The Rhetoric of Sexual Experimentation: A Critical Examination of Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl"

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Queer Media Images

LGBT Perspectives

Edited by Jane Campbell and Theresa Carilli

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We dedicate this book to the brave and dangerous act
of being, and/or loving someone, queer.
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The Rhetoric of Sexual Experimentation

A Critical Examination of Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl"

Brittani Hidahl and Richard D. Besel

In June 2008, singer Katy Perry exploded onto the music scene with her hit single "I Kissed a Girl." The pop song quickly leapt to number one on the Billboard charts, becoming the summer anthem for a generation of young people. Within weeks, it seemed that every mall and radio station across the country was blasting Perry's saucy song. Her music was catchy enough that even seven-year-old girls were soon mindlessly singing along to it, without comprehending the real meaning behind the lyrics. Perry began appearing on talk and radio shows worldwide, proving that she had successfully infiltrated the world of the pop elite.

While media journalists were busy glamorizing Katy Perry's feisty attitude and pinup girl outfits, many others were criticizing the song, including, not surprisingly, right-wing religious conservatives who proclaimed that it advocated a gay lifestyle. One church in Ohio even went so far as to post this message on its marquee: "I kissed a girl... and then I went to hell." When asked about the sign, Reverend Dave Allison said, "It's not something that is really a shock if you're a scriptural person. We meant that as a loving warning to teens... The Scriptures tell us that you should not do what the song tells you to do. The Scriptures are not ambiguous on this issue" (Lecker 2008). Joanne Brokaw, a Christian music blogger from Beliefnet, expresses similar views, saying, "I just think it's interesting that seven years ago she had a Christian album and what she's doing now is clearly not Christian" (Marikar 2008). Because so
many organized religions believe that homosexuality is a sin, it is no surprise that these religious figures are critical about Perry's flippant attitude toward what they consider the immoral behavior of a lesbian kiss. It is mildly surprising, however, that much of the homosexually world is no happier about Perry's song, believing that she is simply promoting and perpetuating stereotypes. The New Gay asked Perry in an interview, "Isn't ["I Kissed a Girl"] kind of like those straight girls who make out at frat parties to get guys’ attention?" (Rosen 2008). Perry's song contains controversial lines that can be interpreted offensively for those lesbians who struggle to disprove negative stereotypes. One angry blogger on afterellen.com, a site devoted to "news, reviews and commentary on lesbian and bisexual women in entertainment and the media," expressed her disgust with the song, stating, "Perry has told the press, 'It's about the magical beauty of a woman.' Hmm. I didn't really get that." (Perry's lyrics call attention to the anonymous, experimental nature of the kiss.) The blogger continues, "How flattering! Lesbians love to be science projects" (Bendix 2008). The one thing that homosexuals and religious advocates can agree on is that Perry's song does not set a good example, although their reasons differ greatly.

No matter which group one chooses to side with, it is clear that Perry's portrayal of the lesbian experience is different from mediated depictions of years past. Images of gays and lesbians have changed in the past several decades, although not to the extent one might expect. Gay activist Vito Russo's famous book-turned-movie The Celluloid Closet examines Hollywood's homophobia from the very beginning of film. In his book, Russo documented "how lesbians and gay men, throughout the early decades of filmmaking, were either rendered completely invisible or portrayed in vague and coded ways, most of which were negative" (Signorile 2003, 231). Hollywood has slowly been transitioning from portrayals of gays as villains and killers to portrayals of gays as everyday men and women—a struggle that will surely continue into future decades.

Hollywood is not the only media outlet that has been changing the way homosexuals are portrayed to the general public. In fact, "TV treatment of lesbians and gays roughly parallels that of Hollywood film" (Fejes and Petrich 1993, 399). Negative stereotypes of gays were inserted into television from its earliest days, much like the stereotypes found in film. However, beginning in the 1970s, gay characters began to be humanized a little more, due to the gay and lesbian community's demands for change. This progress has continued, but the presentation of homosexuals on television is still problematic. "Gays and lesbians rarely are presented as members of a larger homosexual community," state Fejes and Petrich, and "gays and lesbians are secondary or occasional characters who exist primarily in a heterosexual environment" (1993, 402).

Recent media transformations have not been as revolutionary as one might expect. In 1987, Celia Kitzinger, a lesbian psychologist and current associate editor of Feminism and Psychology, argued that the recent shift in psychological research from the view of homosexuals as intrinsically deviant (which dominated in the 1970s and 1980s) toward a liberal-humanistic view of lesbians and gay men as "just like heterosexuals" was not as positive and progressive as it seemed. Rather, she claimed that this viewpoint reinforced the dominant social order by "presenting same-sex sexuality as a matter of private lifestyle, thereby neutralizing its political challenge to heterosexuality" (Diamond 2005, 104). So while it might seem that media portrayals of homosexual men and women have finally given the gay community an opportunity to expose their real lives, in fact the portrayals reflect heterosexual views of the gay world. Diamond further argues that a close reading of contemporary media depictions reveals that "heteroflexibility" is packaged in a manner designed specifically to titillate young male viewers and presents same-sex experimentation as a means of confirming one's essential heterosexuality. We argue that the "bi-curious" monologue of Perry's "I kissed a Girl" enunciates the societal expectation of heteronormativity—the view that heterosexuality is the natural and normal sexual identity for individuals. We also explain how Perry's work is damaging to lesbians who strive to prove that their love is just as valid and worthwhile as a heterosexual couple's, mainly because the song conforms to, rather than defies, heterosexual expectations.

Perry's first single, "I kissed a Girl," from her 2008 album One of the Boys, was scheduled to be officially released on May 6, 2008, but the reaction from listeners was so strong that the single was made available for purchase on iTunes on April 29, a week before its intended release ("Hottie Katy Perry," 2008). The song rose to fame after it was featured on an episode of the show Gossip Girl ("Katy Perry biography," n.d.). Within its first week, the song ranked number twenty-four on the Billboard Pop Singles chart. It climbed to number one on the Billboard Top 100 and held the spot for seven consecutive weeks. The song was so popular that it managed to stay on the Billboard chart for twenty-three consecutive weeks. The song also topped charts in other countries, including Canada, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand ("Katy Perry—I kissed a girl," n.d.). The song was nominated for a Grammy in the category of Best Female Pop Vocal Performance, but was beaten out by Adele's performance of "Chasing Pavements" (Past Winners Search 2013).

"I Kissed a Girl" presents an often-disregarded—and ignored lifestyle, but not necessarily in the most favorable or most accurate manner. Perry's lyrical choices need to be analyzed in order to discern whether or not her portrayal of sexual experimentation is a fair representation of a lesbian lifestyle. Many people who are not familiar with this way of life base their judgments of lesbians on the stereotypes portrayed in the me-
dia. “The media are likely to be most powerful in cultivating images of events and groups about which we have little firsthand opportunity for learning,” states communication and cultural studies scholar Larry Gross. “Lacking other sources of information, most people accept even the most inaccurate or derogatory information about a particular group” (Gross 2001, 11). Furthermore, “minorities share a common media fate of relative invisibility and demeaning stereotypes” (12). Therefore, it is important to know what stereotypes are being presented so that the gay community can support or defend these labels, as needed.

To argue that Perry’s bi-curious narrative in “I Kissed a Girl” plays into the societal expectation of heteronormativity, and to explain how Perry’s song is degrading to lesbians, we must first explore Perry’s personal life and her musical career to understand how her upbringing influenced her career choices. From there, we will examine which sexual identity is present in Perry’s song and how that identity is constructed within the artifact. We analyze Perry’s lyrics for evidence that both supports and resists heteronormativity and use this evidence to prove the claim that this song is detrimental to the lesbian couple who is attempting to demonstrate to society that their relationship is as meaningful as their heterosexual counterparts. Finally, we offer an example of a song that portrays homosexuality in an appropriate and meaningful way, in an attempt to provide an alternative to Perry’s flippant approach to this serious topic.

THE RISE OF KATY PERRY

Katy Perry was born Kathryn Hudson on October 25, 1984, in Santa Barbara, California. The daughter of strict Christian pastors, Perry grew up singing in churches. Perry states that her mother used to ban her from listening to “secular” music. However, after Perry heard a Queen album at a slumber party, her view of music changed forever. Perry states, “Freddie Mercury was—and remains—my biggest influence. The combination of his sarcastic approach to writing lyrics and his ‘I don’t give a f**k’ attitude really inspired my music” (“Katy Perry: Queen of Rock,” 2008). Perry also claims to be influenced by Alanis Morissette, and she actually worked with Morissette’s producer, Glen Ballard. Her recordings with Ballard won her the title of “The Next Big Thing” from Blender magazine in 2004 and eventually helped lead to her signing with Capitol Music in the spring of 2007 (“Katy Perry biography,” n.d.).

Perry quickly made a name for herself in the music industry with songs like “Ur So Gay,” “I Kissed a Girl,” “Hot N Cold,” and “Waking Up In Vegas.” However, this is not Perry’s first attempt to infiltrate the music industry. She released her self-titled debut album in 2001 under her real name, Katy Hudson, at the age of sixteen. This album featured songs written and co-written by Perry, but the subject matter was vastly different from that of her 2008 album, One of the Boys. An album review by Christianity Today editor Russ Breimeier hailed Perry as a promising Christian singer: “I hear a remarkable young talent emerging, a gifted songwriter in her own right who will almost certainly go far in this business” (Breimeier 2001). Breimeier’s prediction may have proven correct in the long run, but not in the religious venue that he was expecting.

After her first attempt at an album flopped, Perry did not give up. She adopted the pseudonym “Katy Perry,” so as not to be confused with actress Kate Hudson, and adopted a new persona. Her Christian fans were not too happy with Perry’s sudden role reversal, however. “It seems like ever since the name change, she’s gotten this rep as a party girl,” Breimeier stated. “You can still hear some of the talent that was there before, but it just sounds like she’s doing whatever she can to get noticed” (quoted in Marikar 2008). Perry did get noticed, and in a big way. Pop star Madonna commended Perry’s 2007 hit “Ur So Gay” on the Johnjay and Rich Show on KRQQ, stating that it was her “favorite song” and encouraging them to “check it out on iTunes.” Madonna also went on to mention the song to Ryan Seacrest, telling him she “had to hear it.” Thanks in part to the good press by Madonna, Perry’s song gained popularity quickly. In fact, the “Ur So Gay” music video had one million views within a week of appearing on MySpace (“Hottie Katy Perry,” 2008). Perry’s career only escalated from there, with the release of her album One of the Boys in 2008.

On May 15, 2008, the California Supreme Court ruled that “sexual orientation, like race or gender, does not constitute a legitimate basis upon which to deny or withhold legal rights” (Mears 2008). Overnight, gay marriage became legal in Perry’s home state. Homosexual couples from across the country rushed to California to take advantage of the chance to validate their relationship in the eyes of the law. But while gay rights advocates were celebrating, other groups, such as the Protect Marriage Coalition and Concerned Women for America, were planning their retaliation. On November 4, 2008, California voters passed a state amendment banning same-sex marriage. In the aftermath of the election results, neither side has given up. Gay rights advocates continue to strive for equal protection under the law, and right-wingers are intent on keeping marriage a heterosexual institution. In a time when the political opinions on gay rights are so heated, it is easy to see how Perry’s song stirred up controversy.

THE ORIGINS AND METHODS OF QUEER THEORY

The origins of what is today known as queer theory can be traced back to the late 1970s. In the time period after the 1969 Stonewall riots, “homosexuality began to lose its essentialist and uniform connotation while
homosexual desire began to be positioned in a social and historical context” (Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, and Bilteyst 2008, 336). This encouragement to change the ways of thinking about homosexuality would ultimately lead to radical change in gay and lesbian studies. However, the development in queer theory was definitely not the beginning of the gay liberation movement. In fact, homophile movements in Europe as early as the end of the nineteenth century fought to “have homosexuality recognized as a natural human phenomenon” (Jagose 1996, 22).

Social constructivism emerged in queer theory as the dominant approach for discussing identity and sexual orientation from both historical and cultural angles. Two important principles emerged from this approach: first, socially recognized sexual orientations vary culturally and historically; second, in cultures where heterosexuality and homosexuality are acknowledged, sexual behavior can move between these categories or incorporate both (Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, and Bilteyst 2008). In America, where basic gay and straight sexual identities are recognized, many alternative sexual identities have emerged, including bisexual, queer, questioning, intersex, and pansexual, among others.

While many people in the gay community adhere to one of these identities, others prefer not to affix a label to their identities. This reflects a core message of queer theory: the concept of resistance. Resistance is a conscious refusal of labels that emphasizes a retreat from binary thinking about sexuality. Queer theory embraces all “non-straight” sexual identities, not strictly gay or lesbian, to reverse society’s assumptions about sexuality and gender (Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, and Bilteyst 2008). Queer theory’s promotion of individuality and tolerance of differences encourages societies to look beyond their norms and at least be tolerant, if not accepting, of alternative sexualities.

Another identity against which homosexuals struggle, especially in media portrayals of the gay community, is an extension of the common straight identity. This portrayal is termed heterosexual: “heteronormativity: the view that heterosexuality is natural and normal for individuals and society.” Heteronormativity does not just construct a norm, it also provides the perspective through which we know and understand gender and sexuality in popular culture: asserts Didi Herman, a professor of law and social change at the University of Kent Law School (Westerfelshaus and Lacroix 2006, 144). The principle of heteronormativity privileges heterosexuality in much the same way that whiteness privileges whites or patriarchy privileges men. From a queer perspective, one of the prevalent difficulties facing gay portrayals in the media is how to “out in culture,” otherwise described as “how to occupy a place in mass culture, yet maintain a perspective… that does not accept its homophobic and heterocentric definitions, images, and terms of analysis” (Creekmur and Doty 1995, 2). No matter what the outcome, however, increased exposure in the media does not always equal increased visibility for gays and lesbians.

Visibility is one of the LGBT movement’s main slogans, and it is to this end that everything from buttons and bumper stickers to shirts and suspenders are emblazoned with the gay pride rainbow. Annual gay pride parades and festivals flourish in the streets of many cities. Through increased visibility, “the queer movement seeks to acquire social acceptance, freedom, and basic safety for sexual minorities” (Galewski 2008). While this is a noble goal, it is proving to be a long, uphill battle.

Along with this increased visibility comes an ongoing concern with the way popular culture supports the conventions of mainstream heteronormativity. Many activists feel that these representations of homosexuals in the media in fact tame and contain, if not outright exclude, queer sexuality. The pervasiveness of the strategic rhetoric of heteronormativity enables heterosexual norms to shape how our own sexuality and the sexuality of others are understood, and “influence[s] which forms of sexuality are sanctioned and which are proscribed” (Westerfelshaus and Lacroix 2006, 428). “The popular media provide audiences with powerful ritual experiences that tap into and promote the mainstream’s sociosexual mythology. These mediated rituals perpetuate the heterosexist social order, often at the expense of queers and queer sexuality” (Westerfelshaus and Lacroix 2006, 430). Sexual experimentation is one such example of a ritual experience that often only serves to reinforce heteronormativity. “In popular culture, kissing a woman is only permissible and sanctioned if a woman is already an avowed heterosexual,” states “Fatemeh,” a blogger on the feminist blog Feministe. “This drags up the male fantasy of lesbian women that perform on each other to please him instead of each other.” There are many slang terms to describe stories of this type of experimentation, including “bi-curious” and “LUG” (“lesbian until graduation”). However, many of these stories ultimately end with the woman focusing on dating men, “not because they were pretending same-sex desire before but because they are giving in to intense social expectations now” (Baumgardner 2007, 41).

Another problem with the media’s representation of lesbians is that the portrayals tend to be very polarized. At one end, we see the intensely butch woman, with her manly hairstyle and cargo shorts. At the other end is the femme, the “lipstick lesbian” who is ultra-feminine with long, flowing hair and stiletto heels. Within the context of the LGBT counterculture, a hierarchy of queerness has developed in which the “butch has been enshrined as ‘the gospel of lesbianism, inevitably interpreted as the true revelation of female homosexuality.’ Conversely, femme gender performance has been considered a retro assimilationism, an unbearable surrender, an unaccountable selling-out” (Galewski 2008, 280). With this perspective of the femme woman as not a “real” lesbian, the public’s perception of lesbians is not helped when ultra-feminine women such as
Katy Perry write songs that further downplay the significance and increase the sex appeal for men of an attractive woman kissing another woman. Queer theorists have investigated the impact that queer music can have on identity formation and maintenance in the gay community. Driver (2007) asserts that “girls not only reference and discuss music with explicitly queer messages; they also offer interpretations of visual, verbal, and sonorous languages exceeding heteronormative codes, used as a part of their ongoing identity work” (196). Clearly, queer music is a central part of gay life, as it provides gays and lesbians with positive role models who are not afraid to be “out and proud.” Driver also believes that “having access to queer music . . . helps queer youth to counter the heteronormative ethos of their social environment” (198). The challenge in analyzing Perry’s song is that Perry is neither a queer artist, nor is she seeking to act as a voice for the queer community. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that Perry is providing lesbians with any sort of positive identity formation; neither is she aiding in the acceptance of a lesbian or bisexual identity by questioning. Instead, Perry’s song is only, in the words of gay activists, “reinforcing stereotypes and trivializing lesbianism” (“Musician of the year,” 2008, 87). One of the ways in which Perry trivializes lesbianism in “I Kissed a Girl” is through her construction of a bi-curious sexual identity.

HETERTONORMATIVITY AND SEXUAL IDENTITY IN “I KISSED A GIRL”

It is important to note that the bi-curious sexual identity in the song is not Perry’s; rather, it is the sexual identity of the narrator. “I love my men,” stated Perry in an interview with The New Gay (Rosen 2008). “I’m not a lesbian, but I can appreciate the beauty of women.” Perry openly admits that the song is merely a fantasy; “it’s a song about curiosity,” she asserts. Although Perry herself is heterosexual, it is clear that the persona in her song is not, or is at least questioning her sexual identity. The narrator openly admits to having a boyfriend, yet she kisses a girl and “like[s] it”—a fact that is asserted nine different times in the song. Her curiosity to explore other sexual identities is clearly expressed throughout the song. It is also evident that the narrator is unsure about her sexual identity and is at least questioning an alternative to the heterosexual orientation.

“I Kissed a Girl” both supports and resists the concept of heteronormativity. Although the song presents a bi-curious monologue, it does so in a way that favors heterosexuality over homosexuality. From the very first line, the narrator dismisses the girl-on-girl kiss as anything remotely meaningful. She emphasizes the spontaneity of the act, almost proclaim-
ordinary occurrence, an innocent act, which begs the question: If the kiss were not an innocent experimentation and was, in fact, a display of lesbian passion, would the kiss then become less innocent?

Perry does claim to be sensitive to gay issues. In an interview with the popular gay magazine *The Advocate*, Perry stated, “I guess it is a subject that is close to my heart. I have a lot of friends who are gay, and I have kissed a girl. I grew up in a very strict household where that was considered what you call ‘an abomination’—and I *f*cking hate that word” (Pratt 2008). Perry can claim to be “a friend to the gays” all she wants; however, her dismissive treatment of such a serious topic suggests otherwise. It is nearly impossible to see Perry’s song as a good example of defying heteronormativity when there are so many superior examples of songs that address the same topic in much more effective ways.

**ALTERNATIVE VIEWPOINTS FROM LESBIAN SONGWRITERS**

There are lesbian songwriters who have broached this topic with much more honesty and integrity than Perry. In fact, the song “I Kissed a Girl” is not an original concept. In 1995, openly bisexual singer Jill Sobule released a song with the very same title. (Perry’s song is not a cover of Sobule’s; it is simply a song on the same topic that goes by the same title.) However, Sobule’s song was a more serious portrayal of sexual experimentation than Perry’s adaptation. Sobule admits, “I played a show in Phoenix [in 1995] and there were a bunch of young girls with braces on their teeth, and they were yelling for the song. And I thought, this is so great, because I remember having braces on my teeth and having a crush on my best friend, and feeling so friggin’ ashamed of it. If I would have heard a song like that, that would have made me feel much better” (Boehlert 1995).

Sobule’s song quickly became a hit with lesbians and bisexuals everywhere because it celebrated kissing a girl. Her song is a firm proclamation that there is nothing wrong with kissing a person of the same sex and that the writer liked the encounter so much, she might repeat it. Sobule’s lyrics bear similarities to Perry’s at times. However, Perry’s portrayal of the subject matter from a straight woman’s perspective results in a very different, much more lighthearted song. When asked about Sobule’s same-titled creation, Perry replied, “If my song directs traffic to Jill, that’s awesome. She’s deserving” (Montgomery 2008). And how does Sobule feel about Perry’s take on the topic? “I don’t feel precious about the title, but I’ve gotten tons of e-mails from annoyed fans,” she tells EW.com. “Some think it’s more of a Girls Gone Wild thing than anything shocking or empowering to true gay feelings” (Halperin 2008). It is honest songs by openly gay artists like Sobule that will help to correct the concept of heteronormativity.

**CONCLUSION**

On the surface, Perry’s song seems like a statement in support of lesbian relationships, based on the simple fact that it is a narrative about a same-sex kiss. However, once investigated in detail, it becomes evident that the lyrics actually reinforce heterosexual norms and perpetuate stereotypes. In the end, Perry is only trivializing lesbianism with her glib and superficial outlook. With so many negative stereotypes of homosexuals still perpetuated by the media, it is important for consumers to reject as many false and demeaning images of gays and lesbians as possible. One way of doing this is to not support media that treat queer relationships in such a dismissive manner. Perry’s song only contributes to the stereotype that bisexuals are oversexed and do not know what they want, as well as the conception that lesbians cannot sustain meaningful and committed relationships. If consumers can keep songs like this from circulating to top spots on the billboard charts, perhaps they can start to dispel some of the unfair typecasts behind the songs.

To break free from the constrictive social pressure of heteronormativity, society needs to view same-sex encounters as “no big deal.” Only once these experiences become commonplace and accepted can the norms of heterosexuality begin to be questioned. Perry’s rhetoric does not take strides to break free of heteronormativity. In fact, because of her heavy support of the straight sexual identity, her song is actually degrading to lesbians. Instead of presenting a simple, honest narrative of a woman who kisses another woman and likes it, Perry downplays the experience through the use of alcohol and the underscoring of straight identity. The narrator is very clear on the fact that this kiss is simply an experiment and that its outcome does not matter. Throughout the song, same-sex encounters are made to seem frivolous and inconsequential. Thus, this song does damage to the progress of lesbians who are determined to prove that their love is the same as that of heterosexuals.

**REFERENCES**


EIGHT

Queer Male TV Commentators

Kinjo-no-Obasan in Advanced Capitalism

Kimiko Akita

The inclusion of effeminate or feminized or gay male guests and cross-dressing commentators on Japanese TV talk shows, daytime variety shows, and “light-news” programs has become increasingly common, accepted, and popular, with a certain nostalgic appeal. Such men—once denigrated as okama (homosexual, but literally, “rice pot”) but now called new-half, a queer term with a more positive connotation in mainstream culture—have become staples of popular Japanese TV programming, respected for their opinions and perspectives, rather than for the sheer entertainment value of what was once considered their deviance.

It took many years and a historical and cultural path different from that of the West for queer men on Japanese TV to achieve their current status of urban, intellectual, and critical commentators respected by male and female viewers of all sexual orientations. These queer men are readily identifiable by fashion and makeup (often, like Miwa Akihiro, Matsuko Deluxe, Ikko, Mitsuo Manglove, and Haruna Ai, wearing women’s clothes) or speech style (such as Pilko, Kuriyazaki Shogo, and Kabachan, who affect a feminized speech and cross-dress) or the critical comments they offer about sex, life, and politics (for which Miwa, a Nagasaki survivor, is famous). Their TV commenting is usually a side job, complementing their primary occupations as actors, singers, writers, choreographers, flower artists, or even beatnickers.

In this study of queer male TV commentators, I unpack culture-bound meanings of gender and sex in Japan; offer a brief history of queer per-