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ABSTRACT
The representation of sexual diversity has recently become common within popular music videos. Whether as part of a subplot or as main narrative, gay and lesbian identities and same-sex desire are key to these “gay music videos.” Drawing on queer theory-informed popular culture studies, this article investigates the way these videos negotiate heteronormativity. By means of a textual analysis of how seven contemporary gay music videos represent same-sex intimacies, the article demonstrates the diversity in the videos’ politics of representation, ranging from reiterations of the heteronormal to provocations and queer critiques of heteronormative discourse and homonormative aspirations.

Introduction

“Same Love” (2012), a hit song by hip-hop act Macklemore & Ryan Lewis, is widely considered one of the major marriage equality anthems of the last few years. The lyrics tackle homophobia and the hypocrisy of different institutions (e.g. the state, the church, the media, and popular culture) in matters of sexual diversity. Yet part of its appeal and success can also be attributed to the music video of the song. Same Love shows the life narrative of a gay man from birth to death. The video represents particular events (coming out), hardships (gay slurs, parental rejection), and aspirations (social and political acceptance, same-sex marriage) that have become dominant tropes within the public discourse on LGBTs. It won the award of Best Video with a Social Message at MTV’s Video Music Awards of 2013. Same Love, however, is not the only contemporary music video that broaches sexual diversity. Whether as the main narrative or as part of a subplot, gay and lesbian identities and same-sex desires have become key to videos that I will refer to as “gay music videos.”

Introducing the gay narrative into music videos is certainly not a new practice. Videos such as Bronski Beat’s Smalltown Boy (1984), the homoerotic Domino Dancing (1988) by the Pet Shop Boys, and Madonna’s Vogue (1990) touched on same-sex sexual practices and gay and lesbian identities in subtle, equivocal, and connotative ways. However, as Carol Vernallis pointed out, the almost total absence of explicit gay content in music videos in 2004 had to do with the role of advertisers in the music industry and the fear of “threatening
content” (81). It is less difficult today to find gay music videos. At first sight, some interesting developments can be noticed. First, genre does not seem to play a decisive role in whether or not an artist puts out a gay music video. Even though more gay music videos are emerging within the broad genres of pop, rock, and indie music, a few artists within hip hop, country, or European schlager music have also engaged in portraying same-sex couples. Second, the perceived danger from being associated with non-heterosexual identities seems to have passed. Consequently, anywhere on the continuum between mainstream and underground music circuits, heterosexual artists can be found who actively defend LGBT rights or LGBT artists who have come out of the closet. Here as well the gay music video acts as a means to establish a gay-friendly image and/or to fortify the ties with potential gay fan bases—a practice that seems to be a particular trend among mainstream pop divas.

Further, the videos’ representations of sexual diversity have changed. The fear of censorship and the power of television programming—such as MTV’s role—in the 1980s and 1990s nudged artists and music video producers into producing “safe,” cut versions (Gaard 44; Vernallis 81). In a contemporary context, the interpretation of what is “appropriate” has been, at least to a certain extent, extended, and the Internet eased the path for “controversially themed” videos to be seen. Even though major video-sharing websites “assume” the role of moral guardian and have the “power” either to demand one’s age to view the content or to ban that content when it is deemed to be in conflict with the moral values the company holds,1 contemporary music videos seem able to imagine sexuality in a more diversified way. Yet, as a growing body of queer theory-informed research into popular music culture has demonstrated (e.g. Ensminger; Leibetseder; Taylor; Whiteley and Rycenga), sexual diversity is dealt with in varied ways, from a heteronormative shaping of gay and lesbian identities to queer approaches that dismantle and subvert the heterosexual matrix. As such, one might applaud the increase and diversification of gay music videos but at the same time need to be wary of homogenized and desexualized representations of sexual diversity.

This article aims to inquire how gay music videos negotiate heteronormativity. Specifically, it analyzes how seven gay music videos represent same-sex intimacies. As several scholars (e.g. Berlant and Warner; Morris and Sloop) have argued, not the mere visibility of gay or lesbian identities but the expression of same-sex intimacy can be a disruptive act that challenges the hegemony of heteronormativity. To this end, I interpret the representational strategies of the videos in relation to theoretical mainstays within queer theory-informed popular culture studies. The selected videos are Carly Rae Jepsen’s *Call me Maybe* (2012), Macklemore & Ryan Lewis’s *Same Love*, Disclosure’s *Latch* (2012), Citizens!’ *True Romance* (2012), Le1f’s *Wut* (2012), Hot Chip’s *Don’t Deny Your Heart* (2012), and the Knife’s *Full of Fire* (2013). To diversify the examples, artists were selected who belong to different genres—respectively teen pop, hip hop, electronic dance music (EDM), indie rock, rap, alternative pop, and electro-pop—and assume different positions within the music industry circuit. Drawing on Gert Keunen’s segmentation of the music industry, I consider Carly Rae Jepsen and Macklemore & Ryan Lewis as belonging to the mainstream music industry, Disclosure, Citizens!, and Hot Chip as part of the alternative mainstream, and Le1f and the Knife as gravitating towards the underground scene. So this article also engages in reflecting on the potential roles that genre and the music industry may play in the reiteration of heteronormativity.
**The Ever-Presence of Heteronormativity**

With mainstream music acts competing for the crown of being the most gay-inclusive, my scrutiny begins by zooming in on the videos that have been marketed as equality anthems or as (re-)affirming the artists’ pro-gay image. These artists have plenty of production and distribution opportunities, are particularly assured that their work will get significant media coverage, and reach transnational audiences that are relatively loyal. Noteworthy are Madonna and Lady Gaga, who have repeatedly announced their support for LGBT rights and included sexual diversity themes in their music videos. Both mainstream pop icons have been approached as complex and contradictory texts that enable the possibility of considering them to be resistant to patriarchy and heteronormativity (e.g. Kaplan’s readings of Madonna or Halberstam’s work on Lady Gaga). Other scholars remain skeptical. Ian Capulet, for instance, criticizes how Lady Gaga represents herself as a bisexual, since her embodiment of bisexuality is often reduced to a marketable stereotype of being obsessed with sex and being able to manipulate men (299). Nonetheless, their gay-friendly image has been widely appreciated by heterosexual and LGBT audiences, and acquiring a similar image has become a goal for other mainstream music acts. Yet in contrast to the work of Madonna and Lady Gaga—who have been demonstrated to be resistant to the heteronormal (see above)—most of the gay-friendly videos produced by mainstream acts address a heterosexual audience whose understanding of gender and sexuality is rooted in heteronormativity and an LGBT audience which emulates a heteronormative way of living, thereby turning into homonormative subjects (Duggan). The reiteration of heteronormativity and the aspiration for homonormativity are central to understanding the representations of same-sex intimacies in the first two videos that I discuss, Carly Rae Jepsen’s *Call Me Maybe* and Macklemore & Ryan Lewis’s *Same Love*.

“Call Me Maybe” was the breakthrough hit for Canadian pop sensation Carly Rae Jepsen. The music video shared in the success of the song, resulting in an abundance of tribute and parody versions. The original video consists of scenes in which the singer performs with her band, alternating with scenes of the singer being infatuated with her neighbor and her attempts to get his attention. The neighbor, a white cisgender man in his early twenties, embodies the contemporary heterosexual ideal. He is muscular, athletic, healthy, and shown mowing the lawn and tinkering with cars. Last but not least, he performs the role of “hero” by checking to see if Jepsen is all right after she accidently falls from the hood of her car. The song also emphasizes heterosexuality. Singing from an I-perspective, the singer addresses a guy she is into and whom she is trying to convince to call her for a date. She represents herself as a woman who has agency, who resents patriarchal and traditional modes of seduction, who wants to decide who is allowed to “call her.” The video accords with these lyrics by employing a female gaze, which objectifies and eroticizes the male body. Her desire might be implied to be love, but it reads, rather, as a strictly sexual desire.

These politics of representation are often considered postfeminist (McRobbie; Stern; Tasker and Negra). Yet, as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra argue, postfeminist popular culture should not necessarily be treated as critical of hegemonic gender discourses. Postfeminist discourse presupposes that gender equality is established, celebrates the ability of women to choose their own life trajectories, and dismisses the obstructions that both men and women who do not belong to white middle-class society encounter (1–2). Angela McRobbie referred to this situation as a “double entanglement” (256). It embraces particular
Aspects of feminism (e.g., sexual freedom, financial independence) while, at the same time, brushing other aspects aside (e.g., intersectional identity inequities) and implying that academic and political feminist movements are no longer needed. As a result, representations of womanhood and female independence emerge that are safe, commodified, and heteronormative. Jepsen articulates this double entanglement by claiming sexual agency and objectifying men, while at the same time desiring the heterosexual ideal.

The pun of the video, however, complicates the reading. After having him watch her perform, she proceeds to give him her telephone number. However, his gaze is already fixed on the shy male guitar player. By the end of the video, he confidently hands the guitar player his number and gestures to call him. This “unexpected” turn of events is met by both the guitar player and Jepsen with surprise and shock. Even more, the disappointment is underscored on the soundtrack as the tempo and pitch of the song are gradually decreased to a full stop. On the one hand, the gay twist allows Jepsen to acquire a gay-friendly image and to join in the roster of radio-friendly pop artists who support LGBT rights. Further, by representing a gay male character who embodies traditional masculine traits and who is sexually confident, clichéd articulations of effeminacy, self-loathing, or identity struggle are defied. On the other hand, the aural and visual disappointment of the gay reveal does expose the double entanglement at work in the video. While supporting LGBT equality by including a non-stereotypical gay character, it also bemoans the loss of well-defined heteronormative identities and roles instead of celebrating the “unpredictability” of sexuality. Even more, having the gay character express same-sex desire in a restricted and contained way while underscoring that the feeling is far from mutual, the video mostly uses the gay twist as a media spectacle and a means to become a viral video. Taking into account that the lyrics are solely focused on heterosexual desire, the video, in the end, is still predominantly about making Jepsen a postfeminist star.

*Same Love* negotiates heteronormativity in a slightly different way. Instead of bemoaning a certain loss of heteronormative order, it advocates how gay and lesbian individuals can fit in within heteronormative societies. As mentioned, the music video narrates the life trajectory of a black man from birth to death. The story is not a literal visualization of the song, since Macklemore’s rhymes are rather a critical analysis of how American society generally treats gay men and women. Rhyming from a heterosexual point of view, he dissects the hypocritical and contradictory attitudes and practices of key institutions such as the church, the state, and popular culture. Further, he does not distance himself from his own involvement in preserving the inequalities and exposes how society in general condones or ignores the ongoing discrimination. By drawing parallels between publicly denounced practices such as racial oppression and (institutionalized) homophobia or exposing how the non-sexual yet derogatory use of words such as “gay” has real consequences for gay and lesbian individuals, he, in fact, engages in deconstructing discursive practices that shape homosexuality as the deviant other and heterosexuality as the foundation of neoliberal heteronormative societies.

However, these rhymes contrast sharply with the heteronormative representations that dominate the video. The first part of the video focuses on the childhood and teenage years of the main character. He is represented as going through an identity struggle. The boy has to deal with traditional gender roles, is being nudged into heterosexual play (e.g., spin the bottle), feels troubled with himself, directs personal frustrations towards his parents, and is alone on the dance floor at prom night. The struggle does not disappear when the boy turns
into an openly gay man. For instance, when coming out to his parents at a dinner party by introducing them to his white male partner, he is once more confronted with rejection as his father walks out. A similar expression of same-sex intimacy is met with rejection and victimization when the gay couple—walking happily next to one another in an urban environment—is called names by a young man. Even though the video refers to everyday-life moments that are governed by heteronormativity, it does not judge the social and political dynamics that keep these norms and values in place. Rather, it shows how the gay couple learns how to deal with these situations and how the men find comfort and support with one another. This is illustrated in the joyful moments both men share, for instance, when jumping off a cliff together into an exotic and remote waterfall pool and listening to records in a homey urban apartment. The happiness culminates when the boyfriend proposes to the main character, a scene followed by a sequence that features the wedding ceremony and a busy and festive reception. Reading the video as a whole, we see that it predominantly questions the hierarchical differentiation between homosexuality and heterosexuality instead of targeting the heteronormative ideology that reiterates the hierarchy.

Particularly, *Same Love* implies that gay men and women cherish the same norms and values rooted in Western society. The desire for relational stability, monogamy, middle-class prosperity, and longevity is particularly emphasized in the final shots of the video in which the partner—ostensibly the same boyfriend whom he wed—is sitting next to the main character at his deathbed in a hospital. The parallel between homosexual and heterosexual couples is underscored once more in the final shot, which features a black screen with the title “Same Love” written in white letters. Strategically speaking, the video emphasizes sameness to convince a heterosexual audience of the similarities they share with gay men and women. Ideologically, however, the video’s homonormative portrayal may strengthen a widely shared conviction that many heteronormative principles are valid and crucial to the existence of contemporary neoliberal societies and that equality should be based on the incorporation of these principles by LGBTs (Murphy, Ruiz, and Serlin 5). The promotion of homonormativity is underscored by the lack of re-enacted or found footage in the music video of LGBT marches and events, LGBT-targeted raids and arrests, or radical queer politics (in contrast to the screened images of black rights movements), which results in a decontextualized and ahistorical representation of the contemporary sociocultural position of LGBTs. Further, possibly to ease a heterosexual audience, the video’s expressions of same-sex intimacy are virtuous. Acknowledging that homosexuality is mainly about sexuality and intimacy, the video’s tame expressions will do little to resist heteronormativity. As Charles E. Morris and John M. Sloop point out, the “bodily challenge” that same-sex kisses pose to heteronormativity works best when they are not domesticated and disavowed in a public environment (19). Without dismissing the video’s support for the undeniably important cause of marriage equality, its representation of gay men as asexual, homonormative, and domesticated and as potential victims who are in need of heterosexual support preserves the mainstream way of representing LGBTs in popular culture (e.g. Landau; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix).

Even though Macklemore & Ryan Lewis’s video is far more socially and politically engaged than Carly Rae Jepsen’s video, they are both heterocentrist and, in many ways, heteronormative. Not surprisingly, more subversion of the heteronormal could be found in the fan-made and unauthorized parody and cover versions that circulate online. Produced outside the realm of a mainstream music industry that manages in detail how a song and a video should match, what messages it should convey, and what commercial purpose it
should entail, parodies and cover versions have more opportunities to go beyond these normative frameworks. “Call Me Maybe,” for instance, became the soundtrack to an abundance of cross-dressing videos. In particular, a version that starred dancing and posing Miami Dolphins cheerleaders in bikinis has been meticulously re-enacted by a US military troop in Afghanistan. Despite the overt display of military power, the subversion resides in the performances that expose the performativity of clichéd feminine gestures and reveal the dedication and pleasure the soldiers experience in bending their bodies.3

Sameness in Queerness

While some music videos underscore their gay inclusivity, others take sexual diversity for granted. Two British music videos are particularly relevant to elaborate on this practice, namely, electronic dance music duo Disclosure’s *Latch* and indie rock band Citizens!’ *True Romance*. *Latch*, which accompanies the duo’s breakthrough single, celebrates sexual desire, attraction, and consummation that is not limited to heterosexuality. The music video accords with the lyrics and atmosphere of the song, in which guest vocalist Sam Smith sings about physically and emotionally connecting to another person. By means of a sensuous and tension-building montage, the video represents this process of *latching* by means of three seduction stories. Specifically, the video intercuts between a man and woman getting ready to make love in the bedroom, a girl subtly seducing a boy in an elevator, and a girl trying to get the attention of another girl at a crowded club. Each time the chorus kicks in—in which Sam Smith croons about latching to another person—the couples exchange kisses, often visually heightened to underscore the mutual desire and satisfaction. In the second chorus, in particular, the backdrop disappears and the pairs find themselves kissing in a black space surrounded by blurred spots of colored lights. The audience’s gaze is directed toward the couples by means of a non-stop camera rotation around each pair, and is the pairs are also subtly exchanged for one another by way of smooth editing. Thus, the video aims to represent the pairs as similar to one another in order to expose the sameness in their sexual desires and thereby promote equality in sexual diversity. However, the video does not rely on a heteronormative or homonormative approach to do so. Rather, the video celebrates intimacy as intimacy and refrains from representing sexual desire as a means to consolidate a heteronormative order.

A similar trope resurfaces in *True Romance*. The music video was inspired by the heavily circulated photograph of a young heterosexual couple embracing one another in the middle of the street amid police officers during the Vancouver hockey games riots in 2011. However, in contrast to the consoling kiss that was given by the boyfriend to the girlfriend after both being struck down by police shields (Fong), the video depicts the kiss as an ongoing embrace. According to the band’s music label Kitsuné, Citizens! intended the video to explore “the intense personal moment to triumph over the doom and chaos of the world at large” (“Citizens!—True Romance”). Besides including a passionate re-enactment of the kiss, the video includes other scenes with similarly intense embraces against unlikely backdrops. Most of the couples are heterosexual. They can be seen embracing in an open grave, on a pile of garbage, in the rubble of a construction site, or on the hood of a police car while being arrested. The video also features a lesbian couple kissing in a store that is being violently robbed and a gay male couple kissing in the back of a truck filled with meat on hooks. In each scene, similar methods of representation are used, such as an establishing shot in each scene that introduces the setting, followed by medium shots and close-ups of the pair.
Like *Latch*, the video for *True Romance* emphasizes sameness in sexual desire and sexual diversity without articulating adherence to heteronormativity. Instead, the sameness in these videos aims to establish a temporal collectivity whose shared intent is social change. This practice corresponds to Max. H. Kirsch’s critique of queer theory’s emphasis on acknowledging differences and dismantling the subject. He argues that contemporary social reality needs politics that not only take the differences within and between the subjects into account but also consider the similarities in order to enable social change. Crucial in that process is the formation of communities, which serve as “safe spaces” to develop social and political strategies to resist hegemonic discourses of oppression and to provide mutual support (Kirsch 121–23). Even though he referred to LGBT communities, the practice also applies across identity axes. As Kevin Duong argues, there is political potency in employing an intersectional approach that looks for actors who share specific commonalities that go beyond demographic or historically constructed identities (383).

Neither video explicitly advocates the formation of a community that unites men and women with heterosexual and/or same-sex desires against an essentialist and normative understanding of sexuality. However, the videos’ representational politics do allow an interpretation of that sort, in particular when taking into account the way both videos deal with public space. In *Latch*, the public space assumes a significant role in two of the three seduction scenes. Only one of the three pairs is represented in the bedroom. The other heterosexual pairing and the lesbian pairing are, respectively, in an elevator and on a dance floor in a club. Even more, whereas the boy and girl wait to express their desire until the elevator is cleared, the same-sex pair embraces with total disregard of the lively crowd that surrounds them and who are taking the expression of same-sex desire in a matter-of-fact manner. It even becomes ironic to have a heterosexual couple “cruise” and seduce one another in a fashion often considered typical for gay and lesbian individuals and to let the same-sex couple express their desires without reverting to self-censorship or coded behavior.

Whereas *Latch* positioned intimacy in likely environments for seduction, *True Romance* injects sexual desire into public spaces and situations generally considered lacking in sexual arousal or prohibitive of the public display of intimacy. The video suggests what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner described as queer counterpublics, obscured spaces in which sexuality and intimacy are not experienced or interpreted in accordance with heterosexual culture. In contrast to a privatized and heteronormative embodiment of intimacy, queer spaces make public alternative ways of having sex or experiencing erotic longing. Despite being scarce and scattered, these queer countercultures go against the universalization and rigid representation of intimacy (558–64). Taking into account heteronormativity’s dominance in contemporary society, a video like *True Romance* aids in symbolically and literally imagining intimacy that is not confined to the private and sanitized domestic setting. In particular, it does so by articulating sexual desire to abject settings and objects (e.g. the dirt, the rubble, the meat on hooks) and to moments of civil disobedience and rebellion (e.g. the police arrest, the Vancouver riots, the store robbery). Acknowledging the omnipresence of heteronormativity in how nations and societies govern their citizens (Puar 69), the video materializes the symbolic violence that society inflicts upon men and women whose queer desires and identities—whether or not they identify or are identified as heterosexual or as LGBT—are unacknowledged. As with *Latch*, the video’s aesthetics and montage (glossy cinematography, comparable representations of the kisses and settings, slow motion pace) allow the audience to gaze at iterations of a public act in which men and women are united.
and express forms of intimacy that go beyond the private and institutionalized boundaries set by heteronormative societies.

Last, I want to point out that the critical statements embedded in the videos are potentially less at risk of losing credibility than mainstream pop artists. Much has to do with the fact that both artists are part of the alternative mainstream. The middle music circuit is populated by hyped artists, bands, and genres that appeal to both the specialized music press and music-savvy audiences (Keunen). As many of these bands are “new” to the scene, they are more able than established artists to make, for instance, queer content that will not be interpreted as a strategic attempt at pleasing an LGBT audience. Yet, because of their often quick ascent to fame, they are able to reach significant audiences. Citizens! and Disclosure fit the profile of hyped young bands that are able to go beyond self-promotion by putting out a gay music video that sparks a societal debate on the governing of heterosexual and same-sex intimacy in public.

**Different Shades of Queer**

Not all gay music videos that offer a queer critique rely on representational strategies that explore the sameness in queerness present in both heterosexuals and LGBTs. Many contemporary videos rely on representational strategies from other popular-culture products that serve as common means to represent queerness and critique heteronormativity. A particularly popular approach is to rely on postmodern strategies (e.g. intertextuality, bricolage, exaggeration) that parody heteronormativity. As Linda Hutcheon argues, ironic parody is able to create a critical distance from hegemonic ideologies and their discursive practices by simultaneously reiterating and subverting their key characteristics (89–91). Not surprisingly, popular culture has produced many of these ambivalent representations of sexual diversity that parody norms and values essential to the survival of the heterosexual matrix (e.g. in television, see Dhaenens; in popular music culture, see Leibetseder). The ambiguity of the imagery makes it easier for (alternative) mainstream acts to insert social criticism without its political message chasing audiences away. The use of play and irony also prevents the artists from being seen as moral guardians who intend to lecture their audiences on gay rights. For instance, *Don’t Deny Your Heart*, a video by British alternative pop group Hot Chip, relies on parody to deconstruct two cultural spheres generally associated with hegemonic masculinity, namely sports culture (see Connell and Messerschmidt; Messner) and video-game culture (see Cassell and Jenkins; Shaw). The video starts by introducing the band members in the back of a tour bus playing “Hot Chip Football,” a parody version of the popular 1990s FIFA World Cup video game. The video game, however, begins to live a life of its own when the game’s soccer captains disobey the gamers’ commands. After a winning goal by team United, both captains approach each other on the field and start a dance-off in an alternative dimension. It is only the beginning of a surrealist wave of elements that “corrupt” the video game’s verisimilitude. For instance, when the men return to the stadium, a giant bodiless mouth spews balls onto all the players. Within this chaos, the two captains approach each other and start to fight, only to receive a red card from the referee. The captains, however, seem relieved to be excluded from the game and passionately embrace one another on the field. The red card is crucial in reading the politics of representation of this gay music video. The card does not symbolize a violation of the actual rules of the game but rather functions as a liberation from the conventions and codes of conduct that
characterize sports culture and other traditional masculine environments. Even though some scholars point out the increasing number of openly gay athletes and a decline in homophobia in sports cultures (Anderson, “Openly Gay”; Anderson, “Shifting Masculinities”; McCormack and Anderson), the public (mediated) debate often presents sports culture in terms of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity (Hardin et al.; Lenskyj). By having the main players of both football teams express same-sex desire, *Don’t Deny Your Heart* goes against the grain. While the band sings about not denying or destroying one’s heart, the captains suit their actions to the words. They remain on the field in an embrace. The video game continues to challenge hegemonic masculine ideals by letting all the other football players, coaches, and audience members—all of whom are implicitly male—embrace one another while a sports commentator applauds the orgy, saying: “Well, we’ve been waiting years for this moment. This is what football is all about.” The video ends by having all men and all balls coagulate into two giant male bodies dancing together in the stadium while fireworks color the night sky.

Reflecting on the politics of representation within this video, I think it is crucial to point out its use of machinima to construct the video game’s storyline. Machinima refers to the practice of “making animated movies in real-time with the software that is used to develop and play computer games” (Lowood 26). The practice is illustrative of a parody’s ambiguous relation to hegemony, as it draws on a dominant culture or cultural product to subvert it. In other words, it complies with certain principles and discursive practices in order to deconstruct them or to alter their outcomes. Within the music video, machinima aims to defy traditional masculine behavior and homophobia. To do so, it exposes a paradoxical relationship that exists within same-sex cultural spheres, namely, the coinciding of homoeroticism and same-sex intimacy with homophobia. Same-sex intimacy is crucial in team sports, but, to preserve one’s heterosexuality, same-sex intimacies are restricted to a limited set of expressions of joy and despair and thereby heavily desexualized. Yet the very presence of homosexuality in sports and the increase in inclusive masculinities already unsettle hegemonic regimes of intimacy between men (Anderson, “Shifting Masculinities” 46–47, 52–56). *Don’t Deny Your Heart* starts from this reality and magnifies the disregarded presence of same-sex desire to epic proportions while excluding homophobic discourse and redirecting the supportive discourses for sports performances (e.g. “a beautiful goal”) to expressions of same-sex desire (e.g. “a beautiful kiss”). Drawing on Jonathan Gray’s account of animated parody, I think is possible that the reliance on animation may mitigate cultural resistance to the video due to the fact that the audience may take animated products and their implied critiques less seriously. Yet animation also enables the representation of precarious issues and social inequalities that are impossible or much more difficult to present in live action parodies (66–68).

Other representational strategies come into play when gay and lesbian artists deploy their “own” sexual identities. Gay and lesbian individuals are able to perform a sexual identity and/or tackle issues to which they can relate. The ability to claim an authentic position towards gay-related issues has nonetheless sparked an ongoing debate. In contrast to heterosexual artists, openly gay artists such as Melissa Etheridge, George Michael, or Ricky Martin are generally considered more credible in their claim to equal rights and run a lesser risk of being reproached for using sexual diversity as a commercial strategy to attract the pink dollar. Further, drawing on Olivier Driessens’s conceptualization of celebrity capital (549–55), gay and lesbian artists might be able to convert their visibility into symbolic capital that...
could contribute to LGBT emancipation and offer an insider’s perspective that looks at the heteronormal through queer lenses.

A good example of a critical music video is *Wut* by Le1f, an American rap artist who is part of a New York underground hip-hop scene. In both the video and the song, Le1f vividly performs a gay identity that is not desexualized or mainstreamed. Sexuality is key to Le1f’s identity. He rhymes in colorful ways about sex (e.g. “suckle on my muscle,” “burst my bubble,” “he wants to Bink my Jar Jar”) and represents himself as an attractive, self-confident black man whose body is desired by numerous men, including closeted gay men who would come out to “go steady” with him. The video—which is constructed of a few scenes in which Le1f rhymes and dances in white-and-black monochrome spaces—emphasizes his sexual agency. In one particular scene, Le1f gives a lap dance to a half-naked white man who is wearing a Pikachu mask. Even though Le1f performs the sexist routine, he does it by mocking it and, at the same time, reversing hegemonic power relations. The white man is represented as a passive sexual object who is muted and made into a laughing-stock, while Le1f is the active performer who is in charge and able to speak. Attentive to how gender, sexuality, race, and class intersect, this moment—representative of the song and the video—brings to our attention how sex and sexuality do not operate in a vacuum. As stressed before, the shaping of sexuality by heteronormativity occurs in relation to the consolidation of white, middle-class privileges. Le1f is wary of those mechanisms and chooses to expose and/or reverse them. In his video, it is the white male body that is objectified and sexualized only to defy the white male gaze. Another example is Le1f’s appropriation of the expression “light in my loafers” to refer to his own sexual identity. In contrast to the pejorative connotation, he uses it in a prideful manner to articulate his (sexual) self-confidence.4

Last, the integration of vogue dancing in the music video further tackles gender norms in heteronormative society. Le1f’s use of the vogue femme style—popular in ballroom houses in the 1980s among black and Latin American gay men—not only evokes a history of queer subcultures but also underscores an elegance and smoothness in Le1f’s performance. His vogue movements are juxtaposed with his frank way of boasting about his sexual virility, reminding us of the performativity of gender and the impossibility of fixed gender identities. The integration of vogue dancing, as well as the explicit recognition of same-sex desire, also unsettles the hegemonic masculinity model that typifies hip-hop culture, where openly gay artists are still rare and cisgender performances are considered the norm (Penney; Smalls). With his video and work, Le1f makes explicit the presence of gay artists within hip-hop culture who do not succumb to the pressure of hegemonic masculinity or heteronormativity.

The video *Full of Fire* by Swedish electro-pop duo the Knife aims to be a radical statement when it comes to sexual diversity. The band members—who do not explicitly identify as gay or queer—cite feminist theory and queer theory as sources of inspiration for the album *Shaking the Habitual* (2013), which features the single “Full of Fire” (Dombal). The 10-minute long track—considered a change in direction for the band—follows no circular or alternating structure but consists of a stream of aggressive pumping basses and squeaking and shrieking sounds. The vocals by Karin Dreijer Andersson are equally haunting: she gasps, hushes, laughs, and shouts. The antagonistic mood is prolonged in the song’s verses that broach gender politics and queer historiography: “Of all the guys and the signori,/who will write my story.” The subsequent verses stress that history is a construction written by men who are predominantly white, patriarchal, and mostly concerned with the social status they might gain from writing history. The Knife exposes and questions their naturalized
privilege to document the different histories of the world. Consequently, the lives of many women, ethnic minorities, LGBTs, or queer individuals have been either undocumented or represented in unified ways (e.g. pathological accounts of same-sex desire) (see Garton). *Full of Fire* aims to represent men and women who remain unacknowledged in historic and contemporary documents. Set in Stockholm, the video follows a diverse set of characters: an elderly transgender man who gets dressed; a blind gay punk who uses his seeing-eye dog to meet another gay man in a parking lot for intimacy; two women who engage in BDSM in public; a woman who urinates in a street; an elderly transgender man who works as a help to an upper-middle-class heterosexual couple; a white leftist girl who becomes attracted to a black female soldier and vice versa. In all its representations, the video underscores the queerness in sexual diversity and refrains from representing the omnipresent, picture-perfect, middle-class, cisgender gay man or woman.

David Halperin points out how many gay men and women in contemporary society crave assimilation to the point that their lives can be described as “banal” (447). The socio-political and legal progress that can be noted in Western societies seems to support their belief that equality is within reach. Yet the assimilationist desire lays bare the power and cultural superiority of heterosexual culture. Halperin therefore underscores the importance of queer politics as a more efficient means of acknowledging a gay culture that is not grafted onto heteronormativity and of engaging in a continuous challenging of the institutions that preserve the heteronormative ideology (452). Reading *Full of Fire* from this perspective, we can see that the representation of queer individuals and practices exposes the confined options of how one is allowed to be in contemporary society. The video reminds the audience of how the many other ways of being or loving are often despised and unrecognized. Even more, the nervous sound and jagged editing make the represented queerness seem uncanny and unruly. Yet this irrational fear of the unknown is at the same time dismantled in the many close-ups that emphasize the nonconforming beauty of the queer characters, as, for instance, in the scenes which feature the transgender man getting dressed in front of a mirror or the joy and comfort that is expressed in the way the gay and lesbian couples in the video hold, caress, and touch one another.

At the end of *Full of Fire*, Dreijer Andersson adapts the chorus of SaltNPepa’s hit “Let’s Talk about Sex” (1991), singing, “Let’s talk about gender, baby. Let’s talk about you and me.” The intertextual reference reads like a call for a continuation of the inquiry set out by queer theory into the hegemony of heteronormativity as well as a reminder that popular culture too can engage in this critical project. As illustrated in this article, many gay music videos within the mainstream music industry limit the representation of sexual diversity to the inclusion of a safe cisgender gay or lesbian character and reconfirm the widespread thought that popular culture is predominantly occupied with pleasing the heterosexual majority. Whether the outcome is to establish a gay-friendly image or to tap into the LGBT market, heteronormativity and homonormativity will be respected in the politics of representation. Yet, as this article demonstrates, gay music videos are able to go against the grain and question, provoke, or subvert that which is considered normal and natural. Halberstam encourages the awareness of a new form of gender politics—which she coins gaga feminism—that speaks to a generation of men and women disappointed in the ideologies and institutions that dictate contemporary society. Even though gaga feminism does not give concrete answers for a future society, it stresses the importance of transformation and social change as the ideologies fail to encompass and address the lived contradictions,
complications, and diverse variations in identification (5, 143). Directing her gaze to popular culture, Halberstam argues that representations that underscore inclusivity or proper LGBT politics (e.g. same-sex marriage rights) will only reaffirm the status quo and isolate everyone who fails or refuses to stay on the mainstream road to heteronormative happiness, hence her appreciation for mainstream acts (such as Lady Gaga) that dare to provoke and transgress the normal in their work by wrapping queer critique in loud, flashy, extraordinary, and sometimes utterly childish or nonsensical audiovisual imagery (145–49).

As argued before, however, mainstream acts such as Lady Gaga are often questioned as to whether their queer interferences are honest and not merely commercial. The gay music videos of mainstream artists such as Carly Rae Jepsen and Macklemore & Ryan Lewis, for instance, did little to employ same-sex intimacy as a critical tool to disrupt the heteronormal and rather became videos that fortified the image of the artists as gay-friendly. Even though the analyzed videos should not be seen as representative of the continuum between the mainstream music industry and the underground, they do reveal that an engagement in gaga provocations can mostly be noted in the videos of alternative mainstream and underground artists discussed. From the frivolous lap dance in Wut over the exaggeration of the homoerotic desire in sports culture in Don’t Deny Your Heart to the queer lovemaking scenes in both True Romance and Full of Fire, the videos articulate a deep dissatisfaction with and sturdy resistance to norms and discipline. Interesting to note, though, is how the last three examples illustrate how genre does not seem to matter when it comes to representing queerness. Having artists within heterocentrist genres such as indie rock and hip hop produce music videos that read as critically queer reveals how ideological conventions within genres can be bent. Even though pop, rock, and hip-hop artists who are part of the mainstream music industry will take little risk of jeopardizing their image too much and refrain from gay-friendly and homonormative content, the genres themselves are at least opening up to queerness. As such, both heterosexual and LGBT artists within a wide variety of genres no longer choose banality and normality as main tropes within their gay music videos and instead participate in a queer politics that looks beyond the scripts of gender and sexuality close at hand.

Notes

1. Exemplary was the removal from YouTube of an advertisement clip for the new record by Perfume Genius in which the artist hugs an older man because the clip was claimed to depict sexual themes of an adult nature (Winistorfer).
2. She stressed her support of the LGBT community after cancelling her performance at the annual National Scout Jamboree organized by the Boy Scouts of America, who, at the time, prohibited teenage members from being openly gay. She withdrew after the American NGO GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) requested that she and another act, Train, withdraw from the Jamboree (Sieczkowski).
4. The appropriation resembles the way the derogatory term “queer” was appropriated by grassroots organizations such as Queer Nation and ACT UP, who stood up against homophobic and heteronormative oppression by mainstream society (Hall 53).
Notes on contributor

Frederik Dhaenens is a research member of CIMS—Centre for Cinema and Media Studies at the Department of Communication Studies, Ghent University, Belgium. He defended his doctoral thesis, entitled "Gays on the Small Screen: A Queer Theoretical Study into the Articulations of Queer Resistance in Contemporary Television Fiction," at Ghent University. His research deals with the politics of representation in popular culture, film, television, and popular music. In particular, he is interested in issues of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity. He has published in international and peer-reviewed journals such as *Television & New Media, Sexualities, European Journal of Cultural Studies, Popular Communication*, and the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*.

Works Cited


**Videography**
