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# A Photo Documentary: Exploring Queer Identities in KwaZulu-Natal

Nicholas Graves  
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# A Photo Documentary: Exploring Queer Identities in KwaZulu-Natal

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South Africa: Social and Political Transformation

Fall 2022

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## Abstract

Media can be a powerful tool in examining the structures of power that both hinder and advance LGBTQIA+ representation and subsequently, lived experiences. Therefore, being able to understand the varying feelings that everyday South Africans feel towards queer people, will be measured through the media that people consume. For the vast majority of South Africans, this would look like movies, TV soap operas, and discussions that take place on the radio. Understanding the role media plays within the country is vital to understanding the overall progress that has been made.

The media's ability to reflect lived experiences within gay and transgender identities serves to increase representation and subsequent acceptance into broader society. While it may challenge existing dominant cultural identities, gay and transgender representation humanizes their experiences and potentially mitigates violence. Through a multimedia approach, this project

will interrogate the role of the media, representation in politics, and overall acceptance in the current day. Using a participatory media method called photo-voice, the researcher will engage with participants that will speak about their experiences as gay and/or transgender individuals in the Northeast province of South Africa, Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN)). A successful approach will lead to multiple in-depth “profiles” that share their lived experiences, and critically interrogate the role media has played in representation.

## Introduction

Media has the capacity to influence, change, and inspire people regardless of their age, gender, or race. Specifically, the radio, television, movies, and music have the capacity to challenge people’s world view. For many, media becomes their escape from reality. This is especially true for queer people whereas their unique position, often on the fringes of society, causes them to turn to media to tell their stories. However, when it comes to the media that showcases in depth stories of queer lives and experiences, it is quite limited. Yet, storytelling has the capacity to humanize people’s experiences as universal. Media not only can speak to these experiences, but also captures the current moment and issues people face at a given point in time.

This project serves to meet the current moment where LGBTQIA+ stories are in such high demand because people want to see themselves on the screen or in popular media. However, this demand goes beyond simply a desire to be represented. Through a series of interviews, this project aims to understand the importance of quality storytelling of queer narratives upon the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in South Africa, specifically the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN).

It is one thing to have stories told for queer people, but a different experience for them to be told by queer people. Inspired by the works of Professor Zanele Muholi, a visual artist and

activist who centers the work of Black lesbian and transgender experiences in South Africa, this project aims to add to the growing archive created by LGBTQIA+ artists. The objectives of this paper are twofold: on the one hand to interrogate the effects of existing media upon queer lives in KZN and on the other hand to create more media by queer people in the province. As a visual queer artist and researcher, myself, my draw to the topic is both personal and political.

This paper will consist of four sections: a literature review, methodology, limitations of the study, and research findings/analysis. The first considers relevant literature on the topic, providing historical context as well as current media that is explored and present in the scholarship on the topic of queer media activism. The next explores the methods used to source participants of the project. The limitations section will speak to the pitfalls and shortcomings that prevented the project from being successful in its initial conception. Lastly, the research findings and analysis will interrogate the responses of each participant.

## Relevant Terms

To situate this paper, it is worth noting that issues that the use of “LGBTQIA+” and “queer” will be used interchangeably.

## Literature Review

### *Introduction*

The discourse regarding the history of gay liberation movements is relevant to this project as it helps provide the framework for experiences today. First analyzing these experiences under the Apartheid regime, specifically for male conscripts in the military

clarifies the framework with which people were viewed. Under the apartheid regime, there were heavy sanctions on interpersonal relationships along ethnic and racial lines, and the idea of sexuality was often not considered beyond the criminalization of sodomy and same-sex partnerships. Post-1994, as democracy was put on trial, the idea of including queer people in the process was also examined. Understanding LGBTQIA+ visibility through the democratization process is advantageous in gauging current sentiments of gay and transgender people in South African society. Over time, the inclusion of queer voices in the democratization process led to the creation of one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. Progress was signaled through the decriminalization of sodomy and the legalization of same-sex marriage. For many queer people, the post-1994 constitution represents a disconnect between the actual lived experiences of queer people and the sentiments that the larger population views LGBTQIA+ people in society. This is where the analysis of the media becomes relevant. For many queer people, their only visibility and representation were showcased in the media, both South African and international. However, analyzing LGBTQIA+ representation in media, both current and how it has changed over time, serves as a measure of the way people have viewed themselves and broader society. Through an analysis of mainstream forms of media and alternative media formats, this essay aims to interrogate the role the media plays in the way gay people's experiences have either improved or deteriorated since 1994.

*Apartheid Era Criminalization of LGBTQIA+ lives*

Understanding the experience of LGBTQIA+ individuals in South Africa is only possible through contextualizing it with the history of apartheid in the country.

Throughout the early thirties and forties across the world, the medical field largely accepted that homosexuality was a mental disorder. This narrow framework led to many unnecessary deaths at the hand of the apartheid regime. Forensic psychiatrist, Robert M Kaplan, writes about the gross human rights abuses perpetuated against queer individuals by the South African Defense Force. In Kaplan's journal article, "Treatment of Homosexuality During Apartheid" he discusses the traumatic experiences many endured under apartheid. Electroshock behavior therapy was not uncommon where conscripts were shown black-and-white images of naked men while receiving electric shocks. Conscripts were then shown Playboy magazine spreads without electric shocks, to 'zap' the homosexuality out of someone. The results were a failure. And yet these abuses continued. In a Guardian article, multiple interviewees explain the abuses they underwent. Some instances cite the intensity of electro-shock therapy being so intense it blew the person's shoes off.<sup>1</sup> These abuses are just one example of the legacy that apartheid has left in the way queer people view their relationship with the government.

In the military, Kaplan notes a conflation between gender and sexuality. Linking these two issues led to 900 men and women undergoing gender reassignment surgery

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<sup>1</sup> Chris McGreal, "Gays tell of mutilation by apartheid army," Guardian, 29 July 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/jul/29/chrismcgreal>.



between 1969 and 1987.<sup>2</sup> The belief was that because gay men were attracted to other men, they were intrinsically feminine or “sissies.” For gay women, their sexuality branded them as “tomboys.” Thus, psychiatrists believed that changing their gender allowed them to fulfill their projected role as the opposite sex.<sup>3</sup> The psychiatrists did not ask for their consent, ignored the fact that victims would need expensive hormone therapy to maintain their appearance, and had little to no experience successfully completing gender reassignment surgery. It was reported that the army was doing about 50 gender reassignment surgeries a year.<sup>4</sup>

After being discharged, those who received gender reassignment surgery were given new documents and told to cut off ties with their families. Under apartheid, the mental health of LGBTQIA+ individuals were completely overlooked. There were high casualty rates from the surgeries, rampant suicide of those who were forcibly transitioned, and indelible trauma left with individuals. Bolstered by activists, “The Aversion Project” was an investigation of the treatment of homosexuals within the South African Defense Force. This project allowed people to speak about the gross human rights violations and uncover the reality of the work the apartheid regime was doing. Some people reported that there were advertisements in newspapers that the regime was able to successfully convert gay people. Many interviewees noted that media

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<sup>2</sup> Kaplan, Robert M, “Treatment of homosexuality during apartheid,” *BMJ* (Clinical research ed.) vol. 329,7480, 2004, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC535952/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> “Gays tell of mutilation by apartheid army.”

representation would change the way that people viewed gay people.<sup>5</sup> The Medical Association of South Africa issued an apology in 1995, but the South African Society of Psychiatrists has yet to do so. The Aversion project served as an alarm to international human rights activists.

The binary view that the apartheid regime was operating under is explored well in Graeme Reid's book *How to be a Real Gay: Gay Identities in Small-Town South Africa*. Reid interrogates small-town gay identities in an increasingly modern world. A key tenant of Graeme's research also posits the idea that gender and sexuality are often, but not always, linked. One aspect of this is showcased in the way Reid classifies homosexuality in small-town South African contexts. Whereas feminine gays are referred to as ladies and masculine gay men are gents.<sup>6</sup> Through language alone, Reid showcases how gay men and women reappropriate traditional gender roles and norms whereas feminine gay men represent passiveness and masculine gay men are granted dominance in the way they are viewed.

The reappropriation of gender roles within homosexual partnerships is explored well by Dunbar Moodie *et al* in "Migrancy and Male Sexuality on the South African Gold Mines." While it is largely believed that homosexuality is inherently "un-African" and an import from the West, many men working in the mining industry found

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<sup>5</sup> "The Aversion Project" Gay and Lesbian Archives Health and Human Rights Project, Cape Town, South Africa, October 1999, <http://196.21.144.194/healthsystems/aversion.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Graeme Reid, *How to be a Real Gay: Gay Identities in Small-Town South Africa*, Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, p 30.

themselves in male partnerships. Many of these relationships mimicked traditional gender roles of heterosexual relationships. Dunbar *et al* conducted interviews with old men in the Eastern Cape on their experiences working in mines from the 1930s-1950s. These interviews serve as evidence that showcases the complexities of male sexual desire and interpersonal power dynamics. One account from the interviews claims that younger boys that worked in the mines were often referred to as “*tinkonkana* or ‘wives’”<sup>7</sup> While many of these relationships were exclusive to the confines of the mine, the younger boys often completed tasks that mimicked the traditional role of women in a heterosexual relationship. Much of this decorum was exacerbated by the fact that men were separated from their wives and families at home, yet “‘mine marriages’ implied more than casual sex underground... these relationships were supposed to be exclusive, and hence ‘men’ might sometimes fight over attractive ‘boys.’”<sup>8</sup> While not every man engaged in ‘mine marriages’ there were great power dynamics between senior men and younger boys. This example is not to suggest that the relationships in the mines were all-encompassing of homosexuality in South Africa, but rather to showcase the nuances of male sexuality in a historical context. Additionally, this example speaks to the consistent conflation between gender and sexuality that permeates South African discourses around queer identities.

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<sup>7</sup> Dunbar Moodie et al, “migrancy and Male Sexuality on the South African Gold Mines” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 230.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, 234.

*Democratization Process*

In the journal article “South Africa's Democratisation and the Politics of Gay Liberation,” Sheila Croucher argues that the period of democratization was the ripe environment for gay and lesbian liberation movements to mobilize. Croucher also claims that the visibility of gay people was not only a product of democracy but in fact furthered the democratization process.

Croucher argues that the African National Congress (ANC) was instrumental in achieving LGBTQIA+ rights for individuals. She makes the claim that the ANC’s decision to incorporate protections for one’s sexual orientation in its interim Bill of Rights was vital to the eventual implementation in the final draft. However, she considers that this was only possible due to elites in the ANC who were either gay themselves or sympathetic to the gay liberation movement.<sup>9</sup> Namely high profile and respected individuals in the ANC, like Albie Sachs, made this possible.

The gay liberation movement only gained prominence in South Africa in the 1980s. The anti-apartheid framework posited human rights for all. This positioning helped gay and lesbian activists legitimize their demands in the eyes of politicians and the larger society. These arguments helped decriminalize sodomy and secure further protections throughout the courts for same-sex partnerships.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sheila Croucher, “South Africa’s Democratization and the Politics of Gay Liberation,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 315–30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/823387>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

The discourse regarding the history of gay liberation movements is relevant to this project as it helps provide the framework for experiences today. Understanding LGBTQIA+ visibility through the democratization process is useful in gauging current sentiments of gay and transgender people in South African society. Ashley Currier in "Transgender Invisibility in Namibian and South African LGBT Organizing" compares LGBTQIA+ movements in the United States (US) and Namibia and South Africa. Currier explores how there was resistance to incorporating transgender identities in the liberation movement by prominent gay and lesbian activist groups in the US. Compared to that of Namibia and South Africa where both Southern African countries staunchly defended the inclusion of transgender identities in the liberation struggle.<sup>11</sup> While the African continent still has strong levels of homophobia, this comparison shatters many liberal perceptions of Africa as being conservative and exclusive. Currier uses an ethnographic observation of LGBTQIA+ movements from 2005-2006. Her findings are relevant to this discourse as her hands-on experience in the early 2000s can serve as a comparison to the transgender experience in activist spaces in South Africa today.

The evolving recognition of queer lives during the liberation struggle helped the eventual integration of LGBTQIA+ in society. This integration was propagated by the visibility of reduced representations of queer identities in the media. While it was limited, there is a clear link between the inclusion of gay identities in media and the decriminalization of their existence by the ANC.

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<sup>11</sup> Ashley Currier, "Transgender Invisibility in Namibian and South African LGBT Organizing," *Feminist Formations* 27, no. 1 (2015): 94, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43860779>.

### *Existing Queer Media*

With a total population of 60.04 million people, South Africa has a large television viewership presence. The state of broadcasting industry report of 2019 showed that there was an audience of 38.2 million TV watchers of about 14.4 million households.<sup>12</sup> Many of these viewers engage with the TV by watching soap opera dramas. In 2009, on prime-time television, the show *Generations* aired its first same-sex kiss. With one moment, after seventeen years on air, the soap opera which tracks over five to six million viewers every night shifted the representation of gay people in the media. While this moment may seem like a minimal scene in the grander scheme of things, for many South Africans it was a rude awakening. For many, this was the first time had seen same-sex characters. For others, this was their lived experience.

The early 2000s was the beginning of the inclusion of more queer characters in South African media. Many ordinary queer South Africans, however, argue that the type of media that has been presented fits a limited archetype. In Tessa Lewin's "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa" she interrogates the epistemological history of contemporary South African media. By comparing US and Western media to that of South Africa, Tessa argues that Black queer South African artists have shifted the activism space seen today. Using the work and influences by both Black queer artists like Zanele Muholi, FAKA, and existing media, Lewin speaks to the emerging aspects of media activism in South Africa. In an interview she conducts with a participant of the study, they speak to

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<sup>12</sup> Hanno Labuschagne "Most Watched TV shows in South Africa, " *The Citizen*, <https://www.citizen.co.za/entertainment/south-africans-spending-70-more-time-in-front-of-tvs-due-to-pandemic/>.

the presence of an existing queer television personality, Somizi Mhlongo. Mhlongo is an openly gay television personality who experienced a large amount of success in the late 1990s for their appearance in the film *Sarafina*. Mhlongo became a household name due to his unapologetic, flamboyant, almost larger-than-life queer presence. The participant spoke to the presence of having representation in the media as Somizi's "presence on national television provides much-needed proof not only that queer people can exist, but that they can be valued) socially and economically)."<sup>13</sup> Somizi embodies this archetype in many ways, but his success has propelled his capacity to be respected in mainstream South African media.

This type of archetype has become informed by the South African government. In South Africa, national strategic planning has been instrumental in driving the narratives in the media that people consume. Through the implementation of national strategic planning, the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) was created. The MDDA's goals are to create media that enables the creation of inclusive media that reflects the diversity and aspirations of every South African. Further, this agency's goals are to develop smaller, independent production houses to create narratives that include historically marginalized communities. Gay and transgender identities fall in line with MDDA's intention of increasing diversity in South African media.

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<sup>13</sup> Tessa Lewin, *The Aesthetics of Global Protest* (Amsterdam: 2019), 52, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/j.ctvswx8bm.7.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Aceb9b88cc0ebf6b7665e3cd26b0a4fa3&ab\\_segments=0%2F5SYC-6646\\_basic\\_search%2Fltr&origin=&acceptTC=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/j.ctvswx8bm.7.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Aceb9b88cc0ebf6b7665e3cd26b0a4fa3&ab_segments=0%2F5SYC-6646_basic_search%2Fltr&origin=&acceptTC=1)

*LGBTQIA+ Media by South African Queer People*

For many, the media that represents queer people is sanitized and reductive, by getting behind the camera, queer people are reclaiming the way they want to be represented in the media. The media's ability to reflect lived experiences within gay and transgender identities serve to increase representation and subsequent acceptance into broader society. However, much of this media is limited in the way it defines queerness to be more palatable for larger audiences. While inclusive and genuinely representative depictions of queerness may challenge existing dominant Zulu identities, gay and transgender representation humanizes their experiences and potentially mitigates violence.

In Rachel A Lewis' article "Queering Vulnerability: Visualizing Black Lesbian Desire in Post-Apartheid South Africa," she explores the work of visual artist and activist Zanele Muholi. Muholi identifies as a Black Lesbian South African whose work emphasizes the importance of showcasing Black queer intimacy in media. Lewis explores existing scholarship on South African LGBTQIA+ experiences. Many of which center around the often-disproportionate levels Black lesbians face in South African society. Lewis staunchly critiques the work of journalist Clare Carter, who draws attention to the issues of corrective rape against Black lesbians. While it is beneficial to draw attention to the issue of corrective rape and gender-based violence in South African communities, Lewis claims that publishing work about brutality and rape against Black lesbians characterizes the primary representation of queer communities about domination and



violence.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Lewis takes issue with the term corrective rape, as labeling a certain crime that is specific to a group of people sensationalizes and eroticizes the crime. This makes lesbians hyper-visible and vulnerable to the way people view them. Muholi's work aims to circumvent this issue of hypervisibility of Black lesbians.

The limited representation of LGBTQIA+ community has caused many to turn to alternative forms of media to create their own visibility and representation. Through the many projects that Muholi has produced, she centers on Black lesbian intimacy to challenge existing discourses that depict the bodies of women and sexual minorities as the site for people's aggression and subsequent violence. Lewis suggests that mainstream media's romanticization of violence against the LGBTQIA+ community has caused many lesbian and gay human rights activists to turn "toward alternative forms of media like photography, digital [storytelling], and documentary filmmaking to represent the complexities of Black lesbian lives in post-apartheid South Africa."<sup>15</sup> Nonmainstream forms of media also seem to attract LGBTQIA+ communities because of the potential safety it provides for these groups. In the article, "Negotiating Transgender Identities on the Internet- a South African Study" author Jeanne Prinsloo interrogates the experience of transgender people using the South African website GenderDynamix. Although the study was conducted in 2009, it can serve as a relevant benchmark for how South African transgender people viewed themselves at that point in time.<sup>16</sup> An aspect that Prinsloo

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<sup>14</sup>Rachel Lewis, "Queering Vulnerability: Visualizing Black Lesbian Desire in Post-Apartheid South Africa", vol 28, no 1 (2016), 205, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44508120>.

<sup>15</sup> "Queering Vulnerability: Visualizing Black Lesbian Desire in Post-Apartheid South Africa."

<sup>16</sup> Jeanne Prinsloo, "Negotiating transgender identities on the internet - a South African study," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, vol 25, no 4 (2011): 33,

explores is how the advent of the internet provided greater community, visibility, and connection without putting themselves in harm's way. Through observing others' interactions on the internet, people had a greater ability to immerse themselves in culture safely. Some participants reported that their limited findings of transgender stories in the mainstream media were deeply sensationalist whereas "accessible and popular forms of mass media provided the information and stories whereby they could begin to imagine transgender, which tended to be constructed discursively as deviant, and the narratives were presented for their variance from anticipated norms."<sup>17</sup> Many of these stories were found in magazines like *Personality* or even presented on popular television shows like the Oprah Winfrey Show. This limited representation helps rationalize the embrace by activists and artists like Muholi towards alternative mediums of representation like photography and documentary film.

Muholi's work continues to push viewers to recognize the power of not only representation but vulnerability in the way one is represented. Muholi argues through her work that love and intimacy are vital in the discourse of sexual rights. Showing love and intimacy within homosexual partnerships, it encourages the desire to care for and be cared for. However, she often raises the concern that those who are perceived as queer are often racialized by white male representations of homosexuality. In this way, it grants white gay men the capacity to take up space and be respected. However, through masterfully articulating "a conception of lesbian desire [Muholi] raises the question of

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[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345817111\\_Negotiating\\_transgender\\_identities\\_on\\_the\\_internet\\_-\\_a\\_South\\_African\\_study](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345817111_Negotiating_transgender_identities_on_the_internet_-_a_South_African_study).

<sup>17</sup>"Negotiating transgender identities on the internet - a South African study, 40.

differential access to social resources, [she] shows how Black lesbian vulnerability in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be thought outside interlocking structures of oppression, such as heteronormativity, racism, classism, and xenophobia.”<sup>18</sup> When using alternative forms of media, this intersectional view is allowed to be explored and embraced because mainstream media often reduces the complexities of gender and sexuality to be digestible to larger audiences. However, Lewis critiques Muholi’s choice to showcase vulnerability in the way she does by saying that we must conceptualize a world in which violence and erotic agency coexist. Yet Lewis warns that “vulnerability can be a source of both pleasure and danger. For, in contemporary South Africa, freedom does not always mean sexual autonomy; it can also refer to the privilege that accompanies the state of protected vulnerability.”<sup>19</sup> By situating the issue of sexual autonomy within the South African context, Lewis raises genuine concerns, about how might vulnerability be challenged depending on whether one is considered protected or non-threatening to broader society.

## Methodology

The researcher engaged in field research and interviews. Through their time spent studying in the KZN province in 2022 and the advice of Aluta Humbane, a visual artist that

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<sup>18</sup>“Queering Vulnerability: Visualizing Black Lesbian Desire in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” 222.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

works with the Durban LGBT center, the researcher has been able to work closely with gay and transgender communities. The interviews were formal and semi-structured, recorded, and disseminated (with the informed consent of the respective parties). Since an aspect of this project requires the identity of each participant, they have all agreed to relinquish their likeness and image for this project.

Considering that most people in the KZN province in South Africa speak isiZulu and English all the interviews were conducted in English. However, the question of language raises a larger question about accessibility. This project is presented using a multimedia website, and a vital piece of this project is disseminating it to the people it's affecting. Some shortcomings of this project are that those that can engage will be constrained to people who have access to reliable devices and the internet.

The research design used a generic qualitative approach. Since the primary objectives of this project highlight LGBT identities in South Africa, interviews have been vital to the research process. Each participant had one interview interrogating their own experiences and views of South African queer identities. The researcher then took portrait photos that represent each participant to become a part of a larger archive of LGBT identities in KZN.

As previously mentioned, media has the capacity to capture specific moments in time, thus an additional aspect of this project is to have each participant create their own forms of media using photography and audio. Participants have been asked to identify three to five objects that resonate with them or bring meaning to their personal identities and experiences. Using either their personal phone or a phone provided by the researcher, participants were prompted to photograph these objects in whatever way they wish to. Lastly, the participants recorded a brief audio explaining their choices, sharing their experiences, or any relevant analysis related to the

creative process. The media each participant creates has been aggregated by the researcher to be presented and disseminated in a digestible format to target audiences. Target audiences include those a part of the LGBTQIA+ community in South Africa, everyday South Africans, and queer individuals abroad.

Those who participated have been elected through recommendations from the researcher's advisor and potential snowball sampling. Participants were to be intergenerational to incorporate a diversity of experiences in the project, thus the age of participants have been limited to age twenty to sixty. Participants have not been compensated as their involvement in the project is entirely voluntary. To ensure the trustworthiness of the process, each participant was not made aware of other participants. The goal was to capture the experiences as objectively as possible, while the researcher documents the experiences as neutrally as possible.

## Limitations

While there were great strides to minimize the number of limitations in this project, all studies have their shortcomings. First, there is an inherent bias on behalf of the researcher. Given that the researcher is a member of the LGBT community, there are strong aspects of bias in the interviews conducted. While this could also be seen as a benefit to the study given that it could have allowed for participants to feel more comfortable while participating in the study, there are inherent limitations with this bias.

In some cases, there were barriers both culturally and in language. Given that many participants speak isiZulu as their first language, there were multiple times when participants expressed the challenges of conducting interviews in English. This is also reflected in the process of receiving consent from participants as the forms were only disseminated in English, not isiZulu or any other language.

Given that this project relied heavily on multimedia methods to execute the process, it caused significant reliance on technology. Instances where interviews were conducted through online video calls like WhatsApp or Zoom, there were often issues with internet connection. This caused difficulties in recording responses effectively.

Next, there were significant time constraints imposed upon the researcher as the research process was to begin on November 7. This only allowed for nineteen days of data collection and field work. Given that participants all work jobs and have conflicting schedules, this made it difficult to find common times that worked for everyone. Additionally, the researcher fell ill minimizing the research time frame even further. This made it extremely difficult to conduct in-depth interviews that were beneficial to the study.

Lastly, there were financial constraints as the researcher had no reliable transportation. This caused the researcher to rely on personal funds to get around the Durban metro area. Interviews were conducted virtually due to the excessive costs of transportation. This limited the overall vision intended for this project as it required participants to be photographed by the researcher as well as interviewed.

## Research Findings and Analysis

In researching the role, the media plays in the lives of queer people, the interviews uncovered both the possibilities and limitations of representative queer media. There were four interviews that were conducted, but only three will be used in this analysis. Part of this is due to connection issues that occurred during the interview. The discussions that were uncovered during these interviews do not and are not meant to speak for the entirety of queer experiences in KwaZulu- Natal as the community is not a monolith. However, what was uncovered certainly

speaks to the literature that was explored in the literature review section. The topics analyzed are broken down into common themes that came up throughout each interview.

### *Prominent Queer Figures*

In each interview that was conducted, all participants mentioned the role of prominent queer figures in South African society. Each participant namely mentioned the role of Somizi Mhlongo. Mhlongo came to fame in 1992 for his role in the film *Sarafina!* While Mhlongo had a minor role in the film, he eventually gained recognition by coming out and speaking at South Africa's first pride. Blessing, one of the participants, spoke about the role that Somizi played in their own understanding of queerness. They mentioned "you might find greater acceptance if you come out in a flamboyant style, with sequins and turquoise hair—resembling Somizi. Because Somizi epitomizes a queer that has made it."<sup>20</sup> This comment is just one example of the role that Mhlongo has played in the increased acceptance and visibility of queer identities.

While it may seem as though it is a positive, on the other end of the scale, there is the possibility that Somizi's prominence limits people's understanding of queerness as a spectrum. The interviewees expressed that because Mhlongo has had a long, successful career people are more likely to accept his representation and expression of queerness as the only form. This fixed understanding of queerness is limiting in what is possible for queer identities. Sazi, a participant who identifies as a trans woman, mentioned that growing up "the only queer person we had at that point in the past was Somizi Mhlongo. I knew I wasn't Somizi."<sup>21</sup> This showcases how Somizi, as a queer figure, became the figurehead and spokesperson for all things gay. In some way, Somizi and queerness have merged as one in the same. This suggests that when there is

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<sup>20</sup> Lethukuthula Xaba (Actor), in discussion with researcher, November 24, 2022, Recorded Interview.

<sup>21</sup> Sazi Jali (Activist), in discussion with researcher, November 18, 2022, Zoom Interview.

limited representation of queer people in the media, people's understanding can become reduced to being that or nothing at all. This connects to a larger issue than one's mindset, but rather limited language to express LGBTQIA identities.

### *Language*

In conversation with Blessing, they mentioned that growing up there was such difficulty in expressing what they were going through due to limits in language. They grew up speaking isiZulu and they mention that the term for gay is an offensive, almost unspeakable slur. This created difficulty for them because even if they “wanted to communicate concepts or curiosities of my queerness...there were no terms to ask my mother or grandmother about what I was going through without being vulgar. And it is a hard job to step out of that vulgarness.... you can't be in your Black mind as much, you must code change and almost enter your global citizen mind.”<sup>22</sup> This separation of oneself to simply express what a queer person may be going through is incredibly challenging if your language is limited.

This was something that Sazi also reflected on. She mentions how growing up she “didn't even realize that there was the term trans until I watched Ugly Betty... That was when I first saw a trans person... I always thought being trans was that you are medically and legally transitioned.”<sup>23</sup> It is interesting that her first time interacting with this terminology was through the lens of international media. This reinforces Blessing's claim about operating from one's “global citizen mind.” If you were afforded the privilege to be exposed to queerness on an international stage, it is likely that your lexicon and view of the capacity for what qualifies as

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<sup>22</sup> Lethukuthula Xaba (Actor), in discussion with researcher, November 24, 2022, Recorded Interview.

<sup>23</sup> Sazi Jali (Activist), in discussion with researcher, November 18, 2022, Zoom Interview.



queer was much greater. However, access to international media in the late 90s and early 2000s was still limited for many Black people in the country.

Blessing suggests that being comfortably queer as a Black African person requires one to “westernize or eurocentricize your entire existence. You must choose an alternative identity to live comfortably queer while being Black so that you have nice words. So that you can say ‘nonbinary’ and ‘gender non-conforming.’”<sup>24</sup> Blessing’s critiques of inclusive language serves as a reminder that much of the discourses for gay people is driven by the language that is used. In the same way, being able to use language like non-binary and gender non-conforming can easily be seen as imports from the West because in some respects they are. The use of language in popular media not only is used as a means to express but can also limit access to the community.

### *Media and its Perceived Effect*

In the interviews many of the participants noted the role of representation on specific shows like soap operas. Namely, there were mentions of the role of the famous television show *Generations*. The first episode of the infamous soap opera or commonly referred to as “soapie” debuted in 1993. Today, there are millions of viewers that watch soap operas every night in South Africa. Thabiso, a cis-gender gay male, mentioned the role of the inclusion of *Generations*’ first gay narrative. He notes:

In the early 2000s where people are just starting to talk about gay rights and gay people having the right to marry... Mfundu Vundla who knew he had a very powerful position... introduced a gay narrative and the whole country was up in arms... that in my opinion was a huge catalyst because it forced people to confront the issue of homosexuality. It forced people to have the conversation about homosexuality... with an intention to understand.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Thabiso Kazi (Legal Advocate) in discussion with researcher, November 22, 2022, Recorded Interview.

Thabiso mentions the decision that Mfundi Vundla made to include this narrative in the show was a major shift in the way that people viewed queerness as well as the way it was represented. In the United States, the inclusion of many LGBTQIA+ narratives have been propagated by prominent and powerful queer producers. Vundla is not a part of this community but decided to include these stories in the television scape. Some would argue that this inclusion was mainly to begin to draw attention to other members of society that had previously limited representation. It could also be debated that this incorporation of queer characters was simply driven by getting more views. However, Thabiso was not the only participant who mentioned the role soap operas played in the visibility of queer people in the media scape. However, it was still quite limited in the representations at the time. For Sazi, she “knew that, definitely I wasn’t any of the guys on the TV soapies at the time. So, I couldn’t even identify myself what was in [South African] media.”<sup>26</sup> The difference in experience between Thabiso and Sazi is just one example of the shortcomings of mainstream media. For Thabiso, a cisgender gay man, the visibility that *Generations* at that point in time was instrumental in his visibility. On the other end of that, for Sazi, the media was still not exactly what representative of her experience as a transgender person.

Another aspect that was mentioned was about the role of government sponsored media post 1994. Blessing mentioned the role of these forms of media during their formative years. They said, “there would be like PSA style TV shows aimed at youth that would cover your first period, sexual assault, HIV/AIDS, and sexual orientation.... There would always be a queer character that they didn’t say outright was queer. They didn’t express themselves as queer, they were made to look queer through wardrobe and hair and makeup....”<sup>27</sup> This is another important

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<sup>26</sup> Sazi Jali (Activist), in discussion with researcher, November 18, 2022, Zoom Interview.

<sup>27</sup> Lethukuthula Xaba (Actor), in discussion with researcher, November 24, 2022, Recorded Interview.

aspect of this section: the media that was meant to represent queer identities was incredibly limited to one format of what queerness could be. Part of this was likely commissioned by the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA). The MDDA was a government agency that was meant to create a more inclusive South Africa through media. The MDDA is still active today and helps approve certain forms of media that can be presented and broadcasted on state owned television networks. However, this limited representation that Blessing is speaking to was intentional. In this way, the media could argue that they were representing all members and issues of society when they were only doing so superficially. In terms of the lived experience for queer people, Blessing mentioned that these limited representations gave “a feeling when you’re younger that that is not going to be my expression of queer. It makes you feel shut out of [your] identity.”<sup>28</sup> Despite all the efforts made to sanitize the representations of the LGBTQIA+ community, it often caused people to continue to feel like they remained on the fringes of society.

### *The Future of Queer Lives*

In each interview, participants mentioned their concerns and hopes for the future of LGBTQIA+ lives in South Africa. For someone like Sazi, who comes from the activist space, many of her concerns came back to advocacy. She expressed that there is a difference intergenerationally in the protections that younger people expect from the government. To be specific she says that the younger generations “[like] the 2000s are more vocal. And being more vocal makes things easier to get access. We are now informed because we now have organizations that are informed.”<sup>29</sup> Sazi brings up a vital point: the advent of social media, access

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Sazi Jali (Activist), in discussion with researcher, November 18, 2022, Zoom Interview.

to information, and dissemination of information creates more informed populations. This access is something that previous generations in South Africa did not have access to. Today, there are still many issues in terms of access to information. From the issues of education to access to internet, there continue to be barriers to understanding available information and resources for queer people. Yet, organizations like TransHope prioritize the liberalization of information and aim to challenge issues of accessibility.

For Blessing, who is an actor and has been working in the entertainment industry for the last decade, their perspective on the future of queer livelihood is much more pessimistic. While mainly speaking from a perspective of media representation, they speak from their experience being queer in a lot of entertainment spaces. They are not how they often find limitations in the media that they can act in. In discussing the existing representations, they mention the following:

It does not have to be categorized so much, nor does it need to be so singular. The monster that is the media often says one thing and does another. They will say inclusivity then be super selective about the imagery they allow on a platform....I look at the media that gets commissioned and ends up on actual screens.<sup>30</sup>

Part of this view is informed by their own experiences, granting them a different perspective to the type of media that get picked up. Additionally, what Blessing is speaking to is a wish for more diverse representations of queerness in media. On many soap operas, having a gay character is now the norm, but their storyline is incredibly superficial and limited to one representation. In Thabiso's interview, he mentioned that after the bold decision to depict a same sex relationship on *Generations*, "it has now become the norm where every production must have a gay narrative and character who represents this part of society....To further the agenda of

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<sup>30</sup> Lethukuthula Xaba (Actor), in discussion with researcher, November 24, 2022, Recorded Interview.

educating the nation about homosexual lives and homosexual lifestyles.”<sup>31</sup> Yet when asked whether or not the stories are in depth, he acknowledges that the media is simply not there. Part of this hypervisibility in the media is also a way for media broadcasters to depict a world view that is more liberal. Perhaps this is to suggest, like the constitution, that South Africa is more progressive and inclusive than it actually is. Incorporating queer narratives grants broadcasters the ability access to these populations, but for those who are not interrogating the type of representation critically, they might continue to view queer people as they are depicted in the media, only worthy to be on the fringe.

Blessing goes even further and suggests that the media “would sooner appropriate the best bits of queerness in its fabulosity...they would sooner take every make up trend and match that in their campaigns than free up seats at the table for every shade of queer. That’s why there will always be one.”<sup>32</sup> This reappropriation of queerness by mainstream media is not uncommon today, whether that is having an overly flamboyant talk show host or even brands using queer language like “slay” or “yas queen.” These are all efforts to appear more inclusive and subsequently liberal. This language was created and coined by American gay Black men but is not that uncommon to see in a store front or on a commercial. The idea of opening a “seat at the table for every shade of queer” as Blessing mentions, would thus require large brands, corporations, and media companies to acknowledge the diversity within the LGBTQIA+ community rather than pick and choose the aspects that are easily commercialized and marketable. Representation in the media is only one aspect of the future of queer people in South Africa.

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<sup>31</sup> Thabiso Kazi (Legal Advocate) in discussion with researcher, November 22, 2022, Recorded Interview.

<sup>32</sup> Lethukuthula Xaba (Actor), in discussion with researcher, November 24, 2022, Recorded Interview.

Thabiso, as a legal advocate holds a similar pessimistic perspective of the future. Thabiso expressed strong critiques of the government in their response to violence against queer people. He mentioned that the response from the government was quite delayed in response to this violence:

When we started to have a lot of cases of queer violence...the failure of government to react swiftly by omission perpetuated a culture amongst delinquents in our society– that the violence against gay people is normal. However, we have seen a change in the modus operandi of the government. Where the government is keen on not only driving an agenda or a message where homosexuals are tolerated...<sup>33</sup>

In a world that is becoming increasingly globalized, there continue to be calls for inclusivity and diversity in the work environment. For the South African government to adopt and reinvent itself as a country that not only includes gay people, but tolerates their existence is useful for the state's image. For both media productions and large corporations, including queer people into the narrative comes down to capital. Through increased diversity trainings and superficial meetings, it sends the message that these spaces are increasingly liberalized and subsequently ideal for queer people to operate in. This is not the case for Thabiso, who expressed the continued sentiments of disapproval towards gay people in the legal profession. Inviting the perception that the corporate space is an inclusive environment is a large leap from the Apartheid regime which punished its homosexual conscripts.

Thabiso goes further in his critique of the government as he has seen first-hand the shift in the way it operates. He urges us to consider how “The government is now interested in investing money and doing workshops for its own employees... Workshopping teachers on the

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<sup>33</sup> Thabiso Kazi (Legal Advocate) in discussion with researcher, November 22, 2022, Recorded Interview.

whole psychology of being a homosexual or transsexual in a school environment.”<sup>34</sup> For some, this large shift from a corporate environment which Thabiso describes only operates at “the eye-level” would be seen as a positive in the direction of progress. However, the government’s change in its protections for queer people in the corporate space through sensitivity and diversity training is rooted in the logic of capital. For people like Thabiso, it raises serious concerns around the country’s ability to genuinely improve the livelihood of queer people and its investment to appear as though it is doing so.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there are still large strides to be made in the realm of protecting the lives of queer people in South Africa. While there continue to be rife examples of femicide, gender-based violence, and murders of transgender people in the country, one cannot help but remain concerned for the future of the LGBTQIA+ community in South Africa.

This project showcased how there is very much a vibrant and active queer community in Kwa-Zulu Natal. While there continue to be limited representations in the media, there have been increasing calls for people across the globe to see themselves in the media they consume. The interviews uncovered that there continues to be a need for people to see themselves and their own communities represented in media instead of having to consume international media. An area of further study could include the influence of international media upon queer individuals in KZN.

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<sup>34</sup> Thabiso Kazi (Legal Advocate) in discussion with researcher, November 22, 2022, Recorded Interview.

While the presence of prominent queer figures is certainly a large switch from no representation at all, there needs to be more diverse representations of what queerness could be. As the government continues to transition toward a more liberalized democracy, the state has a strong responsibility to call in its citizens instead of keeping them on the fringe. Limited attempts to inclusivity through diversity trainings and superficial quotas is not enough when LGBTQIA+ people are being targeted daily. Part of this requires intentional strategic planning to equipped citizens with the understanding and stigmatization of the lives of queer people. In a country as diverse as South Africa, with as many languages that are spoken, there is almost no way to bring universality to one singular representation of queerness. That being said, there needs to be a recognition of the past and how the struggle for queer liberation movements allows for LGBTQIA+ lives to be visible today. However, it will take significant amounts of time and educational understanding for queer people to flourish in their identities in South Africa.



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## Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

Given that the interviews that were conducted were to be recorded and include each participants likeness and image, the types of questions that were conducted were specific to each interviewee. Some questions were as the following:

What kind of media do you consume?

When was the last time you felt the media, you consumed showcased you/your identity? How did it make you feel?

When you were younger, compared to now, how do you feel the media you consume accurately reflects you/your life?

What would you change/keep the same about existing media representations of the LGBTQIA+ community?

In terms of the way the media represents gender affirming healthcare, do you think South African media contributes or hinders acceptability in larger society?

While growing up, was there any person or media that helped you feel seen?

While South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutions for queer people in the world, do you believe the laws enforced socially and politically reflect the country today?