

Gay Teenage Boys' Experiences and Usages of the Media in Spain: Educational Implications

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The best moments in reading are when you come across something - a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things - that you'd thought special, particular to you. And here it is, set down by someone else, a person you've never met, maybe even someone long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.

The History Boys

Alan Bennett

1. Introduction

The academic research in Spain concerning the experiences of teenagers who self-identify as lesbian, gay, transsexual and bisexual (LGTB) is as recent as it is scarce (Generelo, Pichardo and Galofré, 2008, Coll-Planas, Bustamante and Missé, 2009) in comparison with the more than 30 years of such research in other countries, such as the USA and Australia (Savin-Williams, 2009; Robinson et al., 2014). This lack of research contrasts with two important phenomena: (i) the considerable visibility of the figure of the gay teenager in the Spanish Media since the late 1990s, especially in television series (Spanish productions including *Al salir de clase*, *Física o Química*, and *Aída* and American productions that were also issued in Spanish such as *Glee*, *Misfits* and *Shameless*); and (ii) the academic interest in affective-sexual and gender diversity (AS&GD), developed since the early 2000s in Spain coinciding with the approval of the Spanish Organic Law of Education of 2006, the first in its history to acknowledge sexual and gender diversity (Royal Spanish Decree 1631/2006). In fact, this interest has been evidenced through the publication of numerous guides and educational materials (Generelo and Moreno Cabrera, 2007, Platero and Gómez, 2007), as well as monographs in specialized journals (Ferriols, 2011, Huerta, 2014). Given such a remarkable contrast, the present chapter shares part of the results of a study funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation that took place from 2010 to 2016.

As the starting quote from Alan Bennett's play describes, this research is about how cultural products impact young people's lives in complex, non-linear ways. Hence, its main objective is to offer an analysis of a series of practices and media experiences based on what twelve teenagers, between 14 and 19 years of age, shared in one-on-one interviews concerning their self-identification and first socialization as gay individuals. Moreover, its second objective is to identify a series of educational orientations rooted in such analysis results and within the context of the current debates on sex and gender diversity in Spanish education.

Regarding the theoretical framework of this study, it is necessary to present several key concepts and their relationships among them. Following the work of Foucault (2008) and D'Emilio (1994), homosexuality and gay identities can be understood as historical phenomena resulting from the development of the so-called welfare society. According to Weeks (2003), gay identity is a necessary fiction and a product of the need to find comfort and community; at the same time, Butler (2010) links gay identity with the need to become intelligible subjects in societies that grant great power to gender, sex and sexuality issues. Moreover, all these concepts are regulated by the fear of embodying the abject, meaning to be the object of inter/trans/homophobic injury (Coll-Planas, 2010). Hence, gender roles have become undeniably important in our societies, not only between men and women but also within intergroup relations, in this case among homosexual men and boys. From this perspective, a gay identity can be understood as a cultural identity (Hall, 2005) and, therefore, subject to constant negotiation and learning processes. For example, Troiden's work (1989) provides evidence that before self-identifying as gay, individuals must be aware of the existence of such an identity and its main characteristics to evaluate whether they resemble the identity more than they differ from it. Moreover, these individuals must know that there are others who, previously and/or contemporaneously, embody that gay identity themselves. Accordingly, Troiden presented a model of the process of learning an identity through different stages and concepts, of which we would like to highlight the following: (i) the phases of "*confusion*" and "*acceptance*", which represent the turning points of such a learning process; and (ii) the concept of "*disembodied affiliation*", which is the affiliation to homosexuality without having met someone openly gay in person, in this case, due to the environments that surround us, the media and the Internet.

2. Methodology

This chapter is part of a qualitative study that aims to account for a phenomenon and, at the same time, interpret it based on what its protagonists have said about it (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Consequently, twelve semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted following a thematic script of open questions (Heath et al., 2009) with boys between 14 and 19 years old who self-identified as gay at the time. Several international research projects on LGTB youth have reflected and demonstrated the importance of selection, organization and communication with participants, especially underlining the difficulties of accessing them (Savin-Williams, 2009, Generelo, Pichardo and Galofré, 2008). Thus, the present project also attended to such aspects, so much so that the development of the participant sample involved two years of work in both off-line places, including local youth centres, associative venues and high schools, and on-line, through the creation of a blog for the study and an account in the popular social network at the time, Tuenti¹. During the 2011-2012 academic year, the on-line profile generated more than 300 connections, and through it, approximately 30 young people received invitations to participate in the research, although only one of them ultimately accepted it. It was through this first collaborator that a snowball effect began, and the rest of the participants decided to enrol. Hence, the research sample was difficult to form due to the participants' minority characteristics, but fortunately enough, twelve adolescents with different trajectories participated in the research, yielding a concentrated diverse representation: all of the participants attended different kinds of

¹ According to the Spanish National Observatory of Telecommunications, Tuenti was the most used social network by teenagers in 2011. Indeed, 69% of people between 11 and 20 years old had a profile on Tuenti (Ureña, 2011: 106).

schools (public, private, Catholic and non-Catholic) and were from different metropolitan areas and kinds of households (one teenager from Central America, one from Eastern Europe, one from a large family, and two from single-parent families).

The interviews were conducted in 2013, with an average duration of one hour and 30 minutes each. Following the reflections of Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) on the importance of localization, the participants were asked to choose a place to their liking and their most convenience time of day, taking into account the estimated duration. They were also informed that the meeting setting should not be too noisy since the conversation was going to be recorded; the participants were assured that no one except the person responsible for the research would have access to the audio recordings. The majority of the participants did not suggest a place, so they were invited to visit the university campus, which they accepted. At the beginning of each meeting, they were asked if they wanted to know more about the research and the person behind it; they were also reminded of the confidentiality of the research and the possibility of using pseudonyms but that the data on the participants' ages, countries of origin and cities of residence would be maintained.

It is necessary to add that interviewing is a method with a long tradition in research on personal experiences and processes of meaning (Anderson and Jack, 1991, Kvale, 2007). As Kvale notes, interviews are events in which the person interviewed and the researcher collaborate in mutual understanding, and therefore, there is a common willingness to listen and share. In this sense, it is also necessary to indicate that the present research took equal parts from (i) the field of narrative research (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) to highlight the value of anecdotes and stories as elements that bring us closer to lived experiences (Van Manen, 2003) and (ii) the tradition of thematic analysis and its organizational quality for studying content (Braun and Clarke, 2006, Ryan and Bernard, 2000). Hence, after the detailed transcription of the interviews and their validation by each collaborator, the work continued by screening all the material in search of extracts that could be grouped up under different headings and sub-headings. Those groups were outlined during an intense process guided by the research questions and informed by the theoretical framework of the project. As explained by Wetherell and Potter (1996), the first step was to select a manageable subgroup of data among the hundreds of pages, followed by repeated readings in search of increasingly specific patterns and recurring organizations.

It is of utmost importance to end this section by emphasizing that the final goal of this research was, and still is, to learn from the experiences of the young people interviewed with respect and honesty. Similar to Coll-Planas, Bustamante and Missé (2009), we understand and care about the discomfort felt and shared by its collaborators but do not see them, nor aim to depict them, as victims. Likewise, following Heath et al. (2009), in this research, teens' resiliencies and successes are gladly acknowledged, but it is not intended to exaggerate them as imposing superheroes.

3. Results: Mixed Gay Media Affiliations and Paradoxical Internet Practices

In a first approach to the interviews, it was evident that most of the collaborators learned about homosexuality through words and expressions intended to insult, cause harm and/or make fun. The

teenagers recalled hearing those words and expressions during their childhoods, often in school settings, which were sometimes addressed at them. Even though those insults were not directly and totally related to homosexuality as a factual sexual orientation, but were rather mostly related to gender issues, the existence of homosexuality was implied. As Eribon (2000) reflected, for generations, the first suggestions that there was something called homosexuality were strongly connected with attempts at injury with the idea of injury..

Therefore, despite the participants' differences, all of them described a similar journey: from a confusing, negative and laughable idea of what homosexuality was to becoming able to self-identify as gay by understanding that it was a real possibility within their near and wider communities. However, the remarkable element here can also be that, at the beginning of those journeys, the majority of the teenagers, 11 of the 12, were aware of the existence of openly gay men and boys only on TV and the Internet. In fact, according to several studies, young people learn what it means to be gay in contexts such as school (Epstein and Johnson, 2000, Renold, 2005); more recently, the Internet (Laukkanen, 2007, Alexander and Losh, 2010, de Abreu, 2017); and the media (Riggle, Ellis and Crawford, 1996, Bond-Raacke et al., 2007, Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011). As mentioned before, in 1989, Troiden had already coined the term "*disembodied affiliation*" to describe how often people self-identify as gay without knowing their gay peers in person. Hence, in the context and aims of this study, the term must be updated to reflect the broad "*gay media affiliations*" described by the young collaborators.

3.1. Direct and Positive Gay Media Affiliations: not as many as expected

Some of the teenagers, but not as many as expected, expressed how pleased they were to see openly gay young men on TV and what a positive impact these men made on them and their decisions to come out of the closet as gay:

- "*I was moved by the character himself. He was so open about it...*" Eneko (17 y.o.)
- "*I could see my future on the TV. I was obsessed with that show.*" Alain (16 y.o.)

In both cases, the teenagers looked up to these characters because they saw courage and strength, which supported direct and positive affiliations with homosexuality. Notably, one of them had talked with his friends about a particular TV programme with an openly gay character before coming out to them. As he explained, he tested and evaluated his friends' views on homosexuality, as he was scared that they would not accept him. In this sense, many of the interviewed teenagers proved to be not just a passive audience of the media but able to use it in very sophisticated ways.

3.2. Rejections and Mixed Feelings towards Gay Media Representations: in the eyes of the beholders

On the other hand, some teenagers strongly expressed how upset and painful it was for them to watch certain openly gay young men on TV while recognizing their affiliations to them:

- "*I felt ashamed someone could make a connection between him and myself.*" Nico (17 y.o.)
- "*I didn't like those people. I asked myself... Who the f*k is that...?"* Alex (19 y.o.)
- "*I didn't like it when I saw the Gay Parade, but I couldn't stop watching it*" Jesús (17 y.o.)

Butler made an important contribution to the understanding this kind of contradiction (2010). The author reflected on what she called "*the occupation of the injury*", meaning that homosexuality, as a queer

phenomenon, contains both the potential of stigma as well as that of hope and possibility. Therefore, it can be understood that perceptions are based not only on the features of the TV characters but also on the audience's views – as in the English saying, *"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder"*. Returning to the interviewed teenagers, when they shared negative perceptions as those above, those views mostly depended on the following: (i) the age and degree of outness of the boys, as coming out is not a single event (Harry, 1993), and in general, the younger they were, the higher their rejection of gay and queer characters of any kind; (ii) what the teenagers had learned to reject within in their families and schools, which is both obvious and relevant. Indeed, for all 12 of the teenagers, context played a key factor in their media perceptions as well as in the perceptions of themselves. Not surprisingly, the teenagers did not tend to affiliate or want to be affiliated with those who were rejected by the people they economically depended on and saw on a daily basis, as they were scared of what could happen to them.

3.4. Cyber Gay Affiliations and Internet Paradoxical Practices

To continue updating Troiden's concept of *"disembodied affiliation"*, when the Internet was involved, many of the interviewed teenagers described what can be called "cyber gay affiliations":

- *"I got in an Internet forum [...]. People told their coming out stories there, that was my thing then. I was reading for days, and it was good. I saw I could make it too".* Mario (18 y.o.)
- *"I read what they wrote and looked at their pictures to see if they were real [...]. I never talked with anybody, I didn't like it 'cause they talked about dirty stuff"* Eneko (17 y.o.)
- *"It seems too risky to me. If you are not sure that the profiles are real or that they are not going to make fun of you... If you trust them..., but I do not".* (Marco, 14 y. o.)

The participants in this project shared many meaningful experiences concerning the Internet that can be related to other research findings. A good example is the work of Szulc and Dhoest (2013), who provided more evidence on what Hillier et al. (1998) had previously found: the Internet offers a place for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals to learn and rehearse as they come to terms with their identities. Consequently, their research also concluded that the usage of the Internet in relation to these sexual issues increased significantly before and around participants' first coming-outs, including visiting LGB web pages and searching for LGB contacts, with the consumption of pornography also beginning at this time.

However, as expressed above, these cyber gay affiliations also inform us of what Barnhurst called *"the queer paradox of technology"* (2007), as the Internet could be seen as a platform for queer liberation as well as repression and danger, both on and off-line. The participants in this project surfed the Internet anonymously, carefully managing their Internet gay persona, while also carefully searching to learn about their peers, other gay teens, as they aimed to break what Kielwasser and Wolf (1992) called the *"pluralistic ignorance"*, or the ignorance that there are other gay teens out there.

3.5. Entertainment Gay Affiliations through Diva Fandom

Finally, the participants related other media experiences that may have not been as evidently relevant because they represent the minority, but those teenagers who shared them demonstrated a complex pattern of gay affiliation that must be addressed:

- *"I watched Mamma Mia many, many times last summer because it was like being somewhere else, and I needed that..."* Eneko (17 y. o.)
- *"Looking at Beyoncé and other divas is like you want to feel like them... be like them in some way..."* Tasio (17 y.o.)

Indeed, many authors have written about gay and queer cultures – for example, Dyer's work is an excellent reference (2005), although in these cases it is more appropriate to quote Lipton (2008) and his concept of *"queer reading practices"*, such as reading between the lines, because (i) the interviewed teenagers were very young and had hardly socialized with other gay people and (ii) most of them lived in a middle-sized city where they could not get involved with the so-called gay culture. Therefore, their deep connection with some pieces of pop culture was completely unexpected in this project.

To understand this phenomenon, on the one hand, it is important to understand that it was in part related to the need to avoid reality. For example, one of the teenagers had been suffering bullying and felt very lonely the summer he became obsessed with the musical *Mamma Mia*. On the other hand, their identification with pop divas such as Beyonce was related to gender issues. In those cases, divas represented a femininity that the teenagers did not dare to show or perform, as many of them tended to "man up" at school to pass as straight due to their fears of being bullied.

4. Discussion and Conclusion: Orientations for Education

Taking into account the results of the research, the question to be discussed from the educational field could be formulated as follows: *"If the ignorance of their peers and the fear of being treated abusively led the interviewed teenagers to find in the media and the Internet the affiliations they needed during their self-identification and early socialization as gay individuals, how could teachers and schools help during these processes?"*

First, before forming an answer, it is worth mentioning that in Spain, in less than fifteen years, we have gone from the total absence of specific materials on affective-sexual and gender diversity (AS&GD) to having materials not only for the students at all educational levels but also for teachers and families (Platero, 2013: 185). Certainly, Spanish education has never shown so much interest in this kind of diversity and, therefore, educators have never had so many materials at hand to facilitate both the use of appropriate terminology and positive teaching experiences. Currently, we have numerous guides (Generelo and Moreno Cabrera, 2007, Platero y Gómez, 2007, STEILAS, 2015, Xente Gai Astur, 2002), compilations (Generelo and Pichardo, 2006, Simonis, 2005, Sánchez Sáinz, 2009, 2010) and monographic publications (Ferriols, 2011, Huerta, 2014) that offer multiple resources to address AS&GD, mainly trusting that its recognition and understanding of its history will lead to its social respect and dignity.

The fact that these materials aim to generate accessibility, clarity and synthesis should be seen as a positive development, but at the same time, we must insist that, in general terms, they raise questions about their perspectives and epistemological positioning, that is, about the foundation and characteristics of the knowledge they will spread. Hence, alternative voices have emerged from various critical perspectives promoting sophisticated forms of analysis on the concepts of sex, gender and education (Britzman, 2002,

Berná, Cascone and Platero, 2012, Planella and Pié, 2012), hoping that such analyses will result in a deconstruction of the old social patterns of prejudice and hatred.

Second, based on the results of this research, gay teenagers' needs for affiliation with their peers and their fears of being bullied present a different dimension for (i) learning about AS&GD through classifications of sexuality, sex and gender; (ii) studying historical and relevant LGBT individuals; and (iii) critically analysing these issues. Therefore, to complement the already available materials and proposals, we present three aspects that could indirectly help all teenagers, not only gay teenagers.

- **Encouraging the construction of an *real life* social network**

We invite teachers and schools to promote interaction among all students within the same educational institutions, creating secure spaces that mix learning and playing. Such an idea can be developed through projects where students of different ages, even from different schools, can collaborate and coexist. The aim is to promote a sort of a *real life* social network in which young people can get to know each other and create networks of learning, friendship and mutual assistance, disrupting feelings of isolation, ignorance and mistrust among peers of any diversity. For example, this type of experience has been widely developed in "learning communities" (Elboj, et al., 2005) due to their commitment to social transformation and dialogical learning beyond the classrooms and walls of schools.

- **Encouraging "living experiences" that are both individual and collective**

Returning to the testimonies of the teenagers that participated in this project, many negative recurrent thoughts were expressed, as well as attempts to manage and control their practices on the Internet (to not be discovered while searching for their peers). Hence, these accounts lead us to consider opportunities to encourage teachers to support experiences in which intellectual skills, such as analysis and the application of concepts, are irrelevant. For example, authors such as Stoll, Fink and Earl (2004) invite us to expand the Cartesian paradigm "*I think, therefore I am*" to "*learning to know, to do, to live together and to be*". Similar to Planella and Pié (2012), but without the intent to subvert, we also propose the encouragement of "*living experiences*" where a sense of being can grow both individually and as a community. As Greene wrote, "[I]n any defensible social vision, happiness is as important as clarity and consensus, or, as others have said, love is as important as logic. [...] Obviously, I am not saying that it is enough simply to dance and laugh. What I do say is that I think it is important to let the energy that allows a family contact with everything and everyone [...] [and thus] lay the foundations for coexistence within the community" (Greene, 2005: 102-103).

- **Using the arts in favour of the emancipation of all students**

There are several studies that have connected artistic practices with the development of resilience among LGBT youth (Boyd Acuff, 2011, Shelton, 2008), but the fact that they focused only on LGBT youth limited their scope. Meanwhile, projects such as *Respira* (Varanda, 2012) and *Five Days to Dance* (Andreu and Moles, 2014) were carried out in formal education contexts with heterogeneous groups and thus connect better with the previous Greene's quote. This is also illustrated by the testimony of one of the teachers

participating in the award-winning project *Five Days to Dance*: "I was very excited to see two students together who really are like water and oil. They usually are in the same classroom (sic) and do not interact at all, and to see them having to team up, holding hands to hold another student who was falling back, I found it beautiful. [In fact] I trust that [with] this project, for once they are able to relax and let go and enjoy school a little bit, because there has been a lot of tension [in the classroom]. [...] I think it's an opportunity, not only for those who have suffered the laughter of classmates, but even for those who have not behaved well. [...] It has been difficult for all of them [to leave] those roles they had taken, and now that they have expressed themselves, and shared, and see that we are equal, different but equal. [...] I hope that this project is a start point to work towards other things that are not only mind-related" (Andreu and Moles, 2014).

Therefore, this chapter ends with the same hope. As education professionals, we have a great opportunity to work in holistic ways, helping to smooth rough edged and to dilute the fears and mistrust that limit many young people, not just those who self-identify as gay.

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