

Papacharissi, Z., & Fernback, J. (2008). The aesthetic power of the Fab 5: Discursive themes of homonormativity in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 32(4), 348-367.

### Synopsis

Papacharissi and Fernback's article is a critical investigation of the reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The authors interrogated how the show can simultaneously be both representative and exploitative of homosexuals. The authors argued that, as a cultural text, the show does challenge, but also reassures hegemonic perceptions of homosexuality, walking the line between the promotion of heteronormativity and of homonormativity. They posited that *Queer Eye* is truly complex as a site of cultural discourse and meaning. On the one hand, the show offers unique and meaningful portrayals of a group of people largely marginalized within mainstream media. They also noted that the show breaks certain ground by casting homosexuality in a positive light, as well as empowering its gay characters. However, they also noted that this power remains somewhat limited in that it never becomes political, but instead remains confined to the superficial sphere of aesthetics. Additionally, they noted that many stereotypical characteristics are also on display, which helps to reinforce a dominant, heteronormative ideology. The authors' analysis contended that the show must maintain this balance in order to appeal to both heterosexual and homosexual audiences for reasons tied to consumerism.

### Key Concepts

- **Chic visibility:** Gay portrayals on television that are less than substantial and/or problematic (p. 348).
- **Bourdieu's concept of the habitus:** A "socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures... The habitus serves to organize commonsensical notions of social phenomena, including the nature of queerness" (p. 350).
- **Symbolic annihilation:** The exclusion of homosexual identity from mainstream media in order to ignore its very existence (p. 351-352).

### Key Quotes

- "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" (p. 352).
- "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" (p. 357).
- "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" (p. 360).

### Essential Question

- How does the new iteration of *Queer Eye* differ from the original in terms of challenging certain themes or conventions? In other words, what conventions from 2008 are still in place and in need of challenging, and what are some new conventions being challenged?