

# The Aesthetic Power of the Fab 5

## Discursive Themes of Homonormativity in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*

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In a period of more complex and numerous portrayals of homosexual characters in prime-time television, scholars have expressed concern about ostensibly enlightened portrayals that ultimately reinforce culturally dominant themes of heteronormativity. This study is a critical investigation of the reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* as a site of queer discourse that both challenges and reassures dominant perceptions of homosexuality. Despite the assertion of homonormative themes, this study finds that the program, on balance, reinforces heteronormative themes and dominant heterosexual power roles. Using Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus*, this study concludes that the apolitical power granted to the Fab 5 is of an aesthetic nature, permitting them to induce primarily cosmetic change justified by consumer rhetoric.

**Keywords:** *habitus; homonormativity; reality television; makeover shows; gay stereotypes*

Communication scholars have regularly explored the exclusion of marginalized groups from the media mainstream and critiqued mediated representations that are apparently compromised by commercial interests. Specifically relating to portrayals of gay identity and culture in mainstream media, researchers have articulated concern over the absence of gay themes from mainstream media, but have also questioned seemingly liberated portrayals of homosexuality that serve to comfort the conscience of the average viewer (e.g., Condit, 1989; Dow, 2001; Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992; Shugart, 2003). Nevertheless, in response to efforts led by the gay rights movement and the private sector's recognition of the gay consumer (Atkinson, 2003; Bachman, 2003), gay portrayals on television have become more recurrent, although not necessarily substantial, resulting in what Shugart (2003) terms a slightly problematic "chic" visibility of gay men and lesbians in the mainstream. Therefore, homosexuality is usually just implied through a homoerotic subtext and/or drag costuming and sometimes more openly depicted through the presence of gay characters

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in secondary roles. Recent network and cable produced shows, including *Ellen*, *Will & Grace*, *Six Feet Under*, and *Queer as Folk*, among others, feature gay leads and alternative takes on gay culture that have garnered mass appeal. It is within this context that we attempt a critical investigation of the NBC-Bravo produced reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* as a site of queer discourse that both challenges and reassures dominant perceptions of homosexuality.

*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a reality makeover show, showcases five gay male style experts known as the Fab 5, who assume the task of revamping a straight guy's drab lifestyle, purporting to "make over the world, one straight guy at a time," according to the show web site ([www.bravotv.com/Queer\\_Eye\\_for\\_the\\_Straight\\_Guy](http://www.bravotv.com/Queer_Eye_for_the_Straight_Guy)). Each week, the Fab 5 tackle a different straight problem case, educating the straight guy on matters of wardrobe, culture, grooming, food and wine, and interior design. Currently on its third season, *Queer Eye* enjoys demographically wide appeal and has garnered a sustained following, producing impressive ratings well above the cable average (Romano, 2003), spawning a Comedy Central parody, the obligatory book, CD, and DVD, and securing pop icon status for the Fab 5. Moreover, as a reality makeover show devoid of the typical reality elements of trash-talking, confessionals, and voting out of cast members, the show maintains a positive atmosphere that extends and advances the genre of reality. As such, the show takes on a lighthearted but committed education mission to inform the public within the reality-entertainment context.

*Queer Eye* presents a significant topic of communication study for several reasons. First, it presents a unique portrayal of gay identity in that it is the first reality show to feature five lead characters who not only (brutally) criticize the rituals of normative Western masculinity, but also actively attack and restructure symbols of straightness. As such, the show presents a cultural terrain in which the traditional power structure is reversed, and the heterosexual male functions as the minority. Researchers have often examined the significance and interpretation of such celebratory narratives of homosexuality, as challenges to competing expressions of the dominant ideology (e.g., Dow, 2001; Herman, 2003; Shugart, 2003) that could influence public perceptions and attitudes. Therefore, this study engages the cultural accuracy and significance of these portrayals. Second, such empowering contexts are frequently compromised with injections of cultural normativity designed to render these shows audience-friendly to a wider consumer market. Therefore, previous analyses of gay representations have revealed that seemingly emancipated portrayals of homosexuality were negated by efforts to reassure the average heterosexual viewer (Dow, 2001; Shugart, 2003). Tellingly, the Fab 5 are permitted to institute changes in the straight guy's lifestyle, challenging traditional male habits of grooming, dressing or dining (or lack thereof), but not actively challenging the values these habits are founded on. Similarly, the Fab 5 select the show participants from an east coast metropolitan area, thus always placing themselves in a culturally diverse environment. To this point, this study considers the limitations and consequences of these portrayals, as enforced through mass appeal conventions of TV production and

marketing. Finally, this study focuses on *Queer Eye* as a media text of increasing popularity, which could educate heterosexual audiences, reflect gay culture, empower gay audiences, and challenge conventional depictions of homosexuality.

For each of these reasons, this study is grounded in Bourdieu's (1977) concept of the habitus, a schema of "structuring structures" which reproduce the social order through "naturalized" modes of belief and action. The "structuring structures" of the habitus continually reproduce themselves, as they are "determined by the past conditions which have produced the principle of their production" (p. 72). Bourdieu's habitus is a type of organic system that encompasses more than just beliefs, but also an entire propensity for how a person thinks and behaves—action is a key component of habitus. The habitus is based on previous thoughts and experience, without intention. Ultimately, the habitus, "the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history" (p. 82). Thus the principles structured by the habitus develop an internal logic that is objective in nature, which inspires individual and collective action. It is, using Bourdieu's words, a "socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures" (p. 76). The habitus serves to organize commonsensical notions of social phenomena, including the nature of queerness. As an example, Rich's (1993) work on "compulsory heterosexuality" prefigures a habitus of heteronormativity in which "covert socializations" and "overt forces" compel heterosexual partnership. Similarly, Sender's (2001) work on the dominant gay habitus highlights how patterns of consumption and marketing are connected to images of upwardly mobile and financially successful gay men. Bourdieu (1977) argues that the coherent world view produced by the habitus arises, in part, through the continued reinforcement of group-orchestrated meanings that develop over time through collective experiences such as festivals (p. 80). The gay habitus, therefore, like any other group habitus, acquires a homogeneous character that creates a taken-for-granted nature among the group's practices and beliefs. Moreover, gendered behaviors dictating acceptable signs of maleness and femaleness in Western culture have resulted from the controlled, engrained habitus of performative identity over time. Ultimately, the habitus of queerness lies in its opposition to heteronormative culture, reinforced over time in gay culture, and it produces a "naturalized" conception of public asexuality or hidden sexuality. This may be the primary rationale behind the culturally sanctioned power of the Fab 5 in the commercial/aesthetic realm as opposed to the discursive/political realm. Perhaps the overriding habitus of heteronormativity will remain unchallenged when queer power is shunted away from matters of civil rights and queer identity.

## Review

Research on mediated representations of gay and lesbian identity has focused mainly on two themes: documenting the lack of (realistic) portrayals of gay identity

on mainstream media and examining the adequacy of these portrayals. Scholarly work focused on exposing the exclusion of homosexuality from the mediated mainstream has traced the progression of gay representations, mostly in televised content, films, and newspaper coverage.

## Overview of Gay Portrayals in the Media

Up until the 1990s, gay portrayals in popular media were scarce and introduced through the vehicle of role reversal, so as to serve the purpose of comic relief. Gay characters were also typically portrayed negatively, as either villains or victims (Gross, 1993, 2001; Gross & Woods, 1999). As Shugart (2003) argued, gay characters were introduced “as problems to be solved and almost always reflected gendered stereotypes that characterize gay men as effeminate and lesbians as masculine” (p. 68). In response to the gay rights movement, AIDS awareness efforts, and the legitimization of the gay consumer, gay portrayals became more prominent, yet still desexualized, in Hollywood blockbusters and prime time network TV in the early 1990s. Such examples include *The Object of My Affection*, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything*, *Julie Newmar*, *The Birdcage*, and shows like *The Real World*, *My So-Called Life*, and *Ellen* (Gross, 2001).

Even though gay characters were awarded protagonistic roles in the mid to late 1990s, Shugart (2003) finds that two themes dominate and negate gay portrayals of the era: (a) gay identity is presented as a mostly personal and relational matter, avoiding the political context of gay identity and rights, and (b) the gay character(s) emerge as catalysts for the development of heterosexual characters. The first theme is prevalent in shows that have been structured around a coming out ritual for their protagonist, such as *Ellen* and the *Rosie O’Donnell Show*. The second theme characterizes several films, including *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything*, *Julie Newmar*, which introduces gay leads operating in a Midwestern town besieged with typical straight drama, but portrays them as outsiders, thus reinforcing gay marginalization (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2001). The same symptom defines the conceptual premise of *Queer Eye*, which allows the Fab 5 to serve as the catalyst that makes over the straight guy’s drab lifestyle, but at the same time situates the Fab 5 as the “other,” a group invading the straight mainstream in an SUV in the beginning of the show and retreating to the cultural margin at the end of the show, when observing the consequences of the make over from a distance.

## Quality of Gay Portrayals in the Media

Research that focuses on examining the consequences and interpretation of gay representations moves beyond measuring the frequency of these portrayals to examine qualitative elements that counteract the impact they have on both gay and straight audiences. Kielwasser and Wolf (1992) employ the concept of symbolic annihilation

to explain how mediated representations of marginalized groups are embedded within dominant ideology narratives, so as to symbolically obliterate cultural expressions of these groups. They further incorporate the spiral of silence perspective to explain how the mass media participate in such symbolic annihilation efforts, by publicizing opinions perceived as dominant and silencing depictions deviant from the cultural norm. As a result, homosexual activity is either excluded from the media mainstream, or when included, it is identified as the consequence of violence, dysfunctional social background, or mental disturbance, creating the cultural misconception that gay identity is created by and associated with these conditions (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992). Although oppositional readings of these media texts, by both gay and straight audiences, can potentially serve to reassert the interpretive independence of the viewer (McKee, 2000), they may also promote an illusion of empowerment, creating an internalized framework of resistance that does not frequently attain social significance. As a result, mainstream media tend to compromise the semiotic expression of marginalized subcultures, reinforcing the silencing of subcultures that are already sensitive to silence (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992).

The exclusion of homosexual identity from mainstream programming is supplemented by the advertising industry's traditional disregard for the gay consumer. Nevertheless, recent advertising appeals to the gay, lesbian, and bisexual markets have been framed in the context of coded representations interpreted as gay by gay, lesbian, and bisexual readers, but not disruptive to straight audiences. This strategy, known as gay window advertising, was further investigated by Sender (1999), who observed the reactions of focus groups consisting of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual participants to advertisements focusing on gender and sexual representations. The results highlighted the presence of different readings available to different audiences, although gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants were more likely to articulate oppositional readings, within a framework that was openly cynical about consumer culture. Participants agreed, however, that even when androgynous or sexually ambiguous messages were presented, they tended to be complemented by a hegemonic portrayal of sexuality. Moreover, gay, bisexual, and lesbian readers expressed discomfort with advertising appeals that relied on unrealistic and hegemonic representations of homoeroticism; for example, the prevalence of *lipstick lesbians* in advertising. Still, while gay window advertising may win over gay consumers through such covert hailing strategies, it does so by capitalizing on "gay and lesbian chic," thus effectively excluding more representative portrayals and markets. In the same manner, *Queer Eye* structures the straight guy makeover on a *metrosexual* consumer culture, simultaneously hailing and selling to the metrosexual market. The prominence of gay characters allows gay audiences to feel empowered, but at the same time, is packaged within the trendy aesthetic of gay chic, which does not capture the realities of the gay conscience. Like gay window advertising, *Queer Eye* sustains popularity by overtly and covertly "winking" to a sexually diverse audience, while resting on commodified portrayals of sexuality.

The mainstream media focus on chic representations of gays and lesbians successfully reproduces and markets new standards for attractiveness and identity expression, which may be actively adopted by gay cultures and serve to unite or divide gay groups further. For example, Hajek and Giles (2002) argue within a gay culture that places excessively high value on physical appearance, the expression of social identity becomes connected to standards of attractiveness, and leads to rifts in intergenerational communication among gay men. Within the context of a threatened or negatively tinted social identity, Hajek and Giles (2002) argue that gay men may choose “to reinvent themselves through exercise and diet, creating a strong, beautiful body—in essence counteracting an ‘aberrant’ psychology with an aesthetic physiology” (p. 705). This overemphasis on physical appearance is actively incorporated in celebratory expressions of gay identity, thus culturally excluding those who do not abide by these standards. Congratulatory portrayals of this aesthetic on television sustain an inaccurate reflection of gay identity, for both heterosexual and homosexual audiences. For example, in *Queer Eye*, the Fab 5’s connoisseur status on matters of style and appearance allows the cast to challenge and remake the traditional male stereotype, while at the same time reifying a cultural stereotype unreflective of the gay majority. Therefore, culturally acceptable aspects of this type of gay physiology are incorporated into the mainstream, while remaining aspects of the gay consciousness remain excluded.

In an analysis of the gender-, race-, and class-specific habitus constructed through the editorial and content shifts in the *Advocate*, Sender (2001) finds that the magazine successfully established an ideal, “respectable” gay consumer, removed from “a publicly erotic, expressly political, activist stance to one more aligned with long-standing liberal notions of the private, consuming individual” (p. 95). Therefore, this dominant gay habitus reinforces narratives of independence that highlight financial choice, thus emphasizing images of upwardly mobile, financially comfortable gay men who are consoling to both successful gay men and those who hope to be (Sender, 2001). Similarly, *Queer Eye* employs an upwardly mobile, appealing group of gay men that restructures the lifestyle of equally upwardly mobile straight men. Not only does this premise comfort gay and straight viewers who hope to achieve that level of consuming power, it also creates a universe in which the heterosexual and the homosexual identities coexist and acquiesce, even if only on matters of clothing, grooming, food and wine, decor, and culture.

Additional research on representations of gay and lesbian identity examines how such mediated reflections are negated, so as to be palatable to both straight and gay audiences. In an analysis of the coming out ritual of Ellen DeGeneres/Ellen Morgan, star of the ABC sitcom *Ellen*, Dow (2001), found that “media treatment of the *Ellen* phenomenon . . . constrained the implications of gay visibility on commercial television by channeling it through a narrative of psychological autonomy, through television norms of representing homosexuality, and through the overarching strategy of personalization” (p. 123). Therefore, *Ellen’s* coming out ritual does not signify

mainstream acceptance of gay identity, multi-faceted, but rather is packaged as transitional phase of character development that produces relief and resolves problems of cognitive dissonance for the individual. This rhetoric emphasizes personal guilt and lack of confidence as the reasons that prohibit the person from being open about their sexuality, while obfuscating the social conditions and prejudice that belie this reluctance. At the same time, the narrative is comforting to both straight and gay audiences, because it personalizes and de-politicizes the choice to come out.

This trend resurfaces in gay representations across media genres. For instance, in a study of unofficial sources and television coverage of the dispute over gays in the military, Steele (1997) found that journalists tended to include commentary and explanations of advocates that framed the issue as an interest group conflict, rather than incorporating the analysis of social scientists and other experts, who could have contextualized the controversy within a broader historical analysis of gay and individual rights. Similarly, in coverage of controversy over gay rights, journalists typically depict gay claims as self-interested and political, whereas other participants in the controversy, such as the religious right, are acknowledged as political agents.

### **Homonormative and Heteronormative discourses**

Within this context, several scholars employ the concepts of heteronormativity and homonormativity to qualify characterizations of gay representations. Heteronormativity refers to “the discourses and practices by which heterosexuality is constituted as the natural and compulsory norm, against which homosexuality is defined as its binary, and hence, negative opposite” (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002, p. 103). Homonormativity, on the other hand, presents homosexuality as normal, unremarkable, and possible, and may also suggest that other sexualities are aberrant or distinctive (Herman, 2003). For example, Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) argue that the situation comedy *Will and Grace* ultimately reinforces heterosexism and should be seen as heteronormativity, despite its use of gay lead characters and seemingly emancipated treatment of gay identity. Specifically, the authors argue that the show simplistically associates gayness with a lack of masculinity and relies on heterosexual conventions when framing homosexual desire. Additionally, the show’s more potentially subversive characters, Jack and Karen, who frequently challenge heterosexual conceptions about marriage, romance, and relationship, are disempowered by being portrayed as childish and incapable of emotional maturity. These conventions circumvent a homonormative narrative and allow the program to attract a mainstream audience.

In the same vein, the relationship between Will and Grace presents yet another incarnation of the gay man/heterosexual woman couple configuration, which has typified a series of mainstream films, such as *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, *Object of My Affection*, and *The Next Best Thing*. Shugart (2003), in an analysis of these movies and *Will and Grace*, argues that this representation enables heterosexual



audiences to not rule out the possibility of a romantic relationship between the gay male and the heterosexual female, thus rendering the programming more reassuring, comforting, and appealing to the heterosexual audience. Within this context, heteronormativity and sexist discourses are reinforced, by not only allowing sexual access to women, but also by portraying women as “desiring sexist treatment by men who are gay or, at least, sufficiently queered to thwart accusations of sexism . . . [and] affording gay male identity legitimacy by virtue of its sexist prowess” (p. 88). In the British television series *Bad Girls*, however, a drama set in women’s prison, the failure of the program to conform to any genre conventions activates a homonormative context, which enables portrayals that may not be all-inclusive of lesbian identity, but are more representative. Herman (2003) argues that *Bad Girls*, successfully attains this goal by presenting storylines and characters that confront heterosexuality as “largely unappealing and problematic,” placing relationships and loyalty towards women above ties to men, and portraying same sex intimacy in an erotic, yet not exploitative manner.

*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, as a site of queer discourse, bears the potential of encapsulating the antitheses of previous gay portrayals. Although it does feature gay lead characters as powerful agents that doctor the straight lifestyle, the ability of the Fab 5 is clearly limited to the confines of the show. The Fab 5 enter and exit the life of a straight guy as fairy godmothers, pun intended, equipped with magical abilities to transform potential frogs to princes. In doing so, the show employs rhetorical devices and narratives that invite the gay viewer in on an insider joke, while at the same time creating a comfort zone where the heterosexual and homosexual identities can coexist. This does not imply that *Queer Eye* is devoid of meaningful gay portrayals and functions wholly within a heteronormative context. On the contrary, the combination of heteronormative elements with the presentation of a “reality” environment in which homosexuality is not only portrayed as normal, but is also allowed to take over and transform heterosexual identity, create a truly polysemic text, open to multiple interpretation. This focus should allow us to examine *Queer Eye* as a complex site of queer discourse, filled with both emancipatory, homonormative rhetoric and comforting, heteronormative narratives. It should be noted that are homonormative and heteronormative elements are examined as they coexist and articulated concurrently, to understand how they challenge and/or are incorporated to the dominant gay habitus.

## Method and Analysis

In order to examine how television sifts through various discourses about queerness, gender, homosexuality, and heteronormativity, this study analyzes episodes of the makeover program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy (QE)*. The analysis of each episode as a text is rooted in a critical approach to cultural routines of signification.



The analysis concentrates on the discursive power of *QE* as a cultural text which antithesizes dominant portrayals of gays and gay culture while asserting a homo-normative cultural meaning. Textual discourse analysis imparts an empirical basis to conceptual observations about the social nature and function of language offered by critical social theory (Fairclough, 2000).

The study used a sample of 10 episodes of *QE* airing in 2003–2005 following the qualitative discourse analytic procedures described by Fairclough (1995, 2000) and van Dijk (1997). The sample was large enough to yield thematic redundancy and is representative of the typical format of the program. We selected episodes from three different seasons, so as to adequately represent the progression of the show. The shows were also selected to gauge the range of makeovers attempted by the group, so as to assemble a sample of discourses that were reflective of the general tone and tenor of the program. Therefore, having watched the three seasons in their entirety, we subsequently focused on the 10 episodes that were selected as representative of the range of makeovers and so as to reflect the progression of the show. The goal was to work from a sample that would represent a “typical” episode. The subsample of 10 episodes was viewed repeatedly for themes that yielded redundancy. We recorded name and demographic information, as reported on the show, for all main characters involved. We also noted the theme of the makeover and several plot details. Emergent references relating to the themes and the framework of the study were recorded descriptively or in the form of verbatim quotes. Specifically, we paid attention to the contract between gay/straight taste, the use of double entendre, the interaction between the *Fab 5* and the makeover candidate, as well as his circle of friends, family and coworkers. The context and the final evaluation of the makeover, both by the *Fab 5* and friends and family were noted.

Our analytical perspective was rooted in Fairclough’s emphasis (1995) on texts as sites of sociocultural practices that can be interpreted as discursive elements. Thus discourse analysis attempts to illuminate the linkages between the text itself, discursive practices, and sociocultural systems of meaning. Van Dijk’s (1997) approach to discourse analysis echoes Fairclough’s; the objective of discourse analysis is to examine texts as form and practice and as sites for social interaction and function. As potential sites for symbolic participation in discourses about queerness, *QE* makeover episodes function to reveal stereotypical narratives of gay culture, to engage in rhetorical practices that transform those narratives, and to posit alternative structures of meaning regarding queer culture in the United States. For the purposes of this research, discourse includes speech uttered by the five gay characters appearing in each episode. Thus the particular analytic framework employed here concerns representation—how events, people, and relationships are represented in a text. Following Fairclough (1995), this involves analysis of representational processes, including linguistic utterances, nonverbal cues, and aesthetic choices. Because the language in any text is “simultaneously constitutive of (1) social identities, (2) social relations, and (3) systems of knowledge and belief” (p. 55), normative positions of

representation are rendered through these discursive processes. This analysis considers the ideologies of gender roles, archetypes of masculinity, marginalized representations, and dominant heteronormative narratives that have characterized symbolic depictions of gay males in television texts. The primary focus of this discourse analysis is the relation among several themes within the text of each episode: discourse of transformation between gay and straight; narratives of homonormativity; and aesthetic sensibility as power. In line with this focus, we asked (a) what is the nature of the transformative narrative in *QE*; (b) to what extent does the portrayal of gay characters in *QE* focus on representations that go beyond the aesthetic (they may not—indeed, this is a makeover show); (c) to what extent do the narratives of the text indicate a homonormative quality; (d) in what ways does the text acknowledge its gay audience while mollifying its straight audience?

To organize data into thematically unified segments, Glaser and Strauss' (1967) *constant comparative* method of data analysis was used. Each episode was viewed several times in order to form a systematic analysis. First, overall themes in the episodes were recognized and coded according to thematic significance. Second, each theme is evaluated in accordance with the critical arguments supporting the research. Third, the discursive elements are clarified along with a consistent process developed during the procedure of thematic coding. The *constant comparative* method enables researchers to create plausible, reliable theoretical constructs while organizing data systematically (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

## Findings and Discussion

The most significant finding of this research is that, although homonormative discourses are presented in *QE*, the power of that homonormativity is blunted by the nature of the program as makeover show. Dominant structures of power and the habitus of heteronormativity are ultimately reinforced in a program that nevertheless challenges these structures more thoroughly than its televised contemporaries. These findings are revealed in three categorical themes, identified through the analysis and reported in the following sections.

### Reversal of Roles: Illusory Homonormativity

One of the primary objectives of this study was to identify hetero and homonormative elements of *QE*, in order to understand how it serves as a meaningful text for both straight and gay audiences. Heteronormative elements emphasize heterosexuality as the norm or the mainstream sexual choice and employ rhetorical devices that situate homosexuals as the other or as marginal. Homonormative elements, on the other hand, present homosexuality as normal and unremarkable and may also frequently classify other sexualities as different or distinctive. Several shows, while

featuring unconventional portrayals of gay characters, retain a heteronormative structure that appeals to, without challenging, the heterosexual cultural landscape. The analysis finds that *QE* is a truly complex and polysemic show, which affords gay characters great empowerment without disrupting the political dynamics of the straight universe.

*QE* adopts a premise that advertises a veneer of homonormativity. The reversal of roles allows the Fab 5 to confidently take over the straight world and school straight men in grooming, home decor, fashion, the culinary arts, and cultural pursuits. In broadening the cultural horizons of the straight mainstream, the Fab 5 take on traditionally *feminine* qualities or habits that have been used to stigmatize gay men and employ them to reform straight men. It is this reversal of roles that establishes the homonormative discourse, in that it allows the producers and cast of the show to treat homosexuality, rather than heterosexuality, as the norm, in line with Battles and Hilton-Murrow's (2002) interpretation of homonormativity. Therefore, the premise is potentially groundbreaking, in that attributes that have traditionally led to the stereotyping, marginalization, and oppression of the male gay population, such as preoccupation with appearance or interest in the feminized spheres of cooking or decorating, are now used to cultivate the ignorant straight male. The programs are filled with examples of this particular trend, but an especially memorable one involves the Fab 5 makeover of a token military straight guy, who they humorously command to a round of push-ups as Carson (the wardrobe consultant) chants: "Your shoes are last season, your shoes are last season!" Flamboyance is not concealed, but rather used as a property that magically transforms and improves the seemingly drab lives of straight men. At the end of each episode, straight men are able to or voluntarily show an inclination to cook, groom, and clean the bathroom. What women or women's movements have not managed to do for decades, five gay men get one straight guy to do in one hour. Thus homonormative behaviors are not only normalized, but presented as the means to enable a more balanced and fulfilling lifestyle.

Despite the artificiality of the reality set up—no one really believes that a straight man and his household can really be made over in an hour—the Fab 5 are afforded a position of power in this show, which is routinely enforced through a narrative that allows them to set the rules for behavior, serve as teachers and guides to the straight audience, and flaunt, rather than conceal, their lifestyle choices and habits. The show proposes a homonormative environment, in which homosexuality is presented as the norm, and the gay habitus as an ideal cultural space that straight men should aspire to. In this constructed environment, gay and straight men interact without homophobia and have conversations not restricted by differences in sexuality. The Fab 5 make over the straight men, but always with consideration for the straight guy's personal choice, taste, and personality, so that changes are not extreme and can be easily maintained. As Carson proclaims in midst of the transformation of George K., "We're not here to change you, we're here to make you better." Thus the recent divorcee is provided with a wardrobe, household and culture tips that enable him to

interact with his son better and boost his confidence when interacting with single ladies. In another episode, a postal worker/taxidermist is provided with a look well aligned with his lifestyle, and he is remodeled in a way that allows him to connect with his family and children in a more modernized manner. Similarly, a stingy real estate entrepreneur is shown how he can embellish his life and home in nonextravagant ways and shown how to be more romantic with his girlfriend.

In the midst of each transformation, the Fab 5 interact with the straight guy, girlfriends, children, wives, parents, and miscellaneous relatives and co-workers in a manner that not only enforces the normality of the homosexual choice, but actively takes on and dismisses homophobic stereotypes, in what further supports the premise of homonormative discourse. For instance, while making over Ralph, a radio and strip club DJ, Carson, marveling at the results of the makeover, exclaims: "Oh my God, I almost want to make out with you," to which Ralph playfully responds, "Almost?" Similarly, while remodeling Tom, a recent divorcee, the Fab 5 collectively make fun of an effeminate and stylistically dated beach bag Tom uses to take his children to the beach: "Even though you are 6'-6", you still look like a fag!"

The interaction between the Fab 5 and the participants of the show not only presents the homosexual as normal and unremarkable, it also frequently typifies other sexualities as aberrant or distinctive, which presents another dimension of homonormativity (Herman, 2003). For instance, The Fab 5 collectively "wink" at the gay viewer, when in conversation with Steven, a Fuse video DJ makeover, about one of Steven's male friends who bequeathed him an abundance of wicker furniture, they remark: "A straight hairstylist with all wicker furniture? I don't think he's telling you the truth!" During the same makeover, they poke fun at the straight lifestyle by picking up one of Steven's T-shirts reading "Nintendo high scorer" and showing it to the camera: "This is so heterosexual right here!" This humorous stigmatization of the straight mainstream is further effected by unearthing a miscellaneous decorative item of Steven's and displaying it on camera as a "wibble wabblers straight people have." Simultaneously, not only is the straight lifestyle marginalized, the choices articulated within the dominant gay habitus are proclaimed as ideal. "Gay good, grey bad!" Carson joyfully proclaims as he throws out a plethora of grey shirts that used to belong to Jeff, the postal worker/taxidermist makeover. Gay men are portrayed as intellectually superior in several instances, including one where Steven, the Fuse VJ makeover, laments to a coworker: "I consider myself a witty person, but with gay men, it don't work. If I were gay, I think I would be a quiet gay person."

This stream of homonormative dialogue should enforce the homonormative premise of the show. Presenting the homosexual style as the norm and depicting straight identity as the anomaly are central elements of homonormativity, as defined by previous research (e.g., Battles & Hilton-Murrow, 2002; Herman, 2003). The effortless rapport the Fab 5 establish with the show participants, combined with the glorification of the gay habitus, serve to present and sustain a homonormative context, in which homosexuality is portrayed as normal, and is not stigmatized.

Conversely, the straight habitus is brutally critiqued and marginalized. Still, heteronormative elements are present and serve to comfort the straight audience of the show. Despite the seamless rapport between the straight and gay population of the show, straight and gay are presented as distinct opposites, as signified by the opening credits of the show, which point to “gay street” and “straight street.” The Fab 5 are presented as external factors, emerging as catalysts that lead to the development of the straight character, a theme consistent with previous mainstream gay portrayals (Shugart, 2003). The show commences with the Fab 5 invading the straight guy’s apartment, which is not only an empowering action, but also symbolically polarizes the two lifestyles. More importantly, however, the Fab 5 enter the straight guy’s life and conduct the makeover by invitation only. They employ the power that is turned over to them by the straight man, and the potential straight audience, to influence the straight mainstream. This could still be perceived as an empowering gesture, were the Fab 5 not to exit the straight guy’s life and retreat to their stylish loft from where they observe how their makeover subject applies their advice at show’s end.

Furthermore, the structure of the program is thematically organized to sustain the disparity between the two worlds. In every show, the Fab 5 forcefully enter the straight world by way of GMC sports utility vehicle, then proceed to critique, wreak havoc, and humorously disassemble the straight guy’s lodgings. The playful way in which they discard furniture and clothing out the window provides comic relief, but also creates an impression of childlike and reckless behavior. The primary discourse of the text always involves the straight male and his transformation. Straight men and women on the program are allowed to be sexual, and are shown being intimate and expressing interest in each other. The Fab 5, despite the extensive makeover power they are allotted, are presented as asexual, which is congruent with typical mainstream portrayals of homosexuality.

Moreover, the characters of the Fab 5 are generated around folklore stereotypes; the fact they are given license to exaggerate flamboyance for comic relief serves to reinforce the gay flamboyant man stereotype. Following this introductory sequence, the straight guy sequentially follows Carson, the fashion expert, Thom, the decor expert, Kyan, the grooming expert, Ted, the food and wine expert, and Jai, the culture expert, to receive short training sessions in each area. This culminates in some special event (a promotion, family gathering, marriage proposal, time alone with a significant other) for which the Fab 5 help prepare the straight guy. During that event, the Fab 5 observe how their makeover subject performs from the seclusion of their loft, via a surveillance camera system. The Fab 5 enter the lives of East Coast Metropolitan area men by invitation only; following this temporary tour through the mainstream, they retreat to their own space, which serves to assert the distance between theirs and other lifestyles.

It could be argued that this context is open to multiple interpretations and presents a truly polysemic text. For instance, observation from the loft through a surveillance system empowers the Fab 5 in panoptical manner, affording them the privilege to

observe and chastise their subject in front of the audience. Gay men are portrayed as self-assured, competent, knowledgeable, and expert. The loft is an area they retreat to and occupy by choice. At the same time, the distance from which they have to observe could serve to symbolically situate at them away from the mainstream, thus rendering them the *Other* (Herman, 2003; Shugart, 2003). Therefore, the show features gay and straight portrayals that manage to construct a polysemic text that appeals to and does not challenge the straight mainstream, while simultaneously comforting and “winking” at the gay audience. To this point, additional themes present within the show support the thesis that the homonormative environment presented lacks substantive elements that truly empower the gay audience.

### **Transient Transformations: The Straight Guy Cinderella**

The structure and pretext of the show further project a seemingly homonormative context within which the gay man is allotted unprecedented power, but only to enter the straight guy’s life for one hour with the explicit reason of making him over for an upcoming event. The rapport developed between the Fab 5 and the straight guy is promising, and helps present an environment where the straight and gay are challenged and integrated. Still, the show reaffirms the conviction that this type of interaction only exists within an hour long show taking place at the metropolitan east coast, because that is the only environment within which this interaction may exist. To suggest otherwise would imply closer and more substantial friendships between gay and straight men—a fact that would potentially alienate the straight audience of the show. The convenient ephemerality of the hour-long relationship between the Fab 5 and the straight guy is established through recurring storytelling devices.

From the beginning of the show, the transient, in-and-out basis of this relationship is emphasized by showing the Fab 5 rushing in to their van, rushing over to the straight guy’s house, rushing up the stairs, and hurriedly rummaging through his belongings. The Fab 5, straight guy in tow, then rush to the hair salon, the spa, the furniture store, clothing stores, food and wine stores, and manage to squeeze in a cultural pursuit of sorts. Their rhetoric is continually emphasizing that they must rush, that they have to be quick, that they have little time to, according to Carson, “bust in, demolish, and then go shopping!” This constant state of haste serves to signify that the Fab 5 are not “here to stay” and do not have a lot of time to spare because they do not intend to stay in the straight guy’s life for longer than an hour. Staying longer than an hour would involve portraying a more complex, lengthier, and substantive relationship between a gay and a straight man, which the average audience is not accustomed to seeing. Even on a holiday special reunion show, during which the Fab 5 “randomly” check on their makeovers to ensure that they are maintaining their made-over lifestyle, interaction centers on checking things like wardrobe, furniture, and refrigerator contents to ensure adherence to the *QE* makeover.

Presented as taking place within a day but edited into an hour of programming, the hour-long timeframe within which redecoration of a house, extensive personal grooming, copious clothes shopping, a crash course on food and wine essentials, and exposure to a type of cultural pursuit occur further challenges the authenticity of the makeover. The makeover not only is ephemeral, it also appears unrealistic, which ultimately compromises the empowering position from which the Fab 5 could operate. The show is entertaining to watch, because these storytelling devices make for a lively and funny narrative. At the same time, however, this pretense emphasizes the artificiality of this environment within which gay and straight integrate and interact with singular affinity. It is possible that such extraordinary compatibility requires a false front in order to survive the politics of mainstream television.

Behind the presentation of a seamless makeover lies extensive editing, careful selection of participants, a demographic that covers only major cities in the northeast United States, and the voluntary decision of the straight subject to be made-over for an upcoming special event (the motives behind which are awarded some air time, but are never fully exposed). Still, these elements are not included, so as not to disrupt the flow of a picture-perfect makeover, a fairy tale of straight and gay interaction. Within this fable, the Fab 5 are afforded the powers and role of the fairy godmother, sent in to magically and instantaneously transform the straight guy. The short timeframe within which changes occur emphasizes the magical, and thus unreal, element of transformation. Thus, while the dominant discourse is homonormative, the context within which it is presented is magical. The hurried and unrealistic pace within which the homonormative narrative unfolds compromises the veracity of the narrative itself. This potentially presents a narrative that is encouraging to the collective gay subconscious and not discomforting to its straight counterpart. The power vested in the Fab 5 is emancipatory, but equivalent to that of a magic wand: it does not exist in real life. The show is entertaining because it tells the age-old story of a Cinderella-like makeover in compelling language. The show, however, does not advance beyond the magical confines of its own narrative, thus presenting an interesting variation on the homonormative theme, to be further explored in the following section.

### **Power as Apolitical: The Aesthetic “Power” of the Fab 5**

The power awarded the Fab 5 within this narrative is not only of limited duration, but also of limited applicability. The Fab 5 are stereotypically cast to represent different areas of traditionally regarded *gay* expertise. In a heavily stylized introductory credit sequence, the Fab 5 are portrayed as secret style agents: Kyan is shown handling a blow dryer, Carson holding two shopping bags, Jai being a DJ, Thom decorating, Ted making a food and wine recommendation. Once again, gay men are portrayed within primarily feminine occupations and mannerisms, thus exaggerating and isolating nonrepresentative elements of gay behavior. The general flamboyance



they display not only further fits within a gendered stereotype, it also projects a non-threatening, more comical persona, which could not be farther away from the more “serious” face provided to the straight man.

It would be negligent to omit the empowering aspect of the role reversal embedded within the show, acknowledged in detail earlier in this essay. It is this very flamboyance that gays are traditionally stereotyped for that is used to enact change on the straight man. Still, while liberating, this role reversal is limited by the confinement of the Fab 5 to the sphere of aesthetics. The Fab 5 are permitted to induce aesthetic-only transformation and are allowed to function as experts only within these traditionally feminized spheres. Consistent with previous portrayals of gay protagonists, gay identity is presented in a manner that is primarily personal and relational, frequently avoiding the political sphere of gay rights (Shugart, 2003). They may offer advice about styling, décor, cuisine, or even one’s love life, but never become involved in the more substantial areas of economics, politics, business, and so on. Despite the liberating premise of the show, the power awarded the Fab 5 remains apolitical. In the world of *QE*, queer politics and prejudice do not exist. Straight men do not resist change, aesthetic or social. They are never offended by the Fab 5’s criticism of personal items and memorabilia. Families, friends, and significant others are not surprised by five gay men entering and restructuring a straight man’s life, something for which the ordinary straight guy, in real life, would at least be at the receiving end of several jokes. The discourse is confined to the sphere of aesthetics, which produces yet another media text ignoring the real politics of the gay identity. So again, as noted before, a negotiation of homonormative and heteronormative boundaries is observed: For every affordance the homonormative narrative is granted, a reassurance is offered through the nascent heteronormative narrative. Thus the homonormative context is empowered, but only in an aesthetic manner.

More problematic, however, is that this aesthetic power is entirely couched within a consumerist rhetoric, consistent with research that finds the expression of social identity frequently linked to attractiveness standards and the aesthetic physiology (Hajek & Giles, 2002). In their invasion of the straight guy’s home, the Fab 5 identify a series of aesthetic issues, all problems which they proceed to fix with the consumption of additional products. Ralph, the strip club/radio DJ does not have a girlfriend because he does not have the right wardrobe and does not shave in the right direction. Alan, the young successful real estate entrepreneur, cannot meet his girlfriend’s parents because he is too cheap to decorate his house in a trendy manner. This creates the belief that all these problems are encountered simply because the show participants have not been consuming the right products. Associating happiness with consumption of products is the primary advertising strategy within a capitalist environment. The Fab 5 frequently deal with participants who express an aversion to shopping; a fairly typical trend for full-time working individual. Still, the Fab 5 routinely ridicule participants for this aversion to shopping, thus discrediting their own authority and placing themselves within the center of consumer culture—coincidentally, a popular stereotypical location of the gay man in mainstream media.

*QE* never disregards the makeover subject's personality, always selecting furniture and clothing items that complement the straight guy's taste. And yet, in doing so, the Fab 5 oddly manage to match personality with specific designer or store, mentioned by name repeatedly, frequently turning the *QE* into an hour long advertisement. The incessant promotion of designers and stores is effected through the selection of clothing items, grooming products, furniture items, and cultural pursuits. Therefore, Steven the VJ gets the Cavalli pants to suit his "edgier," Video DJ occupation. Adam's more traditional apartment is outfitted with faux antique furniture from Domain. Alan, the cheap real estate agent, is taken to affordable H&M for shopping. The cost and affordability of these items for the average individual are never visited at length, despite them being advertised as magically transforming an individual's life. Thus all discomfort encountered is located within the zone of consumption, with the Fab 5 functioning as consumption navigators for the confused heterosexual.

## Conclusion

*QE*, as a popular show airing on a major network, requires a certain polysemic structure, so as to appeal to a variety of audiences. The ability to provide content that will appeal to and comfort multiple sensibilities ultimately, allows the show to achieve mainstream appeal, in the tradition of other popular media content featuring gay characters more prominently, like the TV show *Will & Grace* or the movie *My Best Friend's Wedding*. This versatility allows the show producers to target a variety of demographics, both as potential audiences and advertising markets.

As site of queer discourse, *QE* is entangled in homonormative and heteronormative elements, which afford it the popularity it enjoys. The show operates on a homonormative premise, involving a reversal of power that allows gay men to transform straight ones. This provocative foundation serves as the show attention-getter for potential audiences, and it also situates the gay characters in a position of power and control not frequently encountered in mainstream television. This foundation allows homosexuality to be presented as a normal and unremarkable choice, and frequently leads into discourse that presents heterosexuality as banal. Yet this homonormative premise is constantly contradicted by structural elements and storytelling devices, which serve to subtly restore heterosexuality as the primary discourse. In this manner, *QE* reinforces the habitus of heteronormativity's structuring structures.

The structure of the show serves to emphasize the ephemeral nature of the relationship between the gay and straight men, thus negating the impact of the seamless and effortless rapport between the gay and straight characters of the show. The intersection of the gay and straight world, therefore, is not presented as an event of lasting power, but rather, as a happenstance brought on by special circumstances, unlikely to recur soon. The power awarded the Fab 5 is similarly annulled by imposing a rapid pace to the makeover, making changes appear instantaneous, magical, and

possibly unreal. Finally, the changes the Fab 5 engineer are strictly limited within the sphere of aesthetics, thus emphasizing stereotypical qualities of the gay population and aligning the gay characters with a culture encouraging consumption. Thus the gay characters remain apolitical, because they are never provided with the power to renegotiate their status and social position. The power awarded simply allows them to move more freely, but still within a marginal place. This conceptualization blunts any power gained in the gay community as a result of the civil rights-era struggles by reinforcing the habitus of the heteronormative capitalist economy (instead of conceiving of a possible homonormative challenge to capitalistic power structures).

The overall impact of the show is further compromised by the fact that it airs on a network catering to a narrow, more educated demographic (Bravo) and that it focuses on Metropolitan East Coast areas that could be perceived as being more culturally diverse. Also, by definition, the makeover genre preaches to the converted: It institutes change by invitation only. At the same time, the show presents an unaffected sincerity in the interaction of straight and gay men that is rarely encountered in prime time media content. The value of this fairy-tale like interaction lies not in its ability to reflect reality accurately, but rather in its allegorical capability to communicate the potential of the reality portrayed.

This proposes several theoretical directions for scholars interested in similar narratives. First, this study suggests that the previous polarization between heterosexual and homosexual choices, as captured by the homonormative/heteronormative conceptual lens, could possibly no longer present an adequate framework for the critical evaluation of gay portrayals in mainstream media. The primary theoretical contribution of this study attests to the existence of a mutated homonormative narrative. This variation of homonormativity presents a complex negotiation of hetero and homo identity boundaries, engineered to appease and appeal to a variety of audiences. Within this process of negotiation, every assertion of dominance of the homonormative narrative is accompanied with heteronormative reassurances. We argue that this more than just an instance of “masked” homonormativity; rather, it presents the new norm for debuting the dominant gay habitus to diverse audiences. A recently published analysis of *QE* (Sender, 2006), similarly concluded that the *QE* gaze succeeded in “deconstructing some of *Queer Eye’s* most heteronormative aims, while leaving class and consumption rationales intact” (p. 131). Our thematic analysis concluded that much of the heteronormative deconstruction is articulated via financial choices that involve consumption of goods and services, rather than a political critique of class and gender distinctions. To this point, Sender (2006) concluded that, despite the show’s joke being on the straight guy, the show “suggests that the appropriate place to negotiate gender and sexual politics is in the commercial realm, leaving its progressive message vulnerable to the vagaries of audience ratings and marketers’ patronage” (p. 148).

For instance, although the expertise of the Fab 5 rests in the “feminized” area of aesthetics, thus negating the true political power of the Fab 5, these activities are

frequently framed as ways of rewarding or paying back the woman or family/social circle who have done so much for the straight subject. Thus the straight guy becomes not just a better consumer, but also a better partner, friend, or father, at least for the duration of program. The *mélange* of sexist discourse with feminized practices puts forth contemporary gender prototypes, that were previously absent from mainstream television. This suggests the advancement of the theoretical concept of homonormativity, so as to address the gray area among the two polar opposites of hetero and homonormative and to correspond to an era when gay portrayals are not only more common, but are frequently the basis on which a show is marketed and sold to the mainstream.

Second, it is necessary for scholars to consider how this pattern of homoternativity—or this mutated homonormativity affects how the gay population perceives itself and its place within the mainstream. *QE* implies the didactic purpose of educating the mainstream audience, as discussed in the beginning of this essay. If the show suggests that the prevalence of a homonormative context is the result of complex negotiation of cultural territory, then perhaps it is of use to consider how this negotiation is internalized and experienced within gay and straight populations. On the one hand, such conciliation of cultural terrain could result in less polarization between popular definitions of what it means to be gay or straight in contemporary popular culture. This could serve to reconfigure the queer habitus away from the rhetoric of opposition to straight modalities. Simultaneously, however, the abandonment of these polar identities could signal the compromise of their true character, especially if the entire negotiation takes place on a terrain that is largely apolitical. This could serve to reinforce the nature of the queer habitus as oppositional to straight modalities. As media content finds ways to appeal to diverse audiences simultaneously and blending homo and heteronormative context, the important question for future study to address becomes whether these possibly false distinctions continue to be meaningful to us researchers.

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