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"Straight" Acting: Changing Image of Queer-Masculinity in Media Representation

Zheng Zhu, Ph.D.¹

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I critically examine media representation of Welsh rugby legend Gareth Thomas, with a specific focus on the construction of his masculinity as an outing gay celebrity. The existing critical scholarship has studied various forms of media representation of queer images. But they did not examine how unconventional queer representation interacts with the normative gender performance. This paper investigates mainstream media's discursive construction of masculine gay male. The findings call our attention to the emergence of macho gay characterization, which supports the hegemonic domination of heterosexual normativity. The stigmatization of gay-ness as the deviated other is rationalized through illegitimizing its positions in the public spheres, marginalizing non-masculine gay characters, and erasing the larger socio-political condition that oppresses closeted gay athletes.

Keywords: Critical, Gay, Masculinity, Media, Representation.

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1.0 Introduction

The present study critically examines how a hyper-masculine gay celebrity is represented by the popular media outlets. A thorough and extensive survey of the existing literature on queer studies revealed that the traditional scholarship was focused on criticizing the negative construction of gay men as *unattractive*, *clownish*, and *perverted* social deviants (Cruz, 2003; Dorfman, et al., 1995; Giles, 2003; Goltz, 2011; Gould, 2001; Gould, Jamieson & Romer, 2003). A very important theme underlying such negative construction is the pessimistic portrayal of the gay romance as fragile and short-lived (Dorfman, et al., 1995; Goltz, 2011). There is a lack of critical attention to the growing media representation of hetero-normative performance by gay characters. To fill in this important gap in the scholarship, I study how mainstream media represent legendary Welsh rugby player Gareth Thomas's masculinity as a newly-out gay celebrity. Based on a wide and careful selection of news texts from a variety of media sources such as newspapers, TV talk shows, magazine covers, and gay dating websites, my critical analysis of the ways these media sources represent Gareth Thomas demonstrate the gender

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norm's continuing oppression on sexual minorities' performance of their public identities. This paper calls our attention to the domination of heteronormative performativity in the queer communities where performing *straight* is the new norm. In response to this call, I suggest mainstream media produce a diverse range of representations that positively portray non-straight acting queers and strong policies be made to provide closeted sexual minorities with accepting environment to come out.

Media representation shapes our perception of reality and ensuing social actions (Ansari, 2008; Flores, 2003; Hall, 1997; Orbe & Kinefuchi, 2008). According to Vargas (2009), people's attitudinal and behavioral patterns are largely determined by the retrieval of two memory sources; one is their prior experiences, the other is the extent and variety of their exposure to the relevant media coverage. The latter often reinforces or guides the ways we understand the former. Therefore, it is important to develop research projects focused on the critical examination of media representation because such studies could reveal the *power mechanism* that naturalizes the representation, which in turn, casts a strong impact on the ways we act, speak, and perceive (Hall, 1997; Moreman & Calafell, 2008; Yin, 2005).

Hall (1997) points out that mainstream media usually evade reports that challenge the status quo and power system. The *absence* of news stories critical of the oppressive power relations maintains the social stability for the privileged class and further impedes the radical social change (Hall, 1997). Following Hall's claim on media and its relations to the formation of sociopolitical system, critical scholars argue that modern media have evolved into a multifaceted entity including a wide range of representations (Ma, 2000). But the *inclusion* does not change power relations, nor does it truly voice the concern of minority groups and historically marginalized others (Hall, 1997; Ma, 2000; Miller, 1988).

New media evoke viewers' normative *desire* through strategic ways of representing *the other* as the undesirable, abnormal, and disruptive *outsiders* (Hall, 1997; Yin, 2005). Critical media and gender scholars assert that queers, especially gay males, should be considered one of the most stigmatized groups of people in the dominant cultural representations (Erni, 1998; Goltz, 2011). Gay men have long been represented as the epitome of a sexual *pervert* in American society due to their direct threat to the commanding power of heterosexual masculinity (Berger & Kelly, 2001; Goltz, 2011, p. 12). In recent years, the stigmatizing representation of gay characters has shifted to a new form of construction that glorifies *well-built* and *straight-acting* gay men. Such glorifying construction perpetuates the superiority of hegemonic masculinity and continues to marginalize the queer performativity. The present study is aimed at revealing this crucial *shift* in the representation through a critical examination of Gareth Thomas, an *out* gay celebrity's gender performance. The analysis sheds light on the strategic ways through which mainstream media support normative gender performance and larger social structure that *mutes* the closeted gay men.

The following part of this manuscript starts with a broad and in-depth literature review highlighting the prior and existing research on media representation of gay characters. Following the literature review section is a detailed explanation of the research methodology and data collection process. The critical analysis of the data is offered after the method section. The final conclusion and discussion section summarize the findings, emphasizes the present study's theoretical contribution, and provides suggestions for future inquiries.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Gay men in popular media

Spanning over the past four decades to date, there has been a rich body of literature focused on the critical studies of media representation of gays and lesbians (Giles, 2003; Gorman & Nelson, 2004). Majority of these studies criticize the ways the queer characters are misrepresented through the heterosexual *lens* (Giles, 2003). One line of criticism is driven towards the negative portrayal of gay men as promiscuous *freaks* and *diseased* outcast (Goltz, 2011). Another growing line of scholarship is directed

towards the investigation of *tragedy* theme in gay drama (Fejes& Petrich, 1993; Giles, 2003; Halberstam, 2005). In particular, the concept of *temporality* is central to the creation of the ideological system that denies the *future* of gay masculinity (Fejes& Petrich, 1993; Giles, 2003). For example, the popular media representation emphasizes the *pathetic* and *pessimistic* life experiences of gay men through contrasting younger gay males with their older counterparts (Fox, 2007; Gorman & Nelson, 2004).

The notion of *youth* plays a key part in the contrasting representations because it signifies the hopeless future of gay men as they grow old; younger gay males are usually depicted as physically attractive, artistically talented, and sexually viable (Dorfman, et al., 1995, p. 35). However, the construction of older gay males is primarily negative and derogative (Dorfman, et al., 1995, p. 35). For example, the *perverted*, *closeted* and *creepy* 60 years old gay men, who prey on younger men in their 20s, are constantly featured in movies, TV dramas, or spoof videos (Cruz, 2003; Dorfman, et al., 1995; Goltz, 2011). The *future* of gay men is denied because there is no transition period between youth and seniority in dominant media narrative (Cruz, 2003; Dorfman, et al., 1995). The idea that being “gay” is doomed and your life is bound to be miserable as clock ticks away is implied and further perpetuated in these narratives (Goltz, 2011, p. 47).

A recent research funded by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services shows that the younger gay men’s suicidal rate is growing rapidly (Bishop, German, & Grelle, 2013). One of the main causes was found to be their heavy exposure to media content, which casts strong impact on the younger viewers’ perception of themselves as groups of marginalized and hated *outsiders* (Gould, 2001; Gould, Jamieson & Romer, 2003). Younger gay men are easily indoctrinated to believe that living a gay life is in essence a suffering experience because their beauty, happiness, and good time are always short, fragile, and prohibited (Dorfman, et al., 1995, p. 29-34). This phenomenon caught the attention of critical scholars who call it *queer temporality*, which refers to the *futureless* representation of gayness by the popular media (Dorfman, et al., 1995, p. 29). This pessimistic construction of *gay-ness* to some extent unveils the *fear* of dominant cultural group who sees the gayness as a threat to the gender normativity, which includes the ideal of masculinity and ability of procreation (Dorfman, et al., 1995; Goltz, 2011, p. 6).

2.2 Gay romance: A common tragic narrative

According to Goltz, (2011), a major form of representing the queer temporality in the mainstream media is the tragic portrayal of gay romance. For example, as shown in most Hollywood movies, gay men’s love ends tragically as they either have to go back to cross-sex relationships, or one of the two passes away, leaving the other in emotional trauma (Goltz, 2011, p. 20). The tragic narrative of gay romance alludes to the conclusion that there is no happy ending for the same-sex relationship and being gay means being lonely and painful. Here, the *loneliness* signifies the desperation and solitude that many gay men have to tread through as they look into the future (Gross, 2007; Hooks, 2001).

2.3 Gay celebrities in the media

The existing research on media representation of gay men has offered us an inclusive, near-exhaustive and multifaceted understanding of the ways the marginalized gender identities and performances are constructed in dominant cultural narrative. As emphasized above, popular media often portray gay characters and their romantic stories in negative light, to perpetuate the value and belief system upheld by the gender norm. Nevertheless, this type of representation is changing as a growing number of *out* macho or hyper-masculine gay males start receiving heavy media coverage. Mostly well-known athletes and entertainers, these celebrities who came out as *gay* are represented in different ways. For example, unlike the traditional depiction of a flamboyant public figure, the current representation is moving towards a highly masculine construction of gay celebrities as they are very *straight-acting*.

Dow’s (2001) study on Ellen DeGeneres’ *outing* shifts between her real-life celebrity status as an enthusiastic, outspoken, and confident media personality, and her fictional character as Ellen Morgan in

ABC sitcom *Ellen*. Dow's research calls our attention to the *inter-textual* representation of Ellen DeGeneres as her character came out the same time she announced her real-life lesbian identity (Dow, 2001, p. 136). Although her coming-out move was praised by the show's critics and audiences, the news media emphasized Ellen did not want to make her sexual orientation a *big deal* (Dow, 2001, p. 133). Dow points out that Ellen only wanted to be true to herself and feel *freed* after years' *hiding* from familial and public suspicion of her sexuality. Therefore, the news media's emphasis on *not making it a big deal* and the coming out is only about *changing her own life* evades the larger power structure that continues to oppress closeted sexual minorities.

In addition to Dow's critical studies of Ellen DeGeneres, research on *outing* celebrities is mostly focused on examining the on-screen (fictional) and off-screen (non-fictional) representation of their gender performances. Compared to the rich scholarship that has studied dramatic representations, such as movie and TV series' portrayals of queer characters, there has not been a published study that examined non-fictional media representation of gay male celebrities. Especially, with the recent success for movies such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and the high profile coming-out stories of Ricky Martin and Anderson Cooper, popular media's attention has moved away from the traditional construction of gay characters as the feminine and clownish *others* to the representation of them as a *dominant man*. However, this important shift has not been extensively investigated. Hence, there is an exigency of exploring non-fictional media texts as a new cultural space where an in-depth examination of the representation of masculine gay celebrity needs to be conducted.

2.4 Gareth Thomas - A man, successful athlete, international star and out gay celebrity

Born in Sarn, Wales, on 1974, July 25th, Gareth Thomas exhibited a breathtaking talent for sports at an early age (Thomas & Parfitt, 2006). He went on to achieve numerous athletic awards for playing rugby at Pencoed Rugby Football Club (Pencoed RFC) and Bridgend Ravens. At the peak of his career, Gareth Thomas was credited as the most well-known and respected rugby footballer in Wales history (Thomas & Parfitt, 2006).

Thanks to his remarkable accomplishment as an athlete and virtuous private life that keeps him away from promiscuity or drug-related scandals typical of entertainment and sports celebrities, Gareth Thomas is widely considered the role model for young men who aspire for a successful athletic career. However, in December 2009, Gareth Thomas admitted he is gay (Thomas, 2015). His *coming out* story immediately turned into a worldwide news sensation (Thomas, 2015). A common theme shared by the mainstream media at the time was that his career might be jeopardized and he risked losing his reputation as a successful and righteous *man* (Thomas, 2015).

When a reporter interviewed him about his plan after coming out, Gareth stated: "What I choose to do when I close the door at home has nothing to do with what I have achieved in rugby" (Stafford, 2009). He said he is still a committed and diligent rugby player; "the guy you used to know and admire in the field" (Stafford, 2009). Represented as both a *sport legend* and *gay man*, Gareth Thomas' *coming out* move made him a controversial figure in the mainstream media. The "controversial" refers to the shifting representation of his masculinity as a gay, and yet straight-acting gay celebrity. Thus, with a specific focus on the construction of Gareth's new masculinity, and the ways it interacts with normative gender performance, the following question is identified: how do mainstream media represent Gareth Thomas' masculinity as a gay celebrity?

3.0 Method

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the most appropriate method for this study because it addresses the role of discourse in legitimating power relations. CDA emphasizes the ways power inequality is

legitimated, reinforced, or transformed through the use of language (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1983). This assumption is the central principle of CDA (Carvalho, 2010; Van Dijk, 1983).

Dahlberg and Phelan (2011) characterize CDA as a complex *methodological concept* consisting of 3 major components; *discourse, analytical, and critical*. *Discourse* is concerned with the particular ways of using language, and organizing various *linguistic elements*, such as the written words, symbols, or bodily movements, into a pattern that makes the narrative understandable to the readers (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011). *Analytical* refers to the complicated and yet *systematic practice and process* through which the main principles and rules guiding the way discourse is structured are discovered (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011). *Critical* determines the nature and goals of using CDA as a search for the ways readers are intended to understand and consume the texts (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011). Fairclough (1995) argues that CDA aims to

“Explore opaque relationships of causality and determination between a) discursive practices, events, and text, and b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes. CDA investigates how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power” (p. 132).

The discovery of the larger social structure and cultural system that builds and normalizes discourse is the ultimate objective of CDA (Fairclough, 1995).

CDA studies text and context (Locke, 2004). Texts are the *material base and site* where a specific linguistic form is produced and naturalized (Locke, 2004). Texts are not just objects where language, words, and sentences are written (Locke, 2004). Rather, texts contextualize the language, sentences, and symbols (Locke, 2004). For example, a newspaper article differs from a fashion magazine article in how the linguistic elements are organized, use of particular signs, and selection of words to express meaning and emotion (Locke, 2004). This difference shows how the nature of a text is ideologically pre-determined by the dominant discourse and social structure; or the *context* (Locke, 2004).

The context usually has two layers embedded (Locke, 2004). One is the dominant assumption that defines the *type* of the text, and the way it constructs the system of signs (Locke, 2004). The other is the ideological system that renders whatever is being written and represented in the text as *normal and correct* (Locke, 2004). For example, the articles or pictures covered in a fashion magazine demonstrate how *being fashionable* is ideologically defined by the society (Locke, 2004). And the ways in which the written words and pictorial texts are presented in the magazines further illustrate how the meaning is systematically constructed to attract the target audiences, and support the norms shaping their lenses and practices (Locke, 2004). As Baker and Galasinski (2001) argue, the critical studies of language are textual; “language serves a textual function by which elements of it are responsible for making discourse appear ‘as text’ while signaling its relevance to the context in which it appears” (p. 67).

Baker and Galasinski explains that “the textual function of language makes it intelligible to the addressee precisely as a text that makes sense within itself and within the context of its appearance” (p. 68). Therefore, the critical examination of a certain linguistic form or structure should be attentive to where the text is produced, and the *context* that functions to make sense of the production to the target audiences and support the dominant sociocultural system (Baker & Galasinski, 2001). As Dahlberg and Phelan points out, the *context* is a power-laden concept. CDA is utilized to uncover the *mechanism* supporting the unequal power relationship (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011). Mechanism is the larger and key contextual element guiding the ways the dominant discourse is constructed and sustained in the text (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011). For example, the critical studies of the newspaper texts usually demonstrate that the government policies control how the news reports are written, and the specific ways the language is used in the news articles (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011). The policies, regulations, or particular actions that are implemented by the government are considered the core *mechanism* underlying the production of meanings in the news texts (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011). Drawing on these insights, my examination of how mainstream media represent Gareth Thomas

employs critical discourse analysis as a tool to systematically analyze how media texts construct the shifting gay masculinity, and how the construction interacts with normative gender performance.

3.2 Analytical procedure

In order to exhaust all the relevant media texts and maximize the representativeness and generalizability of the present study, I set the starting point of my data collection at December 2009, the time when Gareth publicly announced his sexuality, and strive to review all the media coverage of Gareth Thomas as inclusive as possible since then. I leave out media reports that pay attention to Gareth Thomas, and yet fail to treat his masculinity as the focal point in the coverage. As a result, 40 newspaper articles are collected through using LexisNexis and ProQuest software, 3 video clips are found on BBC news, and 2 online gay themed websites are located. As soon as I complete data collection, I immediately start a two-week process of analyzing recurrent thematic issues. Four themes are finally discovered. The following section specifies the findings.

4.0 Analysis

4.1 Role model for gay male

As an aging rugby player, rather than a burgeoning star in the field, Gareth is reportedly *fighting* to set up a positive example for young athletes who are undergoing the similar struggle between their private life and public space where they are forced to act *straight*. Gareth is also portrayed as the role model for gay teenagers across the globe. At this part, media representation of Gareth Thomas emphasizes his courageous move of *coming out* and *masculine appearance* that suddenly break the long-held social stereotype of gay men. *The Independent* calls Gareth Thomas' public declaration of his sexuality *inspiring, revolutionary* and a *heroic act* that "helps rebuild the image of gay men in a world full of homophobic discriminations and abuses" (Foy, 2010, p. 10).

Gareth Thomas' muscular physique and masculine mannerism are implied as re-constructing the traditional gay persona. The re-construction is described as a positive transformation for gay men. *The Daily Telegraph* calls Thomas "the most admirable sportsman in the history of Rugby." (Scully, 2010, p. 20). The following report explain show Gareth Thomas' charming personality, courageous attitude and "perfectly muscled body" re-ignites erotic desire among both gay males and straight women (Scully, 2010, p. 20). Using terms such as "irresistibly charismatic," "men of your dream" and "respectable gay men," *The Daily Telegraph* shows Gareth Thomas is attractive, but in a *heterosexual* way. The underlying message is clear that it does not matter who you are sleeping with, "as long as you are masculine and act like a man" (Scully, 2010, p. 20). *The Sun* directly quotes a line from a lady they interviewed: "I do not care if he likes men or women, all I know is he is smoking hot, I like his muscle and that husky voice" (Kimmage, 2010, p. 53). To a certain extent, Gareth Thomas' sexual orientation is rendered invisible, his *straight-acting traits*, muscular physique, and reputation as a well-respected rugby player continue to secure his popularity and domination both in the field and gender hierarchy.

As a famed athlete, Gareth has been featured in numerous magazine covers and news stories over the years. His tattooed muscular arm, broken teeth, bald head, and hoarse voice became what mainstream media refers to as his "signature mark" and the proof of a "dedicated professional athlete" (Pattullo, 2010, p. 65; Stott, 2010, p. 7). Even after he came out, his physicality still draws media attention, majority of which lauds it as the kind of male body you would fantasize about on a daily basis. One of the biggest gay online dating websites, Gay.com, constantly puts Gareth's picture as the cover of its webpage and associated offline magazines. Meanwhile, the flamboyant gay men images are placed on the *margin*. Relative to the sensual and positive description of Gareth Thomas as "sexiest man of all" and "you want to taste his body," gay males who have heavy makeup and appear in provocative and feminine poses are dubbed with negative or derogatory terms such as "drama queen", "sex slave" or "eccentric man slut" (OUT, 2009; 2010).

Throughout these gay-themed media forums, Gareth Thomas is unanimously represented as the ideal embodiment of gay masculinity; he is rough and has cool six pack abs (*Gay.com*, 2010, April)! In a similar way of representation, non-gay media outlets also give compliments to Gareth Thomas' physicality and his *straight* performance; although Gareth admitted he is gay, he is hot and women find him attractive (*McLeman*, 2010, p. 10). Being gay does not prevent his female fans from admiring him. On the contrary, they love him more because of his courage, bravery, and integrity. As one of the interviewees mentioned, “He is still hot to me!” (*Hari*, 2010, p. 30).

Gareth Thomas's macho figure and manly conduct challenge the media stereotype of gay men. The mainstream media praise Gareth for coming out as a gay man, and meanwhile, looking and acting *straight*; he exemplifies a new form of gay masculinity supporting the normative masculine performance. The underlying message conveyed by the media is that “don't be afraid of telling people you are gay, you can still have that masculinity in you, and let's stop media stereotype by starting to act like a *man*.”

Gareth Thomas' sexual orientation and physical characteristics are split at this moment. Being gay, whereas holding masculine mannerism reinforces his deference to the heterosexual norms in part due to his sports career and celebrity reputation. In an interview on BBC, Gareth said that he has *friends* in the gay community years before he publicly came out. What he did with them is separate from his public performance as an athlete and much-beloved public figure (BBC, 2009, Dec 22nd). Thus, *acting gay* is implied as forbidden to the public space. Non-masculine behaviors are not supposed to be exhibited and acted out *loud* by a man under media scrutiny. Being gay is fine, but subverting normative gender performance is considered bizarre, non-attractive, and problematic.

4.2 “No gay talk” in sports team

As “do not ask, do not tell” policy in the military, issues related to sexuality in sports are rarely exposed to wide public discussion due to their high degree of sensitivity that poses a threat to the norm of athletic machismo. When being asked why coming out so late, Gareth Thomas points out that it is very hard to “spill it out” as a professional rugby player (*Garrod*, 2009). When you are physically around many men for a competitive sport like rugby, it is not a wise decision to reveal your sexuality (*Garrod*, 2009, p. 10).

Gareth said he could not afford the consequences of losing his rising stardom during the early years of his career. As he reiterated throughout the interview, making his country proud, representing Wales, and playing rugby are the three most important priorities in his life (BBC, 2009, December 22nd). He would not trade them for anything (BBC, 2009, December 22nd). Moreover, the news media frequently describe Gareth as he is very clear in drawing the line between his sexual orientation and the sports he loves as a professional athlete (*Garrod*, 2009; *Martin*, 2009). For example, one of his most widely-circulated quotes is “What I choose to do when I close the door at home has nothing to do with what I have achieved in rugby” (*Stafford*, 2009, p. 19). This frequent quoting reinforces an impression that playing rugby is prioritized over his sexual orientation and being gay is limited to his private space, which is completely separate from the professional identity he considers as irreplaceable, monumentally critical, and most important to him and his life. As Robet Norster, Cardiff Blues chief executive, commented in an interview with *Scotland on Sunday*:

“Gareth Thomas is a credit to Cardiff Blues who has truly brought honor to the jersey as a formidable player and a strong leader. His private life is his own concern and we will continue to acknowledge him for the qualities he brings to the squad as a player and an individual who exemplifies the values of commitment, determination, and fair play we expect from our team” (*Hannan*, 2009, p. 21).

Therefore, being gay is represented as a package he has to carry, a burden he needs to bear, and a *reality* he is forced to face and hide from. Such representation further creates a perception that Gareth Thomas just happens to be gay and he is assumed to put the *dirty laundry* inside his private room to protect his sacred rugby career. Rather than confidently addressing Gareth is a proud gay man, mainstream media strongly implies that being gay is not anyone's choice, it is a bad luck to be gay, so we should not blame Gareth Thomas for being this way and instead focus more on his successful rugby career. As highlighted in many news interviews, Gareth Thomas called it an unimaginably *devastating* experience for him to come out, and he would not have been able to go through this process if it were not for his love for rugby (Withers, 2010, p. 13; Guban, 2010, p. 62; Williams, 2010, p. 6).

Contrary to Gareth Thomas's masculine and tough man image in popular media representations, these news reports focus on describing his crying face when he recounted how he desperately begged for help and felt both physically and mentally incapable of playing rugby when he decided to disclose his sexual orientation to the head coach in locker room (Tucker, 2009, p. 16). Thus, *coming out* is represented as a negative move that severely dis-empowers a man; both his virility and optimism. Meanwhile, stigmatized as deviated and marginalized *other*, gayness is perceived to possess the elements of polluting the righteous and healthy domain, such as a sports team or career where the extreme masculine identity is displayed, performed, and protected.

4.3 Man of guilt

Before Gareth Thomas came out, he was married to his childhood sweetheart Jemma from 2002 to 2006 (Weathers, 2009). Their marital relationship ended soon after Jemma's three miscarriages and his decision of coming out (Weathers, 2009). During his interview with BBC, Gareth Thomas expressed his extreme regret of hiding his true sexuality away from the woman he cares about, respects, and yet never been sexually attracted to or in love with. Begging for her understanding, forgiveness and praying for her recovery from their failed marriage are two most salient issues emerging from Gareth's interview discussion with BBC news.

As one of the most recurrent lines in the interview, Gareth Thomas reiterated his heartfelt apologies to Jemma, whom he described as an *innocent victim* of the mistake he made in his early life (Leckie, 2010, p. 7). The *Daily Mail* uses "cheating," and "liar" to describe Gareth Thomas as a lying husband heartlessly betraying the woman who trusted him and suffered from his dishonesty at the cost of three miscarriages and an irreparable public humiliation (Weathers, 2009, p. 22). Not only evident in this interview, but other media sources also indicate the similar tone that blame Gareth on his dishonesty, selfishness, and cowardliness, which ruin a woman's life and leave her with unforeseeable trauma. However, these media coverage fail to examine the larger social structure and historical forces that prohibited Gareth Thomas from coming out at an early age.

Victimizing Jemma as *the only one injured* was overwhelmingly consistent in mainstream media. Gareth Thomas was correspondingly portrayed as the sole perpetrator of her tragic marriage. The acclaimed masculinity of Gareth Thomas as a strong and fearless out athlete was put into question because he maliciously used a woman to protect his career and personal life (Taylor, 2010; Fielding, 2010; Bott, 2010; Ferguson, 2010). Moreover, media representation of Gareth Thomas as a guilty husband is not limited to the overt sympathetic support towards Jemma. Some news stories portray Jemma as a strong-willed woman who still "feels proud of" her ex-husband after he came out (Jones, 2009, p.12). The positive construction of Jemma as an understanding woman of her disloyal husband affirms and re-assures the negative characterization of Gareth Thomas as a man with no virtue and courage; being physically strong does not necessarily determines one's spiritual strength (Bott, 2010; Ferguson, 2010; O' Neill, 2010). At this juncture, the construction of Gareth Thomas' masculinity departs from the masculine ideal enclosed by the gender norm and dominant media representation. Instead, he is represented as a man with no guts. His masculinity is *questioned* and even criticized to secure the border of heterosexual normativity via a discursive referencing to his prior marriage, and yet without taking into account of the

various forms of societal oppressions inflicted upon him by places such as families, schools, and sports teams, which determined his early closeted lifestyle choices.

4.4 Bigger, stronger, and tougher

As noted in the sections above, Gareth Thomas ‘physique draw heavy media attention, majority of which focuses on his muscular build and tough mannerism both on and off the rugby field. Constructed as a new gay icon, Gareth Thomas is represented as challenging the stereotypical view of gay man. At this part, his muscular physique is *stretched* by mainstream media as setting the trend for future queer generation.

For example, *The Independent* describe Gareth Thomas as “the kind of man you can hardly see as a gay” (O’ Neill, 2010, p. 10). This comment is not only shared by many other news media sources, but what also accompanies this comment is usually a short paragraph that graphically illustrates Gareth Thomas’ “breathtaking” rugby body; broad shoulder, big arm, muscular chest and “a pair of legs that run faster than anyone in the field” (Robins, 2009, p. 10; O’ Neill, 2010, p. 10). Being athletic, strong, and physically superior are symbolic of Gareth Thomas’ *gayness* in media representation. Throughout his numerous appearances on online magazine covers such as *Out* and *Attitude*, Gareth Thomas is always positioned as the “role model for younger gay men” (*Attitude*, 2010).

On these magazines covers, Gareth Thomas often wears his sports uniforms and holds a rugby ball in his arm. Titled as “Pink Elephant on the Pitch” by the *Attitude* magazine, Gareth Thomas is portrayed as an arrogant, confident, and strong *jock*. At the bottom of the cover picture, it says Gareth Thomas “wants to be a gay role model he never had.” In 2009’s *gay.com* advertisement, Gareth Thomas is represented as having the gay male body that even straight male can only dream of (*gay.com*, 2009). *Out*, *Gay.com*, and *realjock.com* all used Gareth Thomas’ muscular body as an example to demonstrate what an attractive gay man means and should look like.

However, none of these media outlets emphasize anything beyond physical attraction and sexual prowess. In other words, the intellectual importance of gay men is largely ignored and considered insignificant. This type of representation alludes to Goltz’s (2011) early criticism on media representation of older gay men as perverted and non-attractive *creepers* regardless of their personalities and any achievements they have made in life. At this part, media representation of Gareth Thomas as a role model for younger gay males asserts his physical superiority and masculine personality on a superficial level. Confining gay male to a narrow space bounded by pursuing physical perfection and extreme machismo constitutes the ideal personification of the emerging *normative* gay masculinity, which supports the dominant gender performance. Put differently, the media representation of Gareth Thomas as a man attracted to the same sex, whereas behaving like a hyper-straight male in essence perpetuates the ideological domination of normative gender performance. Such normative performance negates the voices of sexual minorities who possess less masculine physical features and personality traits, and yet might have made significant intellectual and material contributions to the society.

5.0 Discussion and conclusion

The present study examines media coverage of Welsh rugby legend Gareth Thomas, with a specific focus on the representation of his masculinity as an out gay celebrity. Although critical media scholars have studied the construction of gay *butch*, none of these studies either looked beyond fictional forms of representation or analyzed a particular type of celebrity. This project strives to meet these research *gaps* through a critical investigation of the non-fictional mainstream media’s representation of macho gay man, and how the representation interacts with normative gender performance.

The findings reveal that, unlike fictional media portrayals, the non-fictional media sources do not use a certain *dramatic* framework to construct the *characters*. Instead, the media directly show a positive

representation of Gareth Thomas through a discursive negation of the non-masculine gay men. *What it is being said* discursively renders *what is not being said* marginal and powerless (Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram & Tincknell, 2004). The representation of Gareth Thomas as a role model for gay people, and the sympathetic support towards his ex-wife Jemma are seemingly contradictory, but in fact supporting the domination of *straight* normativity through shielding the larger gender oppression and warranting the rejection of *other-ed* queer performances. At this part, I would like to argue that, the mainstream media function *dialectically* to legitimize the structural domination that places *closeted masculine gay male* on the margin of socio-political space as the straight-acting *other*. Further, being gay, and the significant issues related to the *act* of coming out are marked as inconsequential, unimportant, and secondary to issues perceived as more important and critical to a *man*, such as his career, family, and public image.

Gareth Thomas' reiterative confession to his guilt as a lying husband and unshakable commitment to rugby minimize the larger socio-political forces that cause his traumatic marriage experiences and closeted lifestyle choice. Further, Gareth Thomas' incapability of disclosing his sexual orientation at an early age is attributed to his lack of courage and selfish protection of his prominent athletic career. The complex socio-political structure that regulates gayness as a tabooed topic in public domains is not deeply investigated by the mainstream media.

The de-contextualization of Gareth Thomas' troubled personal life and upcoming career track can be conceptualized through Kawai's (2009) critique of neo-liberalism, which erases the overarching power structure. Part of the major arguments made by neoliberalism is that individuals are responsible for their immediate actions and they should not blame society for their bad fortune or failure to achieve success (Kawai, 2009). On a different level of consideration, media representation of Gareth Thomas also supports the cultural assumption of *gay talk* as an inappropriate choice of topic and course of action in hyper-masculine fields such as sports and military. Gareth Thomas' self-revelation is praised, but as an aging athlete who was in the closet during his heyday, and someone who considers performing *gay act* as an extremely private issue limited to his *bedroom*, the actual problem suppressing Gareth Thomas is avoided in the discussion. The structural oppression against gay men remains untouched and needs further interrogation in order to truly empower sexual minorities and challenge the oppressive hierarchy created by the gender norm.

Simpson (2008) points out that the real social change and transformation require radical dialogue with *the other*. Only upfront and radical encounters with the *otherness* would eventually disrupt the ideology that suppresses the forces of resistance. In light of Simpson's theoretical envisioning of creating productive dialogue with *the other*, future media representations are expected to offer more critical, self-reflective, multifaceted, and in-depth analysis regarding sensitive social issues. Ultimately, an open dialogue on these issues can be formed for positive social and political change, through which a mutual understanding could be improved and reached between the *self* and *other*. More specifically, I argue that strong policies be made and implemented to ensure the production of more diverse and positive representation of sexual minorities in popular media. Key social, political, and educational institutions, such as local communities, governments, and schools, should strive to create supportive policies and foster a growing tolerable environment for the closeted GLBTQ individuals to come out, and continue their lives with no fear for losing jobs and personal safety.

Present study critically investigates media representation of an emerging gay masculinity. One obvious limitation in the current study is the selection of research subject. Future investigations could explore media representation of a diverse range of celebrities or non-public figures who appear in different media outlets. That being said, a research like that can be both time-consuming and labor-intensive. Therefore, rather than conducting a solo-project, I encourage a group of scholars working closely together. Such collaboration could provide a more comprehensive and accurate interpretation of queer imagery in prevailing media representation.

Finally, Collier et al., (2002) calls for an intersectional conceptualization of the current critical scholarship. Their call encourages scholars to *complicate* their existing research agenda through a systematic incorporation of multiple cultural elements. Following Collier et al.’s claim, it is important to recognize the performance of gay masculinity as a fluid, multilayered, and shifting entity, in which different factors might conjoin and contest, such as gender, race, nationality, and socio-economic conditions. By bringing together these interrelated factors into the research process, future inquiry could expand its scope of complexity to advance the studies on media representation of queer performativity.

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Appendix: Media data

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