making impossible the incorporation of geographic differences into the analysis. With this procedure, the final sample

was formed by 25 participants. In terms of their characteristics, 14 identified as gay and 11 as lesbian; their ages ranged from 23 to 67, with an average of 32; and, regarding their class position, 15 were classified as upper/middle class and 10 as working/middle class.<sup>4</sup> Also, it is worth noting that, although mentions of a particular gender identity were not part of the recruitment process, all participants identified as cisgender or did not raise issues about this part of their subjectivity.

Data were generated through individual interviews that were conducted in 2019. The procedure included an initial part in which participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the aims of the research and the measures that were in place to protect their anonymity and private information—such as the use of pseudonyms—as well as consent forms to consider and sign. Interviews were then conducted by the researcher in Spanish. They were audio-recorded with each participant's consent and lasted up to two hours.

Specifically, semi-structured interviews (Dunn, 2016) were conducted using a guideline that was not constructed as a list of fixed questions but as a script that proposed an order/sequence of topics and possible questions to ask to cover them. With this type of interview, participants can talk at length, deviate, and show what is important to them while there is still the assurance that all the topics considered in the guideline can be thoroughly assessed, thus making possible comparisons among interviews. Specifically, the first part of the interview aimed to understand the participant's general use of television, the second one focused on their memories and evaluations of programs/characters, and the last one paid attention to their personal experiences of watching these representations.

After the interviews were conducted, verbatim transcripts were made by the researcher. These transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, particularly as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), who explain it as a method used for identifying and analyzing patterns of meaning (themes) that are underpinned by a central organizing concept, encompassing data that are united by what the researcher considers to be shared meaning.

After an initial familiarization with the data, which was done by transcribing and then reading each transcription several times, coding was done by the researcher using NVivo. This procedure was carried out in an inductive manner, according to constructivist grounded theory principles (Thornberg, 2012). This iterative process implied going through the entire data set several times, applying new codes, refining the existing ones, recoding, and checking for consistency. Some examples of the codes that were used are: "TV and reality," "homosexuality as a problem," and "effeminate men." Once coding consistency was achieved, themes were constructed. Themes, in this sense, are here understood as "analytic *outputs* developed through and from the creative labour of our coding" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). They, therefore, do not passively "emerge" from the data, but are "*actively* created by the researcher" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594).

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<sup>4</sup> This is an estimation. Social grade has been dichotomized into these broad categories, which have been estimated using information such as the participant's level of formal education, occupation, and the area in which they were living—factors that are taken into consideration by the Asociación de Investigadores de Mercado (2019) to calculate Chilean individuals' class position.

Through this whole process, as Austin (2008) recommends for the case of audience studies, I have remained aware of my own interventions “in producing audience statements as knowable data” (p. 184) while always keeping in mind the goal of not obscuring participants’ experiences and interpretations. In that sense, the findings that are presented below are constructed in a way that highlights respondents’ opinions, showing the extracts that have inspired the construction of my interpretations.

### **Interpreting Television: Images and Social Consequences**

Participants expressed an eager interest in the televisual representations of homosexuality, making clear that they want to see these images and thus have always actively sought them. They explained that the presence of a gay/lesbian figure makes them pay attention to the TV and that they form strong opinions about these images. Consequently, when asked to make a general assessment of national television’s representations of gays and lesbians, most of the participants stated decidedly that Chilean TV has made homosexuality visible in negatively biased ways through which gay/lesbian lives have been simplified, stereotyped, and consequently, further marginalized.

Although many of them also described newer and more favorable representations, the images that came to their minds more quickly were the ones they qualified as hostile or detrimental. In that sense, while they did think that some changes had taken place, the general evaluation was tainted by an overall comprehension of television as a space that has been harmful and even violent against gays and lesbians. This position can be understood as the result of the cumulative number of negatively regarded images that they have consumed during their lives. As Briggs (2010) explains, any representation is always interacting with other images, those that are taking place simultaneously and also previous ones, forming an intertextual relationship (Fiske, 1987) where any text is read through its relationship with others, thus activating readers’ responses in specific directions. Only time and more consistent changes in the representational patterns could then potentially alter this general interpretative scheme.

Within these conditions, participants discussed the representational patterns of homosexuality in temporal terms as they thought that television has progressively changed the representations of gays/lesbians. They described a transition from the depiction of homosexuality as a condemnable identity to the representation of *some* gays and lesbians as respectable members of the national society. However, although these changes were positively regarded, participants expressed that Chilean television was still not depicting homosexuality appropriately as representations were considered to be still vastly limited and simplified.

In general, participants’ interpretations were strongly situated in cultural and temporal terms as they were molded not only by their individual characteristics but also by their impressions about homosexuality’s position within Chilean society. In fact, thinking about what representations “do” or, in other words, the consequences they have in “the real world” was constantly present in participants’ evaluations. They were then not only decoding television from their particular standpoints but also continuously adopting a *straight viewpoint* that allowed them to anticipate the ways in which these images were going to be received by society at large and therefore their potential consequences. The close

relationship they saw as existing between televisual images and social change—or stagnation—was always present as a base from where their interpretations were constructed.

As also reported in other studies (e.g., McInroy & Craig, 2017), this is particularly important in the case of television, a medium participants considered fundamental for the articulation of common values and fixed ways of understanding social phenomena. The scheme through which their interpretations were made was then not only fueled by their experiences of watching images they disapproved of but also by the crucial role they considered TV has had in the reproduction of regressive discourses that, furthermore, have personal consequences. This can be interpreted from the following statements:

Television [. . .] can manipulate a lot of people. There's a lot of people who only consume television and, for them, what's on TV is the truth. So, if someone grew up watching television and they've been shown a gay character behaving in a certain way, for him, all gays are meant to behave in that same way. (Lorenzo)

I always think, "Please, not the usual stereotype." I also feel a little bit scared [. . .] because one is aware that there are more people watching the show. Your siblings are watching, your family, your friends, so there's always that feeling of "ok, what are they going to say? How are these characters going to be shown?" Because in the end, whether you want it or not, one's going to be associated to these characters. (Luis)

Participants were then particularly interested in watching televisual representations of homosexuality not only because they were personally interested in them but also because they considered these images to be crucial purveyors of social knowledge regarding homosexuality. In general, furthermore, these representations were evaluated in a critical manner even when positive changes were recognized. The ways in which these evaluations were performed, with a focus on the temporal changes identified by the participants, are explained below.

### **Hiding Places: Sordidness, Silences, Suggestions**

What was watched in the past has left firm marks on participants' minds. All of them shared distinct memories of what television was offering decades ago in terms of gay/lesbian representation. In general, they agreed: What was there was not good at all. They characterized the 1990s and the first years of the next decade as a period in which television held a strongly unfavorable position toward homosexuality. This position, however, was almost exclusively materialized through the representation of gay men as participants remembered that during these years lesbianism was seldom present on TV. Although this was reported by women and men participants, almost all of the former raised the issue, while only half of the latter did. The invisibilization of lesbianism was then a much more salient topic for lesbians than it was for gay men, which illustrates the fact that participants tended to center the discussion around images that represented *their own* identifications more directly.

Given this erasure, only gay characters/people were remembered as present on television during these years. According to participants' accounts, television's hostility materialized, in the first place, in

documentaries and news stories where homosexuality was associated with what some participants called "sordid" ways of life. Prostitution, drugs, promiscuity, night life, and human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) were the main topics through which homosexuality received visibility on nonfictional programs. Participants recalled that, through these issues, homosexuality was framed as an abject identity that encompassed a series of antisocial behaviors. It was considered an unacceptable part of society that had to be rejected. As Elena summarized: "They would refer to homosexuality as a negative disease that had no cure and had to be eradicated."

Participants also discussed the existence of other nonfictional programs in which homosexuality was not so violently vilified but, nevertheless, shown as an identity position that produced serious problems in the lives of those who claimed it. Participants stated that, through these images, homosexuality was conceptualized as a shameful identity that had to be hidden. Alberto, for instance, shared his vivid memories of a specific program in which the life of a "regular gay couple" was depicted:

The aesthetics, the environment [. . .] it was all very dark. The whole story was like: We are talking about it but, at the same time, we're hiding it. Like, "This is their place and while being here, they don't have any contact with the outside world." It was a very weird news story because, yes, they talked about what the life of a gay couple was like, how it worked, how they met, their love and stuff, but that's what you'd end up feeling, you know? Like yes, that was a reality at that time, but let's keep it hidden, let's not talk much about it.

For fictional programs, on the other hand, participants identified a representational pattern that was marked by the silencing of the gay identity. They remembered the persistent presence of characters whose homosexuality was never named or assessed as part of their narrative development but only suggested. According to participants, however, it was possible to read these characters as gays because of how they behaved since their homosexuality was suggested through their mannerisms and effeminacy. In general, participants associated these characters with a specific occupation as they remembered them to be hairdressers; a particular way of relating to others since they stated that they were inclined to gossip; and a certain social stratum as they explained that these characters were part of the working class. In Benito's words, "Effeminate, poor, and prone to gossip. I think that was like my first gay reference when I was younger."

These characteristics, furthermore, were framed by a humorous tone. Participants remembered that all these characters were used as one of the comic foils of the programs in which they appeared. In that sense, as their only role within the narrative was to be laughed at by others, participants did not only refer to these figures as stereotypes but more regularly as "caricatures." Through this simplified representation, based mainly on humor, these caricatures were stripped of any other diegetic possibility; their own stories and feelings were unknown. As Elisa described,

Early on, gays were laughed at, they were the ones that were meant to be funny [. . .] They also had to be sissies. Since they had to be funny, any content relating to their sexual or affective life was taken away from them.



According to participants' views, all these depictional patterns had the same effect: Vilifying homosexuality. Either by depicting gay men as macabre and/or comic figures, by ignoring lesbian characters/people, or by showing gayness as a discreditable position that had to be concealed, Chilean television during the 1990s and early 2000s was remembered as a space where gay/lesbian identities were attacked and denigrated. Gays/lesbians were seen as pitiful people whose social space was extremely reduced and whose personal lives were restricted by their abject feelings. This is coherent with the social context of the country at the time as the 1990s was a decade when homosexuality was placed in a permanent position of abjection (Contardo, 2011) and was indeed still illegal as consensual same-sex sexual activity between adults was only decriminalized in 1999.

Imminent changes, however, were vastly recognized by participants. Many of them characterized the next decade as one in which the televisual representations of homosexuality started mutating. They stated that, although many of the "old" patterns continued to exist, from the early 2000s onward, new figures started populating the televisual environment.

#### **Advances and Limitations in the Emergence of "Other" Gays and Lesbians**

There is an agreement among several participants: The appearance of the character Ariel in the telenovela *Machos* (Saquel, 2003) marked a clear departure from the "old" ways in which Chilean television depicted homosexuality. As Inés explained, "That telenovela marked a turning point regarding the stories that were told [. . .] and what happens to the relationship between a father and a son when he wants to be open about his sexuality." Ariel was, in fact, quite different to the gay characters that appeared before him on national telenovelas as they were effeminate men who were depicted in comic ways as part of narratives that did not assess "their personal lives, their problems, or reasons for happiness" (Ramírez, 2020, pp. 1487–1488). Quite the contrary, Ariel was a conventionally masculine doctor, part of a powerful family, who was coming back to Chile seeking their acceptance. According to Amigo and colleagues (2014), Ariel was a character whose behavioral traits were indeed tightly connected with the heteronormative paradigm.

Through this example, participants explained that from the early 2000s, homosexuality was taken "seriously" on Chilean television, echoing what was happening more broadly in the country as, for instance, during these years, the discussion of a series of LGBTQ legal advancements was set in motion (Contardo, 2011; Díez, 2015). Within fictional programs, this turn to seriousness implied making gay/lesbian identifications explicit. Characters were no longer only *assumed* to be gay but *known* to be gay as they clearly identified as such, marking their diegetic development. This was also the case for lesbian characters, who experienced a direct transition from absence to explicitness.

Participants also remembered that this movement entailed that gay characters were no longer only represented through a humorous tone. Although the gay comic foils continued to exist, the new characters—both gays and lesbians—were depicted following dramatic storylines. Through them, gay/lesbian lives were shown in a broader way that encompassed a "dignified" depiction of what Rodrigo called "homosexual emotionality." According to participants, these were rounder characters that had "something to say." Yes, they were gays/lesbians, but this was not *all* they were. These characters were depicted going about their everyday lives, in what interviewees called "quotidian" and "natural" settings. They lived among others and

lived as those others. In this way, similar to the aforementioned international studies, participants of this study also made a positive assessment of the figures and stories that do not consider "sexual orientation as a pretext for differential [. . .] symbolic construction" (Kama, 2002, p. 200).

The positive evaluation of the role these characters played at the beginning of the century, however, does not stand the test of time. While participants recognized that they were crucial for diversifying homosexual representations at that point in time, they were also singled out as the place where other stereotypes and fixed narratives originated. In that sense, although such figures were celebrated for being represented, in Lorenzo's words, as "any other character," some participants also highlighted that their narratives' continuous fixation with a specific aspect of the gay/lesbian experience—the closet—reinforced the representation of homosexuality as an identification that is problematic for those who claim it as it encompasses a relentless pursuit of acceptance. As Luciano explained, "I wish the stories didn't have to be about coming out and the supporting family, the non-supporting family [. . .] all that well-known drama. It's like stop making gay shows about it. We know that already."

Specifically for lesbian characters, on the other hand, participants identified three representational patterns: Masculine lesbians who are nasty and violent, feminine and conventionally good-looking women who are highly sexualized, and those whose storylines are marked by their desire to become mothers. Although these three patterns were singled out as reductive ways of representing the lesbian experience, participants established some differences among them. While the first one was completely rejected, it was considered that the other two have incorporated—although to different extents—certain elements that have moved the representation of lesbians in an appropriate direction. They were still, however, interpreted as not complex enough and, furthermore, as complicit in the reproduction of stereotypes about lesbianism that are anchored in *machista* discourses, which place a high value on femininity associated with dependency, vulnerability, conventional beauty, motherhood, and men-directed sexuality (Antezana, 2011; Bucciferro, 2011).

In general, participants' opinions regarding the representation of lesbians were not as commonly or comprehensively elaborated as the ones referring specifically to gay characters. Most participants either did not identify representational patterns of lesbians or explained that they are harder to determine. According to their view, this is a consequence of a broader social effacement of lesbianism, which has hindered its visualization, even in stereotyped ways. About this, participants explained that lesbian figures, unlike gay ones, have not been given distinct spaces. This was conceived as a further invisibilization as stereotypes, although rejected, were recognized as mechanisms through which gay identifications have been mainstreamed. In Isidora's words: "If homosexuality is a taboo, at least there is the stereotype that all fashion designers are gay [. . .] but there are no stereotypes about lesbians."

These three patterns mostly refer to the representation of lesbians on fictional programs as participants explained that lesbianism was still seldom present on nonfictional productions. They stated that there were almost no visible lesbians among TV presenters, journalists, or news sources, unlike gay figures, who were recognized as highly visible. Effectively, gay presenters and journalists were continuously highlighted by participants as affirmative figures who have broadened the visibility of homosexuality. Respondents celebrated the representation of these men as serious professionals who "happen to be" gay while standing out for their work-related achievements. Participants explained that this is a stark difference

in regard to former representational patterns present on nonfictional programs in which gay men were absolutely denigrated. In contrast, these professional gays were offered as figures that could be respected and even admired. Some LGBTQ activists were also included in this evaluation.

Finally, the last pattern identified by the respondents was the representation of homosexuality through a tragical frame. This was mostly associated with news programs, where homosexuality was made visible through stories about homophobic violence. This was not necessarily conceptualized as a negative feature as these were discussed as issues that need to be made visible to create social awareness. However, the fact that homosexuality gained visibility in these programs *exclusively* through the representation of homophobia was considered reductive as it means that gays/lesbians are continuously placed either in the positions of victims or defenders of those who have been victimized, as in the case of activists. This was interpreted as hindering the placement of gays/lesbians as specialists in other areas, reducing their field of action.

In general, participants' opinions about the majority of the representational patterns through which Chilean TV has made homosexuality visible cohere with Evans' (2007) findings in his analysis of American gays and lesbians' assessment of national TV: "Today's portrayals are much better than the images of the past, but they are far from perfect" (p. 14). In that sense, while positive changes were continuously recognized, the general assessment was tainted by an interpretative scheme that conceptualized television as hostile. Respondents continued to be frustrated by many of the ways in which Chilean TV makes homosexuality visible, including not only the persistent older patterns but also the newer ones, as they believed that they generally show simplified narratives from which several aspects of the lesbian/gay experience are curtailed. Although with different intensities, most characters/people were then singled out as limited in their possibilities and lacking complexity. They might be better, but they were still considered problematic or insufficient.

### **Conditions of Possibility: Representations as "Packages" of Information**

When making these assessments, participants explained that it is not only that Chilean TV's gay/lesbian representations were constructed in a simplified and limited manner but also that there were many "options" that were not appearing at all. It was explained that there was a variety of ways of being gay/lesbian that were being completely disregarded. This can be seen in the following statements:

There are many lesbians like me in the world. There are loads of nerd-looking people who are not too feminine nor too masculine. There are too many lesbians like me, but on TV there are none. It will never happen. (Elisa)

There should be more people on TV representing the wide rainbow we are. Not only the stereotyped characters there are now, the clean gay man or the sort of normal woman. Or the typical *camiona*<sup>5</sup> or the extremely effeminate, pink gay guy. (Manuel)

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<sup>5</sup> Camiona, which could be translated as dyke, has usually been used as an insult in Chile. This concept, however, has been reappropriated by lesbians.

From statements such as these, it can be interpreted that representations were not only being thought of as *limited* but also as *polarized* since participants tended to organize national TV images of gays and lesbians into two groups that were understood as opposed extremes.

They organized this opposition mainly by paying attention to the figure's class position. Respondents explained that those representations that took place during the 1990s and that engendered patterns of depiction still present focus on figures who, in Miguel's words, are "popular working-class characters." This is in contrast to the "new" characters/people who have been progressively populating TV since the early 2000s. Participants explained that, except for the "gay/lesbian as victim" pattern of representation, all these "new" figures belong to the privileged strata of Chilean society. The great majority of the more recent televisual figures were interpreted as upper-class individuals who have restricted the representation of homosexuality in intersection with other class positions. As Luis pointed out, "the homosexual identity [. . .] is sort of absorbed by the Chilean classism. So gay men are always shown as successful characters, who are well-dressed and follow Western beauty standards perfectly."

This was not an issue that was explicitly raised by all participants. There were, however, some other ways in which the "class issue" emerged in the discussions even if it was not *directly* named or addressed. Sometimes, for instance, it was materialized through the opposition between "professional" gays and lesbians—when that profession is one that is highly regarded within the Chilean society and implies a comfortable economic situation—and those who have a job that is considered "nonprofessional" or is less socially valued. This can be seen in Benito's words:

You can say now "I can identify with someone." I can say "I'm gay, I'm professional and I work at a certain place" and I can see another gay guy who's a professional and works at a certain place. It's not only the hairdresser anymore.

Some other characteristics were also distributed along this polarized differentiation. Attractiveness, for instance, was disparately assigned, with privileged gays/lesbians regarded as beautiful or stylish and unprivileged ones as unattractive or bad-looking. Likewise, characters' aims and life purposes got completely differentiated, assigning certain ambitions to certain classes. As Elisa exemplified,

There are the poor lesbians in jail, which is the only place where poor lesbians can be found [. . .] The other ones are these aspirational couples, 35–30-year-olds who want to marry and buy a house. They have typical young adult aspirations.

Gender expression was another feature that respondents considered to be differently assigned when comparing these two "poles." In general, they recognized a persistent association between unprivileged class positions and gender nonconformity. They explained that masculine lesbians and effeminate gays are the figures through which the intersection between homosexuality and a working-class position has been made visible on Chilean television. The other side of the association, however, was completely unaccounted for. No participants directly assessed the fact that those figures who inhabit the other economically defined "pole" act in gender-conforming ways. This was naturalized, made obvious, and taken for granted. The opposition was then explained as one that exists between what they called

"successful" gays/lesbians, on the one hand, and butch lesbians/effeminate gay men, on the other. This can be seen in the following statements:

Homosexuals are shown as privileged people, like a guy or a woman who's professional, who's doing well in life, who's successful. Compared with the effeminate gay [. . .] I think those are the only two representations you can find [. . .] The same happens in the case of lesbians, they're either *camionas* or excessively successful. (Leonor)

Ariel Mercader, who is a very iconic character. I think he was a character that [. . .] broke the stereotype of the *loca*<sup>6</sup> or the effeminate gay who wants to be a woman. It rather shows a guy who is a doctor, a cardiologist, someone who could examine you in your next appointment. (Julia)

Participants were then evaluating characters by comparing features that are of different orders. By conceptualizing depictive patterns as completely opposing elements, representations were assessed as "packages" of information in which certain characteristics are *naturally* connected with others, making alternative intersections impossible. A gay character is then effeminate *or* professional; a lesbian one, masculine *or* successful. In general, these associations were only described by participants and not directly criticized. The call for the inclusion of "other" ways of being gay/lesbian was never directly imbued with a need to disrupt these strict associations. It can be argued, consequently, that this differentiation was naturalized. Other intersections were unthinkable.

In the next statement, for instance, in which Leonor made a stark contrast between scandalous *locas* and professional activists, it can be seen how these figures were understood as opposed, making illegible the crossing of their features:

That's another thing in favor of *Fundación Iguales*: They show another kind of people. Not the *loca* who's always causing a scandal, you know? Not only the gay guy who dances at pride and has nothing else to do. They show that you can be a professional who is working for gay rights.

Here, the existence of a figure that is both, a *loca* that dances scandalously but *also* a serious activist is unconceivable; it is out of the conditions of possibility. The characteristics are, in this way, sticky: If a gay figure is effeminate, he cannot be a doctor or a lawyer; if a lesbian figure is "successful," she has to be feminine. As was already stated, none of the participants challenged these strict associations but rather actively used them when explaining the poles that have dominated the representations of homosexuality on Chilean television.

As is evident in the last few statements, one of these poles got more intensely scorned by the respondents. Words such as "serious," "successful," and "professional," which were used for describing one

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<sup>6</sup> Similar to *camiona*, *loca* (which could be translated as queen) is an insulting word that has been reappropriated by gay men.

of the poles, are concepts that carry a positive connotation. Their reverse—the effeminate, the butch, the scandalous—was then decidedly placed in a position of abjection. In all this, the gender conformity of the first group kept being unaccounted for.

This has to be understood in the Chilean context, where studies have reported that features such as gender nonconformity are rejected by gay/lesbian people themselves (Astudillo, 2015; Barrientos et al., 2016; Figueroa & Tasker, 2014). As explained, this dismissal has been framed as the result of how gay/lesbian identifications have been negotiated by several institutions, including LGBTQ organizations and the media, which has cemented discourses that establish “good” and “bad” homosexual positions to inhabit (Núñez, 2010; Obando, 2017; Ramírez, 2017). In that sense, the fact that participants discussed these representations as “packages” of information can be understood as the result of the discourses circulating not only on television but also more broadly in society. Participants were then interpreting media representations using what had become stabilized as the scripts through which certain types of homosexuality were made *conceivable* within Chilean society.

From a Foucauldian point of view, it can be argued that participants’ statements reveal the ways in which TV representations contribute to the “symbolic construction of the real and the possible” (Orgad, 2014, p. 22). Power, according to Foucault’s (1980) classic conceptualization, is produced through the creation of forms of knowledge; these are discourses that render certain things possible and truthful, while others are singled out as false and beyond the bounds of possibility. In this, media representations work as devices that can reproduce and legitimize these discourses, inscribing them within what is mainstream and acceptable. These representations then reinforce certain “regimes of truth,” where knowledge is formed, establishing “the truth and legitimacy of certain statements, and the illegitimacy and deviance of others” (Orgad, 2014, p. 67).

This is not, of course, to say that TV representations have single-handedly molded how participants imagined certain ways of being gay/lesbian. However, they have certainly been complicit in the reproduction of the rigid conditions of possibility through which homosexual positions are envisioned within Chilean society, where it has indeed been shown that gender nonconforming and/or working-class gays and lesbians are particularly susceptible to experience violence and discrimination (Barrientos & Bozon, 2014; Hiner & Garrido, 2017).

### Conclusion

The presence of gay/lesbian figures on Chilean television has increased steadily over the last decades. However, this study has explained that the gay/lesbian viewers who were interviewed were markedly critical of this visibility as they perceived it as formed by fixed patterns of representation that are limited in their narrative possibilities and lacking real complexity. Likewise, it has shown that an enduring and central part of how participants articulated these interpretations was by thinking about what these images “do” or the possibilities they open and/or close within mainstream society. Participants, in this sense, tended to watch images of gays and lesbians adopting a *straight viewpoint* that makes it possible for them to anticipate the social reception of these representations.

By centering their assessments on images' potential social consequences, participants not only discussed such representations as limited but also conceived them as polarized: Participants tended to organize national TV representations of gays and lesbians into two groups that were conceived as opposed extremes. The ways in which they talked about these images reveal their understanding of these images as "packages" of information where certain features are naturally and immediately associated with others, leaving alternative intersections out of the conditions of possibility.

As has been suggested here, this interpretative approach was shaped by a conviction that conceives television as a powerful social influencer that *determines* how broad sectors of the population understand homosexuality and, consequently, see and treat individuals who identify as gay or lesbian. Even though participants recognized the existence of several other institutions and texts through which knowledge about homosexuality is produced, they talked about television as the one that is particularly responsible for the broad dissemination and reproduction of these discourses. TV, for them then does not necessarily *produce* these sets of ideas but strengthens them and increases their social salience, which is radically important as they were of the opinion that people take at face value what they see on TV.

With these findings, this research has contributed to explaining the articulation of what emerges as possible in terms of gay/lesbian existence in contemporary Chile, focusing on television's implications in this process. Participants' interpretations of TV representations of homosexuality, which are marked by the immediate pairing of certain characteristics, show how TV is implicated in the reproduction of "the dominant sense of reality" (Fiske, 1987, p. 21) as its representations of gay/lesbian lives carry the discursive formations that have been socially crystallized as real and thus actively used by gay/lesbian individuals themselves.

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