REPRODUCING OR CHALLENGING HETERONORMATIVITY?

REPRESENTATION OF GENDER, LGBTQ CHARACTERS AND QUEERNESS
IN ESTONIAN TELEVISION SERIES ON THE EXAMPLE OF “PILVEDE ALL”

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the
Baltic Media and Film School

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts in Public Relations

by
HANNA KANNELMÄE
Kadri Aavik, MA, Thesis Supervisor

MAY 2014
APPROVAL OF THE ADVISOR

Approved:

______________________________________________

I hereby solemnly declare that I have written this theses by myself and without support from any other person or source, and that I have used only the materials and sources indicated in the list of works cited. Neither I myself nor any other person has submitted this to any other institution for a degree or for publication.

______________________________________________

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts in Public Relations

______________________________________________

by
HANNA KANNELMÄE

Kadri Aavik, MA, Thesis Supervisor

MAY 2014
Table of Contents

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 4

2. LGBTQ: background and previous studies .................................................................. 5
   2.1. The concept of LGBTQ ......................................................................................... 5
   2.2. The development of modern LGBT movement ....................................................... 6
   2.3. LGBT people in post-socialist societies ................................................................. 7
   2.4. LGBT rights and movement in Estonia ................................................................. 8
   2.5. Previous studies focusing on LGBT issues in Estonia ........................................... 10

3. Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................. 11
   3.1. Sex, gender and heteronormativity ......................................................................... 11
   3.2. Gay and lesbian studies ....................................................................................... 13
   3.3. The concept of queer and Queer theory ............................................................... 14
   3.4. Media representations and the role of ideology in representing reality .................. 15
   3.5. Depicting LGBTQ in television ............................................................................ 16
      3.5.1. LGBT in U.S. television ................................................................................... 17

4. Method, research questions and sample ........................................................................ 20
   4.1. Research method and research questions ............................................................. 20
   4.2. Sample .................................................................................................................. 22

5. Analysis and results ...................................................................................................... 23
   5.1. Season 1 .............................................................................................................. 23
      5.1.1. Maintaining the binary gender system ............................................................... 23
      5.1.2. Maintaining heterosexuality/ sexual binarity .................................................... 26
      5.1.3. Depiction of LGBT people .............................................................................. 26
      5.1.4. Depiction of queerness .................................................................................. 30
   5.2. Season 7 .............................................................................................................. 34
      5.2.1. Maintaining the binary gender system ............................................................... 34
      5.2.2. Maintaining heterosexuality/ sexual binarity .................................................... 37
      5.2.3. Depiction of queerness .................................................................................. 38
      5.2.4. Comparison of season 1 and season 7 .............................................................. 38

6. Discussion and conclusions .......................................................................................... 39
   6.1. Limitations and directions for further research ..................................................... 42

7. References ..................................................................................................................... 43

8. Appendix: ....................................................................................................................... 47
1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to analyze how heteronormativity is reinforced and/or challenged in Estonian television series, on the example of the popular drama series “Pilvede all” [Under the Clouds], by exploring how LGBTQ characters and queerness are depicted.

Representation of LGBTQ characters and heteronormativity in Estonian films or television series has not been researched before, yet it is important to analyze how these matters are represented in a TV series that is viewed by 208 000 people on average every month (Appendix A). Peele (2007, p. 2) argues that “television, movies, the Internet, music and fashion provide various normative discourses that simultaneously teach us and reinforce the division between the acceptable and the unacceptable”. Pilvr (2011), following Fairclough, states that “the media not only reflects reality, but contributes to constructing social reality according to the power interests of the producers of the texts” (p. 31, own translation).

For these reasons it is important to analyze the nature of the messages mediated weekly to one sixth of the Estonian population. The current social status and marginalization of LGBT people is one of the reasons I find depiction of LGBTQ people important in television series. Better representation of the LGBTQ community would increase the society’s awareness and understanding of LGBTQ people and the challenges they face.

I will analyze the content of seasons 1 and 7 of the TV series “Pilvede all”. I focus on the representation of LGBTQ characters (or lack thereof) and how heteronormativity is expressed, reinforced and/or challenged in the series. I also observe how these depictions have changed since the series began in 2010. In conducting my analysis, I follow insights from critical media analysis and queer theory. Finally, based on my findings, I suggest possible ways how LGBTQ characters could be depicted in Estonian fictional TV-series.

I begin by introducing the development of modern LGBT movement and describe the emergence of lesbian and gay studies in the academia. I then give an overview of the current situation of LGBT rights in post-socialist Europe and then proceed to introduce the development of the LGBT movement in Estonia. I present an overview of studies that have been conducted on LGBT issues in Estonia.

In the theoretical framework I introduce the notions of sex, gender and heteronormativity, as well as the concept of queer and queer theory. I describe the roles of media and ideology in representing and reproducing reality, and explain how non-
heterosexual people and their experience is depicted in public narratives and how this depiction influences public perception of LGBTQ people, and identities and relations that stray from what the public perceives as normal.

2. LGBTQ: background and previous studies

In this section, I outline the recent history of LGBT activism and its evolvement into a social and political movement, which has lead to the gay and lesbian experience that was once hidden from the public eye, to become more visible and part of public narratives and media representations.

Subsequently I describe the emergence of the gay liberation movement.

2.1. The concept of LGBTQ

LGBT is currently the most commonly used term referring to non-heterosexual people. LGBT is more and more frequently complemented with ‘Q’ to also be inclusive of queer people. The acronym stands for:

L – lesbian, women who are physically and/or romantically attracted to women,
G – gay, men who are physically and/or romantically attracted to men,
B – bisexual, men and women who are physically and/or romantically attracted to both men and women,
T – trans*¹, people whose biological gender is not in accordance with their gender identity,
Q – queer, people who have contradicting qualities and identities regarding their gender and/or sexual orientation sometimes identify themselves as being queer (Monro, 2005).

¹ Many trans activists have started to mark an asterisk (*) behind ‘trans’ when writing about issues that include not only transgender people everyone with gender non-conforming identities. The asterisk is used as a sign of expanding the boundaries of the ‘trans category’.
2.2. The development of modern LGBT movement

According to ILGA-Europe (2013), the problems specific to LGBT people are often disregarded and this group is often left vulnerable to discrimination. In most countries of the world, LGBT people face varying degrees of discrimination and violence in different areas of life, including civil rights, social security and social protection, sexual and reproductive rights, health, family life, employment, access to goods and services, etc. (ILGA Europe, 2013).

It is the widespread discrimination and violence against LGBT people that has lead to the development of the LGBT movement, which advocates for the equal treatment of LGBT people. D’Emilio (as cited in Piontek, 2006) states that a homophile\(^2\) movement existed in the United States already in the 1950s and 1960s. In those days, police violence against customers of New York gay and lesbian bars was frequent and systematic. The victims’ rebellion in New York’s Greenwich Village in June 1969 that became known as the Stonewall Riot, “mark[s] the birth of the ‘modern’ gay and lesbian political movement” (Piontek, 2006, p. 3).

The events following the Stonewall Riot, formation of new pro-gay organizations and their activities, became known as the gay liberation movement (Piontek, 2006; Chambers, 2009). At first the gay liberation movement fought to dismiss all conventional norms of sexual behavior, but in the 1970s the movement introduced the notion of sexual orientation, a “fixed sexual identity” and the goal of the movement became achieving gay rights (Chambers, 2009). According to D’Emilio (as cited in Chambers, 2009, p. 12) “it was easier to argue before a city council for civil rights for a fixed social minority than for a capacity inherent in everyone”. For the sake of political clarity, the pursuit of freeing diverse forms of sexuality from stigmatization was reduced to fighting for the rights of a narrow social group – gays and lesbians.

Trans* people were largely marginalized by the gay community and reluctantly included in the gay liberation movement’s activities. This was because the gay liberation movement aspired to make gays and lesbians fit in with the mainstream, and trans* people were perceived as far too deviant from the norm (Piontek, 2006).

\(^2\) The U.S. non-heterosexual people’s movement of 1950s and 1960 identified themselves as the homophile movement (Piontek, 2006).
2.3. LGBT people in post-socialist societies

The human rights situation of LGBT people in Europe is reflected on ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map where the level of human rights achieved is measured on a scale from zero to one hundred. Estonia’s score, 29% is the highest among post-soviet countries but not among former Eastern Block countries. For example, the score of Hungary, is 55% (ILGA-Europe, Rainbow Map, 2013). However, the development of LGBT rights has suffered a backlash, especially during recent years in Hungary’s current political context. Hungary has a cohabitation law for same sex partners, but “ILGA-Europe Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People in Europe” notes several recent hostile developments in Hungarian legislation regarding LGBT people (ILGA-Europe, Annual Review, 2013). Renkin (2009) lists the reasons behind Hungarian society’s resentment towards LGBT people to be psychological homophobia, heteronormative nationalism and anti-Europe attitudes.

In Poland, which scored only 22% in the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map (ILGA-Europe, Rainbow Map, 2013), local and national LGBT organizations were officially registered after the fall of communism in 1993. In the same year disputes over the new Polish Constitution included deliberating whether same sex recognition should be accepted in the legislation. The country’s mainstream media presented sexual minorities as an eccentricity until the beginning of the 21st century, when serious discussions regarding LGBT issues emerged in the media (Szulc, 2011). Yet Szule states: “…this situation has helped to increase the visibility of sexual minorities within Polish society, it has not been directly translated into a common acceptance of non-normative forms of sexuality” (p. 161). Graff (2006) finds that Polish homophobia is rooted in the society’s nationalism. Also, it has been suggested, that one of the strongest influences to the public opinion regarding LGBT issues is the Roman Catholic Church (Szulc, 2011).

There is no marriage equality for same sex couples in any of the post-soviet or former Eastern Block countries. None of the post-soviet countries have adopted registered partnership or cohabitation laws for same sex couples. The only post-socialist country to have adopted a cohabitation act, is Czech Republic.
2.4. LGBT rights and movement in Estonia

LGBT people have gradually gained more visibility in the Estonian society since the country regained its independence in 1991. During the Soviet era, homosexuality was criminalized and lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans-people were forced to hide their identities from the public eye completely (Talalaev, 2011). Today, LGBT related topics are frequently discussed in the media, most of all perhaps the issue of partnership law. Almost 25 years has passed since first Estonian activists started putting their efforts into the cause of LGBT rights, on account of which it is possible to have these public disputes today and for LGBT people to be recognized as a social group with problems that are considered important enough to be part of public discussion. The first organization in Estonia whose activities focused on sexual minority issues, Lesbiliit [Lesbian Association], was established in 1990. Since then, the Estonian LGBT movement, including NGOs such as Gayliit [Gay Association], NGO Estonian Gay Youth or Estonian LGBT Association and independent activists, have been striving to raise the public’s awareness of LGBT people and their rights. LGBT activists consider it important to stress that LGBT people are valuable members of the society and the society should be more aware and supportive of their struggles. Lack of accurate information regarding LGBT people is one of the main causes of harmful prejudices, as was found in a study conducted in University of Tartu (as cited in Papp, Kütt, 2011).

Although the work of Estonian activists has increased the visibility of LGBT people, the population has not yet embraced diversity among LGBT people, acceptance of differences and the awareness that straight and non-straight people lead rather similar than different lives. According to the “Public opinion poll on LGBT topics in Estonia”, 57% of the Estonian population regards homosexuality somewhat or completely unacceptable (Turu-uuringute AS, 2012).

The Cohabitation Act that is meant to be inclusive of both opposite sex and same-sex couples, is the most visible LGBT related topic in Estonian media at the time of writing this thesis, and the issue has quite rapidly gained political attention. A gender-neutral cohabitation bill was submitted to the parliament in April 2014 and the parliament is currently hearing the matter. The question if such a law should be enacted has been raised in the media at least once a year and has been discussed by supporters and opponents of the law. Supporters of regulating same sex partnerships rely on modern values and democracy – equality and
personal freedom\textsuperscript{3}, opponents base their arguments on tradition, moral, nationalism and nation’s growth\textsuperscript{4}.

At the beginning of 2013, an Estonian movement based on religious values, \textit{Foundation for the Protection of Family and Tradition}, the most visible group of opponents to the law, asked people of Estonia to sign a petition to oppose the Cohabitation Act, on the grounds of preserving traditional family values. Although in Estonia, religion influences the opinion of only 5% of the public (Turu-uuringute AS, 2012), 37 854 people returned their signed petitions to the organization who handed the petition along with the signatures to the Estonian Parliament. Nonetheless, the results of “Public opinion poll on LGBT topics in Estonia” indicate our largely secular society’s reasons for homophobia lie elsewhere than in religion. The majority of Estonian people, who consider homosexuality unacceptable, perceive it as contrary to laws of nature (Turu-uuringute AS, 2012). 45 \% of the respondents of “Public opinion poll on LGBT topics in Estonia” believe that same-sex partners should not have the opportunity to officially register their cohabitation on the basis of civil partnership legislation, whereas 36 \% of the respondents think the opportunity should exist (Turu-uuringute AS, 2012, p. 42).

In recent years, supporters of LGBT rights and civil partnership legislation have become increasingly visible in the Estonian society. A number of scholars, human rights, women’s rights and LGBT rights organizations and activists have voiced their opinions to legislators and in public debates. In the first half of 2014, in the midst of public and political discussions over the Cohabitation Act, opinion leaders from various fields of life have publicly supported the civil partnership legislation more often than ever before.

In the midst of heated discussions between both retentive sides of the fence, little space remains for undecided people in the middle to relate to LGBT people and discover


common ground with them. A space where so far unseen but relevant, diverse narratives of LGBT people’s lives could be represented.

Queer issues are rarely discussed in the context of LGBT activism in Estonia and other post-socialist countries, largely because not many non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming people identify as queer. When Estonian LGBT activists initiate public debates questioning heteronormativity, they do not do it from the perspective of queer theory but rather from an identity politics based on fixed categories of LGBT. Queer theory is sometimes discussed in the academia and queerness is sometimes depicted in art projects.

2.5. Previous studies focusing on LGBT issues in Estonia

“LGBT inimeste olukorra uuringute analüüs” [“Analysis of studies regarding LGBT people”] (Papp, Kütt 2011) compiles studies that were conducted between the years 2001 to 2011 on the situation of Estonian LGBT people’s situation in law, social affairs and public opinion, also LGBT movement and personal experiences of LGBT individuals. The studies were conducted by international institutions and organizations, Estonian ministries and state funded institutions and universities.

According to the study “Special Eurobarometer 317, “Discrimination in the EU”” conducted by European Commission (as cited in Papp, Kütt, 2011), only 17 % of Estonians have a homosexual person in their circle of friends. Most Estonians do not see fit for a homosexual person to be a politician. Another study by European Commission named “Discrimination in the European Union. Perceptions and experiences of discrimination in the areas of housing, healthcare, education, when buying products or using services” (as cited in Papp, Kütt, 2011) found that 3% of Estonians have experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation.

Several studies have focused on representation of LGBT issues in Estonian print media. In a research project named “Rassism ja ksenofoobia Eestis” [“Racism and Xenophobia in Estonia”] (as cited in Papp, Kütt, 2011) it was stated that the largest number of aggressive readers’ comments in digital newspapers are directed at homosexual people, Russians and Christians. In a bachelor thesis named “Seksuaalvähemuste representatsioon Eesti meedias 2004. aastal” [“Media Representation of Sexual Minorities in Estonian Media in 2004”] (as cited in Papp, Kütt, 2011) that analyzed how LGBT people are represented in
newspaper articles, it was found that most newspaper articles regard homosexuality as something normal and trivial although, also hostile attitudes were discovered in some articles.

Studies about LGBT people in Estonian audiovisual media, films or television series have not been conducted.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Sex, gender and heteronormativity

Most people understand gender and sex as the category that divides people into males and females (Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender, 2011). Scholars make an important distinction between these terms and define how sex relates to gender (Wharton, 2012).

According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender, 2011), the division between sex and gender should be understood as follows: an individual’s sex can be determined by their biological features: “chromosomes, sex organs, hormones and other physical features”. An individual’s gender depends on sociological factors: their “social role, position, behavior or identity”. Recently, however, gender researchers have started to doubt the usefulness of distinguishing gender from sex, stemming from the understanding that sociological factors, social processes and practices are what give meaning to the biological aspects of maleness and femaleness (Wharton, 2012). Hence, it is the society’s perception of, and attitudes towards men and women and of their position and functions in the society that give meaning and value to people with male or female biological features. Sex and gender can then both be said to be socially constructed.

When talking about the social construction of gender, Butler (1993) uses the concept of “gender performativity”, referring to ways how we continuously and repeatedly act out gender, in ways that obscure the inherent instability of gender. These gender constructions then become a set of cultural norms.

Most individuals perceive these norms as a given, as if a person born with male biological features has masculine traits only because he was born biologically male when in fact the masculine traits are acquired through gender socialization, “the process by which
individuals are taught and learn the values and norms associated with women’s and men’s roles in society” (Gender Socialization, 2009).

It is also through gender socialization that an individual develops an understanding of which gender they belong to – their gender identity (Gender Socialization, 2009) and starts to express their belonging in that gender (Bornstein, 1994).

Thus, the way a person behaves, produces meaning and functions in the society is regulated by society’s more or less explicit gender norms, which the person also reinforces by acting according to those norms. Our understanding of ‘the normal’ is constructed and reinforced by norms (Chambers, 2009).

The set of norms that regulates how people behave, function and produce meaning in the society as sexual and gendered beings is called heteronormativity. Chambers (2009) defines heteronormativity as “a social and political force exercised through norms [that] structures and sustains the social, political, and cultural worlds” (p. 66), arguing that heteronormativity influences ideas and beliefs, and thereby also impacts the functioning of institutions, laws and people’s daily practices. The impact of heteronormativity is most evident regarding issues of sexuality and, as Avila-Saavedra (2009) argues, also maintains the status quo in regard to gender, class and race.

Butler argues (as cited in Chambers, 2009), that heteronormativity presumes that all people are heterosexual – such is the predominant norm and the possibility of same-sex desire is ruled out. Chambers (2009) explains that this does not mean everyone is, has to be or will be made straight. “Heteronormativity emphasizes the extent to which everyone … will be judged, measured, probed, and evaluated from the perspective of the heterosexual norm. It means that everyone and everything is judged from the perspective of straight” (Chambers, 2009, p. 35).

In my analysis I look at how heteronormative values are reinforced and/or challenged in “Pilvede all”. I explore the function of norms that constitute heteronormativity: the presumption of gender binarity and the presumption of exclusively heterosexual desire.

Gender binarity is the heteronormative understanding that there are only two sexes and genders: male and female. From a biological point of view this argument is false because while there are people with exclusively male and exclusively female biological features and chromosomes, intersex people are born with characteristics, which are “intermediate between those of the typical male and typical female” (Intersex, 2004). Yet the conviction that only two sexes exist and it is above all the type of our genitalia that determines our gender (Wharton, 2012; Bornstein, 1994), is so strong that instead of creating legal means to
recognize intersex people (for example the legal recognition of a third or neutral gender), surgeons ‘correct’ the ambiguous genitalia of intersex infants and children to better fit the category of a concrete biological sex (Wharton, 2012), a practice that is condemned by organizations that advocate for intersex people’s rights.

Biological features or chromosomes are a tangible proof that there are more than two sexes, but it is harder to apprehend belonging to many genders, as only two genders are acceptable in the binary gender system. A person who is looking for the answer to which gender they belong to, asks themselves: “Who am I? Am I a woman or a man, or what?” (Bornstein, 1994, p. 34). If approaching this question heteronormatively, that sentence should not end with ‘or what’, yet there are people for whom the choice is different than just one or the other, male or female gender, even if they have the biological features of a man or a woman.

According to Serano (as cited in Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues, 2014) most people, dwelling on gender-binarity, assume men and women should have traits and values that the society considers accordingly feminine and masculine.

The main assumption that heteronormativity makes about men and women is for them to desire the opposite sex – to be heterosexual. Homosexuality may exist, but it is a deviation from the norm.

The most commonly known sexual orientations, heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality, are based on the heteronormative, gender binary categorization of female or male (Monro, 2005), meaning that heteronormativity only recognizes the gender categories of male and female. Accordingly, sexual attraction may develop only in the confines of those genders.

In our culture, a person’s perceived sexual orientation is based on the gender of that person’s partner (Bornstein, 1994), allowing a simple categorization: a woman who’s partner is female is homosexual (lesbian), a man who’s partner is female is heterosexual (straight).

3.2. Gay and lesbian studies

Gay and lesbian studies emerged in the 1970s when the first works were written outside of universities as a grassroots response to the gay liberation movement (Weeks, 2000). By the 1980s, issues of gay identity and the history of homophobia entered the
academia as topics of inquiry. Gay history emerged as a field of study in US universities with courses on gay authors, musicians and other historical figures (Chambers, 2009). Gay and lesbian studies were included to university curriculums across Europe, North America and Australasia (Weeks, 2000).

During the 1980s, the predominant debate in gay and lesbian studies was about essentialism and constructionism (Weeks, 2000). It was debated whether homosexuality was innate and transhistorical – the essentialist perspective, or “a cultural product and a social construction” – the constructionist viewpoint (Chambers, 2003). Scholars questioned and problematized the concept of a fixed gay identity, wondering if it was a category that had immutably existed throughout history or did sexual identities depend on a historical and cultural context (Chambers, 2009; Weeks, 2000). The constructionist approach also disrupted the fixed concept of gender (Monro, 2005) – the understanding that people can only be either male or female, males are masculine and females are feminine, and once a person is born with either male or female biological features, they will remain male or female until the rest of their lives (Bornstein, 1994).

Constructionism is what led to the emergence of what in 1990s became known as queer theory and queer studies (Schuyf & Sandfort, 2000; Chambers, 2009; Hall, 2003).

3.3. The concept of queer and Queer theory

The term ‘queer’ was initially used as a derogatory word for non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming people. Non-heterosexual and/or gender non-conforming people have increasingly ‘reclaimed’ the word, starting to identify with it in a positive way.

Queer theory criticizes heteronormativity and the dominance of ‘straight’ culture. By arguing that gender is a social construction, it is possible to assert that the status and function of men and women are socially produced and are therefore changeable (Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender, 2011). Queer perspectives stress that people’s chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire are not always coherent as is widely presumed (Jagose, 1996), and destabilizes and subverts the rigid binary system to create space for alternatives to the existing notions (Monro, 2005). Queer theory criticizes the way heterosexuality is culturally inscribed as normal and all other sexualities as deviant (Brookey as cited in Avila-Saavedra, 2009). Kirsch (2000) calls this activity of queer, ‘queering’ of culture and explains that
queering can range “from the reinterpretation of characters in novels and cinema to the deconstruction of historical analyses” (p. 33).

Queer theory also criticizes the gay and lesbian movement for abiding to the heteronormative system in two ways. Firstly, as already mentioned, the gay and lesbian movement has often considered homosexuality as based on gender binary categorization of female or male and therefore reinforces the heteronormative system. Secondly, gay and lesbian politics have seen ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ as categories into which an individual may or may not belong and in case of not belonging, would be ostracized. (Kirch 2000). Queer theory dismisses these categories altogether. It rejects “political interest-representation” of gay and lesbian politics and resists more thoroughly to “regimes of the normal” (Warner, 1991, p. 16). Queer “include[s] all who were against any set conceptions of gender, sexuality, and power” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 33).

“Queer theory discusses how power operates with sexuality in contemporary society to define social and cultural norms” (Avila-Saavedra, 2009, p. 6). Hence queer theory looks further from gender and sexuality onto relating matters, such as relationships and family and the impact that heteronormativity has in these dynamics.

3.4. Media representations and the role of ideology in representing reality

The meaning of reality is always constituted, because the way reality is understood, always depends on the way it is represented (Pilvre, 2011). The meaning of reality can be understood by using codes of culture (ibid.). Pilvre (ibid.), following Stuart Hall, states that “reality is always a representation and can only be understood through representations. Representation is the production of meanings through language, visual materials and texts. Production of meanings expresses and reproduces power relations. Objects, concepts and values are related through representation and Hall considers this to be ideological” (p. 32, own translation).

Ideologies are “perceptions and opinions about the social and political realities of societies, which aim at truths and generalizations, although they might also contain untruths, half truths or unfinished systems of thoughts and beliefs” (Wodak, 2006, p. 10). Ideologies are frames of thinking, systems of representations, that enable people to understand the world (Pilvre, 2011). Mass media is the most powerful of institutions that produces and reproduces
ideologies, and it carries dominating cultural ideology (ibid.). “Television, movies, the Internet, music and fashion provide various normative discourses that simultaneously teach us and reinforce the division between the acceptable and the unacceptable,” (Peele, 2007, p. 2). Television creates new norms and versions of the ‘real’ by governing social norms, which are constantly contested and negotiated (Burns and Davies, 2009). Also norms of gender and sexuality are produced and reproduced by television and impact the reality that we live in (Chambers, 2009).

The representations of the society that media produces – images, explanations, stories and narratives – give meanings to the society and enable people to relate to the reality around us (Pilvre, 2011). Television makes people feel they are part of a society, a wider whole, and media has a privileged role in framing people’s experiences of the social and defining what the ‘reality’ of the society is (Couldry, 2000). Almost everyone in the society consumes television and has access to the same programming (ibid.). Television consumption is common to all and it thereby shapes social perceptions. Television’s audience is formed across the whole social range, which enhances its function of framing people’s perception of the reality and gives it symbolic authority (ibid.). “Through seeming natural, media power is normally inaccessible to criticism, it is legitimated automatically” (Couldry, 2000, p. 39).

Furthermore, television is not only about what transpires on screen anymore. Burns and Davies state: “[R]elated websites, gossip magazines or blogs, fan cultures, and the countless types of consumer paraphernalia linked to particular programs (t-shirts, soundtracks, books, ring tones, etc.) are vital in understanding how television texts function as sites of cultural production and consumption” (2009, p. 176).

3.5. Depicting LGBTQ in television

In this section, I introduce observations scholars have made about the way depicting LGBTQ characters in U.S. television relates to heteronormativity.

“Queer media studies examine how the mass media, as a cultural and social institution, contributes to the maintenance of the sexual status quo expressed as the pre-eminence of heterosexuality in the representation of social interactions“ (Avila-Saavedra, 2009, p. 8). On the majority of television shows heteronormativity operates invisibly: everyone is assumed to be straight and most characters are straight. Sexuality is rarely discussed and homosexuality is often ridiculed, which results in homophobia (Chambers,
“Homosexual images are presented in a way acceptable for heterosexual audiences by reinforcing traditional values like family, monogamy and stability” (Fejes as cited in Avila-Saavedra, 2009, p. 8).

Walters (as cited in Peele, 2007) regards such depiction as promoting the gay and lesbian community as “heterosexuality with a twist” (p. 4), meaning that even though a character may be depicted as homosexual, they are conventional in every other way, abiding by heteronormative rules, and is therefore not queer. Such depiction does not adequately represent the gay and lesbian community (ibid.).

Warner (as cited in Peele, 2007) considers such depiction “educational practices” (p. 2) and notes that although the aim of it is to make queer tolerable for heterosexuals, it undervalues queerness and reflects it as undesirable. Peele (2007) continues to argue that representations that think of queer culture as acceptable, but not desirable, are reductive. “Representations that ask for acceptance only make the claim that there is nothing really wrong with queer culture, but they have nothing to say about the ways in which queer culture might offer powerful models of community” (Peele, 2007, p. 2).

Although shows that depict non-heterosexual characters hold the potential to undermine heteronormativity because they question the assumption of exclusively opposite-sex desire and heterosexual identity (Chambers, 2009), it is possible to fail to use this potential even if a series depicts non-heterosexual characters. As Chambers (2009) explains: “[I]f a show about lesbians reinforces heteronormativity, if it preserves traditional conceptions of femininity, if it maintains binary gender, if it rejects queer sexuality, then it cannot blithely be assumed that it will prove progressive in terms of the politics of gender and sexuality” (p. 92).

Fejes (as cited in Avila-Saavedra, 2009) suggest that gay and lesbian identities in the U.S. media do not undermine heteronormativity because they are portrayed in a heteronormative manner. In particular by eliminating erotic connotations of homosexuality as the mainstream mass media welcomes gay male characters only if they do not engage in any sexual desires and practices (ibid.).

3.5.1. LGBT in U.S. television

U.S. television series depict non-heterosexual characters most often, and many
thorough analyses can be found on the portrayal of those characters. Therefore I chose to describe researchers’ previous findings regarding the depiction of LGBTQ characters in U.S. television series.

A United States organisation GLAAD has tracked the presence of LGBT characters and the visibility of the community they portray on U.S. television for the last 18 years (GLAAD, “WWATV”, 2013). They currently annually publish two reports: “Network Responsibility Index” and “Where We Are on TV”. “Network Responsibility Index” counts how many of the total hours of primetime programming of U.S. broadcast networks and cable networks are LGBT inclusive (GLAAD,”NRI”, 2013).

“Where We Are on TV” reflects data on the diversity of regular primetime LGBT characters in U.S. broadcast and cable networks (GLAAD, “WWATV”, 2013). Statistics on gender identity, race or ethnicity and sexual orientation is given. The analysis of both reports is mainly quantitative.

During the last five years the number of regular LGBT characters has increased in U.S. broadcast and cable networks. It reached an all time high in 2012 and decreased slightly in 2013. In 2013 3% of the 796 broadcast network’s prime time regular characters were LGBT.

The number of female non-heterosexual lead characters was equal to the number of male non-heterosexual lead characters in broadcast networks and 11% smaller in cable networks (GLAAD, “WWATV”, 2013).

GLAAD reports do not analyze the content of the television series. Yet, as Avila-Saavedra (2009) states, a queer perspective in media criticism requires going beyond issues of numeric representation of gays and lesbian towards an analysis of the nature and complexity of such representations in the context of a broader notion of hegemony.

There are some U.S. television series, which present almost only LGBT characters, which can be called “queer series”. Many scholars have analyzed the content of these queer series through what Chambers (2003) calls “the lens of queer theory” (p. 3) and found that in fact these series often reinforce heteronormative values and attitudes (Chambers, 2009; Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Burns, Davies, 2009; Wolfe, Roripaugh, 2006).

Queer series also depict non-heterosexual people as hegemonic, offering too little diversity regarding race, gender identity, social class, sexual orientation etc. (Chambers, 2003; Wolfe, Roripaugh, 2006).

In “L Word”, a well-known television series depicting Los Angeles lesbians’ life, most of the characters are white, upper middle class, homosexual, cis-gender women.
In “Queer As Folk”, a popular television series depicting gay men’s life in Pittsburgh, most of the characters are white, upper middle class, homosexual, cis-gender men.

This depiction does not reflect the reality of queer community with people from all races, various gender identities, different, even fluid sexual orientation and from all social classes.

Scholars have also used the lens of queer theory to analyze several series with mainly straight characters, which I label “straight series”. Chambers (2009) finds that series like “Six Feet Under”, “Desperate Housewives” or “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” depict queerness more effectively than queer series.

Besides representing LGBT characters, these series also depict subversions of mainstream sexual politics and heterosexual norms, non-traditional family, polygamy, the closet and presumed sexuality.

Chambers also points out the hegemonic image of homosexual people in straight series. The GLAAD survey “Where We Are on TV” (2013) proves this observation as it shows that in broadcast networks 72% of the non-heterosexual characters were white, in cable networks the percentage was 71. There were significantly more gay-lesbian characters than bisexual characters in both broadcast and cable networks (GLAAD, “WWATV”, 2013).
4. Method, research questions and sample

4.1. Research method and research questions

In my analysis of “Pilvede all” I explore ways how LGBTQ characters and queerness are depicted and how heteronormativity is being reinforced, questioned and/or undermined. I do this from the perspective of critical media analysis.

Critical media analysis is concerned with “how the use of the media has an effect on the way people think, communicate and act in their lives, e.g. fostering consumerism, justifying social inequality, presenting politics as a matter of gossip or entertainment rather than a competition for values” (Stochetti, Kukkonen, 2011, p. 15).

Critical media analysis is rooted in critical theory and social constructivism (Stochetti & Kukkonen, 2011). By combining the idea of critical theory, that media impacts the power relations in the society, and the constructivist idea, that “reality is socially constructed and based on a consensus between participants in a communicational exchange”, critical media analysis considers media to play a fundamental role in the “communicative construction of social reality” (Stochetti & Kukkonen, 2011, p. 7).

In order to have a better understanding of how the media impacts the relations of power in the society, more specifically regarding of gender and sexuality, I undertake a critical analysis of the depiction of heteronormativity in “Pilvede all” and observe how different elements of the television series’ content reinforce, reject or question the rules of heteronormativity - gender binarity and sexual binarity. I will conduct the analysis using the queer perspective, which enables more space for interpretation regarding the characters’ gender and sexual identity, without limiting the choice to fixed categories of straight or LGB and gender conforming or transgender.

I analyze how heteronormativity is reinforced, questioned or undermined in the narrative of “Pilvede all” by looking for elements in the narrative that carry or defy heteronormative assumptions, values and understandings. Foremost I take into account the dialogue between characters and the narration, but also the audio-visual cues achieved by acting, camera work and video, and sound editing.

I will also analyze the personalities of leading characters of “Pilvede all” and the personalities of some of the supporting characters, who play an influential role in relation to
the leading characters. I will explore how the depiction of these characters reinforces, questions or undermines heteronormativity.

I will also be looking for queerness in characters. As previously explained regarding the depiction of LGBTQ people in television, queerness may not always necessarily mean that a character is depicted as non-heterosexual, just as a non-heterosexual character is not necessarily queer. Hence I will look at the way that heterosexual or non-heterosexual characters display queer qualities thereby defying heteronormativity.

In order to explore ways in which heteronormativity is reinforced, questioned or undermined in the narrative of “Pilvede all”, I will follow a list of heteronormative assumptions compiled by Chambers (2009), and analyze how these assumptions are or are not depicted in the series. The assumptions are following:

Maintaining binary gender

- there are only men and women
- there is no ambiguity of gender (queerness)
- men are masculine, women are feminine
- preserving traditional conceptions of femininity
- preserving traditional conceptions of masculinity

Maintaining heterosexuality/ sexual binarity

- presuming heterosexual identity - everyone is heterosexual (until proven otherwise)
- presuming heterosexual desire
- excluding the possibility of same sex desire
- there is no ambiguity of sexuality (queerness)
- fixating on straight sex/ relationships
- producing heterosexual desire
- constructing narratives of straight romance

To understand ways in which the depiction of a character’s personality reinforces, questions or undermines heteronormativity, I will use the criteria for systemic classification of gender compiled by Bornstein (1994) who states that although the society uses this criteria for binary man/ woman gender attribution, the criteria is relevant to a more fluid gender
system. Hence I will use the criteria to determine whether the personality of “Pilvede all” characters abides or defies the gender binary system. These criteria are following:

- Physical cues (body, hair, clothes, voice, skin, and movement),
- behavioral cues (manners, decorum, protocol, and deportment),
- textual cues (histories, documents, names, associates, relationships),
- mythic cues (cultural and sub-cultural myths, archetypes which support membership in a given gender),
- power dynamics (modes of communication, communication techniques, and degrees of aggressiveness, assertiveness, persistence, and ambition),
- biological gender (sex),
- sexual orientation (see Bornstein, 1994, p. 27 - 31).

Finally I will explore if and how LGBT characters are explicitly depicted in the series.

My central research questions in this thesis are the following:
How is heteronormativity expressed, reinforced and/ or challenged in the TV series “Pilvede all”? How are LGBTQ characters and issues represented in this series?

4.2. Sample

The Estonian drama series “Pilvede all” is shown in the private television channel Kanal 2 [Channel 2]. It is currently running the 8th season of the series and has been the most viewed fictional television series since it’s première in 2010. The 1st season of “Pilvede all” was broadcast between September and November of 2010, the 7th season was broadcast between September and December of 2013. The series is viewed by 208 000 people on average every month (Appendix A).

“Pilvede all” depicts the every day lives of three sisters who grew up in a small town but have now made good lives for themselves in Tallinn. The series revolves around the sisters’ personal lives: romantic and family relationships. The characters’ actions depict their values, beliefs and morale. Family relations have a significant role in the story line, as well as the power dynamics between men and women, depicted in romantic and professional relationships.
Therefore I consider “Pilvede all” to have the potential to “produce and govern social roles” (Burns & Davies, 2009) which gives cause to explore what possible messages the series might convey to its viewers.

I chose to analyze the 1st and 7th season of “Pilvede all”, aiming to detect changes in the ways heteronormativity, queerness and LGBT is presented in the series, considering the continuing progress regarding visibility of LGBT people and related discourses in the Estonian society.

5. Analysis and results

The drama series “Pilvede all” offers abundant material regarding matters of sex, gender, sexuality, relationships and family, in implicit as well as explicit ways. In this section, I present my analysis of how heteronormativity is expressed, reinforced and/ or challenged in the series and the representation of LGBTQ characters (or lack thereof). I first present findings from season 1, then from season 7 and finally compare the findings in order to observe whether and how the depiction of characters has changed from the perspectives that I am interested in.

5.1. Season 1

5.1.1. Maintaining the binary gender system

5.1.1.1. Appearance and personality

Conventional gender binarity is especially evident in the characters’ appearance. All female characters wear make up, have long hair and feminine hairdos, and dress in a conventionally feminine way. Men are depicted in business suits or masculine every day wear, and have a modestly groomed or ungroomed look.
Male characters’ personalities are by and large depicted as fitting of binary gender roles. All male characters are depicted as proud, active and professionally ambitious. Only the leading characters’ long time family friend Albert’s professional interests are never portrayed.

Female characters’ personalities are depicted as somewhat more versatile. Two of the leading characters, Piret and Kertu, are portrayed as passive and melancholy. Kertu is depicted crying constantly and being scared of every new situation. Their character of their sister Mari is quite the opposite, as I will describe in the following chapter.

Piret’s friend Diana and Mari’s friend Barbi are shown as ambitious, independent and active.

Piret’s colleague in the hospital, a female character, is depicted as an enthusiastic gossiper in order to achieve a comic dimension, which also reinforces gender stereotypes associated with women.

5.1.1.2. Professional activity

Characters are shown to have jobs in areas typical for their gender. The leading character Piret works as a doctor, her second sister Mari works as an interior designer and the third sister Kertu is a homemaker. Their mother is a hairdresser.

Men are portrayed as leaders - chief physician, mayor, company owner; or have otherwise traditionally masculine occupations such as car salesman. Albert is unemployed.

5.1.1.2.1. Relationship dynamics

As I will describe, characters are also mostly depicted in conventional gender roles and when they stray from these roles, other characters react negatively.

Men - Piret’s admirers, Mari’s admirer, Kertu’s husband and the women’s mother’s admirer - take charge of the female characters’ lives and act as providers without questioning the normalcy of this power relation.

For example, Piret’s admirer Paul (the mayor of Haapsalu, Piret’s home town) asks the local hospital to offer a job to Piret, even though Piret has repeatedly told him, she does not want to move back to Haapsalu. Piret is portrayed to approve Paul’s behavior as she does not protest Paul’s meddling but considers taking the job.
Another example is Mari’s admirer Indrek who repeatedly and secretly enters Mari’s apartment without asking Mari’s permission. Indrek, a complete stranger to Mari, invades her privacy once when she is sleeping and once when she is showering. He also offers to give Mari an apartment in return for sexual favors. Although Mari asks the man to leave, she is depicted to appreciate his behavior as she does not demand an apology, happily has breakfast with Indrek right after the invasion and eventually has sex with him.

Kertu’s husband Erik is determined to have a child. Kertu, who is portrayed as young and childish, is not ready for it. Erik is shown to disregard his wife’s wishes, using her body as means to an end.

Women are more often portrayed deviating from the norm than men but an example of a male character who is depicted as behaving in way that is more often considered a conventional female behavior, is Albert, the sisters’ elderly neighbour. He is shown as a dedicated host who fusses frantically around his guests and always welcomes them with a plentiful amount of food.

On several occasions, when women are portrayed to show signs of independence or dominance, men are shown to be offended, angry or confused.

For example, Kertu’s husband Erik takes his wife on a vacation to Otepää, but his car breaks down on a remote highway. He cannot fix the car, nor is he willing to call for a tow truck. When Kertu is shown to take matters into her own hands and starts hitchhiking on the side of the road, Erik is depicted to get angry and demand his wife to get back in the car.

Another example is Robert, Piret’s admirer who is also married. Piret breaks up with him and Robert is depicted to use psychological and physical intimidation to win Piret back.

Women are portrayed in more diverse roles than men.

Although Piret is mostly submissive to the dominant men, she occasionally questions this conventionality, but does not reject it completely. She eventually turns down the job that Paul organized for her. Yet she is not shown to confront Paul about invading her privacy, but choosing to ignore him. Piret is also depicted to tolerate an eager admirer’s advances. She is depicted hesitant but has sex with Peeter due to his persistence, although she has no actual interest in him.

Kertu is financially completely dependent on her husband and exceedingly stability oriented. She and her husband are also portrayed to have considerable emotional dependency. Kertu complains about spending too much time alone with her husband. When she finds a new acquaintance, her husband is depicted to punish her by making her jealous. Eventually Kertu is shown to abandon the acquaintance.
Piret’s friend Diana is depicted to exploit her husband who provides for her financially. She secretly lives a life of promiscuity.

As mentioned, Mari is portrayed as defying conventional gender roles in many aspects. As the depiction of her deviance of the norm is part of a longer narrative, I will focus on her in a later chapter.

5.1.2. Maintaining heterosexuality/ sexual binarity

As Chambers (2003) has stated, heteronormativity operates in television shows invisibly as everyone is presumed to be heterosexual. This applies also to “Pilvede all”.

All characters except one are presumed to be heterosexual until proven otherwise and any deviance from that norm is never discussed unless there is an explicit reason for that, such as a character coming out of the closet. I will describe these cases in the chapter about depiction of LGBT people.

Most characters fixate on establishing straight relationships, excluding the possibility of same sex attraction and desire. Narratives of straight romance are constructed constantly.

There is some ambiguity of sexuality, deviance from the binary ‘exclusively straight or gay’ sexuality, which I describe below.

5.1.3. Depiction of LGBT people

In season 1, there are two characters that are depicted as explicitly non-heterosexual, both are gay men. There are no characters that are depicted as lesbian, bisexual or trans*.

5.1.3.1. Patrick

The first gay male character appears in a scene of episode 2. He is a male photographer, named Patrick. Mari, who is responsible for the interior design of a hotel, has an encounter with Patrick whose photos are displayed in the hotel bedrooms.

The scene starts ambiguously with Patrick, not yet known to the viewer as a photographer, sitting on a messy bed and crying. Mari appears and the following dialog ensues:
Patrick: You are so cruel. How dare you say that to me. Do you not think of me at all? I am a human being with feelings.5

[…]

Mari: Listen, not all hotel guests might like your photos. I can’t let you put up photos of men squirming on top of each other.

(A shot of a black and white photo – a close up of two men kissing.)
They say art is in the eye of the beholder but your photos are not art, they’re fag porn.

Patrick: I’ll tell on you, you bitch. You freakin’ homophobe!

Mari: Whatever.

(Mari hits Patrick on the shoulder.)

As long as I’m responsible for the interior design of this hotel, these photos will not stay on these walls. Is that clear? Man up.

The scene reinforces several prejudices about homosexual men.

Setting the scene in a bedroom with a messy bed creates an undertone of sexuality. Also, the qualities that Mari projects to the photograph do not exist – the photo has hardly any resemblance to pornography.

The setting and equating an artistic photograph with porn emphasize the prejudice that homosexuality is mostly about the sexual act.

The scene also enforces the stereotype of gay men being overtly effeminate and dramatic. Although Patrick could be introduced as a professional in a working environment, as their relationship with Mari is professional, the only depiction of him is in a vulnerable position, crying because of Mari’s critique. Patrick is also the only male character in the season that is depicted wearing noticeable make up.

Mari is depicted as superior to Patrick. The patronizing, even violent hit on the shoulder and the recommendation to man up, suggest that even a woman knows better how to be a man than a gay man would. The portrayal of her superiority has a ridiculing effect on Patrick’s character.

5 The dialog of “Pilvede all” is performed in Estonian. The excerpts provided here have been transcribed and translated by the author of the thesis.
Mari’s argument that guests would not enjoy the photographs emphasizes the heterosexual norm and the undesirability of any deviance from it. Mari is depicted to speak in the name of all other photo viewers who she presumes to be heteronormative.

Setting a professional conversation about the photographer’s work in an intimate setting, not an office or conference room emphasizes the personal nature of the two characters’ conflict. It is not the quality of the work that Mari is really upset about, but her personal feelings regarding the subject of the photograph. In episode 11 of season 1, this is supported by Piret’s comment: “All her life, Mari had considered herself a homophobe, an intolerant person”.

I would argue that Mari’s reaction is fueled by two motives. First, by her personal resentment toward homosexuality and second, by the way the publicly displayed photos would openly undermine heteronormativity: by reinforcing the possibility of same sex desire and perhaps even making it desirable.

Mari is punished for her offensive behavior – she is fired. However, the punishment is not depicted to be explicitly for being unprofessional, discriminating or violent towards homosexual people. She is fired because the photographer’s partner is the owner of the hotel and he no longer wishes to employ Mari’s company. This suggests that discriminating behavior might be tolerated if it was not for the personal connection between the photographer and the hotel owner, and the consequences for the company.

In the final scene of the episode, Mari is back in the hotel room alone. She is looking at a black and white photograph of a naked man and a woman in a fiercely passionate embrace. The photo has a much stronger pornographic feel than the previous one with two men. Mari’s face reflects content and acknowledgment. Even if she is depicted to lose her job over it, the heteronormative order has been reinstated.

The scene reinforces heteronormative values and several prejudices against gay men. The consequences of homophobic behavior are ambiguous. Mari is depicted to lose her job but gain a more heteronormative environment. It is difficult to assess which consequence has more significance for Mari.

5.1.3.2. Heiki

The second explicitly gay male character appears in two scenes of episode 11. Heiki is Mari’s old and beloved schoolmate. They meet again after a long time apart and catch up. Mari enquires about Heiki’s personal life and the following dialogue ensues:
Heiki: We just moved to a new apartment. We haven’t even had a house warming party yet. When we have one, you’ll be invited. I’m sure Marko will love you.

Mari: Marko? (Shocked.) Oh, I understand.

Heiki: He is my partner. We’ve been together for seven years. We met in Los Angeles. It’s funny you have to travel so far to find the right person for you.

Mari: Yes, I guess that’s how it is.

Mari is depicted as assuming Heiki is straight until he comes out of the closet.

Heiki’s character is depicted to contradict several prejudices against gay men.

Heiki is depicted masculine without any prejudicial physical or behavioral characteristics typically ascribed to gay men. Also, he states he is living with a long term partner, which contradicts the prejudice that homosexual men are promiscuous.

Mari’s attitude toward Heiki is depicted to differ strongly from her attitude toward Patrick which, I speculate, is for the following reasons:

− Heiki is Mari’s friend, they have a personal relationship and Mari is more careful about offending his friends feelings than he was about offending an acquaintance’s feelings;
− Mari herself is depicted to experience a same sex attraction at that time, as I will explain in the next chapter, and she is therefore more empathic and understanding. (When meeting Patrick, Mari had not experienced this attraction yet.)
− Heiki’s character is not depicted as deviant from the traditional male role. Heiki is depicted traditionally masculine in his appearance as well as in behavior, therefore he does not disrupt the heteronormative order.
− Heiki is upfront about the gender of his partner, but is depicted to keep this deviance from the norm private, between Mari and him, unlike Patrick who is depicted to attempt to publicly reinforce the possibility of same sex desire.

Because Heiki’s character is depicted as challenging several prejudices towards gay men but at the same time reinforcing heteronormative values, I consider Heiki to belong to a category that Walters (as cited in Peele, 2007) calls “heterosexuality with a twist”. 
5.1.4. Depiction of queerness

In season 1, there are two characters that can be read as somewhat queer: the leading character Mari and a supporting character Barbi. Queerness is expressed by the characters’ personality and also in the development of the characters’ romantic relationships.

Mari is one of the leading characters of “Pilvede all”. She dresses in an exceedingly feminine way, mixed with masculine elements to accentuate her dominant personality. She is depicted as vain, direct, impatient, arrogant, determined and courageous, appears self-centered but is caring to her sisters, family members and friends. She is depicted to use men for sex.

Barbi is a supporting female character introduced in episode 3. She is depicted as feminine, and to have an air of *femme fatale*. She dresses in an exceedingly feminine way and is depicted as mysterious, independent and direct. She is divorced and a porn film director.

The characters of Mari and Barbi are depicted as contradictory to traditional conceptions of femininity and conventional roles of women.

Before Mari’s admirer Indrek is introduced in episode 7, Mari is shown as independent of her male partners and domineering toward them. She is portrayed as more interested in striving professionally than romantically.

Barbi is portrayed as a producer in the porn industry, which is an unconventional role, as women are usually depicted as submissive counterparts in porn. She is depicted as independent and having no interest in finding a husband or establishing a family as she states in episode 3.

The characters’ first meeting is at a bar where Barbi approaches Mari, and the following conversation ensues:

Barbi: A hard day?
(Mari shrugs.)

Barbi: If an attractive young woman is drinking a sweet cocktail in a bar, she is out on town alone and about to have a long and boring evening. Am I right?
Mari: Think what you want, I could say the same about you. A woman like you with a glass of cognac, alone at this hour? I’m guessing you came here after a hard day of work and before going home to tedious obligations.

Barbi: (Laughs.) I like you. I’m Barbi, Barbi Steinfeld.

In the scene, it is evident that attraction is being depicted between the two women. Their conversation is explicitly flirtatious. They are shown giving each other long seductive looks.

Mari and Barbi’s sexual orientation remains ambiguous throughout the season and thereby reinforces queerness.

Mari is depicted to be simultaneously romantically involved with a male and a female character. Barbi is also depicted to enjoy male attention in a nightclub.

It is possible that the characters’ sexual identity is depicted ambiguously in order to treat the male gaze - offer the male viewer an exotic experience of same sex desire between two attractive females, but in order not to exclude the male viewer entirely, preserve the possibility that the women still also desire men.

Several scenes with Mari and Indrek create the narrative of straight romance. He expresses his desire for her, he cooks for her, gives gifts and they have sex.

Indrek is depicted as exceedingly explicit about his attraction toward Mari. For example, in episode 6 Indrek comes to Mari’s apartment accompanied by a real estate salesman and seeing Mari for the first time in his life, he states: “If you tell me that woman is also part of the bargain, I’ll buy the apartment immediately”. This depiction of a rich man looking to buy a woman as if she was property reinforces gender stereotypes.

Interaction depicted between Mari and Barbi refers to the possibility of same sex desire. Barbi repeatedly addresses Mari as “kaunitar” [beauty], which is rather a romantic not a friendly expression. In episode 6, Mari and Barbi are depicted to spend a private evening sipping champagne in front of a fireplace.

Yet it is difficult to determine whether their relationship reflects homosociality or same sex desire until in episode 11 when Mari and Barbi are sitting in Barbi’s car and the following dialog ensues:
Barbi: No, Mari, you don’t understand. You don’t understand why I never come to your flat, why I couldn’t help you and why I spend every minute of my free time with you.

Mari: I might not understand everything about you but I like to be with you. I consider you my friend. (Barbi glances at Mari sharply.) You give me wings, make me fly, make me feel good. I guess you’re just my kind of a person.

Barbi: You think?

Mari: Of course. You wanted to tell me why you can’t visit me and why you couldn’t help me.

Barbi: See, Mari, I can only be with you in situations where I’m able to control myself. When I can be the Barbi Steinfeld that you know.

Mari: I don’t understand.

Barbi: I can’t come to your home, invite you to live in my country house, offer you a job or be too close to you.

Mari: Why?

Barbi: It’s because…

The viewer is unable to hear what Barbi says next. Barbi and Mari are shown sitting in a car. Mari is shocked by Barbi’s words and runs out of the car. Barbi is devastated and hides her face in between her hands. Mari stops before her front door, then turns around and gets back in the car.

It is important to stress the way the expression of opposite sex desire is depicted compared to same sex desire.

Upon first meeting Mari, it is not shameful for Indrek to blatantly express his desire for her in the presence of another person.
Barbi’s expression of feelings is hidden away from the viewer. Barbi who is already close with Mari, is depicted as hesitant and possibly ashamed about expressing her feelings even in a private setting.

In the end of episode 11, Mari and Barbi are shown drinking champagne together in a romantic environment while Piret narrates: “For the first time in her life, Mari felt what it meant to be loved and she was ready to love back.”

It is significant that although Mari has been with several men during the season and supposedly before that, it is a woman that, for the first time, makes her feel being loved and prepared to love back.

Yet interaction between Mari and Barbi in episode 12 (the last episode of the season) depicts nothing more than friendship.

Although Mari’s sisters notice she behaves as if she was in love, Mari and Barbi only spend time getting a manicure together and do not express any closeness distinctive for lovers, whereas Mari has been repeatedly shown to have sex with her male partners.

Just as Fejes (as cited in Avila-Saavedra, 2009) suggested that erotic connotations of homosexuality are eliminated in U.S. television, a same sex relationship in “Pilvede all” is depicted as little more than a friendship.

The depiction of Mari’s character partly contradicts traditional conceptions of femininity and conventional roles of women. Then again, there are aspects in the depiction, like Mari’s submissiveness to Indrek, which reinforces traditional conceptions of femininity. Hence, the depiction of Mari’s gender role is ambiguous regarding reinforcing or undermining heteronormativity.

Although Barbi is depicted as physically feminine, she is depicted to defy the conventional feminine gender role more considerably. Therefore the depiction of Barbi’s character undermines heteronormativity more than the depiction of Mari’s character.

The ambiguous depiction of the women’s sexual orientation reinforces queerness, but because their relationship is depicted as more of a friendship than courtship, it poses no real undermining effect to heteronormativity. Regarding the possibility that their relationship is depicted ambiguously in order to treat the male gaze, it might even reinforce heteronormativity.
5.2. Season 7

5.2.1. Maintaining the binary gender system

5.2.1.1. Appearance and personality

Conventional gender binarity continues to be evident in the characters’ appearance. Female characters wear make up, have feminine hairstyles and dress in conventionally feminine ways. Men are dressed in modest business suits or masculine every day wear, and have a modestly groomed or ungroomed look, with one slight exception.

A new character, a university student Peep is introduced in the 1st episode. This character wears hip androgynous clothes that sometimes have a slightly feminine undertone. He always has a hip, androgynous hairdo. He has very clear skin compared to other male characters and no facial hair. He also has an androgynous voice. Due to these characteristics I read the depiction of Peep’s appearance as queer. His appearance questions the heteronormative presumption that all men are traditionally masculine and all women are conventionally feminine.

More often than in season 1, some male characters’ personalities are portrayed as deviating from conventional binary gender roles but by and large male characters’ personalities are conventionally masculine.

All male characters are depicted as proud and active. Mari’s husband Indrek, Kertu’s husband Erik and Peep are depicted as professionally ambitious and taking initiative.

Indrek, who is a father, is portrayed as dedicated to his child and family. Erik, also a father, is rarely shown interacting with his child and his dedication to his family comes under question, which I will come back to later.

Albert, and Piret’s love interest Artur are portrayed as more passive compared to other men. They are both represented as committed to starting a family.

When some male characters are shown to have personalities that are not as professionally ambitious as in season 1, all male characters are still depicted to take charge over the female characters’ lives in season 7.

Female characters’ personalities are also depicted as versatile in regard to fitting of conventional binary gender roles.
Piret is depicted as passive and self-loathing but overcomes this with a help of an active and ambitious female colleague Marleen.

Kertu is shown as active, determined and takes initiative in many situations. She is depicted as both obedient and submissive, yet occasionally self determined when interacting with her husband, as I will describe in more detail later.

Mari is portrayed as professionally ambitious and resentful of conventional family life. She is depicted to strive for increased independence from her child and dominant husband, as I will present later.

The leading characters’ mother Sirje is depicted as manipulative and arrogant which reinforces a strongly negative female stereotype.

5.2.1.2. Professional activity

In this season, the characters’ jobs are not as gender stereotypical as in season 1.

Piret is an advisor in the Ministry of Social Affairs, her colleague is a project manager. Kertu’s husband is a project manager in a publishing house and he has a female superior, Maria. Artur is a high school teacher. Kertu is a homemaker and a university student. Mari and Indrek are co-owners of an interior design company. Albert and Sirje are unemployed.

5.2.1.3. Relationship dynamics

In season 7, family relations are a significant point of focus.

Mari and Indrek live together and have a young daughter. Kertu and Erik, a married couple, also have a baby daughter. Mari and Indrek are shown to dedicate equal amount of time to their family but Erik is shown to be dedicated mostly to his work and Kertu to their child.

As a homemaker, Kertu is portrayed as devoted to raising her daughter and caring for her husband. She is depicted to wait on Erik’s hand and foot – he does not even have to put sugar in his coffee by himself. The family is portrayed as idyllic until Kertu starts university and Erik is depicted to become insecure and jealous. He is shown dominating Kertu and making demands about whom she interacts with. Yet Erik is the one who is eventually shown to cheat on Kertu. Kertu is portrayed to remain clear headed but eventually forgive him and
be willing to work on the relationship. Erik is depicted to go to his lover instead, who turns him down and Erik disappears from his family’s life.

The downfall of the family idyll starts with Kertu becoming more independent when she begins university and is not as focused on her family life as she was before. Kertu’s independence undermines the conventional female role. The deviance from that norm has dramatic consequences for all family members. This reinforces the gender binary idea that a woman’s place is primarily at home.

Mari and Indrek spend an equal amount of time at home and at work. This equality is emphasized in Piret’s narration. Yet Mari is depicted as preferring work to spending time with their daughter and when Indrek suggests they could have another child, Mari’s reluctance to do anything family related is depicted to increase. Mari opposes the loss of independence that comes along with pregnancy and raising an infant. Indrek is depicted to thoroughly enjoy spending family time and he repeatedly insists on having another child regardless of Mari’s reluctance. He is regards Mari’s attitude as a whim and laughs at her arguments as if suggesting that procreation should be Mari’s favorite activity as a woman, which she just has not realized it yet. When Mari gets pregnant accidentally, she elopes and leaves her husband and daughter behind, which emphasizes her independence and deviance from conventional gender norms. Other characters are shown to be convinced that she will come back – resume the role of a wife and mother and thereby steer back to the norm.

Indrek goes to Albert for good advice and the two plot a scheme how to change Mari from a business-oriented person into a home maker. The season ends before the scheme is brought to life.

Mari is depicted to sabotage the family idyll with her unconventional attitude towards the conventional role of women: childbearing, motherhood and a wife’s duty. Erik is depicted as a husband with reasonable demands.

One of the families is shown as conventional at first with gender binary roles – woman as the homemaker, husband as the breadwinner. The other is depicted as a modern ideal – equality between spouses, a husband and father who is dedicated to the family and not absorbed in work. Yet eventually neither family is depicted to thrive more than the other. The family members are not happier in either of the dynamics. Women are depicted to deviate from the norm and initiate events that lead to the destruction of stability.

The depiction of family life is diverse and norms of heteronormativity are challenged, yet the deviance from the norms results in unhappiness, which might in turn reinforce heteronormativity.
It is significant that Mari, who was depicted to have a same-sex attraction in season 1, is now shown as a mother and wife to a male character in season 7. The series has returned to the norm, but as described, Mari is deviates from the norm due to her unconventional gender role and possibly also due to her queer history, although the latter is not indicated in the story line.

Piret is depicted to go through a transformation from a conventional woman’s role to an unconventional one… and back again.

Piret takes a bus to work every day and falls in love with a fellow passenger. Instead of taking initiative, she remains passive, stands or sits quietly and smiles, but eventually understands such conduct will not get the man’s attention. Piret tells about her problem to a colleague, Marleen, who is shown to persuade Piret to take initiative. She states with a heteronormative presumption: “No normal man will run away, if a beautiful woman makes a pass at him.” Piret is shown to go along with this. Marleen is portrayed to make her deviate from a conventionally passive role. Instead of being a target, Piret becomes the chaser and Artur becomes interested in her. Consequently, Piret is back in the conventional female role and Artur is depicted in a conventional male role. He is shown to find an apartment for them to move in together, without discussing it with Piret. Piret is shown to try on wedding dresses and rehearse saying her first name combined with her husband’s last name.

Piret deviates from heteronormative gender binarity as she becomes the chaser instead of a passive target, but she is shown to do that only as means to ensure reinforcing of the norms that ensue – Artur becomes dominant and Piret is allowed to resume the conventional female role.

5.2.2. Maintaining heterosexuality/ sexual binarity

In season 7, there are no characters that are depicted as non-heterosexual. Heterosexual identity of characters is presumed repeatedly. For example Marleen tells Piret her sister lives in Norway. The following dialogue ensues:

Piret: Is she married to a Norwegian?
Marleen: No, he’s Estonian. He is there for work, she is there for him, like it always is.
Piret assumes that Marleen’s sister is heterosexual, as well as exclude the possibility that she has moved to Norway on her own initiative. Marleen is depicted to allege that (Estonian) women always move (to Norway) only to be with their husbands. These depictions reinforce heteronormativity by presuming heterosexual identity and by reinforcing gender binarity.

Throughout the season only narratives of straight romance are constructed, only heterosexual relationships are represented and there is no ambiguity of sexuality.

5.2.3. Depiction of queerness

In season 7, there is one character, Peep, who I read as gender queer, however only in his appearance, but not in his behavior and personality. At first glance Peep can be thought to resemble a very butch woman, yet there is no room left for this interpretation as his personality was portrayed as conventionally masculine. None of the other characters notice the ambiguity in Peep’s appearance and he is always referred to as a man without anyone calling his gender into question. As he is portrayed as a young adult, characters are occasionally shown to refer to him as a boy, which is the only acknowledgement of his difference from all the other male characters in the series.

A possible reading to Peep’s appearance might be that because he is depicted as a young adult, his character is more comfortably allowed to follow modern fashion trends and therefore be more attentive to his appearance and dress in a more ambiguous way.

5.2.4. Comparison of season 1 and season 7

The depiction of the characters’ appearance remained by and large the same in both seasons. Conventional gender binarity is evident during both seasons. Women were depicted as looking conventionally feminine and well groomed, men were depicted as looking conventionally masculine and modestly groomed or ungroomed. There was one exception to this depiction of male characters in season 7.
Characters were depicted to have jobs in areas typical for their gender in season 1 but in season 7, the characters’ jobs do not reflect a bias regarding their genders.

When in season 1, male characters’ personalities were by and large depicted as fitting of binary gender roles, and female characters were portrayed as more versatile, in season 7, also male roles were presented as deviant from the norm somewhat more often. In both seasons it was the deviance of women’s roles that resulted in negative reactions from the men and general dissonance.

In season 7, female characters were depicted as less submissive to male characters than in season 1. None of the male characters were portrayed so excessively dominant, intrusive and offensive in season 7 as was depicted in season 1 but they still were shown to take charge over the female characters’ lives in season 7, as they did in season 1. Male dominance had its steady place in both seasons, despite the fact that a slight to outwardly softer masculinities was detected in season 7.

Although the way gender roles were depicted became somewhat less conventional in season 7, there are no developments of portraying non-heterosexual characters or queerness.

In both seasons narratives of straight romance were constructed constantly and most characters fixated on establishing straight relationships, with exceptions in season 1.

The possibility of same sex attraction and desire was included in season 1 as two explicitly gay men and two women with ambiguous sexual orientation were shown. In season 7, non-heterosexual characters were not depicted, hence the possibility of same sex attraction and desire was excluded.

Queerness regarding gender expression was also included as one character that could be perceived as gender queer, as their behavior deviated from the conventional gender role, was represented in season 1. In season 7, there was one character that could be perceived gender queer, as their appearance deviated from the conventional gender role.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to analyze how heteronormativity is reinforced and/or challenged in Estonian television series, on the example of the popular drama series “Pilvede all” by exploring how LGBTQ characters and queerness are depicted.
To study these issues I conducted a critical analysis of how LGBTQ characters and queerness are depicted, and how different elements of the drama series’ content reinforce, reject or question the rules of heteronormativity - gender binarity and sexual binarity. I observed how these depictions have changed since the series began in 2010.

When analyzing the depiction of LGBTQ characters in “Pilvede all” during season 1, I observed visibility of gay male characters, and two female characters whose sexual orientation was depicted as ambiguous. Non-heterosexual characters were shown as diverse regarding their gender, sexual orientation and social status, and the portrayal of characters was also different in relation to heteronormativity.

One of the gay male characters was depicted as overtly effeminate and dramatic, hence deviant from the male gender role, and was ridiculed for it. The second gay character was depicted as traditionally masculine in his appearance as well as in behavior hence he was presented in a way that does not disturb the heteronormative order. The ambiguous depiction of the two female characters’ sexual orientation reinforced queerness, but because their relationship is portrayed as more of a friendship than courtship, it posed no real undermining effect to heteronormativity. This ambiguity possibly also attended to the male gaze, which reinforces heteronormativity.

Season 7 did not present any non-heterosexual characters although considering that the visibility of LGBT topics is increasing in the society, their presence in the series would have been well grounded. The choice of not including any non-heterosexual characters reflects insignificance of the subject to the producers of the series.

In both seasons, heteronormativity was strongly reinforced with characters’ appearance, which was depicted as following conventional gender norms. Actors are made to look their best while staying within the confines of the conventional gender binarity – women look glamorous, men look strong. While the desire to accentuate the characters’ gender binary physical characteristics is comprehensible, diverse gender expressions are not represented to the viewer.

In both seasons the portrayal of the characters personalities was by and large based on gender binarity, hence reinforcing heteronormativity. Depiction of women’s roles allowed more deviance from the norms in both seasons, and male characters deviated more from the norm in season 7 than in season 1. Yet male dominance was similarly depicted in both seasons. Most often, conflicts between male and female characters arose when a character’s gender role deviated from the norm. It is understandable that in order to create events in the
story line, conflicts are necessary, but when based on such deviance, they tend to be too simplistic and result in reinforcing conventional values.

Both seasons explored different possibilities of courtship dynamics and depicted male characters’ frustration with unconventional roles of female characters. Season 7 tested the possibility of a modern family arrangement with active and independent female figures. This reflects the society’s interest in the subject. Yet the outcome of these dynamics was negative as if condemning the possibility of increased female independence, instead of offering the viewers a sense of security about the change in female roles.

Several tendencies in the depiction of LGBTQ characters in television series, that have been observed by academics in the U.S., were also present in “Pilvede all”. A gay male character was depicted in a ridiculing manner, which, as noted by Chambers (2009) can often be interpreted as homophobia. In addition, it reinforces prejudices against gay men and simultaneously reinforces heteronormativity. Fejes (as cited in Avila-Saavedra, 2009) observed the way in which non-heterosexual characters are portrayed as harmless to the heteronormative order by being portrayed as straight in every other way than their sexual orientation. The same was evident regarding the second gay male character in “Pilvede all”.

On the contrary to what Chambers (2009) pointed out regarding the hegemonic depiction of homosexual people in U.S. television series, which the GLAAD survey “Where We Are on TV” (2013) confirmed, non-heterosexual characters of “Pilvede all” were portrayed as diverse in many aspects.

The drama series “Pilvede all” reproduces a reality with some insignificant deviations from heteronormativity that result in outcomes that reinforce conventional gender and sexual norms. Considering television’s symbolic authority and its function of framing people’s perception of the reality, the way the characters and their relations are depicted in “Pilvede all”, plays a significant role in the way people relate to the reality around them. Because norms of gender and sexuality are produced and reproduced by television and impact the reality that we live in (Chambers, 2009), heteronormative tendencies and elements that question or undermine heteronormativity in “Pilvede all” impact its viewers and hence the society at large. “Pilvede all” most certainly reproduces elements of dominating cultural ideology but also offers some alternatives to the norms.

As different interest groups’ and individuals’ support for the equal treatment of LGBT people increases, television series could provide space for yet unseen but relevant, diverse narratives of LGBT people’s lives. It would be an opportunity for the viewers to get an insight of the issues that are discussed in the media in a rather polarized and generalized
manner. The critique of heteronormativity is not merely an opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality (Chambers, 2009). It is obvious why resistance to heteronormativity is necessary for non-heterosexual people, but resisting the deep-rooted dominance of heterosexual norms benefits everyone (ibid.). In order to offer its viewers a richer and more diverse representation of reality and thereby recognize the possibility to break free from the confines of conventional gender roles and sexual identities, “Pilvede all” should depict more diversity regarding sexual and gender identities of its characters and more diverse narratives that include same-sex relationships and the possibility of same-sex desire.

6.1. Limitations and directions for further research

Although I was initially also interested in the politics behind the depiction of LGBTQ characters in “Pilvede all”, the series’ production team was reluctant to comment on the choices made about the characters and narratives of the series. I was unable to describe or analyze how these aspects impact the series and to characterize the politics behind the choices.

Although it was possible to receive some understanding of the way that LGBTQ characters, queerness and heteronormativity are portrayed in Estonian television series, a larger sample should be analyzed in order to provide a more comprehensive result. It is not possible to point out how “Pilvede all” depictions compare to other Estonian drama series without further analysis of other series’ content.

For a better overview of how the characters of “Pilvede all” evolve regarding their sexual and gender identities and gender roles, analysis of more than two seasons of “Pilvede all” should be made.
7. References


8. Appendix:

Appendix A.

Television series “Pilvede all” ratings since the first season in autumn 2010 until the last season in spring of 2014 (still running).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Viewers (thousand)</th>
<th>Viewers (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 2010</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2010</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2011</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2011</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2011</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2011</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2011</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2011</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2012</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2012</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2012</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2012</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2012</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2012</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2013</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2013</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2013</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2013</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2013</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2013</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2013</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to calculate how many people watch the drama series “Pilvede all” on average monthly, I used data given on the webpage of market research and consulting company TNS Emor who monitor the monthly ratings of most viewed television programs.

The table includes data from the monthly ratings of:
September – November, 2010 (Season 1)
March – May, 2011 (Season 2)
September – December, 2011 (Season 3)
February – May, 2012 (Season 4)
September – December, 2012 (Season 5)
February – May, 2013 (Season 6)
September – December, 2013 (Season 7)
February – March, 2014 (Season 8)

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 2013</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2014</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2014</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AVERAGE</strong></td>
<td>208</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>