

Rosalind Hanmer
London Metropolitan University
r.hanmer@londonmet.ac.uk

Queer Television Discourse - Reality TV

Abstract

This paper is a qualitative case study of a dedicated website that contains a chat room and message board where young people discuss the BBC 'Reality Television' series Fame Academy 2. Its explorations of on-line television conversations form a queer discourse that disrupts a normative heterosexual representation. The research generates discussion in the area of interdisciplinary methodology and on-line conversational research. Certain modifications characterise interdisciplinary research areas. For example, in order to tease out queer discourse and its struggle for a position within my chosen television and on-line conversations, I combine aspects of Feminist theory with Queer theory. These theories together with CMC (computer mediated communication) and the use of discourse analysis underpin the foundation of this case study. The computer conversations are a combination of asynchronous communication, which takes place at a different time, and synchronous communications, which take place at the same time (See Munt, 2002). This case study explores the use of interdisciplinary methodologies and how they can be applied to areas of research such as the Internet. For the purpose of this work the researcher engages in a hybrid queer gaze.

Introduction

Fame Academy 2 is a reality television programme that broadcast on British terrestrial television on August 2003 on BBC1. One of the contestants is a young woman called Alex Parks who comes out as 'gay' during a live performance. The series follows the lives of twelve selected contestants who

have entered the 'Academy'. Their age's range between 18 and 35 and their dream is to become famous in the music business. They are judged on their talents as singers and their song writing ability, also their competence to perform in front of a live audience and other students. The BBC set up an official website on the Internet called 'Digital Spy Forum' to enable young viewers of the programme to discuss the contestants activities and performance in the series. The aim of the paper is to develop a discussion about queer discourse found in selected conversations posted on the website message board of 'Digital Spy Forum'.

This case study interprets the young posters linguistic behaviour and their use of emoticons ¹ during their discussion about Alex Parks and her revelation that she is a lesbian. What is fascinating about these on-line conversations is the way a hidden queer discourse is presented as a normative position because the 'queer' in this context is not marginalised. Through the posters/viewers use of language they define their social situation on the Internet.

This paper is structured by a two-tier discussion. The first section provides an overview of what disciplines and methods are used. The second details my brief selection of on-line conversational sequences and my analysis of them. According to John Brewer, '[c]ase studies are distinguished [...] by the focus on the instance of the phenomenon, not by the method used to study it' (2000:188). However, this case study is distinguished by both the phenomenon of a queer discourse and by the methods used to uncover its function. A close reading and interpretation of some of the dialogue considered in this paper is a queer discourse and its disruption of the notion of a heterosexual norm and its representation of a lesbian.

¹ The emoticons are cues that the posters use such as happy and sad face a form of emotional expression within non-face-to-face-conversation.

Section One

Academia has recently been experiencing a trajectory in canonical disciplines and the uses of methodologies, especially in the area of computer mediated communication research. Mann & Stewart suggest that the Internet as a topic of investigation will have far reaching consequences for research because it is 'both a technological and a cultural phenomenon' (2000:7). The authors argue that the Internet will 'have an overwhelming impact on the theory and practice of qualitative research' (2000:7). They predict that the 'potential for development and diversity is immense' (2000:97). The benefit of and usefulness of interdisciplinary methodologies has a reflexive advantage that can only enhance the outcome of future on-line conversational discourse research (2000:97).

Although Feminist Studies and Queer Theory are envisaged by academia as interdependent, they have also often been presented as being at odds with each other. As Judith Butler (1997) points out

'[t]here can be no viable feminism that fails to account for its complicity in forms of oppression, whether they be colonial, class-based, racist, or homophobic. And there can be no viable lesbian and gay studies paradigm that does not examine its own complicitous investments in misogyny and other forms of oppression' (1997:2).

In this research they are used complementarily to produce further discussions and generate questions specifically regarding to Fame Academy 2. Feminism and Queer theory are not represented as having limitations or opposing positions, rather they are positioned within an exploration of complex and sometimes contradictory meanings of relations of power that are disseminated through the conversational sequences.

There is a chaotic side of research that produces disorder and confusion. The research plan (and its procedures) can become problematic in the

transformation and interpretation of analysis. In my experience this happens between the gathering of information and the writing up stage of the analysis, but I have found that it helps to move between different disciplinary borders. The writing up process needs to be accessible to show all the workings and how the interpretation of the data has emerged. The disciplines and procedures undertaken to theorise and develop any research have become a philosophical approach in itself.

This approach incorporates new skills that include the researcher's experience of the chaos involved along the way. Working across interdisciplinary boundaries has questioned my ideological perspective as a lesbian queer reader, despite the subjectivity of my interpretations that I hold as very important. What I am suggesting is that during this process the social and cultural power relations that are explored tend to be reduced or over simplified in the analysis. Thus, the researcher can get bogged down in the methodology and may fail to recognise the importance of the dialogue and to reflect on what has happened throughout the research process.

As researchers we pursue investigations that add meaning to how we envisage our own complex social and cultural identities and our own narratives of the self. We perform our own research identities through the traditional disciplines of Academia that operate to empower us as individuals and enhance our contribution to knowledge. As a queer, feminist, poststructuralist reader, I position myself as a bricoleur² using an interdisciplinary hybrid methodology that grows throughout the research process. This model consists of queer studies, feminist studies, anthropology, sociology, textual analysis and discourse analysis. My approach also includes implementing the tools of digit media and the Internet. 'The researcher-as-bricoleur-theorist works between and within

² This is described and clarified by Weinstein and Weinstein (1991) as a 'Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person. The bricoleur produces a bricolage, that is, a pieced

competing and overlapping perspective and paradigms' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:4)

Levi-Strauss (1966), Weinstein and Weinstein (1991), Nelson, Triechler and Grossberg (1992), all acknowledge bricolage as an undertaking involving practices that facilitate new tools or emerging concepts and techniques produced through the combining of different methodologies. This form of construction can and does achieve a thorough and rigorous investigation with exciting results for the researcher. In this context the amalgamation of interdisciplinary methodologies produces a new challenge to the outcome of research using a hybridized form of communication. Computer mediated communication (CMC) can reveal new discourses and meanings for social and cultural development. According to Mann and Stewart (2000), '[...] CMC offers an excellent site for qualitative researchers who 'observe' discourse online (2000:87). I use the term hybridisation as the act of combining the different disciplines and producing a formatively new critical approach to computer mediated communication. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest, 'If new tools have to be invented, or pieced together, then the researcher will do this' (1993: 2).

This hybridised observational research model is described as a highly localized experience of people in a social and cultural grouping that informs a particular phenomenon on the Internet. Interpreting and analysing one of these groupings and exploring the antagonistic discourses that take place in the selected on-line conversations is what adds to the richness of this study. Brewer suggests that research can have 'a slavish devotion to methods that can exclude the substance or the interest of the story being told in the research' (2000:2). Therefore, I want to ensure that a queer voice is heard within a normative heterosexual discourse.

together, close-knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problems in a concrete

My case study unravels an online narrative of exchanges of dialogue held between a selected numbers of young posters³. The poster's conversations suggest that they are influenced by media representations of gender and identity. They also use a taken-for-granted heterosexist assumption with regard to a queer discourse. This can be observed in the postings and from the print media's interpretations of the contestants taking part in the programme. The next section explains the empirical data and its analyses.

On-line data

The empirical data or 'thick descriptions' ⁴ are gathered from the message board postings of Digital Spy that discusses the reality television programme Fame Academy 2. These conversations are available through a service called Internet Relay Chat⁵. The recent synergy of television and the internet enhance the practical tools available to the researcher for this type of ethnographic qualitative study. The computer and the television screen are the interface required to produce participation these conversations relating to television.

A random number of postings relating to Alex Parks were posted on the 'Digital Spy Forum' message board and chat line on 7.8.2003, and they were selected. The messages⁶ and postings content have not been altered in any way by the researcher. The messages have been copied and pasted directly

situation' (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991, 161).

³ Posters are the name given to participants who engage in the message boards within newsgroups. The ages of the posters who participate in Digital Spy Forum are between 14-35 the ages of the contestants that take part in the television series are between 18-35. (See <http://www.fame.digitalspy.co.uk/article.ds6008/html>)

⁴ This is the term given by Geertz for the data that is accumulated, validated and theorised in qualitative research. (1973, p26)

⁵ 'IRC refers to a live chat area of the Internet in which real-time conversations among two or more people take place via IRC software. IRC is divided into channels. When you join a channel everything you type is visible to other people in the same channel and everything they type is visible to you. Most channels have a topic' (Glossary-Mann and Stewart, 2000: 220).

⁶ These messages are available on the Digital Spy Forum website and it is a public space that anyone can enter at any time

from the website and no permission has been obtained to use these conversations. This is an accepted and ethical procedure for the collection of digital data from a virtual environment such as chat rooms or newsgroup message boards. (See Mann & Stewart, 2000: 46). However, the pseudonyms have been removed from the conversations of the posters to protect the posters and the font size has been changed and speech marks incorporated for the readers ease. No dialogue took place between the researcher and the posters during this case study.

The data comprises selected messages relating to Alex Parks' 'outing'. Parks becomes the subject of these power relations through her lesbian commodification. The analysis and discourse of her lesbianism supports the suggestion that the 'stylization of lesbian sexuality has rewritten radical sex as a commodity and defused its potential' (Hawkes, 1996: 143). Her commodification has evoked an internalised homophobia. Comments made by Alex Parks confirm this internalised homophobia, yet simultaneously these queer discourses captured on-line, dispute established homophobic postulations. My analysis critiques the deferred meaning of a queer discourse and its power relations within Fame Academy 2.

Queer television discourse evolved in the UK when Big Brother and Fame Academy producers Endemol gained a large audience who voted for the out-lesbian and ex nun Anna in their first series of Big Brother. Alex's inclusion as a queer contestant in the Fame Academy mansion is part of an emergent number of queer identities represented through 'Reality Television'. The on-line conversations are productive in that dialogue is happening that favours a queer discourse. My concern is that these discourses are steeped in homophobic utterances. However, the general zeitgeist mood of the posters also suggests that there is a trajectory to be more liberal in this particular chat forum. Fame Academy 2's

representations of gender and sexuality may have added to this liberal attitude.

The television show: Fame Academy 2

Fame Academy 2 is without doubt a form of media that attracts high audience rating figures nationally. The first Fame Academy broadcast in autumn of 2002 affectedly claimed an audience of 8 million for the final show.⁷ Reality TV is an 'attempt to package particular aspects of everyday life as entertainment' (Dovey, 2001:3). Is it a voyeuristic, cheap phenomenon of post-modern television, or do we as human beings hold a natural desire to perform? Whatever the answer, it can be deduced that the illusion of a passive spectatorship is over and that we the watching audience can now participate in these on screen dramas ourselves.⁸

A predisposed or common ingredient of these shows is that they take people to unusual surroundings completely unfamiliar to them. This fly-on-the-wall production embodies a psychological, emotional and physical pressure for the contestants. A twenty- four-seven vigilant eye of the camera casts its judgemental gaze as well as the viewing public. A number of young people from different classes, gender, ethnic and sexual backgrounds compete against each other for a financial reward and celebrity status. The popular discourse that emerges through this television format challenges a⁹common-sense notion of gender and sexuality. The audience can discuss the disclosures of each contestant participating in the programme through the chat room and message board on-line. The discussions on Alex Parks are the ones that generate a queer discourse.

⁷ According to the Nielsen TV Media Research ratings.

⁸ Baudrillard (1994) gave a lecture at the University of Sydney regarding his theory of simulacra.

⁹ See Butler's (1990) 'Gender Trouble' and her influential analysis of compulsory heterosexuality.

Social and Cultural Pleasures of Television

The second series ran for eight weeks and was broadcast on a Saturday night at 6.30p.m by BBC1. It also features further coverage on BBC3, and returns to BBC1 for the results of who had to leave the Academy at 11.05 the same night. The results were given out live after the BBC News and Sports slot. There was also a Fame Academy Remixed showing at 8p.m. the following night and a Fame Academy Live on weeknights at 7.15 on BBC3. Fame Academy Remixed is a general roundup of the week's positive and negative happenings at the Academy. Fame Academy Live offers viewers the latest developments that are taking place from inside the talent school in real time and this is the production where Alex comes out as a lesbian.

The confessional queer discourse 'Just a part of who I am'¹⁰ was the headline on day two of the news stories featured on the Digital Spy site. The concern for what the British voting public would think of Alex Parks became the focal point of the chat rooms. Digital Spy encouraged discussions on the show daily, and personal postings relating to the contestants appeared frequently. Alex Parks is a 19-year-old singer from Truro, Cornwall. She had a conversation live on air with another contestant that divulged that she was a lesbian. The inside knowledge within the gay community was that this was a possible forced outing due to one of the tabloid newspapers already having information about Alex's sexuality. Alex is out to her parents but allegedly not to her grandmother. Her anxiety was that a sensationalised article regarding her sexuality would be published in a tabloid Sunday newspaper. Immediately after her confession the tabloid Sunday newspaper The News of the World run this headline on August 31st,

'FAME ACADEMY ALEX: I'M GAY'

'FAMILY BACK HER'

'FAME Academy babe Alex Parks has confessed to her family she is a lesbian –and they have smuggled a secret message to her saying: "We back you all the way" Alex, at 19 the youngest ever entrant in the BBC show, is tipped to win it. Last night she performed the old Soft Cell hit Tainted Love. But her dad Stephen revealed yesterday she had been terrified her beloved gran Jess would be upset when she found out about her sexuality. So the family sneaked a note from Jess and granddad Stan, both in their seventies, past guards at the Fame Academy mansion in north London telling Alex: "Stop worrying. We love you just the way you are"

Pretence

Talking for the first time about their daughter's concerns, Cornish counsellor Stephen said 'We've known about her sexuality since she was 14. It's never made any difference. We love her. She's worried, but she came out and has been honest. She'd never try to live a life of pretence'. Fame Academy fans have heard Alex talking about her sexuality to fellow contestants. Her mum Jean, a college administrator with three other children, confirmed last night:

'She's anxious how it will affect us. But I want to tell her not to. We're so proud of her [...]'.
'

Alex's concern about the disclosure of her lesbian identity and her wanting to protect her grandmother can be observed in her words, 'If I could change it I would... life would be so much easier'

(<http://fame.digitalspy.co.uk/article/ds/5473.html>).

This particular tête-à-tête sparked an engaging on-line discussion. To categorise these conversations as just a discourse referring to popular culture and a constituent of television classified as Reality TV, is to neglect

¹⁰ The melancholy and loss or mourning for an identity that is perceived socially and culturally

the most important presumption being raised in these discussions, that of the language and power of heterosexism. The disclosure of Alex is not about homosexuality per se, it is about the fear surrounding the interpretation of her 'outing' plus how this action was able to disrupt the privileged heterosexual spaces that function within television representations.

The poster's articulations on the message boards constantly perform and reiterate their assumed heterosexual privileges. The posters accomplish this by suggesting Alex does not need to mention her sexuality therefore eliminating agency and power from [an] 'other', who they perceive to be outside of 'normality'. The language used in this context requests the silence and exclusion of a lesbian existence. An assumed heterosexual gaze has built into its psyche a blindness that privileges both its language and its position in society. The conflict created by this blindness functions as an oppression that sends signals outwards forcing the voice of disclosure (the other)¹¹ to retreat from any social or cultural position.

The oblivious way of thinking and performing a constructed heterosexuality suggests a form of amnesia that disowns the burden of numerous suicides through a crisis of identity that engulfs heterosexual/homosexual prejudice. The gaps that could be made available and habited by queer voices in these television shows are greatly reduced as a result of this prejudice. As experienced by Alex sometimes these voices may need to retreat and on occasion the reinforcing of reactionary or internalised homophobia is what replaces these voices.

Exchanges and Interpretations of Chat

There is an element of moderate stereotyping that is apparent in some of the language used by the posters. The chat room discussions sometimes border on Berger's (1997) statement suggesting the 'simplistic and often

as 'normal' is demonstrated in this utterance. (Butler, 1997)

dangerous ...illogical and uncritical thinking ...of our everyday lives' (1997:54). However, the notion of a progressive critical account regarding Alex's subjectivity and her same sex desire is also present in the on-line discussions. I argue that Fame Academy 2 as a format of reality television can evoke a queer discourse amongst young people and Alex's disclosure on live television is what prompts on-line queer discussions. Websites and chat rooms dedicated to Alex Parks with a similar format to 'Digital Spy' have appeared on the Internet and more young people have responded to her self 'outing' by coming out themselves. According to Jenny White writing for a column in the 'Outbox' section of the Pink Paper, a London based gay and lesbian magazine, 'Websites like the 'Sisterhood of Alex' have been inundated with messages from women bursting out of the closet' (White, 2004:21)

Section Two- On-Line Discussions

The thread is Alex comes out...
and worries what the GBP¹² will make of it.

'So do I, frankly. You would've had to have been totally blind not to see that revelation coming. I wonder how many pairs of Doc Martens and dungarees she's brought into the Academy with her?'

This first exchange discusses Alex's dress code highlighting signifiers of her style that are presented as positioning her as a lesbian. Her dress code Dungarees and Doc Martens a form of clothing and shoes worn by the Greenham Common¹³ commonly stereotyped as lesbians in the eighties. As Walters notes, 'these women participated in [acts of] civil disobedience' demonstrating against the military presence and the notion

¹¹ In this case Alex Parks who retreats from her outing

¹² Great British Public

¹³ 'The peace movement of the eighties was parodied by ...a caricature. Even the Guardian emphasised that the women at Greenham Common were 'punks, some have shaved heads, and others make no secret of the fact that they are lesbians' (Walters, 1998:38).

of hard power, namely the weapons and hardware of mass destruction (Walters, 1998: 67). The stereotypical caricature of the lesbian and her performance as an anti-social, radical man-hating woman was what most media representations produced in the eighties. This was a deliberate distraction by the media to suppress the growing subversive peace movement created and run by women from different social, political and economic backgrounds, which was becoming a real threat to the country's stability. The diversity of this pressure group and its 'consciousness-raising' [element] was vital in giving weight to women's experiences' this meant that both experiences and issues locally and globally concerning women were now being put on the public agenda (Walters, 1998:145).

Three decades after these negative descriptions of lesbians, the dress code signifiers have still not lost their disapproving nuance. However, I interpret the posters' comments that reiterated these stereotypes while discussing Alex's sexuality as being part of a language and dialogue that pertains to a sort of irony. The posters acknowledge these signifiers in their mockery, but give it no real credence other than to suggest a disdain for the ignorance of the media institutions generally. 'Public expressions' or experiences 'of same-sex desire' does not feature often in television and consequently Alex Parks warrant further discussion by the young viewing audience (Hemmings, 2002:58).

'It's funny because ... I did think she might be gay. But I can't really say why. It wasn't that she wore trousers and had short hair - because I'm not an idiot - it was just a vibe'.

The vibe discussed here is the mechanism that substantiates Butler's theory that 'when it is not spoken' queerness is always there lurking in the shadows of numerous narratives (Butler, 1991:13). This intuitive notion or vibe has become part of a post-modern collective consciousness, a narrative that lies below the surface. It posits an understanding of identity

in terms of sexuality that emphasises shifting boundaries, ambivalences and cultural constructions that are temporal. The attention paid to Alex's chosen dress code suggests and provokes an experience of queer pleasure for some of the posters on the Digital Spy site. My interpretation is that the posters read Alex's sexuality through inscribing meaning onto her mode of dress and her hairstyle. At various points in the interaction of the posters Alex's lesbian desire becomes problematic and this is voiced in this posters' concern.

'I hope that it doesn't hurt her chances. Anna in the first year of Big Brother did well (although she didn't win) so hopefully people will not judge by that. Unfortunately while she may do well in the contest, I can see it being a problem when she is out in the real world and real music business. That is, not a problem but she won't get chart hits. Plenty of people do well without that though, Ani DiFranco and PJ Harvey and Sarah MacLachlan do alright'

It can be suggested that while the television text of Fame Academy 2 is intended as a heterosexual text, its receptive meanings changed when the confessional discourse of Alex is broadcast and the viewing audience became subjective in how they dealt with that meaning. The ambiguity and contradictions that define Park's image suggest sexual and gender diversity is what supports a queer¹⁴ reading of her performance and the performance of the posters in the chat rooms. The lesbian narrative according to Hemmings becomes a privileged sign within queer discourse only when the 'sexual object choice is the same as its sexual identity choice' which then forms part of the 'coming out narrative' (2002:114). The sexual tensions generated through Alex's ambiguity and androgynous relationships with the other contestants both male and female challenges

¹⁴ 'Queer theory is very definitely not resisted to homosexual men and women, but to any one who feels their position (sexual, intellectual, or cultural) to be marginalized' (Dowson, 2000:163).

and disrupts a mainstream homogeneous text. '[Q]ueer narrative allows for a far greater range of sexual behaviours' (Hemmings, 2002:114). Although she has proclaimed her sexuality, the uncertainty of her sexual identity or her sexual object choice, up to the point of confession is what adds to the queer pleasure that the young viewers experience when viewing Alex's performance. As Doty (1993) states 'Queer positions, queer readings and queer pleasures are part of a reception space that stands simultaneously beside and within that created by heterosexual and straight positions' (1993: 15).

Alex's performance as a contestant does not necessarily suggest a desire to inhabit a sexual position or pursue a sexual negotiation. Alex's performance is to challenge herself as a singer/songwriter and win a career as a singer/songwriter.

'Popular culture may have begun to provide us with positive glimpses of lesbian lives, yet young women who self-identify as lesbian necessarily negotiate sexual subjectivity and desire in a cultural context where fears and fantasies associated with the lesbian 'other' are rife, and where on an everyday level they are liable to be subjected to rejection, threat and abuse' (Ussher and Mooney, 2000: 191).

' If she doesn't want her sexuality to be an issue then why did she bring it up? What does it have to do with Fame Academy? If I'd been in there having a discussion about heterosexual role models, I wouldn't feel the need to say 'I'm heterosexual by the way'. It seems to be her that's making the issue out of it'. Tactics, or am I just being cruel and cynical 😊

I interpret the remarks of this posters homophobic language as reiterating the rejection and fears that the writers Ussher and Mooney, 2000 express in the study of young lesbians and what they are subjected to in their coming out experiences. The poster refuses to accept the need

for Alex to express her sexuality but uses the emoticon to diffuse the harshness of the language.

The language of cultural and social politics brings into play conflict and oppression; this poster is making an identity-related claim. Their own identity needs to be stated and their hostile reaction to Alex's disclosure as a lesbian suggests an anxiety of definition.

'Hetero-sexuality is as much a social construction as lesbian sexuality, [h]owever, such is the strength of the assumption of the naturalness of heterosexual hegemony, that most people are oblivious to the way that it operates as a process of power relations in all spaces' including television texts or internet chat rooms (MacDowell and Sharp 1997: 150).

'it was obvious anyway wasn't it? i don't think the gbp 'll care really, but maybe i'm being too optimistic found it really sad that she said she'd change it if she could -pity she feels this way - she needs to start living in a bigger city i think, and she won't be feeling like she wants to change it any more!

The young people who interact in this particular chat room use a dialogue that is learned through social and cultural experiences and this language constitutes their own insecurities, fears and anxieties around the notion of their own subjectivity and identity. Their concerns with regard to their own identities and cultural positions locate Alex as being dangerous even though her performance and representation as an 'out lesbian' is definitely portrayed on television as non-threatening. However, this changes when Alex actually wins the contest in October 2003. In an interview given to *Diva*, a lesbian monthly magazine, Alex states, 'I came out bloody years ago, aged 14, [o]f course I thought about coming out on TV. But I'm proud enough of who I am not to let that worry me'. In the *Pink Paper* in a later interview Alex claims, 'I couldn't give a shit – if coming out had been a problem and I was voted off then it was meant to

be' (The Pink Paper, 2004: 20). What is revealing in this statement is that it contradicts the conversation Alex had with another female contestant on Fame Academy 2 that ended with 'If I could change it I would...life would be so much easier' (<http://fame.digitalspy.co.uk/article/ds/5473.html>)

Alex's uses language that is diametrically opposed yet mutually exclusive in this context, it suggests she feels more secure in her 'outness' when discussing it in a queer environment or for a queer publication. The oppressive positions that can become part of heterosexual and homosexual discourse can instigate hostility as the above posters states. Credence is given to a common-sense notion of the naturalness of heterosexuality and it being positive, good, moral and normal and its derivative homosexuality being viewed as negative, bad, immoral and deviant. The judgement that '[I]esbian desire is dangerous' and that it can be used tactically to move from a position of subordination (the private) to a position of power (the public) is what presents a threat and a risk to the unstableness and ambiguous notion of a heterosexuality identity (Ussher and Mooney, 2000: 191).

'If she came across as strong and confident she'd have problems but she seems quite vulnerable so is non-threatening'.

This utterance elucidates Alex's necessity to have to 'lay claim to the power to name oneself' (Butler, 1993: 227).

'Tactics, or am I just being cruel and cynical?' 😊

The reply given by another poster to the accusation that Alex is using her sexuality as a tactic is dispelled by an accessible explanation of the notion of compulsory heterosexuality.

'Yes, I think you are. Since our society presumes that everyone is heterosexual unless proven otherwise, there is rarely any need to announce that you are straight as it will be assumed that you are. Making it clear that this doesn't, in fact, apply to you is not 'making an issue out of it,' it's correcting a misapprehension about something very important to who you are. I find it difficult to believe that coming out could be a tactic. It's more likely to cause her trouble than not, although I hope not. I think the fact that she is so young will help her. If she came across as strong and confident she'd have problems but she seems quite vulnerable so is non-threatening. I don't think the voters will be turned off by her. But yes, it may be a totally different story when she is trying to build an actual career'. 😊

What is interpreted from this discussion is the challenge that is offered to the stereotype of the homosexual and to the assumption of the compulsory heterosexual normative function. The emoticon of sadness suggesting that in the 'real world' we all are aware that her sexuality will be problematic for Alex's career as a professional singer.

'It's perhaps the impact on the other students, not on the public, that is more important for her at the moment, and it's good to see she got a sympathetic reception. Hope the others are as accepting.'

'Can't see it being a problem. Most people in that age group are pretty cool about sexuality these day, especially creative types' 😊

The age category mentioned here is between eighteen and thirty five, the posters suggest and agree that this age group have a liberal outlook towards sexuality, 'cool and creative types' being the operative words here. This age group is viewed as being resistant to the policing of

non-conformity, and with a shared sense of 'other' to the dominant culture.

Conclusion

These on-line discussions, while progressive on one level, are sometimes framed in essentialist terms. They illustrate the tensions set up by a complex desire which asserts a queer position and at the same time tries to dissolve the single lesbian identity. The queer discourse found in the Digital Spy Forum at times reflects homophobia and yet at other times questions the rationale of homophobic language and its presumptions. I would argue that Reality TV and its element of queer discourse continue to produce internalised homophobic language and populist or reactionary conversations. As Alex states, 'If I could change it I would...life would be so much easier'. However, these types of cultural productions can also ensure a space for the performance of the queer lesbian. This can also instigate engaging discussions in computer-mediated environments.

Furthermore, it suggests that young people do reflect upon and consider the different social and cultural practises of marginalised groups. While arguing that not all the queer identities represented in Reality Television are progressive these on-line discussions suggest that homophobia can at least be tackled and debated and these forums can be used to instruct and challenge homophobic assumptions. What emerges from my combination and use of disciplines is that a queer discourse can be captured through the use of interdisciplinary methodologies. Brewer has described interdisciplinary methodologies as a 'broad theoretical and philosophical framework into which [...] procedural rules fit' (2000: 2). The rules are then further developed and implemented by the researcher. The procedures chosen can be made more flexible and adaptable, which enables a more fluid practical approach to one's research. An interesting response

can be to resist the traditional binaries between qualitative research and quantitative¹⁵ research and become adventurous in Internet research.

References

Berger, A (1997) 'Narratives in Popular Culture, Media and Everyday Life', Sage Publications, London, New Delhi, pp54

Butler, J, (1991) 'Imitation and Gender Subordination', in D. Fuss (ed) Inside/Out Lesbian, Gay Theories, London, Routledge. Pp. 13-31

Butler, J, (1993) 'Bodies That Matters', London and New York: Routledge. pp,227

Butler, J, (1997) 'The Psychic Life of Power': Theories of Subjection, 'Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification: Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Butler, J (1997) Against Proper Objects in 'Feminism meets queer theory' (eds) Elizabeth Weed & Naomi Schor, Brown University Press pp. 2

Brewer, J.D. (2000) Ethnography – Understanding Social Research, Open University Press, pp. 2

Denzin, N, and Lincoln, Y, (eds) (1994) Introduction: Entering the field of qualitative research in Handbook of Qualitative Research. London: Sage.

Denzin, N, and Lincoln, Y, (1998) Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials (eds) Sage Publications pp. 213

¹⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of Internet qualitative research see Mann and Stewart, (2000) 'Internet Communication and Qualitative Research' A Handbook for Researching Online' Sage Publications.

Doty, A. (1993) 'Making things perfectly queer' - 'Interpreting Mass Culture' Minneapolis Press, The University of Minnesota.

Dowson, T.A. (2000) 'Why Queer Archaeology? An Introduction', World Archaeology, Routledge, Vol 33 Issue (2): 161-165)

Dovey, J, (2000) 'Reality TV' in The Television Genre Book, British Film Institute Publication, pp.3

Geertz, C. (1973) 'The Interpretation of Cultures', Selected essays New York: Basic Books.

Hawkes, G, (1996) 'A Sociology of Sex and Sexuality', Buckingham Open Univ Press. pp 143

Hemmings, C, (2002) Bisexual Spaces, 'A Geography of Sexuality and Gender', Routledge, pp 14, 58, 114

MacDonald, L. and Sharp, J. (eds) (1997) 'Space, Gender, Knowledge', Feminist Readings, Arnold, London, Great Britain.

Nelson, C, Treichler P.A, & Grossberg, L (eds) (1992) Cultural Studies Routledge, New York.

Mann, C & Stewart, F. (2000) 'Internet Communication and Qualitative Research' – A Handbook for Researching Online, Sage Publishing, London. pp. 7, 46, 87, 97

Munt, Sally R. Bassett, E. H. & O' Riordan, K. 2002. 'Virtually Belonging: Risk, Connectivity and Coming Out On-line' in the International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies. Vol. 7, Nos. 2 & 3, July 2002 pp 125-137

Levi-Strauss, C, (1966) 'The Savage Mind', Chicago University Chicago Press

Usser, J.M. and Mooney-Somers, J. (2000) 'Negotiating, Desire, and Sexual 'Subjectivity', 'Narratives of Young Lesbian Avengers', in 'Sexualities', Special Issue Vol 3, No 2 Sage Publications, London, pp. 183-2000

Walters, N, (1998) 'The New Feminism' Virago Press, pp 67, 145,

Weinstein, D & Weinstein, M.A. (1991) Georg Simmel: Sociological flaneur bricoleur, in Theory, Culture and Society, Vol 8. Sage Publishing, London pp 151-168

Newspaper Articles and Magazines

Marshall, S. (August, 31st, 2003) Fame Academy Alex: I'M Gay – Family Back Her in ' The News of the World, copyright News Group Newspaper Ltd.

White, J, (2004) in 'Outbox Section' –'The Pink Paper', Issue 824, 30th January, pp21

Parks' life' (2004) in 'Alternate', 'The Pink Paper'-Issue 824, 30th January, pp 20

Internet Website

<http://www.fame.digitalspy.co.uk/article.ds6008/html>)