

I guess I'll see you at the movies

An examination of gay and post-gay media representation experienced by Dutch queer audiences

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Abstract

Recent years have shown a dramatic shift in representation of queer identities in both film and television. Within that rise, character's sexuality often became more incidental to the plot, instead of the center of the story – a notion sometimes described with the late 90's concept of 'post-gay,' which considers sexuality to no longer be a defining characteristic in any way and sets out to disentangle queer sexuality and struggle. Although this increase in representation of LGBTQ+ characters in mainstream media has been celebrated, some scholars have criticized the *politics* of said representations, arguing that post-gay neglects societal reality and depoliticizes real queer experiences. This thesis examines these claims, centering queer audience's experience of these representations, through qualitative research. Through a series of semi-structured interviews and by drawing on Uses and Gratification Theory, this thesis demonstrates the way queer audiences adopt an actively critical lens when consuming (queer) media, whilst also consuming post-gay media to fulfill the specific need of tension release. In doing so, it showcases the ineffectuality of the *concept* post-gay, as well as the potential post-gay representation has for queer audiences.

Keywords Post-gay, queer representation, diversity, audience studies, media studies

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1. Introduction

The recent decade has seen the entertainment industry undergo big changes - changes in subject matter, in who is depicted, in who is depicting. This shift towards a more diverse media landscape covers various facets, ranging from the representation of sexuality to that of race or gender. Films and television series that portray sexual identities outside the norm of heteronormativity have made a steep rise both on online streaming platforms and the film festival circuit, and there has been a surge in critical acclaim and audience numbers (Monaghan, 2020; Eguchi et al., 2014). Within this ‘group of films’, the range of subject matters has grown wider as well, shifting further and further away from queer themes as the core plot line and putting less and less emphasis on queerness of characters (Monaghan, 2020). This change is interesting in relation to the way in which these films are labelled. For a long time ‘gay film’ and ‘queer film’ were considered specific film genres – and in many ways still are. Almost all big streaming platforms, including Netflix and Amazon Prime, offer ‘LGBTI’ as a genre of film.

In recent years, referring to these groups of films as one genre has been criticized as being generalizing and reductive (Ferreira, 2015; Nichols, 2016) - why should films that share no themes, tropes or storylines be placed in the same ‘genre’ on the basis of depicting a character on the LGBTQ+ spectrum? On the other hand, could there be positive use of a conscious grouping together, for those seeking to be more informed or feel more recognized? This wish for a de-emphasizing of queer sexuality as a core characteristic also manifested in the rise of a new concept – that of ‘post-gay’. Articles headlining ‘These Are Our Top 10 Post-Gay Films of the Decade! - celebrating films in which queerness is “refreshingly incidental to the plot” (Huffington Post, 2014) have been appearing more and more regularly. Or, as the Hollywood Reporter for example writes “But one reason [the 2018 film] *Bohemian Rhapsody* can be seen as post-gay in that the movie sees Freddie as so much more than his sexuality. He’s a titan, a rock god, a towering singer and musician, and he’s not solely defined by his gayness.” The use of the concept has grown strongly – but what exactly does this mean for the audiences watching?

Representations in both gay and post-gay films may relate to how queerness is experienced, and it therefore raises the question of what those representations, and the accompanied labels, might entail. To examine this, this thesis will attempt to answer the research question

“How do queer audiences from the Netherlands experience queer representations in gay and post-gay films from 2010-20?”

On an academic level, questioning how queer depiction in media is experienced is relevant because of the rapid changing of the cinematic landscape. Much academic theory on this subject gets outdated relatively fast, exactly because of this fast changing (Monaghan, 2020). In addition to this,

queer audiences are a group that has historically been strongly underrepresented in audience research (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992). The examples of queer audience research I was able to find were either quantitative and using a standardized survey, thereby not taking individual considerations into account (Doest, 2012), or they were qualitative but focusing on the reception of a specific subgroup of a piece of media, such as ‘lesbian depictions in film’ (Staiger, 2005).

The value of keeping research on this subject up to date is also societal - it has been proven that the growth of queer depiction has led to a growth in queer acceptance and inclusion (Syed Musa et al., 2020; Montalbano-Phelps, 2013). The ways in which queer film is perceived, labelled and discussed are not only linked, but have a large societal impact. And perhaps even more relevant than broad society’s view is the potential it has to create change in experience of self-worth and the way queer audiences view themselves. Scholars have highlighted the positive effects of representation and depiction on a person’s self-worth (Hall, 1973).

The research limits itself to the period 2010-2020, primarily because it is a clear demarcation of time that covers ‘the recent years’ in which that shift has been identified. Of course, the shift of growing representation cannot simply be placed in a confined time period - it is instead the result of a much longer process. The actual research of this thesis has to be limited to the past decade because audiences right now will presumably have the best grasp on and best recollection of films of recent years. Another argument to consider this specific decade is the role of online media. New media and new platforms have created a demonstrable shift in not just representation, but also in shaping communities and online spaces (Tropiano, 2014).

To answer the question of how Dutch queer audiences experience queer representation in (post-)gay film a series of eight interviews was conducted, during which the opinions, values and experiences on and with queer representation were discussed, specifically in regard to the shift in quantity and rise of post-gay representations. In order to examine the experience of these audiences, and specifically the possible difference in the experience of gay and post-gay media, the following sub-questions will be answered.

- 1. In what ways do Dutch queer audiences actively seek out queer representation in media?*
- 2. How do queer representations in gay and post-gay films inform queer audiences’ perceptions of queerness?*
- 3. What aspects of queer representation do these audiences consider most valuable?*

This thesis is structured as follows: first, it offers a theoretical overview of queer theory and queer representation in media. This section starts off with a brief introduction of queer theory and examination of the notion of post-gay, then delves further into queer representation in in media, and finally draws on audience studies, particularly on Uses and Gratification Theory. The theory section

is then followed by the method section, in which the methods used this research are outlined – 8 interviews were held, transcribed, coded and analysed through thematic analysis. Subsequently the data and findings are discussed. The final section offers a reflection and discussion on these findings.

Theory section

Here, the main concepts and theories used in this research will be discussed. First, a brief introduction into the concept of queer theory will be offered, which is followed by that of queer representation in media. This is where Burston's 'post-gay' (1994) will be introduced, as well as Monaghan's notion of the politics of representation (2020) as a reflection on that concept and the results it has had. Finally, it will review both reception theory and gratification theory in light of the concept of audience meaning making.

1. Queer Theory

Queer theory as umbrella

The mercurial nature of the concept 'queerness' has often been described (Dilley, 1999), but this fluid or elusive character may not be fully unintentional. According to Annemarie Jagose (2009) queer theory's "strategically open-ended character" may be conscious, for it being "a concept that prominently insists on the radical unknowability of its future formations" (2009, p. 158). Queerness is often described as an umbrella-term for the hybridity and fluidity of the spectrum outside of heteronormative sexuality (Villarejo, 2007). Both 'queer' and the acronym 'LGBTIQ' are used to represent (individuals within) that spectrum of non-normative sexuality and are often used interchangeably. Both have faced somewhat similar criticisms in that they would both flatten racial, ethnic, and class differences within the spectrum (McCann & Monaghan, 2020; Altman, 2018). 'LGBTIQ' has also been criticized for its strong emphasis on lesbian and gay identities (McCann & Monaghan, 2010). Keeping in mind both critiques, in this thesis I will be using queer, because it is the one more often used in describing media, on which this thesis focuses.

The word 'queer' far precedes the concept of queer theory (which as a term only came into being in 1990, when it was coined by Teresa de Laurentis) as well as the theories and genealogies it is built upon. Although often tied to the notion of non- or anti-normative sexual identity, queer theory has moved further away from the concept of identity (Love, 2011) and its focus on sexuality as its sole purpose (Cohen, 1997). Because of these shifts, some have stated that queer theory has grown to equate postmodernism and post-structuralism, because of their shared objective of interrogating binary structures. McCann and Monaghan (2020) argue however that although there is lots of overlap in their "ways of theorizing," there is still a clear distinction between them in that queer theory "has always also been inflected by histories of activism and resistance to oppression" (p. 9).

Criticisms

Queer theory's "issue" of its problematic focus on sexuality as its sole focus was first voiced in these terms by Cohen in 1997, but criticisms regarding the neglect of other identities intersecting with the one of sexuality can be traced back to key works stemming from critical race studies, (women of colour) feminist theory and post-structuralist theory from the decades prior, defined by Ferguson (2003) as 'queer of colour critique'. Definitions of this critique have varied from being a 'methodology, theoretical position and a political stance' (Manalansan IV, 2018). As Manalansan words it: queer of colour critique "highlights the uneven terrain of bodies and desire" (p. 1288). Or, as Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) articulated a similar sentiment:

"Queer is used as a false unifying umbrella which all 'queers' of all races, ethnicities and classes are shoved under. At times we need this umbrella to solidify our ranks against outsiders. But even when we seek shelter under it we must not forget that it homogenizes, erases our differences."

This critique being very much a part of the field that is queer theory, many scholars have since proposed additions or alterations. One of these additions is the framework of quare theory. E. P. Johnson (2001, 2005) has introduced the notion of 'quare' which is an African American vernacular of the word 'queer' and underlines the "material lived experiences" of queer people of colour (Eguchi et al., 2014). Quare theory articulates the acknowledgement of experiences of Black people as "not a move towards essentialism, but instead a move toward expanding our understanding of queerness" (Eguchi et al, 2014, p. 373). Johnson (2005) emphasizes the way in which White authors fail to examine (or recognize) "the ways in which their own whiteness informs their own critical queer position" (p. 130). Philips and Steward (2008) argue that "the cultural visibility and academic productivity of White gay men and lesbians" has induced a conflation between queerness and Whiteness (p. 381). By stressing this, quare theory offers a means of critical examination of the racial privilege of Whiteness that is so ingrained in queer theory. The implications for a framework like quare theory on media analysis will be touched upon again in the section 'queer representation in media.' These critiques are of great value for any study on the experience of queerness, but specifically to the question of post-gay: its definition, its impact and its implications. For – is gay to be 'post' anything without the awareness of the other identities with which it intersects?

Gay & Post gay?

In order to understand the relatively new notion of post-gay in media, it is useful to have a look at the way it originated and to examine in which ways it distanced itself from the narrative of 'gay politics' and therefore (activist) queer theory (Monaghan, 2020) - at the time of its conception. Interestingly, the discourse around this term formed almost entirely outside of academia, and instead originated and was in large part developed in magazines and newspapers. The term was

coined by journalist Paul Burston in 1994 as a criticism (and “observation”) of gay politics, and then found a greater audience when it was used and referenced by James Collard in the New York Times, in 1998 (Ghaziani, 2011; Mendelsohn, 1996). Collard:

“We should no longer define ourselves solely in terms of our sexuality – even if our opponents do. Post-gay isn’t un-gay. It’s about taking a critical look at gay life and no longer thinking solely in terms of struggle.” Collard, 1998, p. 53).

Warner (1999) characterized it as moving past gayness being a defining feature and as the disentanglement of gayness and struggle, which is the definition this thesis will be using.¹ John D’Emilio (2002) has noted that this shift, “from the exorcized gay margin to the normalized center” (Mendelsohn, 1996, p. 31), was characteristic for the 1990s and the dawn of the millennium. It was during this time that gay politics shifted towards goals of relatively conservative values such as acceptance in the army and family issues (Mucciaroni, 2008). This focus on safety and assimilation into heterosexual spaces now became more and more detached from the radical politics of queer theory and the Gay Liberation movement.

This transition of us *versus* them into us *and* them is a logical result of being less marginalized (Ghaziani, 2011), but the notion of a post-gay era does have its issues, as expressed by multiple scholars. Many of them have questioned whether the mainstreaming of queerness is inherently a good thing (Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002, Dow 2001, Meyer 2010, Ng, 2013). One of the primary aspects emphasized by these scholars is the way it reinforces normativity. The shift described by D’Emilio (2002) may move towards more acceptance, but by shifting towards that heteronormative centre (instead of the closed off queer margin), the white, male, middle class standard is being reinforced, leaving a “culture of heterosexual dominance” in place (Seidman, 1993; Seidman, 2002; Warner, 1999). This tension is ever present in the challenges surrounding queer acceptance. As Ghaziani puts it:

“Post-gay could entail a multiculturalist blurring of modernist boundaries and a move toward expanded tolerance and freedom – or it could entail a neoliberal, class- and racially inflected, and surface level blurring that redefines the contours of hetero- and homonormativity. Which of these two models is more valid is as of yet inconclusive”?
(Ghaziani, 2011, p. 120).

¹ There is one more question that should briefly be addressed in regard to this definition. Why not use ‘post-queer’? There is of course a difference between the words ‘gay’ and ‘queer’, and the rest of this thesis uses ‘queer’ and not ‘gay’. Post-gay was developed specifically as a response to “gay politics” (Ghaziani, 2011) and was done so by gay men. This raises the question of whether then this label possibly limits the scope, and whether ‘post-queer’ may be a better term. But this term already has a different use, at least proposed by Green (2002). This meaning is more theoretically grounded, in that it is aimed at incorporating queer theory in the study of sexuality. Therefore, the term of post-gay is used, the definition does imply the inclusion of the broader spectrum of sexualities.

This sentence encapsulates the duality of post-gayness. But these conflicting readings of the same framework raise the question of whether it is of any value at all. Monaghan (2020), drawing on Gahziani's 2011 article 'Post-gay Collective Identity Construction', argues that the "specific set of post-gay politics characterized by themes of "tolerance, acceptance and genuine love" mask a troubling politics of normalization" (p. 2). She then also places it within the context of 'post-discourse.' As with other deployments of post-somethings (such as post-feminism and post-race), "post-gay is deeply rooted in neoliberalism, through which a focus on the individual fuels a certain apathy toward broader social issues" (p. 3).

It is interesting to tie this criticism to queer of color critique. As mentioned previously, almost all those involved in the introduction and discourse of the term have been White gay men. Post-gay's implication that (gay) sexuality should no longer be a defining characteristic, whilst at the same time not taking in account other defining characteristics such as race and different gender identities proves exactly the point queer of color critique makes, as well as fully complies with Monaghan's argument.

In her paper 'Post-gay television: LGBTQ representation and the negotiation of 'normal' in MTV's *Faking It*,' Monaghan (2020) actually does apply the notion of post-gay to queer media, being one of the first to examine post-gay media in academia. Very few scholars have examined the notion of post-gay applied to media. Other than Monaghan, only Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2015) briefly touch upon the term. This small amount is striking given that the term has grown in use in popular culture. However, only in the last five years has it been actively used by media platforms (Monaghan, 2020). The specific implications of post-gayness, as well as the development of queer representation in media and the issue of stereotypes will be discussed more thoroughly in the queer media section.

2. *Queer representation in media*

Defining 'queer media' and a brief introduction into its history

There is no academic consensus on the matter of how 'queer media' should be defined. The critiques (both on the field of queer theory and the term 'queer' itself) discussed previously of course matter in defining queerness. As described, queer theory is oriented towards the questioning of binary structures, but how does this translate to film? Does there have to be a theme of romance, sex or sexuality in order for the label to be used? Can 'queer' be fully in the subtext? LGBTQI+ film festivals themselves seem to use different sets of requirements. Most of them however simply accept films that label themselves to be queer (Allan, 2018). João Ferreira, artistic director of *Queer Lisboa Film Festival*, emphasizes viewing queer film as a genre, that has its own narrative and characteristics, would be impossible because of the immense variety of genres that can be classified

as queer film (2015). He argues that we could “succumb to the canonical and overused explanation that Queer Cinema is any film whose main storyline represents LGBT characters,” but that this would be a mistake as well – queer film, he argues is simply film that is examining barriers. For the sake of this research, the broadest definition of queer media was used. All media that contain queer elements (characters, aesthetics) were considered interesting because of how audiences related to these elements.

Early representations of the reversal of gender-roles, as well as same-gender kisses were seen on the screen in the early 1900s (Ferreira, 2015). My goal is not to offer a complete overview of the history of representation of queerness in media, but I do want to draw attention to a couple of specific moments and movements in queer film history, in order to highlight the ways in which queer film has always been intertwined with political developments and activism – and to highlight moments that do the reverse of what post-gay depiction has done in recent years. One particular moment I would like to touch upon is the New Queer Cinema movement, a movement within independent film (Ruby Rich; Pearl, 2004). It refers to a group of films that hit the festival circuit in the early nineties.² These films actively rejected “positive queer representation” and used “queer as an aesthetic strategy by defying cinematic conventions.” This conscious rejection often resulted in fragmented and ahistorical storytelling (Pearl, 2004, p. 23). Many of the films placed within this banner of New Queer Cinema emphasized the experience of marginalized groups within the spectrum of sexuality. Many theorists have stated the direct link between this movement and the aids crisis, arguing that it not only shaped the politics of this movement, it also gave form to its aesthetics and ways of filmmaking (Pearl, 2004; McCann & Monaghan, 2020). This example is only one moment in history in which political development informed queer media, but there are many more. This specific example is relevant because the way these films positioned themselves was diametrically opposed to the way the initiators of these new post-gay politics did, even though there was less than five years between them.

Queer representation across popular culture

The last two decades have shown a massive increase in representation of queer characters in popular media. They have become a staple in television, notably in film and series aimed at teenagers (Monaghan, 2020). This is relevant in considering the value and function of representation – as described previously, both qualitative and quantitative studies have shown that audiences viewing positive representation are more likely to be accepting of queerness (Syed Musa et al., 2020; Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2015). There is however another significance to it – the teen

² A selection of films grouped within this label is *Poison* (1991) by Todd Haines, *Paris is Burning* (1990) by Jennie Livingston and *Swoon* (1992) by Tom Kalin.

genre plays a particularly important role and a source of information on sexuality and gender, Monaghan emphasizes. Multiple authors have pointed out the way in which (youth) media can relate to identity formation (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992; Meyer, 2003). So – the critical and activist nature of queer theory (McCann & Monaghan, 2020) can be found within examples of queer media, but the criticisms on (and part of) queer theory itself have also been of great value.

The concept of “queer representation in media” also directly relates to the examination of tropes, themes and stereotypes that have become linked to queer characters in media. Stereotypes are usually identified as a “misrepresentation, or misperception of reality”, and as having “the power to negatively influence different social groups.” (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2015, p. 80). Battles & Hilton-Morrow (2015) argue that these stereotypes “can be traced to the early understanding of homosexuality as a form of gender inversion,” meaning that stereotypes were often based in the depiction of femininity within men and masculinity within women. They do highlight that the depiction of lesbian women has shifted away from the emphasis on masculinity, which they trace to the mid-90’s trend of ‘Lesbian Chic,’ in which the “lipstick lesbian” would actively reject the ‘butch’ or ‘mannish’ stereotype that prevailed at the time (p. 81). Bisexuality is often stereotypically linked to sexual promiscuity (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2015) to only being ‘a phase’ (Monaghan, 2016). From the punchline, feminine gay best friend in comedies to the depiction of pedophilic gay characters in drama’s (Hart, 2000), the list of what may be classified as queer stereotypes is long. It should be mentioned that research into this, specifically that of the early 2000’s, is almost always oriented towards stereotypes of gay, lesbian and bisexual identities, and less so to other identities also on the queer spectrum. The main criticism towards research of stereotypes is that it often moves from the assumption that a stereotype misrepresents the reality of the identity of a group, which means it also assumes there *is* a singular reality of a group (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2015).

When looking at representation in media, as Davis and Dickinson (2004) argue, it should be taken in account that a lot of these texts are from the nineties and early 2000’s, and the dramatic shift in accessibility caused by the internet should of course be considered. However, for a very long time, mass media was the only source of information for a large group of audiences, in part because it was often free and private (Meyer, 2003). And even more recent research has shown its role as an information source, maintaining being of large interest to television scholars (Waston & McKee, year). “The relationship between mediated worlds & identity formation is an integral part of how an individual constructs their sense of self throughout late adolescence and emerging adulthood” (Davis & Dickinson, 2004).

When discussing queer representation in media, the criticisms and frameworks brought up in the previous subchapter are often very suitable to be applied to media and popular culture. The

relevance of the queer lens is apparent and has been emphasized before. As Stephans (2010) noted, “Growth in gay and lesbian media visibility has coincided with the mainstreaming of ‘queer theory’ in academe and its normalizing of Whiteness” (p. 245). An example of a queer reading of a piece of media is the analysis by Eguchi et al. (2014) of film about a Black, queer love story (Noah’s Arc – Jumping the Broom, 2008), analysing through two major themes: heteronormativity (the depiction of singular and essentialized sexuality) and White queer normativity (the depiction of class, language and consumerism).

Gay and post-gay in media

The concept of ‘post-gay’ and that of a ‘post-gay era’ have been examined mainly on a broader, societal level. Very few have applied it to media, or explicitly, to film. One of the arguments that has been made by authors (not directly using the term post-gay but rather describing a similar phenomenon) in media is that it is used to sanitize queer sexuality and desire for the consumption of the masses, and that it depoliticizes something that is inherently political (Monaghan, 2020; Doran, 2014; Walters, 2014). Monaghan’s 2020 article ‘*Post-gay television: LGBTQ representation and the negotiation of ‘normal’ in MTV’s Faking It*’ has been touched upon previously but becomes exceptionally relevant in the analysis of post-gay media. In this article she draws on a quote by MTV executive producer Carter Covington, who was describing the “new politics” of his new series *Faking It*. Monaghan argues that his comments can be linked directly (and are almost exactly reproducing) post-gay ideologies (p. 7). Monaghan is very critical of this, and in doing so is not alone. Vast amounts of scholars have tied this tendency to a neoliberal standpoint in which queer desire is transformed into “depoliticized, sanitized and safe images for mainstream consumption,” meaning any and all depictions of queer sexuality must be attuned to the norms of mainstream audiences (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Doran, 2013; Ghaziani, 2011; Ng, 2013; Walters, 2001; 2014, Warner, 2000).

So, this brings us back to the paradox already offered up by Ghaziani in 2011. Is the post-gay concept a tool that allows for more open, broader storytelling in media (Covington, 2014) or does it reinforce normativity and de-politicizes something inherently political? Is it possible for it to be doing both? The arguments discussed so far are from a producers’ perspective and an academic one. One side that is underexposed is that of audiences. There is no clear-cut set of characteristics of what makes a film post-gay, as it’s both under researched and not used a lot yet. Post-gay film is not a genre – it is a concept sometimes used to describe films that tell stories detached from queer sexuality. To take the case of *Bohemian Rhapsody* mentioned in the introduction – The Hollywood Reporter emphasizes the depiction of Freddie Mercury as “so much more than his sexuality,” which more or less translates to the fact that the film, mostly about Freddie Mercury’s life, actually paid

very little attention to his sexuality. And that is what post-gay names – the not paying attention to sexuality. In doing so, the films it describes actively avoid stereotypes and imply a life post sexual identity playing a big part. But how do queer audiences feel about this? In order to get a better grasp on this it is useful to have a look at audience studies, and specifically Uses and Gratification Theory.

3. Audience Studies

Reception theory: Uses and Gratification

This concept will shed further light on the questions on the audiences' perceptions of queer representations. Useful in examining this is the field of *reception theory*. Reception theory moves from the assumption that rather than text, context is what informs the reception of a piece of media (Hall, 1973). This context may consist of multitudes: the identity of the consumer, as well as the circumstances in which the media was consumed and even the broader societal context. Therefore, each individual audience member is expected to formulate a different meaning.

Uses and Gratification theory

Finally, there is the question of what both gay and post-gay films might *mean* for queer-identifying audiences, thus more specifically how these films may *inform* their perception and definition of queerness, it is worthwhile to draw on another theory from media studies, which is uses and gratifications theory (UGT). This theory focuses on the different motivations audiences can have for consuming certain types of media, thereby moving to the assumption the audience possesses the power in what media they want to consume. UGT questions audiences' motivations for media consumption, and how certain media may satisfy them. UGT was initially developed by theorists Katz, Blumler, Michael Gurevitch. As Katz (1959) describes:

“The "uses" approach assumes that people's values, their interests, their associations, their social roles, are pre-potent and that people selectively "fashion" what they see and hear to these interests.” (p. 3)

This implies a direct tie between the social roles and identities of the queer-identifying audiences and the selection process they enact when choosing what to watch. Moreover, it entails that – if the audiences experience gay and post-gay representation differently, this is again tied to their social identity. In 1973 Katz, Gurevitch & Haas introduced a comprehensive system in which they ‘expose’ the way in which audiences choose specific types of content to fulfil specific needs and achieve specific types of gratifications (West & Turner, 2010). In it, they identify five types of needs. Cognitive (the need to acquire information, comprehend things), affective (the want for a

nice, emotional of aesthetic experience), personal integrative (to boost confidence, status), social integrative (enhancing social connections) and finally tension release (offering escape and diversion) (Katz, Gurevitch & Haas, 1973). For each of these proposed types, different media type examples can be offered. Out of the five, three of them fit specifically with television and media, which are the media types this thesis is focused on (West & Turner, 2010). These are the cognitive, affective and tension release needs. The media examples for the integrative needs are more tied to media like video and internet. These three therefore form the basis for the selection-section of the interview guide. There are other examples of studies in which Uses and Gratifications Theory is applied to queer audiences, for example examining the uses and gratifications of social networks used by queer men (Gudelunas, 2012; Miller, 2015). One interesting finding from this research (Gudelunas, 2012) was that gay users used those media for the exact reason their straight counterparts did, but also had an added layer of unique motivations separate to them. The uses and gratifications of the internet are widely researched, tied to queer people as well. But I was not able to find any further examples of the use of UGT in queer audience studies specifically.

Uses and Gratification Theory will be applied to the experience of post-gay depictions, as will be elucidated in the Methodology chapter.

Method

The Present Research

The literature has shown the duality around the notion of post-gay and the value of examining the experiences of queer audiences with these different representations. The Uses and Gratification Theory (Katz et al., 1973) discussed informs the first sub-question of how and for which reasons the audiences select queer media. Ghaziani's analysis of the concept of post-gay (2011) and Monaghan's (2020) application of the concept to media forms the basis for the second sub-question of how queer representations in gay and post-gay films inform the respondent's perception of queerness. The final sub-question, what aspects of queer representation do queer audiences consider most valuable, again helps shed light on the way post-gay representation is valued, and thereby helps answer the research question posed at the beginning: "How do queer audiences from the Netherlands experience queer representations in gay and post-gay films from 2010-20?"

Semi-structured Interviews

As discussed, a series of eight interviews with audience members identifying as queer was conducted and examined. Because the research question of this thesis is so strongly oriented towards the experience and point of view of audiences, qualitative research and specifically, qualitative interviews, is a convincing fit (Bryman, 2012, p. 472; Burgess, 184). The flexibility this method offers brings great insight into which aspects of the different topic areas the interviewees consider most relevant themselves. The interviews conducted were semi-structured - the reason for using this method rather than fully unstructured interviews is primarily the fact that I am already going into this research with a relatively clear focus (a specific time period, a specific set of films), that I know I want to touch upon in these conversations (Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews offer a solid way to address these talking points and are also best suited for sensitive subjects, such as in this case where respondents are asked to discuss their own relationship with queerness and their own queer identity (Lee, 1993).

Participants

The primary shared characteristic of the group of respondents is that they all identify as queer. The second one is that they are (post-) gay or queer film consumers. It was therefore confirmed before each interview that each respondent was an active film audience member. Because the research focus spans the 2010's, it is relevant that the respondents have been active audience members over this entire period, and at least in theory could have seen the selected films. In order to ensure this, I have put this age border at the birth year of 2000, meaning the interviewee has to have been in at

least their early teens when this decade started. Multiple authors have pointed to the fact that in queer audience research, in theory ‘speaking’ for a much wider community, is often based on data based on male, White and highly-educated (queer-identifying) respondents, meaning it is often not representative for the queer community as a whole at all (Sandford, 2000), though it is also argued that it is that specific group that is most likely to publicly identify as queer (Dhoest, 2012). I attempted to find a diverse group of interviewees, in order to make sure respondents of different races, genders and ages are represented, specifically keeping in mind the previously discussed criticisms of queer theory into account. However, finding a sample proved difficult. As Kielwasser & Wolff (1992) argue, finding queer respondents is challenging. Those willing to identify themselves as homosexuals are probably not representative of those who remain unwilling or unable to articulate such a definition – which slightly expands the challenge of finding a representative sample.

Respondent	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Education	Queer identity
Respondent 1	23	Male	White	MA student	Gay
Respondent 2	24	Male	White	BA finished	Gay
Respondent 3	25	Female	White	MA student	Lesbian
Respondent 4	21	Male	Kurdish-Dutch	MA student	Queer
Respondent 5	20	Non-binary	White	BA student	Queer
Respondent 6	20	Male	White	HBO student	Bisexual
Respondent 7	24	Female	White	MA student	Queer
Respondent 8	24	Female	White	HBO student	Asexual

Table 1: List of respondents

The first couple of respondents were recruited through my personal network and social media groups. After this it snowballed, and the rest of the respondents were found through the earlier ones. It should be mentioned up front that this led to a rather homogenous group (table 1). Although the respondents identify as a wide range of queer identities, seven out of eight respondents were white and all of them have received or are currently either a higher vocational education (HBO in Dutch) or university education.

Procedure

I built my interview guide (Appendix A) working from both the theory section and sub-questions. The guide first focuses on the respondents’ movie-going practices and consumption patterns, and then moved to the notions of queerness and queer film, for which primary questions are “How

would you define queer film?,” which is then followed by “What is your relationship with the concept of queerness?”. After discussing the concept of post-gay, the question “Do you feel that the nuance/difference between gay and post-gay films contribute to these relationship or perceptions?” attempts to then shed light both on the way the respondents feel about these labels and the way they consider their own definition of queerness to be informed. The interview guide section that follows this is based of Katz et al.’s (1973) theory of gratification needs, asking the respondent’s if they feel they have actively (or, subconsciously) sought out queer media for the purpose of learning about queerness, fulfilling emotional needs, social needs, etcetera. Finally, in order to fully grasp which aspects of representation are most (and least) valued by the respondents, it asks about examples of the best and worst examples of representation they remember. When the interview guide was finished, I did a test run of the interview to assess how long each section took, and then took some questions out that turned out to receive repetitive answers (Bryman, 2012, p. 474).

For the majority of the time writing this thesis the Netherlands were under national lockdown because of the Covid-19 pandemic, which of course influenced the opportunities of conducting interviews in person slightly. Six out of eight interviews were held in person, the other two over video call due to travel restrictions. The length of the interviews differed slightly and ranged from 45 minutes to just over 1,5 hours. It averaged at just under 1 hour and 15 minutes each. Each interview was recorded on my phone or, if the interview was taking place over a video call, on my laptop, and was then transcribed verbatim. Since this thesis is focused on queer audiences in the Netherlands, all interviews (but one, for the respondent preferred to do it in English) were conducted in Dutch. All quotes and sections used in the data analysis section are therefore translated into English.

My initial plan to fully focus the interviews on queer cinema proved difficult. When speaking on first memories of representation or examples of negative representation, examples often stemmed from television shows and in some cases even books. The list of films, divided into the categories ‘gay’ and ‘post-gay’ (Appendix B) that was supposed to form the basis of a section of the interview, therefor got a different function. This division of the two categories was loosely based on labels given in newspaper and magazine reviews, interviews with directors and social media analysis, and initially it would form the basis to discuss each film the respondent had seen separately. Because the interviews strayed away from solely speaking on film, and because often, multiple films on the list were already discussed when the interview got this section, the list became more of a series of loose prompts. The question would usually be a broad “which of these films have you seen?” After this, usually the respondent would simply start discussing one of the films they liked or disliked, and the interview would get into the reasons behind this.

It is also important to briefly touch upon the ethical considerations of the research. Before each interview, the informed consent-form was gone over, which guaranteed full confidentiality and anonymity to all respondents and stressed that participation was voluntary, and the respondents could stop the interview and withdraw at any given time. Discussing personal experiences with sexual identity can be a sensitive matter and was handled with care.

The test-run interview offered insight in how the interviews would go, and in each of the interviews, the guide was followed quite strictly, meaning there was a strong consistency of measures (Bryman, 2012, p. 157). The group of respondents is very homogenous – as described, this has its downsides, but the similarity in age does create a very similar – and therefore, reliable - sample in that respect. There was also much overlap in the answers of the respondents, which does raise the expectation that with a similar sample and repeated under similar circumstances, similar results would be found. As described, during the two interviews conducted over video call, the respondents were slightly less likely to elaborate and took less time to conduct. So, this variable should be taken into account. When it comes to validity, the limitations of the sample previously discussed (in age, ethnicity and education) do limit the extent to which the research question posed can be answered. The sample does not fully represent queer Dutch audiences, but instead a smaller group. Therefore, it is questionable whether it is possible to make any statements on the Dutch queer community as a whole.

Lastly, my own positionality should be discussed. Although I cannot fully place myself within a specific queer identity yet, I do feel a strong affinity with the subjects of queer theory and queer media. They are something I have been interested in and a consumer of since my early teens. Furthermore, I am White. Johnson's (2004) analysis that White authors often fail to recognize the way their own Whiteness informs their critical queer position should be noted here. Although I am aware of the privilege I hold when writing about queer theory, representation and depictions, I should acknowledge the limitations this holds.

Data Analysis

In order to analyse the data, I have used thematic analysis. Drawing on Fereday & Muir-Coltrane (2006) I have used a combination of conductive and inductive coding, first building an a priori coding template based on the sub-questions and used theories (adapted from Boyatzis, 1998) and then aligning and adjusting them to the results of the open coding done on the transcripts.

As stated, the raw data was analysed through the combination of both inductive and deductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Drawing from the previously discussed sub-questions as well as the theoretical framework, a number of preliminary and (broad) code categories emerged: Defining Queer(ness), Post-gay, Selection and Gratification. These categories formed the

basis for an initial coding template, as Fereday & Muir-Cochrane do, referencing Boyatzis (1998) and Crabtree & Miller, 1999). These code categories were then tested on the transcript of the first interview, in order to test reliability of the codes. After summarizing each interview transcript and noting the key points made in answer to topics that came up in the interview questions. After comparing my initial round of coding with this preliminary framework, some coding themes shifted or were separated. 'Selection' was initially covering all codes on both the selecting process and the motivations behind the decision to watch certain media, thereby actually also covering gratification already. To better balance this out, selection was then split up into 'selection' and 'motivation'. Other codes that kept coming up were tied to value judgements on representations, both good and bad, which lead to the preliminary code groups of 'Value judgements' and 'Content of representations.' After this, all interview transcripts were coded according to this preliminary framework. One more code group came up here – a selection of codes tied to societal issues such as race, discrimination of specific queer identities, and more. These were all tied together under the coding theme of 'Critical lens.' In the end, after cross-examining the different codes and coding themes, the following list of themes arose: Selection, Motivation, Complexities of defining Queerness, Shapes of Representations, Post-Gay & Tension Release, and Critical Lens. An abstract of the coding table can be found in Appendix D.

Findings

In this section the recurring findings of the experiences with representation of the Dutch queer audiences are discussed. Each of the themes that resulted from the thematic analysis will be discussed here.

1. Selection

One of the first themes that came up is that of the selection of media to watch. Choosing which film to watch is one of the first decisions the audience makes when consuming media and therefore a great starting point. This theme is tied to both how audiences select queer media and what type of queer media they select. The question of whether the respondents actively sought out queer media was answered in the affirmative by all respondents. Although some felt they did this unconsciously, others explained they actively went searching for queer media from a very young age. When asked for the reasons behind this preference, two major motivations came up. First, the ability to identify with the characters was considered of value. As Respondent 3 words it: “at a certain point, when you’ve just found out that you’re like that, of course you’re going to want to see if there’s more people that are like that as well, because it feels very lonely at the beginning.” Respondent 2 said: “Yes. Yes, I think so. (...) On the one hand, it is being able to identify, and on the other hand, it is – yeah, you do feel connected with the broader community.” Second, the distaste for depiction of heterosexual love. Respondents 1, 3 and 4 all described a certain boredom or aversion for straight media. As respondent 3 stated: “(...) I just do not feel like watching heterosexual love. I think that plays a big part for me.” Respondent 4: “the more heteronormative a movie is, the sillier it feels to me. Because it almost – even thought is not intentional, it – it’s like they’re making fun of it.” Respondent 1 also expressed disinterest in seeing a film that plainly focusses on a love story between a man and a woman, finding it more exciting if the story is queer, but also noting that this is interesting because the film may not actually be better just because of a queer element. Respondent 1: “Yes, I think it is more exciting. (...) In that sense, it does work. Kind of as a strategy.”

The selection process differed slightly in that some respondents went actively searching for queer media, whereas others emphasized the fact that – because large parts of their social circle are queer, choosing queer film was less of an active pursuit and rather something that just happens naturally. As respondent 3 explained: “a lot of my friends actually have the exact same taste in film as me, so if they watch a movie and tell me – oh, this is really nice, then I’ll watch it too.” Respondent 5 emphasized a similar notion. “(...) it’s more that I already follow a lot of people on social media that are queer, that the films that get recommended to me, are then often queer as well.” However, naturally, not everyone’s circle is both queer *and* into film and television. When asked whether her

social circle played in her selection process, respondent 7 stated “It’s not decisive. But that’s also because – most of my female friends who are into chicks are less interested in film than I am.”

Respondents’ steadfastness in answering this question in the affirmative is rather easily substantiated by Hall’s writing (1973) on representation. Audiences are more likely to appreciate something they feel recognized in – something that is also tied to the familiarity principle, a term from psychology. Some of them also reiterated that they also wanted to get different things out of queer media at different times in their lives, specifically – different times in the development of their (queer) identity.

One of the films discussed during the interviews is Luca Guadagnino’s film *Call me by your name* (2017). This indie film telling a love story between two boys “somewhere in Northern Italy” was a massive box office hit and was seen by all but one of the respondents, who actively did not want to watch the film. This film is specifically interesting to discuss in the light of the theme of selection, because multiple respondents identify it as a defining moment after which they started actively seeking out queer media (Respondent 2, 6, 8). Respondent 3, who felt a strong aversion towards the film because of the problematic power relations she felt were depicted in it (the main romance is between a 17-year-old boy and a 24-year-old man): “I don’t enjoy watching that, [...], because the only thing I can think about the power relations.”

There was no consensus whatsoever on how the film was experienced, answers ranging from “the right tone” (Respondent 5) and ‘giving you butterflies’ (Respondent 2) to problematic and ‘basically the Notebook’ (Respondent 1). What makes this interesting is that multiple respondents tied their experience to either a certain time of their life, or a certain need being fulfilled. At least two respondents (respondents 4 and 5) initially liked the film, but later felt a growing sense of discomfort around it. Respondent 5: “At first I thought it was good, better than the book. But then later I did see – I read some stuff about it, and then I was like – weird, such a young boy, with an older man. (...) So – I can see very well what is problematic about it.”

Included under the theme of selection is that of the quality of the queer film being watched. Multiple respondents emphasized that just because a film may be queer, does not mean it is good (respondent 5, 8). Respondent 1, speaking specifically of *Call me by your name* (2017) even argued that the label is used as a way of acquiring status or a label of prestigious.

R1: “And I do feel like that because it’s gays, there’s this layer of ‘oh yeah, but this is kind of queer struggle, so this is (...) but in the end it is just the same film’ [as a straight film]”. (...) that it kind of is the catch that makes it different from other films, the queer element. Even though there isn’t really another catch.”

This claim is interesting to examine, because its implications could, in light of the notion of post-gay films, which supposedly do not use queerness at the centre of the story, make therefor make it more challenging to market this way.

All in all, the respondents actively look and select films that they themselves define to be queer. Each of them has said that their social circle plays a big part in selecting media, confirming they all follow recommendations from those around them. About half of the respondents also followed more traditional media, though these were also sometimes considered “not fully conscious of queer media” (Respondent 7). This theme has mainly highlighted the fact that the *active seeking out* of queer media happens for almost all queer audiences. Social circles contribute to the selection process, as do more traditional media and online sources. But which exact motivations inform the selection process will be highlighted within the next theme.

2. *Motivation*

So – actively selecting queer media is something most respondents identify with. When asked why, two arguments that came up were seeing yourself and a disinterest in the depiction of queer media. But, if we are to examine this further, it is time to have a look at the different gratifications potentially tied to choosing to watch queer media. In order to do so, the five main needs discussed in the theory section as applicable to film and television, introduced by Katz, Gurevitch & Haas in 1973, become highly relevant. Cognitive, affective, tension release and social and personally integrative motivations were all discussed with the respondents and will be discussed respectively.

Cognitive Needs

First off is the cognitive need, which is described as a need for information, comprehension and knowledge (Katz, et al., 1973). Most respondents spoke about watching queer media with the motivation of informing themselves on queer identity, but both the types of media and the contexts varied greatly. Where some (respondent 1 and 2) specifically watched documentaries and history-based cinema, rather than contemporary fiction (such as film or television), others explicitly used fiction to inform themselves or learn more (respondent 3 and 8). The remaining respondents (respondent 4, 5, 6 and 7) all stated that although they do not usually select media with the purpose of learning or education themselves on queerness, but still indicate film and television as something that has thought them a lot about queerness. They argue that the learning still happens, but unconsciously. Respondent 1 argued that he used to watch queer media with the purpose of learning about himself and about his queer identity in the past, but that it was tied to the context of still being searching and developing his own queer identity, and that this need had become less urgent later on.

“At that time it [the Norwegian tv series *Skam*] offered this glimpse of who I was, what I also wanted. But did not have at that moment yet, per se.” “That [that gathering of information] fits a lot more to that period of searching, and I’ve had that. But I’m not searching anymore.” Respondent 1

“When you grow up in an environment where there are absolutely no representations of the queer community. Not in my immediate vicinity, not at school, not even at high school. So – then of course – the image you get [of queerness] is very much based on the representations you pick up in the media.” Respondent 7

Respondent 3, who is poly-amorous, explained that the watching of queer media offered information on open relationships and polyamory.

“But also in my own relationship – she was a big fan of *Sense 8* as well, even more than I was. And that’s- that’s where I really got the idea from – of like oh, you can have an open relationship. The idea of non-monogamy really kind of originated there.” Respondent 3

In short, the answers of the respondents suggest queer film and television gratify their cognitive needs, and that its role as offering information on queerness, albeit sometimes unconsciously, plays a part in their viewing experience.

Affective Needs

Second, there are the affective needs – the need for a pleasant or aesthetic experience, but above all, an emotional one. Again, almost all respondents confirmed that emotional gratification was one of the primary motives for watching queer media, although this again took different shapes for many as well. Strikingly, each of the respondents felt gay and post-gay media fulfilled different emotional needs for them, explaining how it can be draining to see (parts of) your own struggle represented. As respondent 3 stated:

“It would be great, I think, to see a film that is not a period drama, where all the characters surrounding the leads are super homophobic and they have some kind of secret love and have to hide and stuff- then I’m like yeah, I understand you want to see that. Because it is extremely to see your own oppression reproduced every time.”

For almost all, these different emotional needs imply that there is sometimes a want for escapism, for not wanting negative emotions to be overtly present in what they are consuming. As Respondent 3 argues: “And, on the other hand, post-gay is just great for your escapism. That you’re like, well – I don’t think about – you know – everyone who hates me, but just to – be.” Respondent 3.

These descriptions, of the escapism tied to a post-gay viewing experience, all point towards the other need introduced by Katz et al (1973) – tension release. The link between post-gay media and tension release will be discussed more thoroughly in the theme section ‘Post-gay – the release of tension.’

Integrative Needs (social and personal)

Finally, it is also of use to briefly touch upon the social and personal integrative needs also brought up by Katz, Gurevitch & Haas (1973). On the subject of social needs, a couple of respondents did emphasize the collective/social nature of going to the movies, as well as the fact that – because their friend groups or social media circles were for a large part queer, there was a big social component to it. As discussed previously, friends (explicitly described as queer friends by multiple respondents) often contribute to the selection process of films. And subsequently the section of personal integrative needs – in regard to “enhancing credibility, self-confidence and status” (West & Turner, 2010), the remarks of Respondent 1 on his perception that queerness is sometimes used as a way of elevating media to a prestige level, simply because it depicts queer characters, may be interesting. Actively watching ‘prestige’ media is very much in line with this fulfilment of personal integrative needs, but Respondent 1’s comments were aimed at the entertainment industry rather than a personal motivation. Although this does not make it disposable, it is not an aspect that came up in any further interviews.

All in all, very few respondents identified queer media as fulfilling social or interactive needs. Some considered it possible that the unconscious consumption of information through queer media may have informed social interactions indirectly, almost none felt this was something they were actively doing. This of course tracks with West and Turner’s (2010) analysis of Katz et al.’s Uses and Gratification Theory, which links integrative needs more to internet and video.

The themes of selection and motivation have offered analysis of the ways in which the respondents seek out queer media. It has shown not only an active want for media that offers queer representation, but also the ways in which different queer media (namely the distinction between gay and post-gay media) are able to meet different audience needs.

3. *Complexities of defining queerness*

As has become clear from the literature review, queerness is a concept that does not easily let itself be defined (and rather, actively seems to dodge definition). In discussing the concepts of queer film and queer media with these audiences, knowing the respondents' definition was central to the conversation. A few are listed below to get a grasp. Respondent 1 and 5 both defined it in a rather broad sense:

“(...) an easy answer would be, sort of, about gay relationships (...) and then it is specifically about sexuality, like – the love side. That’s what may be expected, but it doesn’t have to be that. It can be way more, just (...) queer is just a bit... not straight.” Respondent 1

“Maybe film that shows you a certain experience, or a certain viewpoint that – that you have if you are a queer person yourself. So it can be about discovering your identity, or the struggle with that, but – for example a lead character that is queer, and is doing other things – but it is still part of that character and the choices – the motivation behind making or avoiding certain choices.” Respondent 5

Some respondents stuck more to the definition based in a film’s narrative (meaning the *story* is about queer people, a queer experience). This definition, described in the theory section by Ferreira (2015) as a limiting, is what almost half of the respondents consider to be accurate - this narrative definition of queer film was given by respondents 2, 6 and 8. Respondent 6 for example describing it as the following:

“I think when it comes to queer film, you need for it [queerness] to play a big enough part in the plot of a story. So that you’ll be able to find [...] people from the LHBTQI+ spectrum and that that impacts the story.” Respondent 2

The notion of normativity (non- or anti-) was brought up by a vast majority of the respondents (Respondent 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). “For me queer basically means being non-normative in all respects. So not just romantic, but that you – in the way films are made – you actively do something with that,” Respondent 3 said. Or, as respondent 4 words it:

“Any film that basically tries to move beyond the normative – normativities of a particular society (...) and that does not necessarily have to be related, so to say, to displaying different sexual preferences, or, other kinds of relationships. But just, generally, what makes

something queer for me is if it's – if it's campy, if it doesn't subject itself to any norms or standards that society kind of holds for them.” Respondent 4

One aspect that, in defining the notion of queer film, did stand out was the way in which some respondents explicitly emphasized the role of trans and non-binary people within the spectrum of queerness, and therefore queer film (respondents 4 and 5). Moreover, every single respondent has mentioned either trans or non-cis identities in their interview. This will be touched upon again later, when discussing the theme Critical Lens.

The theme of Difficulties in defining queerness sheds light on the way the respondents perceive queerness itself, and therefore of great help in examining how that perception is informed by queer representations. The fact that, even within such a homogenous sample, there is such range in definitions is relevant. It can of course be explained through 1) the fact that there is not even a consensus on the term 'queer' (McCann & Monaghan, 2020), and 2) that even film festivals cannot seem to find consensus on the matter. But the fact the differences in definition, some more oriented towards narrative, others taking a broader approach, should be taken into consideration when examining which aspects of queer representation the respondents consider valuable.

4. *Shapes of representations*

The interviews also touched upon examples of representation that stuck with them, either very good or very bad. Which aspects of representation did the respondents value most? This is also tied to the notion of stereotypes – of misrepresentations of queer identity as described by Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2015). Interestingly, over half of the respondents had very little early memories of queer representation, even when asked specifically about bad or stereotypical representation (respondent 2, 4, 6, 8). Respondent 1 also emphasized that he remembers very little bad representation, explaining that he simply was not looking at media in a critical way back then. But he did have an example: “you do have – I think in American series and films, but definitely also just in *Gooische vrouwen* [2005] – you had ‘Jari,’ and that is just a classic example of one of those entirely over the top gays, that fully functions a clown for the straight public.” This employment of queer characters for comedic gain fully tracks with the research on stereotypes discussed in the theory section (Hart, 2000). Respondent 7 however, when asked out bad representation, did emphasize the following:

“I mean, what is good and what is bad. I know that in these kinds of analyses, there's a lot of bashing on negative representation. In the sense of – characters that have no characteristics

except that they are labile and almost can't handle it. Being queer. But again, there are people who are actually like that, so in that sense it is representation.”

This is an interesting quote in that it comments upon the ‘evil’ of bad representation, mainly drawing on the stereotype of queerness being equated to craziness, implying that stereotypes may not always be a bad thing and can in some cases still comment on reality.

Respondent 3 noted a different stereotype – that of the consistent killing off of openly queer characters was also still prevailing. Naming the shows *The 100* (2014), *Pretty Little Liars* (2010) and *Arrow* (2012) as examples, she described that in her experience, often after something good happens to a confirmed queer character, there needs to be some kind of consequence, some form of punishment to the character. In describing this, the respondent referred to the Hays Code that was only uplifted in the late sixties, this code that offered governing rules for Hollywood productions had severe impact on the depiction of queer identities.

Another matter of representation, discussed by respondents 2 and 5, is that of the casting of queer characters. Respondent 2 discussed the tension of straight actors playing leads in same-sex love stories, and even more so, cis actors playing the roles of trans characters. He stated that he sometimes could understand the reasons behind certain castings, but also emphasized ‘but, I’m not sure if enough of an effort is made, to really choose a trans person for roles like this. So that is something that – *the Danish Girl* [2015] is an example like that.” Respondent 5 also spoke about this, and about non-binary actors specifically: “I think currently, yes [non-binary characters should be played by non-binary actors]. Because I think – that a non-binary actor can also bring their own experiences and put those in the role.”

The other side of this question is which examples of representation the respondents found to be done very well. When asked to explain what makes representation good, respondent 1 said: “The tension between people - then it usually the queer element of like – is that other person even... That is, I think, a fascinating tension to see, that examining of – what level are we on.” Other examples of good representation mainly focus on aspects entirely *outside* of sexuality – when discussing good representation and what made it good, respondents 2, 6, 7 and 8 all stated layered characters or a layered story. As respondent 7 described it, discussing a character in *Blue is the warmest colour* (2013): “What makes it more credible, or what makes it more representative than other characters in other cases - media cases, is indeed that she is more layered and therefore more believable.” The fact that half of the respondents emphasized depiction of sexuality or sexual identity actually not being what makes representation valuable, may in some ways be linked to the rise of post-gay depictions. This will be delved into further in the following theme.

5. *Post-gay – the release of tension*

A minority of the respondents had heard of the notion of post-gay before. Out of those four came different definitions with varying degrees of broadness. Two of them (respondents 1 and 3) felt it was tied to innovation in queer media, and deviation of the repetition of the same queer film tropes, and only two (respondents 2 and 7) had heard of the definition as this thesis has been using it; centred around the depiction of struggle: “That it’s used to point out films in which the struggle of queer characters (...) that that struggle actually does not play such a big role anymore.”

After discussing the majority of respondents expressed some of the same concerns Monaghan and Ghaziani did towards the politics of representation and the risks of the persistence of ‘post-gay’ as a new norm in both film and television. However, they all also emphasized the (emotional) value of queer representation that does not stress the political aspects and struggles tied to this identity. This duality still persists. Some respondents stated that there is not (nor will there ever be) one right way to depict queerness and emphasized the necessity of both representations. Whether post-gay is a label that is useful, however, is another question.

“On the one hand you want for the entire queer community to be in situation in which you can make a movie about a person (...) and about their love life, or their search for identity, without always having there to be this fight, that struggle (...). So of course I understand the longing for such a genre, and wanting to make that [these kinds of films]. And I think it is very important these films are made, in which there is this assumed normality, but at the same time we are just not at that point yet. And I think that is where it (...) becomes tough. Because by doing that, you ignore the harsh reality that applies to a lot of people.”

Respondent 2

R5: “It may be difficult either way to – to fully detach the struggle around queer identity from the rest of your story, or your character, or something. That’s going to be impossible – that that’s the only thing the film is about. (...) Because characters will have more attributes than just that.” Respondent 5

The want for depiction without struggle was both problematized and appreciated by almost all respondents. At the same time, the want to be able to consume queer media without the emphasis on struggle was expressed by all. A good example is Respondent 1 discussing the 2021 miniseries *It’s A Sin*. He explains how he has a great interest in “important things from queer history”, documentary mainly, and is watching that more and more actively. At the same time he emphasizes

how attaching to characters that will then go through struggle or die again is not something he is always up to. Respondent 1:

“Although – up to a certain extent – not always, because that show right now on AIDS - I don’t feel like watching that right now. (...) I don’t feel like getting attached to characters that all die again, I just don’t feel like it.”

This is interesting, and maybe rather obvious, but saying this implies that for the respondent, subjects of struggle or hardship may be more easily consumable in an educational form rather than fictionalized, in which the audience gets to know and attaches itself to characters in a story.

Respondent 2 also stated he consumed a lot of documentary material on queer media.

Sexuality being incidental to the plot, which can be characterized as post-gay, was praised by multiple respondents. Respondent 8: “*Booksmart* I thought was a really great film, a youth film, that just very casually showed that you can date a girl, that you can be in love with a girl, and that there just isn’t – there wasn’t a big deal made out of it, so that’s actually quite good.” Or, Respondent 7: “What makes it believable, or makes it more representative than other media expressions. So in that sense [...] it does surpass queerness – indeed, that is kind of post-gay or post-queer.”

This distinction may in part explain rise of post-gay depiction in queer, fictional, media. The interest in queer history (which includes queer struggle) is in no way lessened by an interest in post-gay film and television. This tension, of the awareness of not wanting to depoliticize, whilst also almost all expressing the need for tension relief through queer media, is where the politics of representation (as described by Monaghan (2020)) come in.

The majority of respondents expressed some of the same concerns Monaghan and Ghaziani did towards the politics of representation and the risks of the persistence of ‘post-gay’ as a new norm in both film and television. However, they all also emphasized the (emotional) value of queer representation that does not stress the political aspects and struggles tied to this identity. This duality still persists. Some respondents stated that there is not (nor will there ever be) one right way to depict queerness and emphasized the necessity of both representations. Whether post-gay is a label that is useful, however, is another question. On this matter, it is also useful to come back to *Call me by your name* briefly. The reason that it is such an interesting case to discuss, is not just because of the criticisms the respondents shared or at least described, but also because they found it challenging to describe as either gay or post-gay. Respondents 1, 4, 5, and 6 all expressed surprise in seeing it categorized as post-gay, whereas respondents 2 and 8 very much found named it as a

good example of post-gay film. These contradictory readings emphasize the fact that most queer films lay somewhere in the middle, maybe leaning a bit more towards 'gay' or 'post-gay.' 'Post' implies a binary, but it is rather hard to imply a binary to the depiction of queerness, which is often very nuanced. There was not a single respondent who fully rejected or embraced either the notion of gay or post-gay, but almost all emphasized the value of both.

6. *Critical Lens*

Finally, most respondents took on a critical and even sceptical look towards the queer media they do (or do not) consume, but even more so, a critical look towards the representations of different identity categories within that media. Almost all have brought up both race and gender identity as aspects that were handled badly. Respondent 4 specifically criticized the gay community, describing it as an unsafe place.

“Because I think ‘queer’ for me personally, and I think for a lot of people, it – it used to be, right, like a bad word to say, obviously. It was a swear word. And now, a lot of people – for me, but also for a lot of people who are non-binary, and trans, etcetera, right – they don’t see themselves fitting within ‘gay culture’, which in some senses is sort of a heteronormative culture. So the word for me, kind of just describes moving away from that.”

As has been described, most of the media depicting queer identities is limited to depicting gay and lesbian identities. The lack of representation of trans and non-binary characters is huge. As mentioned previously, in describing their definition of queerness multiple respondents reiterated trans identities as part of the queer spectrum and mentioning the term (non) cis identities (respondents 2, 8). Respondent 5, who identifies as non-binary (or genderqueer) themselves, described the representation of non-binary characters as plainly non-existent, or at least something they had never seen. “I cannot give an example of bad representation [of non-binary people], because it indeed just does not exist.”

Secondly, respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 all on their own volition brought up race. Respondent 1 emphasized the structural nature of under-representation: “but what you have to be aware of is that the image of queerness in the Netherlands is very much determined by Whiteness – of course, as everything is.” Respondent 5 mentioned the way race interplays with stereotypes of queerness: “[...] that in a lot of films, or tv shows, there will be all White characters, and then there’s *one* Black boy, who’ll then also be gay. We started numerating them, and it became such a list!”

One more aspect of this theme that came up is that of collective critiques. When discussing *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Respondent 4 did not only describe the social cohesion built around watching it with other queer-identifying people, but also a shared critical viewing experience. "It's a very nuanced example. Because I don't feel one way about it." The show is highly beloved, Respondent 4 explains, but at the same time he and other audience members struggle with the way it (not always appropriately) "uses" Ballroom culture, handled trans identity (trans contestants were not allowed to partake in the early seasons of the show) and the commercial nature that offers a distorted image of what drag really is to its growing straight audiences. "It's what holds our community together," argues Respondent 4. "Because us – we have those critiques right [...] we have it because we already shared consensus among us how we want to live and how we view our future. [...] It's not that the critique is what is holding us together, it is the thing that is creating that critique."

Finally, it is interesting to note the fact that multiple respondents emphasized that, although aware and in some cases even sharing in the criticisms on or around certain films or tv series, those pieces of media can all the while still be consumed. Respondent 7 explained that with a today's knowledge, a lot of films and books taking on queerness are now being written off, even though they still hold great value for her. "[...] that's also the case with *Blue Is The Warmest Colour* [2013], that sex scene of twenty minutes long makes *no* sense, but – I still liked it, you know."³ Or, as Respondent 4 stated: "I still consume it and I watch it. I also don't think I only should watch things I agree with."

³ It should be noted that the 2013 film *Blue Is The Warmest Colour* is a lesbian romance story, that got discredited because of the way the director had dealt with the actresses, particularly during the sex scenes. After the actresses spoke out, a lot of scenes in the film shift drastically in their reading.

Conclusions & Discussion

This thesis has tried, through a series of interviews, to examine the ways in which queer audiences in the Netherlands experience queer media from the decade 2010 to 2020, and specifically the politics of representation in those media. That meant that the notions of gay and post-gay media, and thereby the centralization of queer struggle in the narrative of film and television series, were at the centre of this research project.

The first sub-question posed was whether and in which ways, Dutch queer audiences actively seek out queer media. They do so on the basis of recommendations of both their social environments and traditional media. According to the respondents, queer media can fulfil emotional needs other media cannot (or less easily) fulfil. Moreover, gay and post-gay fulfil different needs, in which post-gay media specifically fulfils the need of tension relief, as introduced by Katz et al. (1973). It offers a form of escapism, whereas gay media functions mainly fulfilling cognitive and affective needs. This leads to the second question – how those gay and post-gay representations inform queer audience's perception of queerness. Because of those different fulfilments, these different media representations also inform the respondents perceptions of queerness differently. Gay media has, or can take, the role of offering information and emotional support, and thereby offers a more in-depth image of queer (political) identity than post-gay media is able to. Furthermore, it has shown that audience needs are dependent on context, and that different stages in the development of queer identity require different forms of media gratification.

Finally, the question of which aspects of queer representation were most valued. Almost all respondents emphasized the dual need for both representation focused on political and social inequality, and stories about queer people in which sexuality is decentralized. Stereotypical representations have often been examined and were brought up by some of the respondents again. When it comes to representation that was considered good, two points were found. First off – good queer representation should simply entail layered, human representation. So – characteristics beyond queer identity. Secondly, the importance of the representation of the entire queer spectrum, as well as the representation of other minority groups was valued highly. This connects to the final interesting finding – the majority of respondents adopts a critical lens when consuming (queer) media, a lens that moves far beyond their own queer identity, and instead looks at broader inequalities.

Although this thesis did not set out to pass judgement over the *term* post-gay, but rather to examine its implications, a couple of conclusions regarding the term may still be drawn from this research. The first is that post-gay, on a societal level (and specifically if it's supposed to represent to whole queer spectrum, rather than just gay identities) is in no way applicable. The difference in acceptance

of identity categories, such as trans or non-binary identities, are simply too big – also in how (and if) these are represented in media. Secondly, the labels gay and post-gay imply a binary, a choice of two options, whilst in reality and certainly in media, the truth may very well lie in the middle, as this research has attempted to show. All in all, the label itself may have very little to offer.

However, the value of the *representations* tied to this label, are not as negligible. Of course, Ghaziani's (2011) and Monaghan's (2020) arguments still hold – the content of what those representations may be, should be handled with care. But as this research has shown, the ability to offer tension release to queer audiences is a feat that should not be underestimated.

Limitations and further research

One of the main aspects that should be taken in account is how limited the sample of this research was. As described previously, the mostly white, highly educated group is not representative of the queer community as a whole. Because all respondents were avid cinemagoers and identified as film audiences, an even more limited group of the queer community was represented. However, it hopefully still is able to contribute to the understanding of audience needs of young, queer audiences. Apart from these practical limitations it is also relevant to touch upon the limitations of the research itself. For example, the fact that the vast majority of the films discussed (on my preliminary list, Appendix B) are Western productions. There is a lot of world cinema that offers queer representation, but that simply has not been shown or made accessible in the Netherlands. This may result in a distorted representation of the actual state of representation in cinema. It would be great to see research into the depictions of queerness in non-Western production, potentially through the lens of post-gay as well, to offer comparison. Furthermore, would also be interesting to examine the experiences of queer-identifying people who do not watch film and television as regularly, to consider how they perceive representations of queer struggle. Moreover, the same question is applicable to straight audiences. Up to what extent are they actively aware of queer representation? Do they distinguish gay and post-gay media? These questions would certainly be interesting ground for further research.

With the hopeful prediction that queer acceptance will only grow wider in the future, it may be safe to assume that the notion of post-gay will only be more present in the future as well. As discussed, right now it holds very little meaning, certainly in terms of media, but it will be incredibly interesting to follow the rise of the concept in the coming decades.

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Filmography

Noah's Arc – Jumping the Broom. Patrik-Ian Polk. LOGO films, 2008.

Pretty Little Liars. I. Marline King. Warner Bros Television, 2010.

Arrow. Greg Berlanti. Warner Bros Television, 2012.

Blue Is The Warmest Colour. Dir. Abdellatif Kechiche. Cinéart, 2013.

The 100. Jason Rothenberg. CBS Television, 2014.

Call Me By Your Name. Dir. Luca Guadagnino. Memento Films, 2017.

RuPaul's Drag Race. LOGO TV (2009-2016), VH1 (2017-present).

Bohemian Rhapsody. Dir. Bryan Singer, Dexter Fletcher. 20th Century Fox, 2018.

It's A Sin. Dir. Peter Hoar. Channel 4, 2021.

Appendix A - Interview Guide

Introductory questions

- What is your name? And do you have a preferred pseudonym?
- What is your age?
- Is there a specific queer identity you identify with?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What is your education background?
- Where did you grow up? And where do you live now?

Film, consumption patterns, and selection

- How often do you go to the cinema?
- How often do you watch films at home?
 - On the basis of which elements do you usually make that call? (money? availability? accessibility? comfort?)
- Do you have a preference for a way of consuming film? In the cinema/at home? On your own/with others?
 - Do you feel that the difference in context (this also includes watching alone or with others, setting, etc.) affects the way you experience the film?
- On the basis of which criteria do you select films you watch? Is there a difference in selecting films you watch at the cinema versus those at home?
- Which types of movies do you feel attracted to quickly? Why?
- Which types of movies do you write off quickly? Why?
 - Why do you have those preferences?
- Do you follow recommendations by (online) media? newspapers, magazines, websites)
- Do you follow recommendations given by friends?

Queer film (active selection).

- What do *you* consider to be queer film?
- What definition would you use?
- Are you aware of the labels gay and post-gay? (if not, they should be explained briefly, and can then be discussed together).
 - how do you feel about them?

- When was the first time you saw queer representation in a film?
 - (This may also include “representation” in straight media, such as “stereotypes/tropes”)
- Do you actively seek out queer cinema? Why?
- When did you first actively seek this type of film out?

Perceptions of queerness

- What is your relationship with the concept of queerness?
 - How do you interpret it?
 - What does queerness mean to you?
- Do you feel that the nuance/difference between gay and post-gay films contribute to that relationship/perceptions? How does that influence work?
- Over the time span of this selection of films (2010-20), in which ways have your own perceptions of queerness developed (shifted?)

Gratification? (will incorporate this theory in theoretical framework)

- Have you ever watched these movies to acquire information/learn about on queerness? (*cognitive needs*)
 - Why yes/no?
- Would you say these films are able to fulfill certain emotional needs, specifically needs that non-queer films cannot meet? (*affective needs*)
 - Why yes/no?
 - In which ways do gay and post-gay films meet different emotional needs for you?
 - Can you describe the way you felt watching these films?
- Has watching or discussing one of these films affected personal relationships (*personal/social integrative needs*)
 - Do the media we have discussed have a different entertainment value for you then non-queer media? Why?

Most valuable, most gratifying (follow ups)

- Are there examples of cases of representation in which you felt queer identity was handled/represented badly?
 - Why? Can you explain which elements specifically were handled in a bothersome/insensitive manner?

- And are there examples of cases where you felt representation was handled very well, and affected you in a positive manner?

- Could you elaborate on the elements that made you feel this worked particularly well/was handled with care? (some examples here could be the depiction of sex, depiction of specific, less often represented groups within the queer spectrum, realistic dialogue, any aspects you might find relevant, interesting or important)

Appendix B - Provisory list of films, used in interviews as prompts

Gay films

Moonlight (2016)

Beach Rats (2017)

Disobedience (2017)

Love, Simon (2018)

The Miseducation of Cameron Post (2018)

Rafiki (2018)

Portrait de la jeune fille en feu (2019)

And Then We Danced (2019)

Post-gay films

Carol (2015)

Call Me By Your Name (2017)

Gods Own Country (2017)

Booksmart (2019)

Supernova (2020)

Appendix C – Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title and version	“I guess I’ll see you in the movies” an examination into the reception of (the distinction between) gay and post-gay film by queer audiences
Name of Principal Investigator	Inna van Engen
Organisation	Erasmus University Rotterdam
Purpose of the Study	I am inviting you to participate in this research project about the reception of gay and post-gay ‘prestige cinema’. The purpose of this research project is to get a better grasp on audience needs and audience relationship to the concept that is ‘post-gay’.
Procedures	You will participate in an interview lasting approximately one hour. You will be asked questions about your experience in moviegoing, queer cinema specifically . Sample questions include: <i>“On the basis of which criteria do you select films you watch? Is there a difference in selecting films you watch at the cinema versus those at home?”</i> . You must be at least 18 years old.
Potential and anti-cipated Risks and Discomforts	There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.
Potential Benefits	Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. The broader goal of this research is to examine the politics of representation, instead of the simple notion of (the quantity of) representation as end goal.
Sharing the results	The results of this investigation will be made public in the thesis database of EUR, and if you are interested, they will be sent to you if you would like to read them.

Confidentiality	<p>Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request.</p> <p>As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters). In the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location in the researchers' offices or on the researchers password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study.</p>	
Right to Withdraw and Questions	<p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator: (researchers contact information)</p>	
Statement of Consent	<p>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</p> <p>I have been given the guarantee that this research project has been reviewed and approved by the ESHCC Ethics Review Committee. For research problems or any other question regarding the re-search project, the Data Protection Officer of Erasmus University, Marlon Domingus, MA (fg@eur.nl)</p> <p>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</p>	
Audio recording (if applicable)	<p>I consent to have my interview audio recorded</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> no</p>	
Secondary use (if applicable)	<p>I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> no</p>	
Signature and Date	NAME PARTICIPANT	NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Inna van Engen

	SIGNATURE	SIGNATURE
	DATE	DATE

Appendix D

Theme	Codes
Selection	Outing, Social circle, friends/family, straight media, marketable, prestige, identification, active selection
Motivation	Learning, information, documentary, fiction, education, feel-good, sad, happy, comedy, rom-com, social encouragement, personal growth, personal context, gratification
Challenges in defining Queerness	Definitions, Narrative, non-normative, anti-normative, cis/non-cis, het/non-het, trans identities, racism,
Shapes of representations	Stereotype, Memory, Example, Comedic relief, Distortion of reality, Casting and representation, Positive representation, Negative representation, Realism
Post-gay, Relief of Tension	Post-gay, Struggle, misery, escapism,

	a-political, political, Society, duality,
Critical Lens	Race, Racism, Ableism, Gender, Transsexuality, Non-binary, Genderqueer, Collective/social criticism