

# THE CONVERSATION

## Cucumber, Banana and Tofu are queer in many more ways than one

March 13, 2015 12.00pm GMT

### Katharina Lindner

Lecturer in Film and Media, University of Stirling

### The Conversation's partners

---

The Conversation UK receives funding from Hefce, Hefcw, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as sixty five university members.

### [View the full list](#)



Queerest show yet? Ben Blackall/Channel 4

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans characters have started to gain a more sustained presence in the TV landscape. They have appeared for example in *Skins*, *Hollyoaks*, *Eastenders*, *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*, as well as *Six Feet Under*, *Modern Family* and *Orphan Black*. But they are often relatively marginal and remain isolated from a sense of queer community.

It's in the larger context of this lack of LGBT-focused representation that some select shows have come to carry the burden of representation for the queer community. *Cucumber*, *Banana and Tofu*, Russell T Davies' recent trio of programmes, very much belong to this group. There was an implicit expectation that these shows would be everything to all (queer) people. To be meaningful and enjoyable, to speak to and resonate with experiences and, above all, to be "realistic". They had a lot to live up to, and so it's not surprising that, for some, they failed on these grounds.

So why three? There's Channel 4's *Cucumber*, the most "conventional" of the lot in that it is big, grown-up television; episodes are a standard 45 minutes long and the narrative develops centrally around its middle-aged, mid-life crisis plagued male characters.



T'Nia Miller as Kay and Charlie Covell as Amy. *Ben Blackall/Channel 4*

Then there's little sister series *Banana*, broadcast on E4. *Banana* consists of shorter episodes of around 20 minutes. There is no notable over-arching narrative arc. Instead, the largely self-contained individual episodes introduce us in more detail to some of the characters that make only brief appearances in *Cucumber*.

Finally, *Tofu*, an online documentary series available on 4oD which is a series of short documentaries featuring interviews with cast members of *Cucumber* and *Banana* and with members of the general public. It explores the contemporary sexual attitudes and behaviours of "real people", including older men and women and trans and asexual individuals, around themes such as coming out, bad sex, teenage crushes, not doing it and hook-up apps.

## Cucumber

*Cucumber*, unsurprisingly, received the most attention of the three. There is, and rightly so, praise for the show's loud yet sensitive and serious yet funny portrayal of contemporary queer life in Manchester, and for its candid engagement with current social and political issues as they affect LGBT people: including ageing, unemployment, family relations, marriage, illness, death, intimacy, migration and homophobia.

*Cucumber* also deserves recognition for its fairly diverse portrayal of the queer community: the show is populated with characters from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds and their age profile is markedly "old", as far as queer television goes. Fifty-something insurance salesman Henry (Vincent Franklin), the show's central character, and his partner of nine years, Lance (Cyril Nri), would look oddly out of place amongst the hip young crowds of *Queer as Folk*, *Lip Service* or *The L Word*.

But viewers' high expectations also – and predictably – led to **negative responses**. These ranged from "superficial", "boring", "unrealistic" and suggestions that Davies has turned a self-indulgent mid-life crisis into his next television project, to it simply being "bad TV".

## Queer expectations

However, I think *Cucumber* is good television. It's also good queer television. The collection of characters and the community they are embedded in are queer in the sense that they break gender and sexual boundaries and binaries. While there are straightforwardly gay or lesbian characters, they form a kind of community (through living arrangements in a squatted house and the development of supportive networks and relationships) that flies in the face of

hetero-normative reproductive and family relations.

Even the “straight” characters defy normative gender and sexual expectations. There’s the time, for instance, when Henry’s sister Cleo (played by the ever-fabulous Julie Hesmondhalgh – who is perhaps best known for playing trans character Hayley in Coronation Street) enlists a male friend for sex and provides a detailed description of how she wants to try her “new vagina” that she hasn’t “used” since a post-birth operation going not quite as planned.



Sex on screen. Channel 4

And yes, there is lots of stereotypical and clichéd hot gay male sex – lots of it. But there are similarly frequent portrayals of other kinds of sexualities and sexual behaviours that are less straightforwardly categorised. Perhaps most interestingly, the central relationship between Henry and Lance is not just a queer relationship because it involves two men. It’s also queer because Henry and Lance “don’t fuck”. They haven’t. Not once. In nine years. This is one example of the ways in which Cucumber, while frequently playing into gay and lesbian stereotypes, simultaneously undermines them.


The one thing I do find slightly disappointing about Cucumber is the marginal significance of characters who are not male. The programme features male characters of all shapes and sizes, ages, ethnicities and different class backgrounds, occupations, sexual habits and (dis)abilities. The cast is encouragingly diverse, but it’s mainly diversity among men.


That said, it’s probably what should be expected from a series of programmes named after the different stages of male erection.

Banana and Tofu depict a more diverse range of (mostly younger) characters and issues. They provide the space for a more in-depth exploration of the kinds of people and events that appear, literally, in Cucumber’s margins.

So I would argue that it’s the combination of the interlinked series – Cucumber, Banana and Tofu – and the resonances between them, that’s truly exciting and new and, well, queer. They complement each other. As a set of programmes they manage to achieve what they don’t quite manage to do individually: speak to a range of different – straight and queer – audiences in a way that encourages us to reconsider what’s “normal”.

 Tweet47

 Share9

 Get newsletter