

RESEARCH INITIATIVE ONE

**CURRENT REPRESENTATIONS OF LGBT PEOPLE
IN ENTERTAINMENT TELEVISION: THE CASE OF
*WILL & GRACE***

GLAAD CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF MEDIA & SOCIETY

**Van M. Cagle
Project Director**

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**Overview: Expansion of Scholarship in Studies of GLBT-Oriented Entertainment
Television**

Research in the area of glbt-oriented television is quite sparse when compared to that which has been conducted in loosely comparable areas (women and television, race and television, youth culture and television). While a total of fourteen scholarly journal articles have been published in the broad area of glbt television studies during the past six years, only eight have focused specifically on issues in entertainment television.¹ Thus, the major purpose of the *Will & Grace* project was (and is) to further establish a broader academic presence in the area of lgbt-oriented television studies while also providing activists with pertinent scholarly insights into interrelated issues regarding visibility, representation, and contemporary television.

These points in mind, *Will & Grace* became an obvious choice for analysis. By October 2000 the program had been nominated for numerous awards (Golden Globe, People's Choice), and at the 52nd annual Emmys it received three prestigious honors: Best-Comedy, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Supporting Actor. With placement (9pm EST) in NBC's Thursday night "must see" line up during Fall 2000, it was evident that *Will and Grace* was a bonafide prime time hit. . With the third season now complete, network ratings demonstrate a forty-four percent increase in viewership this year. By Spring 2001 an average of 17.3 million viewers were tuning in each week.

One outcome of the program's increasing popularity is that it has been the focus of a number of scholarly conference papers and popular press articles during the past year. In these both scholars and journalists have raised a series of similar questions about the *kind* of visibility that *Will & Grace* offers its viewers: What is significant about the "heteronormative pairing" of Will and Grace, and subsequently, the program's attempt to "pair" Jack and Karen? While Will presents a different version of gay male culture than that which has typically been portrayed on American television, what kind of representation is being offered via the characterization of a "straight acting" gay man? Despite some of the stereotypical characteristics of Jack, does he present gay audiences with certain points of reference that are otherwise not accessible on mainstream television? (And what of this?) Are the characters essentially de-eroticised due to the narrative's simplistic focus on gay romance? If *Will & Grace* is often problematic for "me" as a lesbian or gay viewer, then why do "I" find myself *laughing* when I watch the show? These were just some of the questions that frequently arose, regardless of the author's position regarding the progressive or non-progressive nature of the program.

¹ I acknowledge that one main reason for a lack of published work in this area is perhaps due to the fact that glbt representations during the early to mid 1990s were often sporadic. I am also aware of the fact that the timetables of journals often affect "number counting." In addition, I realize that issues regarding tenure and promotion often play a role in the publication focus of scholars in this area.

What I found most interesting was that no matter the stand of journalists or scholars one theme was most often clear: *Will & Grace* presents a number of contradictory representations for both heterosexual and glbt viewers. However, while it was acknowledged that the program may mean different things to different viewers, there was often a kind of cognitive-rationalistic assumption that parts of the program require a specialized understanding, parts of the program require an almost “realistic understanding” of “gay life from the inside out.” Based on this presumption then, the question often became: since the “in jokes” are often “gay jokes,” when taken out of “gay contexts” (i.e. subcultural milieus) how might these jokes be interpreted?

In this regard while no conference participant or journalist assumed that audiences are cultural dupes, there was an overriding concern regarding “heterosexual middle American” viewers who may not have many cultural references for gay men, as well as with those “middle American” lgbt viewers who may be limited in terms of social and cultural outlets. In a similar manner, the majority of writers/speakers also raised issues regarding youth: What kinds of images of lgbt people might glbt as well as heterosexual youth envision through watching *Will & Grace*, and thus, what kinds of stereotypes are these viewers likely to encounter? Indeed, despite arguments regarding polysemic texts, “acceptable contradictions,” and the pleasures associated with fictional simplicity, many writers implied a kind of sexual and age-related elitism in regard to the program by assuming that perhaps glbt adult viewers are the only ones who have the ability to “get it,” thus implying that we should possibly be concerned about the instances when others do not get the punchline(s).

In giving strong consideration to these kinds of questions, GLAAD’s mission however wasn’t to establish whether *Will & Grace* is a positive or negative “example” of lgbt-oriented television programming, nor did we intend to speak for all audiences. Instead, we did attempt to give consideration to a variety of viewing practices as a way to further explore the kinds of multifaceted issues that the program poses. Accordingly, we took the stand from the outset that *Will & Grace* is open to multiple interpretations; no one system for producing meanings operates alone in the program. At the same time we wanted to dig beneath the surface of the program’s images and determine what, if anything, is at stake when audiences that may have heretofore rejected glbt-oriented television embrace a program with gay characters. In the process it has been GLAAD’s purpose to give credence to scholarship in this area and to learn more about the possible ways in which we might interpret a program that is currently at the *center* of the American media landscape.

In doing so we issued a call for research papers on *Will & Grace* on October 20, 2001. In turn, we commissioned seven of the most promising proposals that were submitted. In June 2001 we received the final papers and we are quite pleased with the results.

Will & Grace Summaries

Overall Summary of Projects:

During the past twenty-five years, while LGBT representations have increased in entertainment television media, they have often been contextualized through villainous images or particular forms of whimsical stereotypic humor. Thus, according to our researchers, *Will & Grace* originally held potential for more diverse representations in that it presented two broad versions of gay male culture (as opposed to one narrow stereotype); it promised some hope of dealing with gay romance; and it offered some possibility of providing LGBT viewers with a program that is directly relevant to their lives. One important aspect of our project is that while *Will & Grace* has been heavily analyzed at conferences and in the popular press, few researchers have written about its representations, its popularity, and the kinds of messages it transmits to a variety of viewers.

Thomas Linneman takes on this subject by analyzing the associations between feminine references (appellations) and gayness as presented on the program. He determines that while *Will & Grace* offers more diversity than past television shows, it also connects and reconnects the stereotypical assumption that gay men—even “straight acting” ones—have particular essential feminine attributes. In Linneman’s study, this dynamic is demonstrated as he presents a number of associated content analyses. In turn Linneman subjects his results to focus group viewers who, oddly enough, are not overtly aware of the feminine appellations and thus provide a wide array of pro/neutral/con responses regarding the program’s use of such appellations.

Denis Provencher takes on a related topic through examining the narrative function of both the heterosexual and homosexual kiss on *Will & Grace*. He finds that while heterosexual kisses and overt displays of romance are abundant on the program, it has included only one same-sex kiss. This kiss was especially significant, but only because it occurred between Jack and Will in a non-romantic situation. However, while *Will & Grace* fails to initiate same-sex romance as a key component of the program’s narrative, it does prove to have progressive overtones. Indeed Provencher’s survey of mostly Caucasian/Christian/heterosexual/ middle class college students demonstrates—in a quite interesting manner—that the majority find the program’s characters and themes acceptable and believe that the program offers great benefits for gay and lesbian individuals. Provencher ends his study by discussing what his results may imply about “middle American” college students’ views on homosexuality and media, and what the study says about possible “target audiences” of NBC.

Chris Castiglia and Chris Reed offer an alternative reading of *Will & Grace* than those provided above. Writing from the perspective of gay activist scholars, they argue that during the past twenty years the media has engaged in a kind of cultural amnesia by denying the “gay past” of the 1970s and by associating gay pleasures with disease. As they see it, *Will & Grace* offers an alternative (and positive) vision in the character of Jack in that he resurrects camp, cruising, and subcultural icons/divas for gay viewers.

Through analyzing online message board data, chat-room data, and the narrative of *Will & Grace* the authors argue that the contradictory characters of Jack and Will operate so as to restore a sense of gay memory that has never been adequately addressed on prime time television.

In an opposite manner, authors Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow utilize feminist and queer theories to strongly suggest that *Will & Grace* is limited by the sitcom genre and its reliance on narratives that are heteronormative. In their view the program is so rigidly structured by a heterosexual lens and its characters are thus so binarized, that it has very little, if any, potential for presenting progressive images of LGBT individuals or groups. Likewise, David Tschida takes a slightly similar stand, but focuses more heavily on the history of the comedy of the sexes genre, arguing that *Will & Grace* replicates the opposite-sex pairing schemes so often apparent in past heterosexual-oriented sit-coms.

In another vein, Melinda Kanner employs queer theories to examine not the heteronormative subtexts of *Will & Grace*, but the overt queerness of Karen. In doing so, she argues that while Jack and Will occupy gay spaces in a gay narrative; Karen is the primary “queer character” on the program. In Kanner’s view, this is significant, because it suggests that gay characters (i.e. Will and sometimes even Jack) are, quite simply, not always queer. Likewise heterosexual characters can often be considered “queer” due to particular attributes that challenge heterosexual culture.

Finally, Henry Rogers, Ron Smyth, and Greg Jacobs discuss their socio-linguistic research on gay speech. As a result of submitting the voices of Will and Jack to the same digitized analyses used in their classic Rainbow passage study, the authors confirm that the differences in the Jack/Will characterizations are in part attributable to actual speech differences used by the actors. This finding raises a number of interesting questions regarding media representations of “gay speech,” and whether or not gay actors present speech patterns that are more readily identifiable as gay.

While it is difficult to generalize about the findings, overall it is appropriate to claim that according to our studies, Will & Grace presents two versions of gay male culture that are often contradictory yet in some significant ways complimentary as well. While our scholars as well as the audiences they studied took issue with the program’s limited presentation of only two broad versions of gay culture, most still found that Will & Grace is in many ways progressive in that it offers insights as well as representations that are not typically seen in prime time. One broad conclusion can be drawn: The scholars and audiences appreciate the efforts of Will & Grace to demonstrate more than one narrow version of gay male life, but across the board both audiences and scholars wish to see more diversity on mainstream American television.

Expanded Summaries:

Thomas Linneman, “The Intersection of Male Homosexuality and Femininity on *Will & Grace*” (tjlinn@wm.edu)

Thomas Linneman’s study opens with a review of research on cultural associations that link gay men with conceptions of femininity. In this section Linneman cites studies that demonstrate that homophobia is consistently linked through cultural conduits to the stereotype of gay man-as-feminine. In turn, he argues that “straight acting gay men” can thus serve as a challenge to heterosexual culture because they redefine the parameters through which many heterosexuals conceive of gay men. Through examining *Will & Grace*, Linneman’s goal is thus to analyze the media presence of the “feminized stereotype” as well as the “straight acting gay man” and then to determine some of the frames of reference utilized by audience members when interpreting these two divergent images.

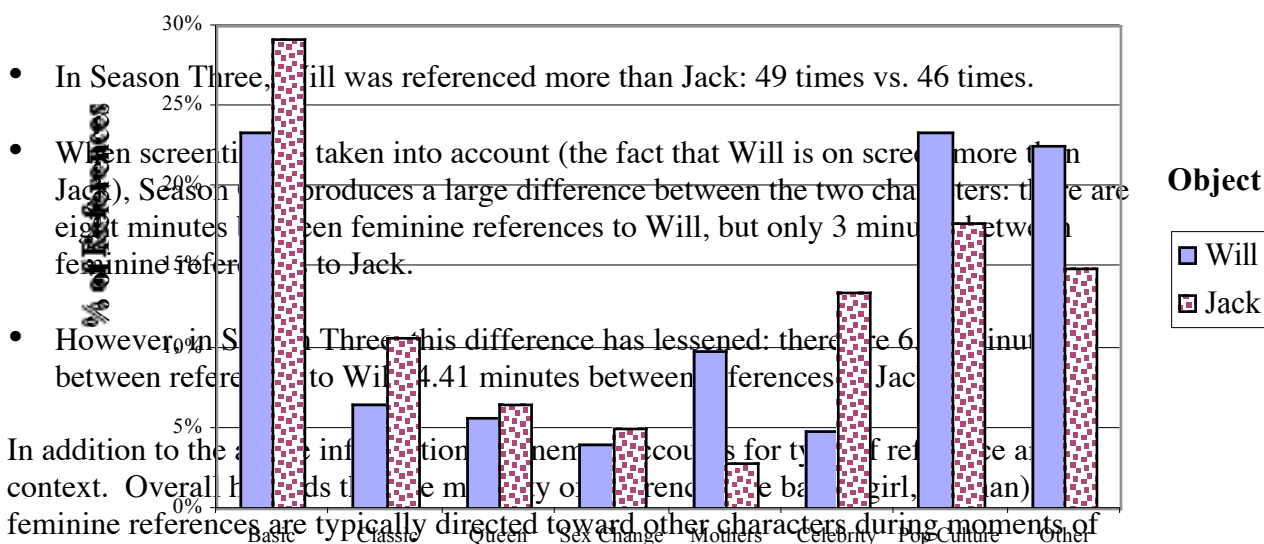
Linneman’s project involves two parts:

- 1.) A content analysis of all sixty-seven episodes of *Will & Grace*, from the beginning of Season One to the end of Season Three. Linneman locates each of the moments where a man was referenced in the feminine (by being called a woman, she, lady, some female name, etc). He then codes these references for object, source, behavior, context (what was the context within which the reference was made: conflict, banter, love, greeting, other?) and type (what was the substance of the reference?).
- 2.) Six focus groups with various audiences were arranged: gay and lesbian youth, college students, and adults, heterosexual youth, college students, and adults. The groups involved a total of 39 people: 20 gays and lesbians, 19 heterosexuals; 19 females, 20 males; 11 non-white, 28 white. The groups discussed their general thoughts about the show. Then, after being shown twenty-five clips that included these feminine references, group members were asked to provide reactions to the references. Finally, after being shown the data from the content analysis, Linneman asked for members’ input in regard to his results.

Some of Linneman’s most significant content analysis findings are presented below:

- In the sixty-seven existing episodes, male characters have been referenced in the feminine 283 times.
- 280 of these references have been directed at gay men.
- This is an average of four times per episode.
- In Seasons One, Two, and Three, there were 92, 88, and 103 references, respectively. Jack, the stereotypically effeminate gay man on the show, has been referenced in the feminine 141 times. Will, the supposedly non-stereotypical, straight-acting gay man on the show, has been referenced in the feminine 124 times.

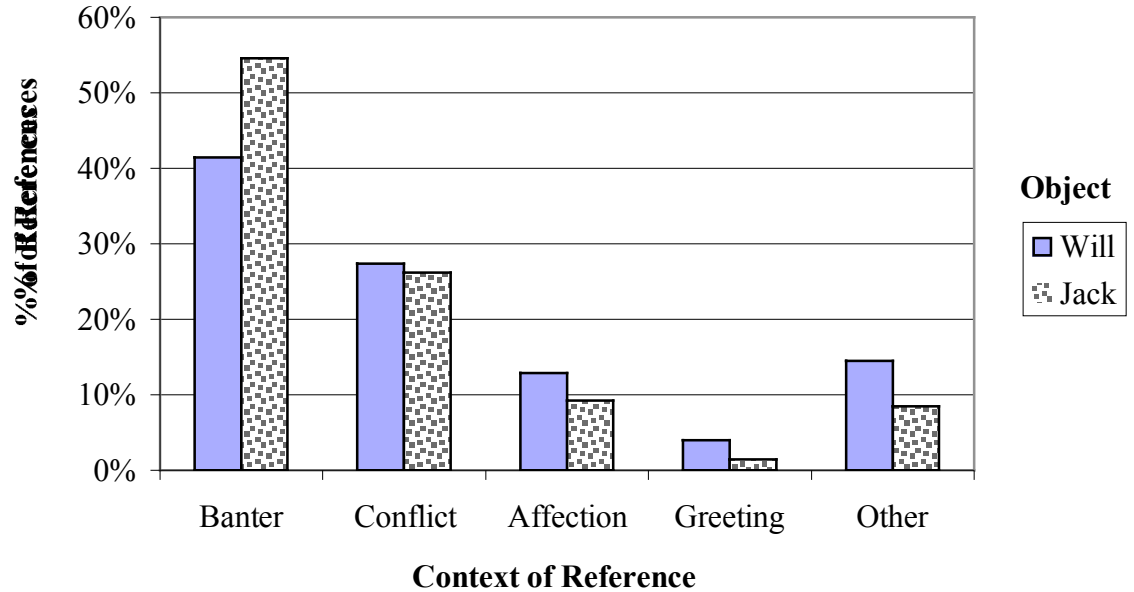
**Graph Five:
References by Category**



- In Season Three, Will was referenced more than Jack: 49 times vs. 46 times.
- When screen time is taken into account (the fact that Will is on screen more than Jack), Season Three produces a large difference between the two characters: there are eight minutes between feminine references to Will, but only 3 minutes between feminine references to Jack.
- However, in Season Three, this difference has lessened: there are 6 minutes between references to Will and 4.41 minutes between references to Jack.

In addition to the above information, the chart shows that the majority of references for both characters are directed toward other characters during moments of banter. In other words, to refer to a male character in the feminine, usually signifies the ultimate “put down.” And when not being used as “put downs,” feminine references are often employed during other moments of banter, when “true feelings” seem to be the motivation of characters.

**Graph Seven:
Context of References**



Realizing however that content analysis can often lead to subjectivism, Linneman conducts focus group research in order to analyze viewer responses to feminine references on the program. While acknowledging that focus groups are not representative of larger populations and therefore the research is not generalizable, he does find interesting overall trends among those viewers who were research subjects.

	<i>Gay and Lesbian Participants</i>	<i>Heterosexual Participants</i>
<i>Regular</i>	8 (40%)	8 (42%)
<i>Previously Regular</i>	1 (5%)	1 (5%)
<i>Semi-Regular</i>	5 (25%)	2 (11%)
<i>Occasional</i>	1 (5%)	7 (37%)
<i>Non-Watchers</i>	5 (25%)	1 (5%)
	20	19

Linneman notes that the majority of his viewers did not notice the male homosexuality/femininity dynamic, even when he informed them of the purpose of his study. At the same time, upon realizing the prevalence of this dynamic and during general discussions of the program, a number of interesting responses arose. One mom, for example, discussed the ways in which her daughters had originally commented on Jack (strongly homophobic), as opposed to the ways they viewed him after becoming fans of the show (strongly supportive of Jack as well as glbt individuals in general). An adolescent viewer talked about how the feminine references upset him due to the kinds of verbal abuse glbt individuals face at his high school. A number of viewers stated that the program reinforces negative stereotypes. The majority of viewers are not concerned about “their own attitudes,” but are instead concerned about those “less refined people” who might get the “wrong idea” about gay men as a result of watching the show. At the same time, the majority of Linneman’s gay viewers agreed that gay men do “talk this way” and thus they stated that the show depicts certain aspects of “reality.” In fact most of the gay viewers did not see the feminine references as extremely problematic.

Overall then, Linneman’s study presents an interesting picture of *Will & Grace* and its relationship to stereotypical versions of gay male identity in contemporary American culture.

Christopher Castiglia, Loyola University Chicago, Christopher Reed, Lake Forest College "'Ah yes, I remember it well': memory and queer culture in *Will & Grace*" (ccastu@luc.edu)(reed@lfc.edu)

Through employing a historical and literary analysis, Castiglia and Reed argue that during the course of the 1980s and early '90s, the mass media presented gay men as victims of a subculture characterized as immature, pathological, and diseased. As they have it, the implied message was that gay men’s health was threatened by their past, and that a healthier future could be insured only by renouncing their history.

According to the authors, the popularity of *Will & Grace* attests to the desire to celebrate and nurture memories of such gay subcultural practices as "camp" and "cruising," even as these are extended to create a "queer" community that reaches beyond the demographic of gay men. In analyzing the plots and characters of *Will & Grace*, as well as the internet chatrooms of its fans, Castiglia and Reed explore the use of “shared memory,” both between the show's characters and with its audiences, to affirm and expand the power of cultural memory in shaping positive and politically effective queer identities.

In the main text of the paper, the authors suggest that like other classic sitcoms, *Will & Grace* offers viewers not coherent, believable characters, but emblems of competing social positions or attitudes. Two pairs of characters--Will and Grace on the one hand, and Jack and Karen on the other--represent (among other things) opposing attitudes toward memory and, because of that, toward sexuality, self-worth, and community. However, as the authors argue, one of the pleasures of *Will & Grace* is its use of humor to stage an optimistic hope for a resolution between often-opposed positions in debates over memory and queer identity.

For example, Jack pulls Will from his isolation, encouraging him to remember shared sexual exploits and eliciting from him spontaneous yet carefully choreographed campy duets that suggest Will's unacknowledged store of gay memory. In return, Will protects Jack, providing the emotional and financial support that allows Jack to pursue his more transgressive behaviors. The authors find then that the rapprochement between seemingly antagonistic forms of gay identity constitutes a fundamental appeal of the show to gay viewers. Accordingly, Castiglia and Reed conclude that *Will & Grace* counters belittling and divisive representations of gayness with plots that treasure and use gay memories to resolve some of the complexities of gay identity today.

Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow
“Gay Characters in ‘Straight Spaces’: *Will & Grace* and the Situation Comedy Genre” (wendy-hilton-morrow@uiowa.edu) (Kathleen-battles@uiowa.edu)

Battles and Hilton-Morrow take a critical approach to examining portrayals of gay men and lesbians and how they are organized within a framework of heteronormativity. They argue that, although *Will & Grace* offers the potential for subversion of compulsory heterosexuality, this potential is contained by the program's subtext of heteronormativity.

Utilizing queer and feminist theories, the paper examines the complexities of heteronormativity and the importance of the concept for understanding *Will & Grace*. In turn, the paper explains how *Will & Grace* is constrained by the situation comedy genre, a model that relies on inherently heteronormative conventions, including the privileging of domestic space, an emphasis on gender differences, and dependence on a battle of the sexes framework for its humor.

After establishing the significance of these generic constraints the authors conduct a textual analysis of *Will & Grace* episodes from the 2000-2001 season to demonstrate five particular ways that the show fails to challenge heteronormativity: by defining gayness against masculinity, de-eroticizing homosocial bonding, privileging heterosexual relationships, containing the program's most threatening characters through infantilization and buffonery, and representing homosexuality through a heterosexual lens.

The authors draw on ideas from Judith Butler, Michael Warner, and Teresa DeLaurentis in analyzing the above points. In doing so the authors examine how and why *Will & Grace* offers viewers a “gay show” that heavily privileges heterosexual conventions and traditional gender and sexual binaries. In turn the authors conduct an exhaustive analysis of the ways in which Will is often positioned against Jack as “more masculine,” while concurrently being positioned against straight male characters as “more feminine.” In the latter part of the paper Battles and Hilton-Morrow examine all of the characters on the program, the various “binary logics” that are used in pairing these characters, and the ways in which these characters are located in “straight spaces” not unlike those of most traditional American situation comedies.

Denis Provencher: “**Heteronormative Strategies in and Audience Responses to NBC’s *Will & Grace***” (provench.deni@uwlax.edu)

In this study Denis Provencher conducts a textual analysis of several key episodes from *Will and Grace* to examine the use of the on-screen kiss for both opposite-sex and same-sex couples during the show’s three-year running time. In particular, he compares and contrasts several episodes that present an opposite-sex kiss (primarily between Will and Grace) with the only episode during *Will and Grace*’s three-year stint to include a same-sex kiss between two men (Will and Jack). He illustrates how the kiss works as an artifice to regularly pair off the show’s characters into seemingly straight couples and to reinforce a narrative in which heterosexual affection is normalized and same-sex affection remains strikingly absent. Moreover, as Provencher argues, the *continual recurrence* of the “straight kiss,” in a sense, neutralizes the single occurrence of a gay kiss. In sum, it obscures and impacts negatively upon the depiction of gay characters and same-sex affection on primetime television (as Provencher illustrates through several illuminating examples).

In the second half of this study, Provencher maps out an analysis of “straight viewing practices” in relation to *Will and Grace*. (Or, to use his terms, the *straightening* of a “gay sitcom” as opposed to the *queering* of a “straight sitcom.”) In doing so, he presents data obtained from a survey of 85 undergraduate students at the University of Wisconsin who watched and reacted to two episodes of the program. Provencher acknowledges that the study is not representative of a broad population, but given the type of sample, he believes that it may say something interesting about a particular population.

An overwhelming 95% of the students list their sexual orientation as heterosexual;
96.4% list themselves as Christian;
71.43% are women;
28.57% are men;
96.4% are Caucasian;
69% are regular television viewers (at an average of 9.65 hours of TV per week).

After viewing the episode involving the “gay kiss” as well as two additional episodes, students responded to a fixed set of criteria (positive/negative; explicit/subtle; sexual/non-sexual; realistic/non-realistic) associated with the question: “How would you describe the portrayal of affection between same-sex duos in this episode? This question was followed by others regarding the sexuality of particular characters, the portrayal of gay romance on the program, etc. Provencher also included a series of open-ended questions in his survey.

To provide a brief summary:

Provencher finds that the majority of heterosexual student viewers tend to prefer portrayals of gay male characters that are “reasonable,” “respectable,” “balanced” and “non-sexual.” Thus, the majority of student viewers (92.86%) see Will as “very positive” and “very real” (78.7%), while the same respondents see Jack as “very explicit,” “very sexual,” and not “very real.” (Only 35% say that Jack is “real.”). While accepting of the “gay kiss” between Jack and Will, the students demonstrate much more acceptance of

verbal affection featured during a commitment ceremony in which minor characters, Joe and Larry, pledge vows to one another.

Across the board Provencher finds that the student viewers tend to appreciate less sexually overt gay representations (i.e. Will, Joe, Larry), and they see de-sexed characters as “more realistic” than characters that openly discuss sexuality or demonstrate sexual prowess (Jack and Karen). Provencher believes that this is due in part to a lack of familiarity with gay images in general and perhaps because these students may only be sensitized to de-sexed and partner-less gay characters on commercial television and in film.

One of Provencher’s most interesting findings is that a majority of the student viewers argue that *Will and Grace* is a “pioneer on network television” when it comes to gay issues and that the Jack/Will kiss represents a “success” in regard to progressive media representations of gay men. Provencher finds that it is the minority of student viewers who ask the question “Where’s the ‘gay’ in this sitcom?” He thus ventures to guess that that the number would be significantly higher if asked of an exclusively GLBT audience. Future research in this direction will most likely confirm this.

According to Provencher, it should come as no surprise that *Will & Grace* is acceptable to this “middle American” student group since the program represents an attempt to reinforce conventional narrative strategies where only heteronormativity and middle-class values ultimately matter. *Will & Grace*’s narrative strategies seem to suggest popular culture’s ability to reinscribe conventional sexual politics and market the show to American moderates. In conclusion, Provencher suggests that *Will and Grace* and the generation of television shows that follow will hopefully attempt to “normalize” same-sex relationships in more queerly visible ways.

Henry Rogers, Ron Smyth, and Greg Jacobs, “Will & Jack: Sounding Gay, but Different” (rogers@chass.utoronto.ca)

This study is significant for two main reasons: 1) Researchers in the field of sociolinguistics have examined speech and language patterns in relation to variables such as class, race, geography, education, and ethnicity, but only two studies aside from the those conducted by Rogers, Smyth, and Jacobs, have examined categories relating to sexual orientation. 2) Rogers is a leading scholar in socio-linguistics and has developed a highly respected quantitative methodology for analyzing gay-sounding/straight sounding speech. Rogers’ work in this area is highly respected among socio-linguists.

In Rogers, Smyth, and Jacobs’s groundbreaking Rainbow study, a majority of glbt and heterosexual listeners were able to distinguish self-identified gay male voices from self-identified straight male voices. Heterosexual and gay voices were then analyzed quantitatively for phonetic traits, frequencies, pitch, linguistic patterns, etc. to determine possible differences in gay and straight “sounding speech.” In turn, Rogers et al. were able to identify specific kinds of language patterns that reoccur in gay speech and in doing so they raise important questions for future studies that they will conduct.

Specifically, they intend to study the subcultural basis of gay speech patterns, speech and gay identity, and the development of particular kinds of speech traits among gay men.

With respect to *Will & Grace*, Rogers et al. ask whether Sean Hayes and Eric McCormack use the vocal characteristics of gay men as demonstrated in the Rainbow study. Since Jack seems to present a more stereotypical gay role the researchers expect that Jack will demonstrate vocal characteristics of the gay-sounding men in the previous study, and that Will's voice will be more like straight-sounding male voices.

Rogers et al. investigate the speech of Will and Jack for each episode during the 2000 and 2001 seasons. The voices are then analogized digitally according to the guidelines established in the previous study. This allows them to adequately compare the speech of the two actors with the results already obtained. The approach also allows the researchers to look for any changes that may have occurred in the actors' speech over time.

During the 2000 season, Jack and Will's voices did differ on some variables. Overall Will's voice mirrored a majority of the "straight-sounding" variables in the previous studies while also presenting some qualities of the "gay sounding" vocal styles. And when giving consideration to key variables, Jack's voice did sound "gayer" than Will's. In the 2001 season both characters sounded gayer than in the 2000 season. In other words, Will's voice, while still "straighter" than Jack's became "more gay" in 2001.

Conclusions: Will has more measurable "straight" qualities in his voice than Jack, who has more measurable gay sounding qualities. According to Rogers et al. it is significant that *while both* characters have become more "gay sounding" in 2001, the straight/gay difference is still maintained. These findings suggest that the creators, actors, producers, etc. have been successful in presenting Will as "straight-sounding" and Jack as "gay-sounding." Through utilizing a complex analysis of vocal patterns the authors identify and discuss the phonetic basis for these successful vocal performances.

The authors thus argue that while Will is a departure from the frequent stereotypical depiction of gay men in media, both actors have been successful in representing two different styles of gay men's speech: one more stereotypical and the other less so. While Will's voice has more of the "straight sounding" qualities than Jack's, it still falls within the range of "gay sounding" voices established by the previous study.

Some items to consider:

Would Will sound "more gay" if played by a gay actor?

The researchers ask whether "camp" speech and behavior are simply one extreme end of a gay-straight continuum, or whether they involve different kinds of performance.

Do the different phonetic features co-occur as a bundle in all speakers who sound gay, or does the speaker make a selection from a possible menu of items?

The researchers plan to address these issues in a forthcoming study that will expand upon current findings.

David Tschida: “The New Gay Man on *Will & Grace*: The Television Construction and Acceptance of a Gay Sitcom” (dat9ad@mizzou.edu)

David Tschida examines how the “comedy of the sexes” convention operates on *Will & Grace*. In doing so, Tschida analyzes the history of television programs that have employed this convention and compares heterosexual narratives and themes on previous programs with narratives on *Will & Grace*. In turn Tschida utilizes some of Alex Doty’s ideas to discuss the queer aspects of the program.

Although Tschida is fairly critical of *Will & Grace*, he finds that the program has several strengths. In his words, “*Will and Grace* can serve as a springboard for furthering social issues.” In 1999, the cast took a stand on California’s Proposition 22, otherwise known as the “Limit on Marriage” bill. Appearing in a TV spot against the proposition, this represented the first time that the entire cast of a television program has taken such a visible stand on a political issue.

Second, according to Tschida, the program offers the possibility that media relationships with gays and lesbians may be changing. He finds that the arrival and popularity of *Will and Grace* may have allowed for other programs to create positively inspired gay characters. It shows that a television situation comedy is a site where cultural difference issues can fade into the distance, if only for a moment.

Tschida concludes that *Will and Grace*, like any situation comedy, has its limitations. At the same time, it does provide a successful example of a text that allows for a new, if somewhat restrictive, reading of homosexuality. This show may only be the starting spot for a radical new look at homosexuality in television.

Melinda Kanner, “Queering the Gay Text: Karen as the Queer Center of *Will & Grace*”(mkanner@antioch-college.edu)

Kanner’s analysis attempts to answer the question: What can queer theory tell us about *Will and Grace*? Kanner addresses this question through an examination of *Will & Grace*, first as a “gay program,” by looking at the ways in which the media have addressed the sexuality of the actors and the characters, and secondly, as a queer program, by employing queer theories to understand if gay content is always describable as “queer content.” In doing so Kanner finds that the “semiotic power that derived from the once subterranean nature of gay life has been replaced with visible, packaged, readable markers of gayness that are controllable by the whim and vagaries of mass culture taste.” According to Kanner, gayness has become, at least semiotically, accessible to non-gay audiences. In the process, gay images have perhaps lost some of their power to interrogate conventions of gender and sexuality. As Kanner sees it, then, gayness has become not only accessible, but also appropriateable. Thus through discussions of *Will*

and Jack, Kanner finds much that is gay, but little that is “queer.” In turn, Kanner focuses on the character of Karen, claiming that:

Much like the Fassbinder Petra von Kant, who, as Sue-Ellen Case has noted, is a "truly queer creature who flickers somewhere between haute couture butch lesbian and male drag queen" (Case 1991: 2), the character of Karen Walker is invested with the power of the queer inside this gay text.

Through presenting an analysis of Karen, a heterosexual character, as the “queer center” of *Will & Grace* Kanner offers some interesting insights into ways in which queer theories might be utilized to analyze dimensions of programs that may—on the surface--seem “straight.”

Thank you for your time and consideration in reading this document. Please attend our paper session at NCA if you would like to know more.
Van Cagle