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Commercialization of Lesbian Identities in Showtime's *The L-word*

By Martina Ladendorf

Abstract

The article discusses recent developments in media culture through one case study: *The L-word*, the first television series narratively centered around lesbian and bisexual characters. The business discourse surrounding the series' production is examined together with the televised text itself and the merchandize connected to *The L-word* brand. The main research question is why lesbians, a target group previously deemed uninteresting by advertisers and international media conglomerates, have suddenly become demographically desirable. Media producers show increasing interest in the active audience, and encourage fans' own creativity, for example through social web 2.0 media productions and events, and intermedia storytelling. This is made possible through the televised text's discursive re-positioning of lesbian identities. The article argues that lesbian identity is a social construction and that it can be seen as an empty or floating signifier, which is filled with new meanings. It also analyzes the immersive online communities and various other merchandize connected to the series as an aspect of *thingification*, a process were the media is increasingly occupied with things and brands rather than stories and representations. The result is the branded lesbian, or the lesbian brand, which can be seen as an appropriation of lesbian identities.

Keywords: Lesbian identities, intermedia storytelling, thingification, television merchandize, *The L-word*, discourse analysis

Introduction

> The audience of Showtime's Emmy-nominated series THE L WORD® is one of the most demographically desirable to advertisers. According to a February 2005 online survey conducted by the network, 76% of the show's website audience is between 22-45 years old; and, over 50% earn over $50k annually and have completed college or more. The show's viewing audience skews female 18-49. THE L WORD® also has one of the most active online fan communities, with multitudes of users spending countless hours each month on THE L WORD®-themed blogs, message boards and fan fiction sites. (*Business Wire*, Dec 5th, 2005)

> All gay characters on television exist *because* of capitalism; it is the force that makes them possible and the only agenda allowed. (Avila Saavedra 2009,17)

The aim of this article is to discuss some recent developments in media culture through one case study, *The L-word* (Showtime, 2004–2009), the American cable network Showtime's successful television series about a group of predominantly lesbian and bisexual women in Los Angeles. First aired in 2004, the series became very popular worldwide. After its sixth season, aired in January 2009, it was cancelled, which makes it the longest running series on Showtime to date. The main research question is how lesbians, a target group previously deemed uninteresting by advertisers and international media conglomerates, could suddenly become demographically desirable to them. Jennifer Vanasco (2006) suggests that *The L-word's* "glamour factor" could have harmful effects on lesbians and make them more obsessed with looks and traditional feminine beauty. According to her (2006: 184): "One of the most incredible, freeing aspects of being part of the lesbian community is the absence of the beauty culture." Even though I am critical of her idyllic description of the lesbian community, and skeptical about the discourse on harmful media effects, Vanasco makes an interesting point. In this article, I will deconstruct a commercial discourse, and examine how lesbian identities are appropriated in media culture.

In modern media conglomerates, finance departments and economic personnel are increasingly having a say on what the artistic department will produce (Caldwell 2008: 232), a development that can be seen as one of the components of the trend media scholars have called marketization (Murdock & Wasko 2007). Today, TV and film producers' decisions are heavily influenced by the prospects of expanded storytelling on several media platforms, including possibilities for user participation, the selling of spin-off products, and last but not least the shelf life of artistic content in international syndication and re-runs. Media convergence and intermedia storytelling direct increasing attention to media content as trademarked products targeted at demographically segmented consumer markets and audiences. After the cancellation of the series, the executive producer of *The L-word*, Ilene Chaiken, said: "The brand and the social network community, *OurChart.com*, will continue to live and be a destination for lesbians everywhere and a lasting tribute to what 'The L Word' has accomplished" (Nordyke 2008). An In-

ternet spin-off series has also been produced starring Leisha Hailey (playing Alice) (Nguyen 2009), and the making of a movie is discussed. Early on, the series got the attention of independent lesbian fan sites like *Afterellen.com*, but producers also used expanded storytelling on the Internet and produced sites for user-generated content such as different forms of blogs, discussion boards, and web communities.

Producers' increasing attention to fan discussions highlights both cultural studies' celebration of the active audiences and political economy's more pessimistic views on the pervasive power of media producers. In a theoretical discussion about the user-generated content site YouTube, cultural theorist José van Dijck (2009) productively criticizes one-sided celebrations of "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2006) and argues that it is important to be guided by consumer sociology, political economy and cultural theory to understand phenomena like "wikinomics" and user-generated content.

> The potential for niche marketing has been further enhanced in the Internet era; advanced digital technologies facilitate the tracking of individual social behavior. The already close relationship between content producers, advertisers and consumers has become even more intimate. (Van Dijck 2009: 47).

Today, traditional media such as television are interlinked with new media, mainly the Internet, both by television fans' own viral ("word of mouth") marketing and producers' intermedia storytelling. Furthermore, as prospects for syndication are becoming increasingly important, to create a cult TV series, like *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989-1998) or series with a huge cross-cultural audience, like *Baywatch* (NBC 1989-1999), is of course to hit the jackpot. An easy way to do this is using niche marketing to target minority audiences or marginal lifestyles. Caldwell argues:

> Contemporary media conglomerates have, in effect, commercially "mainstreamed" difference, hijacking the very issue around which critical scholars once developed feminist or race studies as progressive, culturally resistant forms of identity-based criticism and activism. This trend is sobering, given the consumerist (rather than truly resistant) goals of modern conglomerates. (Caldwell 2008: 235)

As commercial TV's first drama series narratively centered on lesbian and bisexual characters, *The L-word* has received some attention from scholars. The studies have mainly focused on textual analysis, for example in an anthology exclusively dedicated to the series (Akass & McCabe 2006). There is however one small reception study, using focus groups (Ladendorf 2007; 2008), and a study on public viewings of the show (Moore 2009). The latter is relevant for my own study, as it focuses on the power dimensions of production and reception and on how producers negotiate with the fans to make them embrace the *L-word* brand. The concept worldmaking, which will also be used in this article, is used in the concluding discussion by Moore.

Much of the work discusses how successful its representations of LGBTs (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered) are in terms of political recognition of dis-

advantaged minorities, for example bisexual women (Moorman 2008), queer femininity (Douglas 2008) or issues of race (Muñoz 2005). In a highly interesting piece, Aviva Dove-Viebahn (2007) analyzes some *L-word* story arcs through the concept of visibility and lesbian fashion, particularly the upper middle class fashion style commonly referred to as "lesbian chic". According to Rebecca Beirne (2008), *The L-word* has much in common with the lesbian chic of the 1990s (Clark 1995; Ciasullo 2001). She also discusses femme or lipstick lesbians as both hyper-visible and at the same time not seen as real lesbians in the series' narrative. Candace Moore (2007) has analyzed the viewing positions offered by *The L-word* narrative in a reading which critically converses with film spectatorship theory, seeing these as inviting a tourist gaze. These studies are all highly relevant for my own project. There is however a urgent need to see *The L-word's* construction of lesbian identities in the light of theories of media production, and recent developments in the media industry, a project that has already been started out by Moore (2009).

Method, Theories, Concepts, and Outline

The term identity/identities is used frequently in this article, and I will therefore describe my understanding of it. Coming from a poststructuralist perspective, I see both individual and collective identities as social constructs. Even if the expression lesbian identity is sometimes used, I do not think there exists one monolithic lesbian identity. To make visible the heterogeneous qualities of lesbian identities, I will whenever possible use the plural form. Being a student of the media, I often talk of mediated representations of identities, and this could be misunderstood as constructing an opposition between media constructs and social identities. My position is quite the opposite; I see both representations and individual and collective identities as socially and culturally produced, exercising influence on each other.

As strategy of analysis, critical discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe 2001) was used to interpret the different materials. By discourse theory I mean the ontological thought that humans constantly relate to and position themselves through or against a number of discourses and that there is no meaning outside discourse. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001; see also Jørgensen & Phillips 2002), discourse is an attempt to fix meanings, something which is impossible, because meanings and identities are forever changing and under negotiating. It is some of these negotiations, regarding lesbian identities, that will be examined here, through readings of the business discourse surrounding the TV series' production, the televised text itself, and the expanded storytelling on the web. *The L-word* can be seen as a product that is offered to an audience, constructing meanings that will make sense to them. However, in the business discourse, it is the audience itself, or rather the attention and interest of the audience, that is the commodity.

What follows is an outline of the article. The next three sections: "Women, lesbians and consumption", "Active audiences", and "Consumption and non-heterosexual visibility" provide a background for the analysis and an overview on previous research relevant for my argument. Also, a background for the production of *The L-word* is introduced.

The section following next, named "The (re)construction of lesbian identities and sartorial style in *The L-word"* analyzes a story arc from the series. To understand what makes it attractive and intelligible to the audience, Laclau & Mouffe's concepts nodal point, master signifier, chain of equivalence, and the discourse theoretical term "positioning" are used. Nodal points are in the words of Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 112) "privileged signifiers that fix the meaning of a signifying chain." They constitute centers around which a certain discourse is constructed. Nodal points that describe social identities are referred to as master signifiers, and are used in discourse to fix the definition of social identities. These signs are in themselves empty or floating signifiers, and therefore other signs are used to define and fix them in so-called chains of equivalence, for example like this: woman – sensitive – maternal – wears dresses – wears makeup (where "woman" is the master signifier). The example given is of a particularly conservative discourse; in another discourse the master signifier "woman" could be given other kinds of meanings through another chain of equivalence, and therefore the master signifier can be seen as an empty or floating signifier (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 113). To study the signs in these chains is to deconstruct and analyze the meanings that is given to the master signifier. My use of the concept positioning draws on Bronwyn Davies (2000, chapter 6) understanding of the term. Discourses offer different subject positions; people are positioned by discourse or use it to position themselves and others. Davies is mainly using the term to analyze narratives in conversations and everyday talk, but sees this as similar to the positions offered by literary works. In this article it will be used to understand which subject positions are offered by the televised text (Talbot 2007), in ways that has similarities to the literary term reader formations (Bennett 1985), which offers a post-structural view on texts as open for different readings and reading positions. Also, queer theorists who are critically engaging with spectatorship theory (Mulvey 1975), are helpful for understanding the positionings and interpellations performed by media texts (Aaron 2003; 2007; Moore 2007).

Next come two sections that analyze the business discourse surrounding the series. "The 'branding' of lesbian identities" draws on research on brands and trademarks, connecting this to both identities and recent research on television production. Here, previous research and theoretical concepts from Lash & Lury (2007) and Jenkins (2006) are used to understand a new development in media production. Lash and Lury's concept "thingification" describes a situation in the media industries were products, things and brands take priority over narratives and representations, using examples from contemporary media culture such as

football, Wallace and Gromit and the Swatch watch to make their point. Thingification together with Jenkins' concept "worldmaking" (originally coined by Goodman 1978) are helpful for understanding and analyzing both the production of *The L-word* and contemporary television production. "The active audience as desirable demographic" analyzes the business discourse and intermedia storytelling, drawing on Jenkins (2006) concept convergence together with 1990s research on active and resisting audiences (Jenkins 1992). This is followed by a concluding discussion.

Women, Lesbians and Consumption

According to feminist cultural theorists (Thornham 2000: 126-154; Radner 1995; Bowlby 1985, 1993, 2000), consumption has traditionally been associated with women and femininity. Female consumption is however closely intertwined with heterosexuality. This linkage among femininity, heterosexuality and consumption has made lesbian consumption invisible (Clark 1993; Martinsson 2005) and therefore the connection between lesbians and consumption has previously been weak. According to an often cited article by Danae Clark (1993), to make a group visible as consumers, they must be 1) identifiable, 2) reachable 3) measurable, and 4) possible to profit on. Lesbians have been hard to define through factors commonly used by advertisers, such as age, class and ethnicity. Another problem is that they often have chosen not to be visible to outsiders because of fear of discrimination and homophobia. However, they commonly seek to make themselves identifiable as gay or lesbian to other non-heterosexuals through special codes in behavior and appearance. In the early 1990s, advertisers started using these codes in what Clark calls a dual marketing strategy, where they tried using covert gay codes to reach a homosexual audience without alienating heterosexuals. This strategy could for instance be seen in Calvin Klein advertisements for cotton briefs (for males), who made use of a gay sensibility but also catered to a straight female audience and helped increase heterosexual males' interest in fashion, bodily adornment and beauty products (Bordo 1999: 179). The ads encouraged queer readings, but did not restrict the readings to homosexual relationships or identities, creating open texts that could be read differently by different groups. Clark analyzes fashion spreads from the early 1990s where the models could be read as either lesbian or straight. A development can be seen from these images to the open lesbian representations in *The L-word* in the 2000s.

Active Audiences

Lesbians and other non-heterosexual persons are disadvantaged in heteronormative societies. This subordination is visible in the mainstream media both as negative representation and stereotyping, and as silencing and exclusion of non-

heterosexuals and non-heterosexual perspectives (Gross 2001). Despite, or perhaps because of this, lesbians have been looking for lesbian representations and role models, making counter-readings of hegemonic media messages (Muñoz 1999: 1). One example is the lesbian pulp novel, American light pornographic books about lesbians that were catering to a straight male audience in the 1950s, but were also widely read by lesbians. The genre conventions include storylines ending with the death of the lesbian protagonists, or one of them turning straight. Despite these negative portraits of lesbian lives and relationships, the books made isolated lesbians aware of a lesbian community, and where other lesbians could be found (Bachmann 2000). One way for lesbian media consumers to make counter-hegemonic readings of dominant texts on heterosexual romance is to identify with the male protagonist. Another is to take advantage of lesbian subtexts that some media texts offer (Doty 1993). The lack of representations and role models has led to a need for recognition that has made the non-heterosexual media audience experts on reading against the grain and using their own imagination when consuming media texts. Audiences' media use and resistance were much discussed in the early nineties (cf. Hall 1980; de Certeau 1985; Jenkins 1992) in ways celebratory of the active audience. With the advent of the Internet, the fanzines and fan conventions have moved out in cyberspace, making it easier for media producers to collect data on audiences' discussions and desires. Recent studies (Jenkins 2006; Caldwell 2008) report that media producers use and are influenced by fans' interpretative communities on the Internet, thus giving even more power to active audience members but at the same time exercising control over them. Furthermore, as a popular saying goes: "On the Internet nobody knows you're a dog", neither does anybody know if you're a audience member or a media producer, making lines between production and reception increasingly blurry.

Consumption and Non-Heterosexual Visibility

The starting point for the modern gay movement is often dated to 1969, the day when LGBT-patrons at the Stonewall bar in New York rioted against police harassment. One of the reasons for the gay clientele being at the bar as a clearly recognizable social group was the bar owner's intent to earn money. The urban metropolis was a prerequisite for bigger groups of non-heterosexuals to gather, thereby creating a gay bar scene (and later on, a gay community), a development dependent on late-capitalist society. This forms a parallel to commercial TV, where visibility and representation of homosexuality are driven forward by commercial interest. Lesbians are a group previously *not* seen as demographically desirable by advertisers, but as rather poor consumers (Martinsson 2005). However, gay men have earned (fairly or not) the reputation of "earning like men but consuming like women" (Liljestrand 2003; see also the popularity of TV shows such as *Fab Five. Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Bravo 2003–2007). This has

led a large part of the gay media as well as mainstream media, to be more interested in representing gay men than lesbians. However, with *The L-word*, this seems to have changed. In an interview with Ilene Chaiken, executive producer of *The L-word*, she speaks of a dramatic development in the media when it comes to lesbian stories and how lesbians are perceived by marketers:

> Attending black tie parties, giving speeches and having to "represent," Ms. Chaiken said, were not developments she had anticipated when, in 1999, after writing a magazine article about same-sex couples with children, she pitched a drama based on her life as a lesbian mother in Los Angeles. "There wasn't a shred of receptivity," she recalled. "I got comments like, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we lived in the sort of world where this show would be possible?'" She temporarily shelved the idea and returned to screenwriting. In the meantime, lesbianism became hip. Reality dating shows revealed girls necking in hot tubs. Rosie O'Donnell came out. Girls went wild. Madonna planted one on Britney. Ellen DeGeneres's sexuality, once viewed as toxic enough to sink a sitcom, morphed into a nonissue benign enough for her to have her own daytime chat show. "From 1999 to now, gay issues entered the political zeitgeist and the television landscape changed drastically," Ms. Chaiken said. "Stories that before weren't being told started being consumed avidly." (Glock 2005)

How, then, could a previously "toxic" group suddenly become demographically desirable? One reason could be the increase in niche marketing and narrowcasting in the 1990s. Another could be the brand building efforts of cable TV networks (Caldwell 2008: 245) through daring representations, breaking taboos concerning sex, violence, swear words and drugs, and catering to ethnic, racial and sexual minorities.[1] As mentioned before, Caldwell even talks about the TV trade's "hijacking" of minority identities. Therefore, the lesbian collective's need and craving for representation fit industry needs hand in glove. The odds were high that a series focused on lesbians would instantly become a cult series. Because gays and lesbians are online to an even higher degree than heterosexuals (Harris interactive and Witeck-Combs Communications 2007), there are also great opportunities for fan-based viral marketing and expanded intermedia storytelling. Lesbians being a previously untapped consumer market increases the prospects for spin-off products. This is all made possible by cultural knowledge of the group. The executive producer Ilene Chaiken being an out lesbian and some of the directors and actors coming from "New Queer Cinema" gives the project high credibility in the lesbian community. But as Avila Saavedra (2009) argues, capitalism is the condition of commercial TV, something that is illustrated by Chaiken's statement in an international press tour interview: "The premise I had set up for myself: Los Angeles, lesbians, fashionable, glamorous, interesting. I knew that I wanted to tell this story." (*OurChart.com*). It is telling that the first word after lesbian is "fashionable". With *The L-word*, Chaiken constructs and makes popular a partly new identity in the media: The fashionable lesbian. This is also exemplified by her cooperation with the "L"Ement of Style fashion line, the Love and Pride *L-word* jewellery collection and numerous other business ventures. This development is in line with recent expressions like "the pink economy" (Liljestrand 2003) and "the gay index" (Florida 2002), which paints a picture where LBGTs are increasingly

being seen as a profitable group, both as a creative workforce and as affluent consumers. In the next section, I will demonstrate how the representations of lesbian identities are discursively displaced and the identity position "lesbian" is partially filled with new meanings in the televised text of *The L-word*.

The (Re)Construction of Lesbian Identities and Sartorial Style in *The L-word*

> **"Alice" Sheer Lipstick** - A warm, rose with champagne shimmer inspired by Alice's quirky fashion-forward look.
>
> **"Bette" Sheer Lipstick** - A sophisticated red that's as passionate and powerful as Bette.
>
> **"Kit" Sheer Lipstick** - A saucy raisin with copper shimmer that's as fiery as Kit.
>
> **"Shane" Sheer Lipstick** - A creamy, natural tone to enhance your lip color, inspired by Shane's no-nonsense style.

Entering *The L-word* site on Sho.com in 2009, one can among other things try solve the Jenny murder mystery, not resolved in the series' narrative, discuss with other fans, and upload pictures, but also purchase various products, such as *The L-word* board game, CDs, DVD boxes, different types of clothes, mugs, a candle, and lipsticks in four different shades, the latter named after the most popular characters (see citation above). The selling of lipsticks to lesbians does not quite fit in with earlier views on lesbian consumption. This could be seen as a sign of discursive re-positioning of lesbian identities, and to illustrate my argument, I will analyze a storyline from *The L-word*. In one scene in episode three (named "Let's do it") in the first season, Shane, Alice and Dana, three attractive women in their twenties, are sitting at a café, the Planet, gossiping about an acquaintance. They seem relaxed, but at the same time very interested in the conversation.

> *Alice:* What is it with Jenny and Marina?
>
> *Dana:* I thought Jenny was straight?
>
> *Shane:* Most girls are straight until they're not. Or sometimes they're gay til they're not. And then there's those that never look back, and you can spot them from a mile away.
>
> *Dana:* How?
>
> *Shane:* You read the signals.
>
> *Dana: That's* my problem.
>
> *Shane:* It's not a problem, sexuality is fluid, whether you're gay or straight or bisexual, you just go with the flow.
>
> *Dana:* But that's my problem, I don't feel the flow, that *thing*, I ain't got it.
>
> *Alice:* You don't have gaydar! That's right, you don't got it.
>
> *Shane:* But everybody's got it!
>
> *Alice:* I'll prove it to you! See that girl that just got in?

Alice asks Dana if the girl that just entered the café is straight or gay, based on style codes such as short or long nails, if they are natural or polished, and choices of dress. According to Alice, tapered jeans with high-heeled sandals symbolize "heterosexual" in existing cultural codes. This is something the naive Dana, who doesn't have gaydar, is oblivious about. This poses a problem, as she is interested in sous-chef Lara, and does not know if Lara is gay or straight. In this episode, the Chart (intertextually connected to the website *OurChart.com*), a virtual online map showing sexual connections between lesbians, is introduced. The friends help Dana search the Chart for Lara, without finding her. They therefore visit Lara's place of work to look for signs of lesbianism, with no clear conclusion. In a last desperate attempt they send forward Shane, the series' Casanova, without any reactions from Lara. Apparently, Lara is lacking lesbian markers, style codes and desires, and deemed by the friends not to be a lesbian. Anyhow, later on it seems that she is a lesbian anyway, and she wants to go on a date with Dana. Once again, the friends take a tutorial stance, lecturing Dana not to wear a sundress on the date. Dana is positioned as ignorant of lesbian style codes. This particular story arc is discursively centered on sexuality and sexual identities, and these discourses are organized around the difference between gay and straight. The difference between heterosexuals and lesbians is not physiological or directly noticeable. Therefore, the ones interested in seeing the difference need gaydar. The master significant (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) in the discourse formation is the lesbian. In the narrative a chain of equivalence is formed, looking like this: a lesbian – a person on the Chart (a person that has had sex with other lesbian/s) – a woman desiring Shane – a person dressing according to certain style codes – a person not dressed in a (sun) dress. It is however important to point out that masculine or androgynous styles are *not* privileged in the TV series, even though there are characters that play with masculine attributes such as ties etc, but instead a feminine and highly glamorous ideal, which in some cases borders on the androgynous. The characters have often been accused of being unrealistically good looking and expensively dressed and styled, and they often wear feminine attire such as dresses, skirts, blouses and high heels.

Dana follows her friends' advice and wears slacks to her date, but when she picks her up, Lara is wearing a summer dress. Lara is thereby positioned as a lesbian subject who does not follow the norms of the lesbian chain of equivalence. "The lesbian" can therefore be seen as an empty or floating signifier (Laclau & Mouffe 1985), that lacks essence, and is filled with different meanings dependent on what it is put up against. In this way, the lesbian codes are at the same time constructed and deconstructed in the television series.[2] According to sociologist Arlene Stein:

> [L]esbian/gay boundaries, identities, and cultures are negotiated, defined, and produced. The history of lesbian social worlds is in part this production of boundaries, identities, and cultures. These symbolic struggles construct female homosexuality as social reality; they create images, myths, and fantasies of lesbian love, desire, and

> fulfillment; and they shape the composition of the group of women called lesbians. (Stein 2006: 24)

Media representations of lesbians are a part of this symbolic struggle, creating powerful constructs that help shape queer women's social reality. Why then this particular (re)construction? One answer could be that this is a way for TV producers to successfully interpellate a heterogeneous queer collective. Both women who desire and do not desire Shane, and follow or do not follow the lesbian style codes, are here positioned as *potential* lesbian subjects. *The L-word* (re)constructs lesbian identities, but there is an openness in this construction. This openness leaves room for different reading positions, firstly what we could call "the real dyke", a subject that lives by the lesbian chain of equivalence. According to these norms, the lesbian woman is often positioned as "masculine", something that is a remnant of the theories of Sigmund Freud and scientia sexualis. In Foucauldian terms, powers' production of knowledge of a certain identity position also produces these subjects' self-knowledge. The other possible identity position interpellated by the text is the feminine lesbian, the "femme" or "lipstick lesbian", often made invisible as lesbian by an older discourse (Walker 2001), but being of huge interest for media producers and advertisers who want to position lesbian women as consuming subjects. Recent queer theory has reclaimed the "femme" as a rule breaker, an aesthetic of "too much" that challenges norms of middle-class straight femininity (Lagrace Volcano & Dahl 2008), but these "femmes of power" do not have much in common with the respectable traditional beauty of *The L-word* cast. The feminine subject position is prevalent in *The L-word's* televised universe, something that can be interpreted both as a strong connection to consumerism and a discursive displacement of lesbian identities. According to Rebecca Beirne (2008), this is however in line with previous popular media representations of lesbians, especially the feminine "lesbian chic" representations of the 1990s. She also sees similarities between the series and the lesbian pulp novels of the 1950s, which show a very dark picture of lesbian lives and relationships. In an analysis by Candace Moore (2007: 17), it is pointed out that *The L-word* offers different viewing positions, because "[t]he show positions lesbianism as a *sensibility,* not a sexuality. This is particularly important because as a sensibility, lesbianism can potentially be co-opted by straight viewers." Moore proposes the term "heteroflexibility" for the straight viewer of *The L-word*.

The "Branding" of Lesbian Identities

Today, brands and the immaterial and symbolic capital these have attached to them are seen as more valuable than a company's physical or material assets. Well-known and high status brands give the consumer added value, an experience and a point of identification. This development is mirrored in the ways individuals look at and express themselves in postmodern society (Featherstone 1991). Con-

sumer products and brands are increasingly being used to signal identity, lifestyle choices and group memberships (Holmberg 2002: 83). The aspect of choice, to choose or not choose different kinds of products or brands, could also be foundational in the lifestyle project of the individual. Branding work has become increasingly important in the culture industries, especially the music industry, film and television. Some (Lash & Urry 2002: 137) even claim that these industries function more like advertising firms, focusing on brand building, and outsourcing media production. When *The L-word* was registered as a trademark, the media producers used already existing identities, the lesbian. These identities were partly formed in opposition to heterosexual identities and a society where heterosexuality is the norm. Also, both in lesbian self-identities and in common lesbian stereotypes, the connection between lesbians and consumption has previously been weak. *The L-word* brand is filled with meaning through the stories and the points of identification the television series offers its viewers. It is then used to sell different types of products. The show also creates a glamorous backdrop that encourages consumption, for example through the characters' glamorous designer outfits, makeup, hairstyles and the interior decoration (the settings are often the characters' own homes, places of work, cafés, restaurants and bars). One example of how *The L-word* brand is used to sell consumer products is the scent L Eau du Perfume, which went into retail just before Valentine's Day 2006 (Cole 2006). Scents and perfumes are products connected to glamour, luxury and lifestyle. Another example is the "L"ements of style limited edition fashion line on sale on Showtime's website and in selected stores in the US in 2006 (Scott 2006). Lash and Lury (2007) suggest the term "thingification" when describing a process in which western media are increasingly highlighting things and consumer products. As products become brands, and thereby signs with a certain meaning, rather than necessities, and the media are increasingly being preoccupied with these branded products, the media become a system of things rather than representations of ideas or the world. Through the consumption of goods, it is also possible for the media audience to enter a world created by the media. Henry Jenkins (2006: 21, 114; see also Goodman 1978) proposes the concept "worldmaking" when describing how forms of media convergence and spin-off products create a world where media producers no longer just create a story or a character, but also a fictitious universe that the audience can immerse themselves in. Together with Lash and Lury's term thingification, this suggests increasingly tactile or haptic dimensions to contemporary media consumption. I would not therefore suggest that the world created by the media is completely cut off from social reality, but rather that social worlds and fictitious universes are productively influencing one another.

The Active Audience as Desirable Demographic

In 2005, "*The L-word* Fan Lib Event" took place, where fans were invited to write a scene for an episode for the coming fifth season, under strict guidance by professional writers. The event was successful and it was repeated for the sixth and last season. It took place over the Internet, where the fans could vote for the scenes they preferred and it also got the attention of the American webzine *Business Wire* (Dec 5th 2005):

> THE L WORD FanLib event is a tremendously sticky and interactive way for marketers to reach one of the most coveted demographics in television," said Chris Williams, co-creator of FanLib and a former Yahoo! executive. "FanLib's technology is a quantum leap in the effort to link brand marketing initiatives to consumer generated media. For the right sponsors, this event is a great opportunity to reach a coveted audience and to tap the potential of the booming consumer generated media phenomenon.

To create one's own stories about the characters of a favorite television series is common in fan communities. In written form, these fantasies are called fan fiction. These texts and other fan activities have been seen as forms of resistance and struggle over textual meanings (Jenkins 1992). Fan fiction was also originally opposed by the producers of popular culture, for example in the case of Star Trek "slash fiction" where female fans dreamed up a love affair between Captain Kirk and Dr Spock, who in the original Star Trek narrative are strictly heterosexual. This art of "slashing" same-sex characters is today very common in fan culture, something that can be seen in an excess of material on the Internet (see for example Jenkins 1992). *The L-word's* producers kept a close eye on the fans' cultural production, and also used the active audience as an argument for attracting advertisers. This is another example of transmedia production, and of *The L-word* becoming something more than just a popular television series. Other spin-offs are the online community *OurChart.com* (cancelled in 2009 and redirected to *Sho.com*, Showtime's web page), and a virtual world in *Second Life* (Ves: 2008).[3]

> For Showtime, creating a virtual *L Word* for fans and Second Life players in general gives them the chance to gain exposure for the show and its affiliated products (such as the "L"ements of Style) to people from all over the world—which will hopefully convert into real life purchases of those products and subscribers for Showtime. In addition, by creating in-world products (*L Word* clothing, real estate, apartments, etc. are in the works), Showtime can tap into the virtual economy of the game to earn cold, hard cash in an entirely new kind of marketplace. With online gaming now a multi-billion dollar industry populated by die-hard gamers willing to shell out insane amounts of cash for virtual goods, it could turn out to be a very smart (and profitable) move. (Ves 2008)

The L-word community on *Sho.com* has blogs, a wiki, a shop, and you can download the episodes via Itunes or Amazon unbox for $1.99 per episode, or watch previews for free. The obsolete website *OurChart.com* used the television series' storyline about "The Chart", a virtual web which symbolizes the connections and sexual relations between lesbians and bisexual women. *OurChart* also exists as an

online community owned by journalist Alice Pieszecki in *The L-word* narrative. *The L-word* season six starts with a murder, which is not solved, and this murder mystery (Who killed Jenny?) is used in intermedia storytelling on *Sho.com*, where the users can choose between possible suspects and vote. These various texts create an L-world, which is inhabited by different characters, relationships, events and situations the audience can use to create their own stories and fantasies. Here, the boundary between production and reception becomes blurred, even though the power relation between executive producer Ilene Chaiken and the audience is an unequal one, with Chaiken controlling both the narrative and the brand. In her blog at *OurChart.com* (posted in March 10, 2008), Chaiken hinted that a big group of fans called TiBetters, who wanted the broken up couple Tina and Bette to re-unite, had influenced the narrative (they indeed got back together in season five), and that season six was going to be even more interactive, using the Fan Lib technology.

Conclusion

After a long history of misrecognition, lesbians are now seen as demographically desirable, partly because of recent developments in the media industry and commercial culture. The market is arranged in segments, according to demographics or lifestyles. Therefore, already existing identities and a global LBGT culture can be used to obtain both economic gain and artistic and political acclaim in the culture industry, not least when it comes to the brand building efforts of cable networks. Creating a cult series for lesbians suits contemporary media conglomerate's wishes and needs perfectly, giving them a chance to reach one of the most coveted demographics. Lesbians as an active audience possess many of the qualities that were celebrated by "new revisionism" cultural studies (McGuigan 1992) through notions like resistance (Hall 1980; Hebdige 2001) and participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), characteristics at the same time increasingly sought after by contemporary advertisers. This is made visible in business discourse by buzz words such as user generated content and wikinomics. Media user behavior earlier described as resistance by cultural studies scholars is now deemed to be "a booming consumer generated media phenomenon" (*Business Wire* Dec. 5th 2005). This would of course not be possible without new digital technologies tracking user behavior, providing increased opportunities for media producers to control and survey the audience.

In queer studies, scholars have discussed LBGT representation in popular media as associated with normalization. When representations of identities are adjusted to fit the narrow matrix of the market, there is a risk that less attractive groups in the LBGT community are left out. Ann Ciasullo (2001) describes the exclusion of the masculine woman in media representations of lesbians in the 1990s, a conclusion that *The L-word* with few exceptions confirms. José Esteban

Muñoz (1999) shows that there is a white norm in representations of LBGTs, whereas *The L-word* made efforts to include Latin-American and African-American characters. In a reception study of *The L-word* (Ladendorf 2008), informants criticized its middle class norms. To trademark lesbian identities could be seen as making successful or attractive forms of queer identities visible at the expense of other groups. An earlier study (Ladendorf 2007; 2008) shows that *The L-word* successfully communicates to gay women, and that the show is seen as important, both as a tool for recognition and as a point of identification. An important aspect is the thingification of the media in a media industry where things and brands have sometimes become more important than narratives and representations. The immersive, brand-building qualities of TV series *The L-word* confuse identity work with consumption. The selling of lifestyle products intimately connected to glamorized femininities such as lipstick and perfume indicates a discursive re-positioning of lesbian identities and could encourage its viewers to go out and buy themselves a "lesbian identity kit". The selling of lesbian lipstick to lipstick lesbians could be both enabling and constricting for the identity work of queer women in the future. *The L-word* characters form strong points of identification and role-models for lesbians, even if the viewers make oppositional readings of them (Ladendorf 2007; 2008). In my view, *The L-word's* "hi-jacking" of lesbian identities is however doing more good than bad when it comes to creating a place for queer women in both popular culture and the media industry, even though it is important to discuss what price has to be paid for this visibility.

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Notes

1 Examples of such series are *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998–2004), *Dexter* (Showtime 2006–), Weeds (Showtime 2005–), *Nurse Jackie* (2009–) and *Queer as folk* (American version) (Showtime 2000–2005).
2 This particular story arc has previously been analyzed by both Aviva Dove-Viebahn (2007) and Rebecca Beirne (2008).
3 *Second Life* is an online game where the players are represented through avatars, and where one can exchange real life money for virtual (but also earn money inside the 3-D world), to buy all kinds of virtual products. This is in itself profitable, and at the same time Second Life-players are an attractive demographic for advertisers.

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