When you know you know

A queer, female perspective on Camp

Student Name: Evie Mertens

Student Number: 608120

Supervisor: Dr. Ofra Klein

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Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

Camp is a socially constructed concept that is difficult to conceptualize, but its roots with queer culture have long been established. For queer people, Camp is a mode of self-expression, a secret language, and a lens to view the world, emphasizing irony, dramatics, and defiance. Consequently, it became a queer subculture that could help make sense of one's queer identity, connect them with others, and make queerness visible in society.

In previous literature, Camp is defined as a solely gay male subculture, neglecting the experiences of other queer identities, such as queer women. Moreover, the concept remains underexplored in contemporary research, with most research originating from the twentieth century, which claimed that Camp would fade into irrelevance once queer rights advanced. This raises the question of how younger, female generations experience Camp in the context of contemporary queer politics and media. Therefore, the following research question is posed: "How do queer women (18-28) experience Camp today?"

This study built on thirteen in-depth interviews with queer women, who identified as queer, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual and asexual, aligning with Queer Theory (de Lauretis, 1990, p.iv). The data was analyzed by conducting a Thematic Analysis, aided by the coding software *Atlas.ti*. It aimed to find out which meanings they ascribed to Camp, which motivations they had for engaging with it, and which purpose they thought it served in society.

The findings reveal that Camp is not solely a gay male experience that has faded into irrelevance since queer rights have advanced. Contemporary queer women understand Camp, interact with Camp, express Camp in their fashion, and connect with other queer people by talking about Camp. Moreover, their conceptualizations are similar to previous scholars, such as its relation to queerness, unseriousness, defiance of norms, dramatics, and social construction, connecting it to contemporary media and online spaces. Notably, queer women do experience a certain distance or exclusion from Camp, because they either do not feel that their sexualities are defying the norm as much, or because they do not perceive their personalities as that over-the-top.

Ultimately, this study shows that Camp is understood across generations, sexualities, and gender identities. Camp is a queer counterculture that is difficult to define but is deeply understood by those who live it.

KEYWORDS: *Camp, Queer Theory, queer social visibility, queer readings, appropriation*

Inhoud

1. Introduction

Camp is a midwife in the birth of melodrama.
— Allan Pero (2016, p.28) *A Fugue on Camp*

Tiffany lamps, the old Flash Gordon comics, the love for melodramatics, androgyny, and exaggerated sexualities—these are some of the many examples and characteristics Sontag (1966) lists in an attempt to give meaning to the word *Camp* (p.277-280). Sontag (1966) admits Camp is hard to define; it is both a lens through which one can view the world, and a quality found in people, objects, and media (Sontag, 1966, p.275-277). Furthermore, she notes it is a socially constructed phenomenon based on shared meaning-making within a specific group that recognizes campy codes in films, clothing styles, furniture, popular songs, books, architecture, and people (Sontag, 1966, p.275-277).

According to Sontag (1966) Camp is apolitical (p.276) and more than homosexual taste (p.288), but this assumption has often been criticized by later scholars. They pose that Camp emerged in the twentieth century as a reaction to the lack of gay representation in mainstream culture and the subculture would not have existed if gay people had not been oppressed (Dyer, 2001, p.114; O'Connell, 2019, p.45). It has since then functioned as a secret language within the queer community based on in-jokes and popular media, as well as a political tool to make queerness visible (Meyer, 1994, p.1-4; Meyer, 2010a, p.142; Nielsen, 2016, p.118-119; O'Connell, 2019, p.29-55; Wolf, 2013, p.284-285). Moreover, queer people were able to create their own culture, by embracing people, cultural objects, and media that had been rejected by the mainstream because of their overexaggerated and "bad" qualities (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2; Dyer, 2001, p.110). This fostered a sense of community for gay men, in times when their rights were contested (Harris, 1997, p.8-39; White, 2009, p.271-297).

Scholars in the twentieth century assumed that Camp would fade into irrelevance (or "die") once queer rights had advanced (Dyer, 2001, p.112; Harris, 1997, p.34-39; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Meyer, 2010c, p.103; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; O'Connell, 2019, p.29; Wolf, 2013, p.287). While there are currently more legal rights for queer people than before (Herre & Arriagada, 2024, p.1), Camp is still studied by contemporary scholars (O'Connell, 2019, p.29; Nielsen, 2016, p.116; Rosenberg, 2020, p.94; Villanueva-Jordán, 2024, p.165; Wolf, 2013, p.288). However, these studies rely on textual analyses of media and cultural products and do not reveal how Camp is part of queer people's daily lives. This raises the question of how Camp is then experienced nowadays, considering queer people

face less discrimination based on their sexuality or gender identity than in the twentieth century (Herre & Arriagada, 2024, p.1).

Although Camp is considered inherently *queer*—referring to all sexualities and gender identities other than heterosexual and the assigned gender at birth (Nielsen, 2016, p.121)—prior research has predominantly focused on the gay male experience, particularly of older generations who had to advocate for gay rights (Dyer, 2001, p.49-62; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Meyer, 2010b, p.1-2; Sedgwick, 1990, p.144-146; White, 2009, p.271-297). The few studies that did relate queer women to Camp, simply focused on lesbians, forsaking the experiences of bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and transgender women (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.4; Lim, 2015, p.301-306; Nielsen, 2016, p.116-118). As the most recent research on Camp dates from almost ten years ago, it calls for an exploration of how younger generations, like Generation Z (born after 1997) (Dimock, 2019, para.6-7), experience Camp considering the development of queer rights and media since the twentieth century. To address these gaps, the following research question is posed:

"How do queer women (18-28) experience Camp today?"

The research question is supported by the following sub-questions: (1) "What meanings do queer women ascribe to Camp?", (2) "What are their motivations for engaging with Camp?", and (3) "How do they view Camp and its purpose?". These questions will be answered by conducting in-depth interviews with thirteen queer women between the ages of 18-28. Ultimately, it will show that Camp is not exclusively a gay male experience and has not faded into irrelevance, but queer women have their own unique experiences with Camp based on their engagement with contemporary popular culture and politics, and the queer community.

1.1 Scientific relevance

This study is scientifically relevant, because the experience of queer women with Camp is underexplored, especially for contemporary generations. Previous research has connected Camp to queer culture, but this research focused solely on gay male experiences (Dyer, 2001, p.49-62; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Meyer, 2010b, p.1-2; Sedgwick, 1990, p.144-146; White, 2009, p.271-297). Moreover, their experiences were related to the position of queer people in the twentieth century, a time in which same-sex marriage was not yet legalized (Harris, 1997, p.8-39; O'Connell, 2019, p.55; White, 2009, p.271-297; Wolf, 2013, p.284-285). By interviewing young queer women on their experiences with Camp, this research can provide insight into how queer women from Generation Z relate to Camp in the context of contemporary queer politics and media.

A few scholars have addressed this notable lack of a queer, female perspective on Camp. Lim (2015, p.301-306) and Nielsen (2016, p.125-131) analyzed representations of lesbian culture and conceptualized their own, lesbian version of Camp. Alternatively, Creekmur and Doty (1995) suggest that Camp is not for lesbians and they should create their own subculture based on popular media (p.4). This shows that the queer, female perspective of Camp remains underexplored and prompts further research on their connection to Camp. Besides, these studies exclusively revolved around lesbians and textual analyses of media and literature, neglecting the actual experiences of all queer women (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.4; Lim, 2015, p.301-306; Nielsen, 2016, p.116-118). Therefore, this study will not only close the gap of research on queer women of Generation Z but also provide insights into their lived experiences.

1.2 Societal relevance

The societal relevance of this study is emphasized by Camp's relation to queer politics. In the twentieth century, gay men used Camp to challenge heteronormative narratives amid social and legal discrimination of queer identities (O'Connell, 2019, p.55; Wolf, 2013, p.284-285). Instead of hiding who they were, they used Camp to advocate for their right to exist, by being loud, over-the-top, flamboyant, and stereotypically gay (Meyer, 1994, p.4; Meyer, 2010a, p.142). This not only fostered identity and belonging for these gay men, but also made them visible through mainstream cultural expressions, such as pride parades (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Meyer, 2010b, p.5-6). Moreover, it was believed that once this visibility was achieved, and queer rights advanced, Camp would become irrelevant (Dyer, 2001, p.112; Harris, 1997, p.34-39; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Meyer, 2010c, p.103; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; O'Connell, 2019, p.29; Wolf, 2013, p.287).

While these efforts have largely normalized the effeminate homosexual male identity, other queer identities remain underrepresented, especially queer women (Annati & Ramsey, 2022, p.313; Dyer, 2001, p.110-111; Meyer, 2010a, p.141; Nielsen, 2016, p.118). Additionally, although queer rights have advanced since the twentieth century (Herre & Arriagada, 2024, p.1), hate crimes and microaggressions against queer people persist (FRA, 2024, para.4). Nielsen (2016) argues that because Camp historically empowered gay men in times when their rights were contested, it could also serve this same purpose for contemporary queer women (p.118). It could be that now, instead of gay men, queer women need Camp to make their queer identity visible to the mainstream and foster a sense of community. Accordingly, it is relevant for society to research whether queer women experience this political dimension of Camp, like gay men once have.

1.3 Reading guide

This study will be structured as follows. Chapter one will provide the theoretical underlining of this research. It will show how Camp has been defined in previous research, the functions it has served for queer people in the past, and previous scholars' predictions of its purpose in the future. Chapter two justifies the qualitative methodological approach of in-depth interviews, by being transparent about the sampling method, data collection, method of analysis, and the ethical considerations. Chapter three presents the results and provides answers to the sub-questions of which meanings, motivations, and purposes queer women (between the ages of 18-28) relate to Camp. Finally, chapter four provides an answer to the research question, and explores the theoretical and societal implications of this research, as well as its limitations.

2. Theoretical framework

To understand how queer women (18-28) experience Camp today, it is paramount to first consider how Camp has been defined and interpreted in previous literature. This theoretical framework will outline the most common conceptualizations of Camp and its most important functions in society: as a queer political act and a queer reading strategy. The chapter will conclude by discussing previous scholars' predictions that Camp would become subject to appropriation and fade into irrelevance.

2.1 Defining Camp

In Notes on 'Camp' (1966), Susan Sontag was one of the first to attempt to define the concept of Camp, which she did through a list of fifty-eight notes including characteristics and examples (Wang, 2024, p.1). Sontag (1966) acknowledges that Camp is difficult to define (p.275)—a thought that is often shared by succeeding Camp academics (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.4; Newton, 2002, p.442; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; Pero, 2016, p.31; Wolf, 2013, p.284). On the one hand, Sontag (1966) states that people, objects and media can be Camp (p.277). On the other hand, Camp is an aesthetic and a lens through which one can view the world (Sontag, 1966, p.276-277), which is the definition that is often echoed by later scholars (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Meyer, 2010c, p.73; Pero, 2016, p.29). Other scholars describe Camp as a verb—*camping about* or *camping it up*—with its roots in the French verb *se camper*, referring to behaving overly dramatic and flamboyant (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Meyer, 2010a, p.142; O'Connell, 2019, p.43). Ultimately, Sontag (1966) states that people can classify something or someone as Camp, when the intention was to be serious, but it was unintentionally comedic, melodramatic, and "too much" (p.280-282). Over time, scholars and critics have built on, and added to, this conceptualization and four common characteristics of Camp are identified.

Firstly, Camp is a celebration of exaggeration and artifice (LaValley, 1995, p.63; Newton, 2002, p.443-444; Nielsen, 2016, p.118; Sontag, 1966, p.278; Wolf, 2013, p.293). For instance, Sontag (1966, p.278-279) and Wolf (2013, p.293) point to sexual characteristics or social roles, which are sometimes exaggerated to the point that it seems completely nonsensical and far-removed from real life. Similarly, Newton (2002) identifies drag queens as Camp, because they perform their femininity—or masculinity in the case of a drag butch or king (p.440)—in a theatrical way (p.443-444). Leslie (2022) relates it to schlock horror, arguing its campy characteristics are its excessively gory and graphic scenes (p.91). All these authors come back to the same point: Camp is a love for exaggerated theatricality.

Secondly, Camp dismisses the dominant norm, which it does in three ways (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Pero, 2016, p.28; Sontag, 1966, p.278-279; Wang, 2024, p.2; Wolf, 2013, p.284). The first way is opposing the heterosexual, privileged norm, which creates an understanding for people that fall outside of this norm (Nielsen, 2016, p.118; Wang, 2024, p.2-3; Wolf, 2013, p.284). The second way is through androgyny, which describes how the lines between masculine and feminine can be blurred (Pero, 2016, p.28; Sontag, 1966, p.278-279). The last way is by disrupting and juxtaposing binaries, such as male and female, young and old, rich and poor, classy and kitsch (LaValley, 1995, p.63; Newton, 2002, p.443; Nielsen, 2016, p.119-120). Through these three ways, Camp challenges societal norms, and opposes heteronormativity and traditional gender norms (Meyer, 1994, p.1; Pero, 2016, p.28; Sontag, 1966, p.278-279; Wang, 2024, p.2; Wolf, 2013, p.284).

Thirdly, Camp is unintentionally unserious, and therefore fun (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Leslie, 2022, p.92; Newton, 2002, p.445; Pero, 2016, p.31; Sontag, 1966, p.282-289). This relates to the thought that Camp is considered of bad taste, but this awfulness is particularly what makes it good (Pero, 2016, p.28; Sontag, 1966, p.289; Wang, 2024, p.3). Something is Camp when it tries to be one thing, but it achieves the opposite (Leslie, 2022, p.92; Nielsen, 2016, p.119; Sontag, 1996, p.280). Specifically, it is this failing at seriousness and quality that makes it enjoyable, and thus Camp (Harris, 1997, 8-39; Newton, 2002, p.445; Nielsen, 2016, p.119; Sontag, 1966, p.282-289).

Lastly, the concept of Camp is socially constructed, established through shared meaning-making (Sontag, 1966, p.275-277; Wolf, 2013, p.284). As Harris (1997) explains, this shared meaning-making often revolves around popular culture, such as film and music (p.8-39). Because it is socially constructed, Camp is not a fixed concept and can change over time (Newton, 2002, p.442; Sontag, 1966, p.283). Sontag (1966) further argues that this stems from familiarity: when something feels too familiar to everyday life, it is harder to appreciate its exaggerated qualities (p.283). Over time, perspectives can shift, which explains why Camp media products often evoke feelings of nostalgia (Leslie, 2022, p.103; Meyer, 2010b, p.1; Sontag, 1966, p.283).

Considering these numerous conceptualizations of Camp and the assumption that it is socially constructed and evolves throughout time (O'Connell, 2019, p.29; Sontag, 1966, p.275-277; Wolf, 2013, p.284), it raises the question whether contemporary generations—like Generation Z—would define Camp in the aforementioned terms or offer different conceptualizations. Specifically, whether they would highlight its celebration of extravagance and artifice, its dismissal of dominant norms, its unintended unseriousness, and its social construction, or if there are other characteristics they would add to the conceptualization of Camp.

2.2 Camp as a queer political act

Notable criticisms of Sontag's (1966) conceptualization of Camp regard her assumption that Camp is apolitical (p.276) and not inherently queer (p.288), which are closely related criticisms. According to these critics, Camp is both political and queer because it purposefully opposes dominant gender norms and heteronormativity (Dyer, 2001, p.110-116; Lim, 2015, p.302-303; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Wang, 2024, p.2; Wolf, 2013, p.284). As Dyer (2001, p.114) and O'Connell (2019, p.45) argue, Camp emerged in the twentieth century as a reaction to the lack of gay representation in mainstream culture; a countercultural phenomenon that would not have existed if gay people were not oppressed. Moreover, Wang (2024) views Camp as a form of queer resistance (p.2), while Lim (2015, p.302-303) and Wolf (2013, p.284-285) describe it as a survival strategy within a heteronormative, homophobic world. Ultimately, this political, countercultural nature of Camp serves two functions: an internal one within the queer community, and an external one in the broader political landscape.

Firstly, Camp has functioned within the queer community as a secret language (Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Meyer, 2010c, p.73; O'Connell, 2019, p.55; Wolf, 2013, p.284). Harris (1997, p.8-39) and White (2009, p.271-297) describe their experiences as gay men growing up in the twentieth century and explain how Camp played a significant role in finding their identity and fostering belonging with other gay people. Namely, by openly expressing their love for certain films or celebrities that were considered Camp, gay people could reveal their sexual identity without attracting the attention of conservative, homophobic audiences (Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Meyer, 2010c, p.73; O'Connell, 2019, p.55). Meyer (2010c, p.73) and O'Connell (2019, p.55) define these references as a secret language—secret, so that their homosexual identity could remain in the so-called closet. This is in line with Queen's (1998) analysis of queer linguistic practices, who found that queer people often relied on *covert communication*: subtle references to their sexuality, employed when they were unsure of whether they were in an accepting environment (p.203-209). For instance, referring to Judy Garland or asking, "Are you a friend of Dorothy's?" might seem like a simple conversation about the *Wizard of Oz* (1939) to an unknowing listener, but within queer circles, these references carry a deeper meaning (Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Queen, 1998, p.209-210). This way of using Camp gave gay people the ability to find each other and build a sense of community, particularly in times when the fight for gay rights, like the legalization of same-sex marriage, had just begun (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Meyer, 2010c, p.73; O'Connell, 2019, p.55; Queen, 1998, p.203; White, 2009, p.271-297; Wolf, 2013, p.284). However, as Meyer (2010a) addresses, the rise of the internet has made it easier to stay in the closet, because on the internet, people can perform their gay sexuality openly, while keeping their personal identity a secret (p.144-147). Consequently, there is less need for covert communication or a secret language, since gay people can now find community through the

anonymity of the internet, rather than relying on subtle Camp references in real life (Meyer, 2010a, p.144-147). Moreover, Meyer (2010a, p.147; 2010b, p.1) and Wolf (2013, p.287) wonder whether Camp would still be needed in a world where gay individuals can openly express themselves. This raises the question of whether contemporary queer generations experience this dimension of Camp, given that queer rights are advancing, and queer identities are more normalized in society (Herre & Arriagada, 2024, p.1).

Secondly, Camp has paralleled gay activism and has been used by queer people as an activist strategy in the broader political landscape (Meyer, 1994, p.1; Wolf, 2013, p.284-285). Meyer (1994, p.4; 2010a, p.142) argues that the political function of Camp is to produce *queer social visibility*, referring to how gay men overdramatized their flamboyant characteristics to oppose the dominant, heterosexual male norm. Similarly, Dyer (2001) argues that Camp was a way to create a gay culture; mainstream culture validated the heterosexual norm, while Camp was the one aesthetic that could validate queerness (p.110). Meyer (2010a) continues that in the twentieth century, Camp was used by gay activist organizations such as the Gay Liberation Front, AIDS ACT UP and Queer Nation to produce this queer social visibility, promoting the concept of "coming out of the closet" and urging gay men to "camp it up" (p.142-147). This is echoed by Dyer (2001), who explains that Camp as a verb—camping about, or camping it up—fostered identity and belonging, as it was the only aesthetic that was undoubtedly gay male (p.110). However, this dominant representation of queerness that followed remained limited to the effeminate homosexual male, which neglects other gay identities and completely ignores other genders (Dyer, 2001, p.110-111; Meyer, 2010a, p.141). Since then, Camp's role in producing queer social visibility has shifted to mainstream cultural expressions, such as drag shows, pride parades and reality TV (Meyer, 2010b, p.5-6). While these representations have normalized this effeminate homosexual male identity, queer women—for instance—remain underrepresented or represented in stereotypical or oversexualized ways in the mainstream (Annati & Ramsey, 2022, p.313; Nielsen, 2016, p.118). This raises the question of whether queer women experience this political dimension of Camp in the same way that gay men once did.

Earlier publications that assert Camp as inherently queer, often frame it solely as a gay male experience (Dyer, 2001, p.49-62; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Meyer, 2010b, p.1-2; Sedgwick, 1990, p.144-146; White, 2009, p.271-297), which neglects the perspectives of queer women. Lim (2015, p.301-306) and Nielsen (2016, p.125-131) sought to include lesbians in the discourse on Camp, both by analyzing representations of lesbian culture. Lim (2015) uses the concept of *dyke camp*, specifically emphasizing its political agenda, and relating it to how lesbian Latinas exaggerate their femininity and queer identity to subvert societal norms, through humor and irony (p.302). Similarly, Nielsen (2016) conceptualized *lesbian camp* by conducting textual analyses of lesbian media products, to

show that the way lesbians oppose norms through Camp humor has been overlooked (p.121-131). However, by analyzing this dyke and lesbian camp, Lim (2015, p.301-306) and Nielsen (2016, p.116-118) fail to include bisexual, asexual, pansexual, and transgender women. Therefore, Camp should be viewed through the lens of *Queer Theory*, which seeks to go beyond the binary of *gay* and *lesbian* by using the term queer (de Lauretis, 1990, p.iv). This way, varied perspectives by different types of queer women are included in the discussions about Camp.

2.3 Camp as a queer reading strategy

As Sontag (1966) explains, the concept of Camp comes from shared meaning-making between a specific group, who is able to identify secret codes in certain people, cultural objects, and media products (p.275-277). Over time, scholars have added to Sontag's (1966) conceptualization by arguing that Camp operates as a so-called *in-joke* within the queer community, which relies on shared (queer) knowledge (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; O'Connell, 2019, p.29; Wang, 2024, p.2). Nielsen (2016) adds that Camp is an ambiguous concept and has often invoked sentences in academia such as "it is in the eye of the beholder" and "you have to see it to know it" (p.117). While Sontag (1966) argues that people, objects and media can be Camp (p.277), several scholars oppose the belief that Camp is merely a thing or an aesthetic quality that can be identified within an object or person (Dyer, 2001, p.113; Newton, 2002, p.442; Pero, 2016, p.31). They argue that Camp is the relationship between the individual and the campy object, where the act of identifying or interpreting an object or person as Camp is what makes it Camp (Dyer, 2001, p.113; Newton, 2002, p.442; Pero, 2016, p.31). For instance, Newton (2002) emphasizes the importance of context: when a gay man wore a certain dress, it was Camp, but when a straight woman wore the same dress, it was not (p.443). As these authors merely relied on their own experiences or textual analyses, and neglected other (queer) people's experiences, it suggests an analysis of how contemporary queer audiences experience Camp as a shared meaning-making process. Specifically, whether they believe people and objects can have Camp qualities, or if it is the relationship between the identifier and the person or object, or something else.

Camp can be connected to Hall's (1980) *Encoding/decoding Model*, when it is viewed as a *queer reading strategy*. This model explains that television (or any other) audiences play an active role in decoding the message of a text and they do not always rely on the preferred meaning (Hall, 1980, p.123-124). When the audience fully understands the preferred meaning, but decides to decode it in a contrary way, this is defined as an *oppositional reading* (Hall, 1980, p.127). Similarly, Doty (1993) defines a *queer reading* as "non-, anti- or contra-straight" (p.3), explaining how films that are targeted to straight audiences sometimes encourage queer readings, because of the queer

subtext in the portrayal of intense same-gender friendships, or ambiguous genders (p.8). As Doty (1993) explains that these audiences decode a film as queer, while the producer encoded it as straight (p.3-8), this type of queer reading can be identified as an oppositional reading (Hall, 1980, p.127). Nielsen (2016, p.119) and Wolf (2013, p.293) connect Camp to queer readings by explaining how queer people can reject the preferred meaning imposed by the producer by employing a *Camp reading*. A Camp reading is defined as a queer reading strategy used to oppose the dominant, heterosexual norm, and to create a gay culture by taking certain cultural products that are not taken seriously by the mainstream and embracing it as Camp (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Nielsen, 2016, p.119). Similarly, Sedgwick (1990) uses the term *Camp-recognition* to describe the act of embracing a cultural object or media product by seeing oneself—in this case gay men—as its ideal audience, while this was not necessarily intended (p.156). Instead of dismissing the text as inauthentic, through Camp-recognition a queer audience can reinterpret the text through a playful, personal, and imaginative lens, which is comparable to Camp readings (Sedgwick, 1990, p.156). Dyer (2001) adds that Camp has the ability to make someone realize that art and media representations are not necessarily the truth or a reflection of real life and can be interpreted in contrary ways (p.115). For instance, many archetypal films that are considered Camp do not depict explicit queer identities or stories, but they have unintentional campy features, which invite queer people to decode it as such (Nielsen, 2016, p.119). While these media products might not include accurate queer portrayals—or none at all—there is a campy quality that is relatable and therefore enjoyable for a queer audience (Knapp, 1995, p.264). A Camp reading is then interpreting these cultural objects or media products by separating them from their content and emphasizing style over meaning (Dyer, 2001, p.113). By taking pleasure in the exaggerated, artificial, or performative aspects of something, one can disregard or mock its intended seriousness (Dyer, 2001, p.113). Wolf (2013, p.285) connects Camp readings to Hall (1980, p.127) and identifies this act as an oppositional queer reading strategy; without having the intention, a film (for instance) can be classified and embraced as Camp by queer people (Knapp, 1995, p.264; Newton, 2002, p.444; Nielsen, 2016, p.119). This is similar to Doty's (1993) characterization of films such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991) as inviting queer readings due to the homoerotic undertones of their depictions of female friendships (p.8).

Camp as a queer reading strategy relies heavily on humor (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Leslie, 2022, p.95-96; Newton, 2002, p.442; Pero, 2016, p.31; Sontag, 1966, p.289). Newton (2002) illustrates this link by identifying three characteristics of Camp, which all interact and make a queer reading possible: (1) incongruity is the topic, (2) theatricality is the style, and (3) humor is the strategy (p.442). Other scholars and critics relate Camp to humor as well, emphasizing that it is supposed to be fun, and it cannot be fully understood without considering it through a humoristic lens (Dyer,

2001, p.110; Leslie, 2022, p.95-96; Pero, 2016, p.31; Sontag, 1966, p.289). Camp is something that was meant to be serious, but it was unintentionally absurd and unserious (Leslie, 2022, p.92; Newton, 2002, p.443; Nielsen, 2016, p.119; Pero, 2016, p.31; Sontag, 1966, p.280-282). Camp is a queer person pointing out this absurdness and seeing the humor in it (Newton, 2002, p.443). Here, humor is not making fun *of* something, but making fun *out of* something (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Leslie, 2022, p.95-96; Newton, 2002, p.445; Sontag, 1966, p.289). It is laughing at the (lack of) gay representation in mainstream media, instead of crying (Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Newton, 2002, p.110). Dyer (2001) identifies this as a form of self-defense for gay men, explaining how they used Camp readings to reframe their marginalization through fun and wit, so to not feel defeated (p.110). Over the years, gay representation has evolved, but queer women are still underrepresented or not authentically represented (Annati & Ramsey, 2022, p.313; Nielsen, 2016, p.118). Considering queer women's marginalized position, it raises the question of whether they now use the humor of Camp in the same way as gay men once did, as a self-defense method, or engage with it differently.

Employing Camp readings as a queer reading strategy has both its advantages and drawbacks for queer people. The main advantage is that by employing Camp readings, queer people created their own culture, which gave a sense of identity and belonging in times when queer rights were contested (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2; Dyer, 2001, p.110; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; O'Connell, 2019, p.44; White, 2009, p.271-297). Namely, Creekmur and Doty (1995) explain how Camp gives queer people the ability to "queer" straight culture, by providing them with the tools to oppose and question mainstream culture (p.2). Through Camp, they can assert the existence of queerness, despite a culture that continuously reinforces a heterosexual norm (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2). Moreover, Camp fosters moments of recognition because queer audiences can reinterpret cultural objects and media products through a queer lens, and wonder, "What if this was made by someone like me?" (Dyer, 2001, p.110-116; Sedgwick, 1990, p.156; O'Connell, 2019, p.44). They can form a personal connection to the media because it feels as though the creator embedded it with secret queer codes meant for them to recognize (Sedgwick, 1990, p.156). However, Dyer (2001) also emphasizes the potential drawbacks of Camp readings, which lie in their humoristic and mocking nature (p.111). By refusing to take anything seriously in the pursuit of Camp, it can serve as a form of escapism, allowing queer people to avoid engaging with the serious sides to being queer, such as social discrimination (Dyer, 2001, p.111). Additionally, as Camp involves a degree of self-mockery as a means of critiquing queer representation in media, it runs the risk of reinforcing the idea that queer people *should* be mocked (Dyer, 2001, p.111). So, while Camp fosters a sense of identity and belonging, its drawbacks stem from those very same qualities, leading to potential harmful stereotypes or the trivialization of the serious struggles that queer people face (Creekmur & Doty,

1995, p.2; Dyer, 2001, p.110-111; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; O'Connell, 2019, p.44; White, 2009, p.271-297).

Previous research on Camp readings by a queer audience has mainly revolved around gay men (Dyer, 2001, p.49-62; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Sedgwick, 1990, p.144-146). For instance, many authors mention Judy Garland, the character Dorothy, and the song "Over the Rainbow"—all elements from *The Wizard of Oz* (1936)—as important Camp staples of gay male culture, although the film never intended to have this meaning (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2-3; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Sedgwick, 1990, p.144). However, queer women's experience of Camp, and Camp readings, remains underexplored, just as their identities remain underrepresented or stereotyped in popular culture (Annati & Ramsey, 2022, p.313; Becker et al., 1995, p.33; Nielsen, 2016, p.118). On the one hand, Creekmur and Doty (1995) suggest that Camp is a gay male subculture, while lesbians might have their own relations to popular culture, which do not necessarily have to involve Camp readings (p.4). On the other hand, Nielsen (2016) suggests that because lesbians are historically underrepresented in media and cultural products, Camp would serve as an important form of expression for them, because that is where the subculture had stemmed from in the first place, in the case for gay men (p.118). Although the texts convey different ideas, both solely focus on lesbian women, overlooking other queer identities, such as bisexual, asexual, pansexual and transgender women (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.4; Nielsen, 2016, p.118). Therefore, the way queer women experience Camp should be explored further, through the lens of Queer Theory (de Lauretis, 1990, p.iv).

2.4 Camp and appropriation

Several authors have expressed one common fear in the continued existence of Camp: *(cultural) appropriation* (Dyer, 2001, p.112; Harris, 1997, p.34-39; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Meyer, 2010c, p.103; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; O'Connell, 2019, p.29). Cultural appropriation refers to the inappropriate use of symbols, customs, ideas, or artifacts from a usually marginalized culture by a dominant culture (Rogers, 2006, p.474). In this case, it is the appropriation of Camp by heterosexual culture, usually for commercial purposes or to purposefully discriminate against queer people through stereotyping (Dyer, 2001, p.112-115; Harris, 1997, p.34-39; Leslie, 2022, p.95-96; Nielsen, 2016, p.117). Specifically, Dyer (2001, p.112-115) and Meyer (1994, p.1; 2010c, p.103) state that the superficial manifestation of mainstream Camp separates itself from the queer experience, which has negative consequences. For instance, Harris (1997) even claimed that this appropriation would lead to the death of Camp (p.34-39). On the one hand, O'Connell (2019) shares this fear, stating that bringing Camp to a mainstream audience can lead to misinterpretation as well as misuse to align with broader social and moral imperatives (p.29). On the other hand, he suggests that it could also have positive

consequences, such as the education of audiences, and more visibility and acceptance of queer identities (O'Connell, 2019, p.57). These mixed opinions encourage a further exploration of what contemporary queer generations identify as the appropriation of Camp, and whether they view it as having negative or positive implications for society.

While Sontag (1966) downplayed Camp's connection to queer identities, she does share the negative opinion of its appropriation, when she distinguishes between *naïve* and *deliberate Camp* (p.280-282). She defines naïve Camp as the purest form of Camp, as its intention was to be serious, but it was unintentionally comedic and dramatic (Sontag, 1996, p.280). Alternatively, *deliberate Camp* is when a person deliberately camps out—either through behavior or through attempting to create a campy media or cultural product—which cannot be pure Camp because it was intentional (Sontag, 1996, p.280-281). In this sense, deliberate Camp is understood as an appropriation of Camp, because both have the intention to be Camp and are usually considered less enjoyable (Dyer, 2001, p.115; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; Sontag, 1996, p.280). However, several authors have since identified camping out as a pure Camp expression, most notably drag queen performances (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Meyer, 2010a, p.142; Newton, 2002, p.443-444; O'Connell, 2019, p.43), raising the question of whether intentional Camp can be considered Camp after all. Building on this, Meyer (2010c) argued that every Camp manifestation is Camp, as long as it maintains a connection to queer culture (p.82-103). Furthermore, he identified two types of Camp: (1) *Low Camp*, referring to expressions of queer identity through behavior, posture, linguistic practices, and clothing styles, and (2) *High Camp*, referring to more nuanced expressions of queer identity, relating to how a person or object interacts with the space around them and the context (p.82-102). Ultimately, both of Meyer's (2010c) definitions could be unintentional or deliberate Camp, but they are not considered appropriations because they are connected to queer culture (p.82-102). As Sontag (1966) denied that Camp was inherently queer (p.288), it raises the question of whether contemporary queer generations would agree with her assumption that camping out is not a pure manifestation of Camp, or if they would align with Meyer (2010c, p.82-102).

While scholars in the twentieth century assumed that Camp would become irrelevant (and "die") due to the rise in queer activism and mainstream appropriation (Dyer, 2001, p.112; Harris, 1997, p.34-39; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Meyer, 2010c, p.103; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; O'Connell, 2019, p.29; Wolf, 2013, p.287), contemporary queer and media studies continue to study the concept (O'Connell, 2019, p.29; Nielsen, 2016, p.116; Rosenberg, 2020, p.94; Villanueva-Jordán, 2024, p.165; Wolf, 2013, p.288). For instance, several scholars have researched the Camp aesthetic in television programs, like *Will & Grace* (1998-2020), *The Eurovision Song Contest* (1956—), and *Drag Race* franchises (2009—) (Rosenberg, 2020, p.94; Villanueva-Jordán, 2024, p.165; Wolf, 2013, p.288). Moreover, Meyer

(2010a) describes how Camp is still visible in certain framed events, such as “political protests, drag shows, pride parades, gay marriage ceremonies, and television reality shows” (p.149). However, Meyer (2010a, p.148-149) and Wolf (2013, p.294) add that while Camp might not be dead, it might have changed and serve a different purpose than before. This aligns with Sontag (1966) who stated that Camp adapts to its time and its meaning can evolve (p.283). Additionally, Meyer (2010b) argues that the need for Camp has possibly diminished, because homosexuality has become socially visible (p.1). This prompts further exploration of the meaning of Camp in contemporary society, particularly for the underexplored group of queer women. Specifically, how they see Camp’s relevance, considering queer women have not achieved social visibility like gay men have, at least not in authentic ways (Annati & Ramsey, 2022, p.313; Becker et al., 1995, p.33; Nielsen, 2016, p.118).

3. Method

3.1 Justification

The purpose of this study is to understand how queer women experience Camp in contemporary society and builds on a qualitative research method. As Camp is a socially constructed concept, which is established through shared meaning-making (O'Connell, 2019, p.29; Sontag, 1966, p.275-277; Wolf, 2013, p.284), a qualitative research method is most fitting. Since there have been various definitions and understandings of Camp by academics (O'Connell, 2019, p.43; Wolf, 2013, p.284), understanding how queer women experience it requires a qualitative exploration of their personal perspectives and the meanings they ascribe to it.

The method that was used to find an answer to the research question was qualitative in-depth interviewing. As stated by Johnson (2001), this method involves "one-on-one, face-to-face interaction" (p.103) between an interviewer and an interviewee, with the aim of establishing the type of intimacy one could have amongst friends (p.103-104). This method is most suitable for researching queer, female perspectives on Camp, as the research seeks to gain a deep understanding of their subjective experiences and interpretations. Namely, Camp is a subjective concept, and people's reasons for engaging with it, as well as the way they experience it, can differ per person (O'Connell, 2019, p.43; Wolf, 2013, p.284). By conducting in-depth interviews, participants can articulate their perspectives in their own words, provide insights into their lived experiences, and reveal what is typically concealed from ordinary view (Johnson, 2001, p.104-106). Additionally, the intimate nature of in-depth interviews provides a safe space for sharing queer experiences, which can be sensitive (Johnson, 2001, p.104). Ultimately, these in-depth interviews provide a varied view on Camp and how queer women experience it in their daily lives (Johnson, 2001, p.106-107).

As this research is qualitative, it is important to reflect on my role as the researcher and how my background may have influenced the process. Prior to this study I already had an interest in Camp and encountered the concept through online spaces, forming my own conceptualization of it in the process. This familiarity meant I started this research with certain assumptions about Camp's meaning, which could have led to a bias during data collection and analysis. However, while I am in the same age group as my participants and share their gender identity, I identify as heterosexual. This mitigated my bias and allowed me to remain objective during the analysis by approaching their answers without projecting my personal thoughts on them, since I am not a queer woman.

3.2 Sample

The sample for the study was thirteen queer women between the ages of 18-28, who have some prior awareness of Camp, and they were recruited through a snowball sampling method. This approach was suitable, because as an outsider to the community, direct recruitment—like convenience sampling—could have been met with hesitation or distrust. Moreover, purposive sampling through queer spaces, like gay bars, can lead to a bias, because it would merely include queer people who openly express their identities through frequenting these bars (Browne, 2005, p.49). So, snowball sampling was deemed most appropriate, because it leveraged pre-existing connections with queer people and subsequently drew on the community-oriented nature of queerness.

Initial recruitment was facilitated through referrals from friends who had connections to the queer community, and snowball sampling occurred from there on. These people served as entry points to the queer community, as I am not part of it myself. This is based on Browne (2005), who explains that when the research topic is sensitive—especially when revolving around non-heterosexuality—people are more likely to participate when they are referred to by a person they trust (p.48). However, while this is an advantage of snowball sampling, a disadvantage is that it could lead to a biased sample, as it often involves people from the same social groups (Browne, 2005, p.57). To mitigate this potential bias, recruitment was conducted through multiple social networks, and efforts were made to ensure that no single individual contributed a disproportionate number of participants. Ultimately, the final sample included thirteen women of varying queer identities, ages, and nationalities, and various levels of Camp-awareness.

By focusing on queer women, this study fills a research gap, as previous research has viewed Camp as a predominantly gay male phenomenon (Dyer, 2001, p.49-62; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Meyer, 2010b, p.1-2; Sedgwick, 1990, p.144-146; White, 2009, p.271-297). Additionally, the term *queer women* is intentionally broad, because it includes all queer sexualities as well as trans women, and aligns with Queer Theory (de Lauretis, 1990, p.iv). Moreover, as Browne (2005) explains, using the term queer makes participating in the study accessible because it does not require someone to have labelled themselves as a specific sexuality or gender identity, as long as they do not identify with heterosexual and/or cisgender (p.49-50). The female interviewees preferred diverse labels indicating their connection with the queer community, such as queer, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual and asexual. One participant used both she/her and they/them pronouns, with which they are still included under the umbrella of queer women.

This study further closes the gap by focusing on queer women born after 1997, commonly referred to as Generation Z or Gen-Z (Dimock, 2019, para.6-7), as previous research has mainly

focused on the experiences of older generations advocating for gay rights in the twentieth century (Harris, 1997, p.8-39; O'Connell, 2019, p.55; White, 2009, p.271-297; Wolf, 2013, p.284-285). By interviewing queer women of Gen-Z about Camp, this research provides insights into how newer generations experience Camp in the context of contemporary queer politics and media. While aiming for queer women between the ages 18-28, the youngest participant was 21 and the oldest 28.

Participants were not excluded based on their nationality, as this research wanted to avoid silencing anyone who was interested in participating. All participants were based in Western countries at the time of the interviews, but some participants were originally from less gay-friendly countries. These national contexts were mentioned in anecdotes, but views on Camp and queer identities as outside of the norm were shared across participants regardless of their location. The participants' nationalities included American, Argentinian, Dutch, German, Irish, Serbian, Slovenian, and Turkish.

Finally, awareness of the phenomenon of Camp was paramount, so this criterion was included in the sampling. This ensured that the interviewees interpreted Camp in line with this research, instead of other, more common, connotations with the word *camp*, such as the outdoor activity. It did not matter whether participants were experts on Camp or had only encountered it casually online or through friends, allowing for a range of interpretations. The interviewees' pseudonyms and demographics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Overview of interview participants

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Preferred label	Date interview	Duration
Louise	22	Dutch	Queer	01-04-2025	0:47:27
Audrey	22	Serbian	Bisexual/queer	02-04-2025	0:46:57
Frenchy	22	Slovenian/Dutch	Bisexual	03-04-2025	0:50:32
Janet	24	Irish	Bisexual	06-04-2025	0:51:10
Thelma	28	Turkish	Bisexual/pansexual	07-04-2025	1:02:56*
Dolly	21	Argentinian/Dutch	Bisexual/queer	08-04-2025	0:55:22*
Marilyn	21	Dutch	Lesbian/queer	11-04-2025	0:45:24*
Lola	26	German	Asexual	15-04-2025	0:51:18
Roxie	23	Dutch	Queer	17-04-2025	0:51:22
Velma	21	Dutch	Bisexual	18-04-2025	0:48:44
Cherry	22	American	Lesbian, she/they	18-04-2025	0:52:06*
Michelle	24	Dutch	Bisexual/lesbian	23-04-2025	1:04:32
Romy	26	Dutch	Lesbian	24-04-2025	0:52:45

** these interviews were conducted online.*

3.3 Data collection

This study built on thirteen in-depth interviews of about 45-60 minutes, which were recorded. This sample size allowed for sufficient diversity in responses while the amount of data remained manageable for the timeframe of the study. Furthermore, the decided length of the interviews ensured that participants could talk about their experiences in-depth, without feeling overwhelmed or losing interest. Initially, the number of interviews was not set, aiming between 10-15 interviews. As Johnson (2001) explains, the researcher has gained enough data when the interviews no longer offer new insights, which is called saturation (p.116). So, recruitment of new participants was ceased when saturation was achieved, leading to thirteen interviews in total.

Furthermore, the interviews were semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews, like structured interviews, rely on a pre-determined set of questions, but are much more flexible because they leave room to change the order of questions and ask follow-up or probing questions to gain deeper insights (Brennen, 2017, p.28-29). While unstructured interviews also have this flexible and adaptive aspect, it comes with the risk of missing essential information and unequal coverage of topics (Brennen, 2017, p.29). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were deemed most fitting for this research.

The interviewing process lasted from April 1st, 2025, until April 24th, 2025. Due to participants' tight schedules or geographical differences, four interviews were conducted online through Teams. As mentioned by Saarijärvi and Bratt (2021), interviews through video call are dependent on the quality of one's internet connection, camera, and microphone, which can serve as obstacles (p.393). While there were some technical difficulties in two of the four online interviews, this was merely at the beginning, and the rest of the interview continued smoothly. The remaining nine interviews took place in person at cafes or university. For the six participants who had Dutch as their native language, the interviews were conducted in Dutch, as this is also my native language. The other seven interviews were conducted in English. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, with two interviews lasting a few minutes longer (see Table 1).

To prepare the data for analysis, the interviews were transcribed, edited, and anonymized. As mentioned by Brennen (2017), transcribing is time-consuming (p.39), which is why the transcribing tool *Just Press Record* was used to make the transcription process more efficient. For the online interviews, the automatic transcription tool of Teams was used, of which consent was asked at the start of the interview. Both applications save data locally and therefore cause no ethical concerns regarding privacy (Microsoft Teams, 2025, para.3; Open Planet, n.d., para.4). After this, the software's mistakes were fixed, the interviews were formatted consistently, and the interviewees' identities were anonymized. This was done by replacing their names with pseudonyms and removing

or replacing other identifying information from the transcripts, such as specific names of universities, workplaces, or gay bars they frequent. Ethics and privacy will be further explained at the end of this chapter.

3.4 Operationalization

The interviews were structured according to a topic guide based on the theoretical framework. After building rapport through introductory questions, the insights from the interview answer the following sub-questions: (1) “What meanings do queer women ascribe to Camp?”, (2) “What are their motivations for engaging with Camp?”, and (3) “How do they view Camp and its purpose?”.

On March 29th, 2025, a preliminary interview was conducted with a 24-year-old bisexual/demisexual, female friend, to assure whether the order, the amount, and type of questions were appropriate for this research, as well as a practice for the interviewer. After this, the interview guide was adjusted accordingly. As mentioned by Silverman (2014, p.87-88) this ensures reliability. The interview guide is presented in Appendix A.

The first sub-question “What meanings do queer women ascribe to Camp?” is answered through the interview questions that ask for the interviewees’ personal definitions of Camp, their examples, and how they learned about it. In previous literature, Camp is described as an aesthetic and lens, a quality within people, cultural objects, and media products, or how a person can act (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Pero, 2016, p.29; Sontag, 1966, p.275-277). Moreover, Camp is characterized as embracing drama and unnaturalness, a dismissal of dominant norms, an unintended unseriousness, and a social construction (Meyer, 1994, p.1; Newton, 2002, p.443-445; Nielsen, 2016, p.118; Sontag, 1966, p.275-289; Wolf, 2013, p.284-293). The answers to these questions show whether contemporary queer women share these previous conceptualizations of Camp or have different perspectives. As Camp is considered hard to define (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.4; Newton, 2002, p.442; Sontag, 1966, p.275), the interviewees were asked to define the concept once again at the end of the interview, to see whether talking about it in-depth had made it easier to give a concise answer.

The second sub-question “What are their motivations for engaging with Camp?” is answered through the interview questions that ask for the reasons the interviewees personally interact with Camp (or not), and whether this relates to their sexuality or gender identity, and if it ever connected them to other queer people. Previous literature has asserted Camp as inherently queer, and as a tool to make sense of one’s queer identity and connect with other queer people (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2; Meyer, 2010c, p.73; Wolf, 2013, p.284). These questions show whether contemporary queer women have similar motivations for engaging with Camp or have different reasons.

The remaining questions answer the last sub-question “How do they view Camp and its purpose?”, by asking how Camp fits into the larger conversation about gender, sexuality and identity, as well as how it helps them make sense of the world and if it can be used in a political way. The answers to these questions will show whether queer women view Camp’s purpose as a queer political act (Meyer, 1994, p.1; O’Connell, 2019, p.55; Wang, 2024, p.2; Wolf, 2013, p.284), a reading strategy to create a queer culture (Dyer, 2001, p.113-115; Knapp, 1995, p.264; Nielsen, 2016, p.119), or if they see it serving a different purpose in their lives and the lives of other people. Moreover, they were asked to think of examples of non-queer people expressing Camp and what will happen to it when it becomes widely popular. This is because previous scholars have suggested that Camp will become irrelevant once queer rights have advanced, either because it will lose its political meaning by becoming mainstream, or because it will be appropriated by heterosexual people (Dyer, 2001, p.112; Harris, 1997, p.34-39). This will further shed light on how queer women view Camp’s purpose and if its relevance depends on its queer political ability or if it can exist outside of queer culture.

To wrap up the interview, the interviewees were asked what they think the future of Camp is, and whether there was anything that they would still like to add to the interview before it finished, and if they had any recommendations of Camp cultural or media products.

3.5 Data analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (TA), aided by the coding software *Atlas.ti*. As explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), TA is a method of analysis in which the researcher identifies common themes that come up repeatedly in a text and can be used for interpreting interviews (p.79-80). Accordingly, this method helps uncover the shared and opposing ways in which the interviewees make sense of Camp. Additionally, the flexibility of TA aligns with the constructivist perspective of shared meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78).

The TA was guided by the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87-93). After repeated rereading of the transcripts to ensure familiarity with the data, initial coding was applied to six of the thirteen interviews. This phase followed an inductive approach, allowing the codes to emerge from the data without trying to suit it to the specific theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.83). Examples of initial codes are “camp should not try to appeal to straight audiences” or “camp helps explore gender”. These initial codes were grouped together into larger categories, which were then applied to the remaining seven interviews. In this phase, a more theory-driven approach was taken by examining how groups of initial codes collectively connected to the theoretical framework and answered the sub-questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.84). For instance, the initial codes “opposing gender norms”, “camp as not normal outside of queer contexts”, and “camp blurs the lines of

gender" were grouped together under the subtheme "Camp is challenging the norm". This name was inspired by previous research that defined Camp as a rejection of the norm (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Sontag, 1966, p.278-279; Wolf, 2013, p.284). These subthemes were then further grouped into five overarching themes, based on their relation to each other. For example, the subthemes "Is Camp only for gay men?", "Queer women as consumers not producers", and "Camp is not for everyone" all described queer women's feelings of exclusion or distance from Camp, resulting in the theme "Camp as members-only". These themes are elaborated on in the results section. The coding tree can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Coding tree

Theme	Subthemes	Answers SQ	Example initial codes
Camp as a queer counterculture	- Camp is inherently queer - Camp is a dismissal of seriousness - Camp is challenging the norm - Concerns about mainstream Camp	1, 3	connection to queer culture, camp is unserious, opposing gender norms, camp should not try to appeal to straight audiences
Camp as the art of being "too much"	- Camp as over-the-top fashion with intention - (Drag) performances as the epitome of Camp	1	camp is over-the-top, camp as self-expression, extravagant fashion, camp in performance
Feeling more queer through Camp	- Camp makes queerness visible - Camp as permission to be yourself - Camp as community building - Camp and the gaydar	2, 3	queer artists' performances as political camp, camp helps explore gender, being yourself is camp, connecting to other queer people through camp media, covert language as gaydar
Camp as members-only	- Is Camp only for gay men? - Queer women as consumers not producers - Camp is not for everyone	2, 3	camp qualities are associated with femininity, appreciation of camp, to express camp is scary
You know it when you see it	- Camp is felt, not defined - (Social) media as Camp entry points - Shared understanding of Camp through cultural references	1, 2	pointing it out without explaining, hard to define, learned it online, shared meaning making of camp

In line with Boeije (2010, p.83-89), several strategies were taken during the analysis to ensure the research remained credible. Firstly, the research remained aligned with the theoretical framework through analytic induction, by keeping the theories presented in mind throughout the initial coding and categorizing process (Boeije, 2010, p.87). Secondly, by both viewing the interview data through the theoretical lenses presented in the theoretical framework, and allowing codes to emerge from the data, the research achieved theoretical sensitivity. This way, this study does not only describe existing patterns found in the interview data but also implies what these patterns mean in comparison to previous studies (Boeije, 2010, p.88). Thirdly, through constant comparison after each coded transcription, it was ensured that no codes were missed and the established codes were reevaluated (Boeije, 2010, p.83).

3.6 Ethics and privacy

To ensure that the study remained ethical, several measures were taken based on Brennen (2017) and Johnson (2001). Firstly, before the start of each interview, it was made sure that the interviewee gave their informed consent for participating in the study (Brennen, 2017, p.31). For this reason, the interviewees were sent a consent form a day or two before the interview through WhatsApp, and each of them gave their oral consent before the interview began. Additionally, it was important that there was no deception, so the interviewee was informed about the nature of the study and how their answers were going to be used through this consent form as well (Brennen, 2017, p.31).

Secondly, as in-depth interviews involve exploring personal feelings, reflections, and perceptions (Johnson, 2001, p.120), I was attentive of the extent to which I probed for answers, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as sexualities and gender identities. Moreover, in the consent form, and before the start of each interview, it was emphasized that the interviewee was in their right to choose not to answer a question, stop the interview as a whole, or ask for a break if needed.

Finally, to protect the interviewees' privacy (Brennen, 2017, p.31; Johnson, 2001, p.121), the data was solely shared with the researchers involved in this study and will be deleted after completion of the thesis in August. To further ensure privacy and anonymity, the interviewees' names were replaced with pseudonyms, and any other identifying information such as locations were removed or replaced in the transcripts (Brennen, 2017. p.31). Furthermore, in the consent form, and at the end of the interview, it was emphasized that the transcripts and entire thesis could be shared with the participant upon request (Brennen, 2017, p.31). The consent form is presented in Appendix B.

4. Results

This chapter will outline the five themes that emerged from the interviews and will answer the following sub-questions: (1) "What meanings do queer women ascribe to Camp?", (2) "What are their motivations for engaging with it?", and (3) "How do they view Camp and its purpose?" As these three questions all overlap and intertwine, it did not make sense to separate the themes according to the questions. For instance, many times the reason for engaging with Camp is because they have ascribed a certain meaning to it and view it as having a specific purpose. Therefore, a summary is presented at the end of this chapter, which gives a clear answer to each sub-question.

4.1 Camp as a queer counterculture

The most prominent theme that emerged from the interviews is that Camp is a counterculture rooted in queerness. It has four subthemes: (1) Camp is inherently queer, (2) Camp is a dismissal of seriousness, (3) Camp is challenging the norm, and (4) Concerns about mainstream Camp. This theme shows what meanings queer women ascribe to Camp and how they view its purpose in culture.

4.1.1 Camp is inherently queer

All participants described Camp as queer. They either thought it originated from queer culture or was culturally owned by queer people. For instance, Roxie (queer, 23) admits: "*Maybe it's a bit arrogant to say, but I think that Camp—at least how I experience it—is something that the queer community kind of claimed*". Moreover, they believe they understand it and can interpret it, because of their queer identity. As Michelle (bisexual/lesbian, 24) puts it: "*I have the feeling I can give an opinion that's somewhat grounded […] I know what I'm talking about*". This contradicts Sontag's (1966) statement that Camp is not necessarily connected to queerness (p.288) and aligns with her critics (Dyer, 2001, p.110-116; Lim, 2015, p.302-303; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Wang, 2024, p.2; Wolf, 2013, p.284).

However, there is some debate among participants whether something must have a queer connotation for it to be Camp, or if non-queer things and people can also be considered Camp. On the one hand, seven participants suggest that by nature, heterosexual people cannot be, or express, Camp. As Velma (bisexual, 21) says: "*I don't think a lot of people would call a heterosexual man Camp*". Moreover, Louise (queer, 22) and Cherry (lesbian, she/they, 22) admit that they would consider it less Camp when straight people express Camp aesthetics such as drag and exaggerated fashion. On the other hand, six participants consider that straight people or their creations can be

Camp, for instance when it has certain campy characteristics or when they are aware of their queer audience. Dolly (bisexual/queer, 21) mentions that "*drag can be done by a straight man or a straight woman and can still be Camp*". Both opinions align with Meyer (2010c) who stated that something is defined as Camp when it has a queer connotation (p.82-103). This connotation can be inherently queer (through people's sexualities), or queer-associated (by referencing drag or addressing a queer audience).

Moreover, eleven participants acknowledge that non-queer people could learn about Camp and understand it as well. However, someone needs to be knowledgeable about the queer community, either through media, academia or queer friends. Michelle (bisexual/lesbian, 24) thinks "*you have to be in circles where someone is queer, who's told you about it or heard about it before. I don't think that it's something you can [find out] accidentally"*. An important factor here is that someone needs to be open to learning about experiences that differ from their own. Audrey (bisexual/queer, 22) emphasizes: "*I feel like anyone could [understand]. You know, as long as they're not prejudiced, or anything*."

Ultimately, the meaning that these queer women ascribe to Camp is that it is inherently connected to queer, and it must have this connection for it to be considered Camp, aligning with Meyer (2010c, p.82-103). Moreover, these queer women agree with Sontag (1966, p.275-277) in that only a specific group is able to identify campy codes in certain people, cultural objects and media products. While previous research has argued that the queer community is this specific group for whom Camp acts as an in-joke based on shared cultural knowledge (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; O'Connell, 2019, p.29; Wang, 2024, p.2), this subtheme shows queer women do not necessarily think non-queer people are excluded from this. However, they do feel that it is more connected to them, as queer people, than it is to straight people.

4.1.2 Camp is a dismissal of seriousness

Camp as a dismissal of seriousness, by being fun, "bad", satirical, or ironic, was a meaning twelve participants ascribed to Camp. Mainly, Camp was seen as a reminder to take the world, and yourself, not as seriously. As Roxie (queer, 23) explains: *"You can act a bit crazy, and that should be allowed. Especially in a world where a lot of stuff suddenly is not allowed anymore."*

Michelle (bisexual/lesbian, 24) adds on to this by explaining that some bad films were not meant to be Camp, but are classified as Camp by the audience, because they are "*so bad they're good*". While most people would dismiss these films as merely bad, a certain audience can adopt them and celebrate them as part of Camp culture. This is echoed by Romy (lesbian, 26) and Dolly (bisexual/queer, 21), who explain that most people do not understand the fun in Camp expressions,

for instance because they are "*trashy*" or "*too much*". This act of embracing films that are rejected by the mainstream as Camp can be defined as a Camp reading, and how one can take pleasure in the exaggerated qualities of a film by mocking its intended seriousness (Dyer, 2001, p.113; Knapp, 1995, p.264). Moreover, it adds to the notion that this unseriousness can happen unintentionally (Leslie, 2022, p.92; Newton, 2002, p.445; Nielsen, 2016, p.119; Sontag, 1966, p.280-289).

However, participants struggle to explain whether Camp should always be unserious. For instance, Janet (bisexual, 24), Marilyn (lesbian/queer, 21) and Velma (bisexual, 21) acknowledge that Camp should not just mock queer stereotypes, but have a certain intention behind it, which could be serious. As Janet explains, Camp should take "*these tropes, like the dressing up in drag […] repurpose them, and perform them in an empowering way*". This aligns with the scholars who explain that while Camp should be considered through a humoristic lens, it should not hold the purpose of being able to escape the serious sides of being a marginalized group (Dyer, 2001, p.110-111; Leslie, 2022, p.95-96; Pero, 2016, p.31; Sontag, 1966, p.280-282). Ultimately, this subtheme shows that similarly to previous research, queer women view Camp as a dismissal of seriousness, either by deliberately being ironic, or by unintentionally having campy qualities (Dyer, 2001, p.110-113; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Knapp, 1995, p.264; Leslie, 2022, p.92-96; Newton, 2002, p.442-445; Pero, 2016, p.31; Sontag, 1966, p.280-289).

4.1.3 Camp is challenging the norm

All participants viewed Camp as the opposite of the norm, contrasting it with traditional gender norms, societal norms, and heteronormativity. According to them, Camp is not merely an aesthetic but a stance that is deliberately defiant, which is expressed through fashion, make-up, attitudes, behavior, and cultural taste. Six participants connect this to defying and blurring the lines of gender. For instance, Bambi Thug and FKA Twigs are named as Camp artists, both non-binary singers who express androgyny in their performances. Janet (bisexual, 24) explains how FKA Twigs has an "*alien like quality*" to their appearance, which "*their music reflects as well*". Others add how Camp juxtaposes the binaries of gender, by explicitly contrasting masculinity against femininity.

Challenging societal norms is considered the purpose of Camp, with Velma (bisexual, 21) noting that "*Camp is something provocative*". Camp is used to purposefully stand outside of the norm, by reclaiming queer stereotypes, such as that gay men are flamboyant. Society wants people to fit in certain box, but queer people purposefully break through that box by expressing or engaging with Camp. For this reason, Thelma (bisexual/pansexual, 28) defines Camp as a "*fruity flavor of counterculture*" that "*emerged from just the disdain and people just being angry at being categorized*

before they even open their mouth". Similarly, Lola (asexual, 26) compares it to how other subcultures such as punks set themselves apart from the mainstream.

The participants explain that this is why Camp is hard to understand outside of queer contexts, with Dutch participants saying it often evokes reactions as "*Can't we just act normal?*" (Romy, lesbian, 26). She adds: "*That's what I've noticed a bit in the Netherlands: it's fine if you're gay or lesbian, that's all fine, as long as you behave like everyone else*". Audrey (bisexual/queer, 22) further explains that because of this, public displays of affection between people of the same sex are already rebellious Camp acts, because they challenge the heterosexual norm.

The meaning that these queer women ascribe to Camp aligns with scholars who conceptualized Camp as something that challenges dominant, heterosexual, gender norms (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Pero, 2016, p.28; Sontag, 1966, p.278-279; Wang, 2024, p.2; Wolf, 2013, p.284). Participants mention how Camp juxtaposes binaries, but only connect this to masculinity and femininity, and not the other juxtapositions mentioned by LaValley (1995, p.63), Newton (2002, p.443) and Nielsen (2016, p.119-120). Similarly to Pero (2016, p.28) and Sontag (1966, p.278-279), the participants describe Camp as something that blurs the lines of gender. Ultimately, these queer women align with Dyer (2001, p.114) and O'Connell (2019, p.45), who explain Camp is a countercultural phenomenon that sprouted from the fact that queer identities were considered not "normal".

4.1.4 Concerns about mainstream Camp

As Camp is considered a queer counterculture, twelve participants are afraid that once it is no longer niche, because it becomes normalized or accepted by the mainstream, it will be watered down and lose its loud queerness. For instance, Romy (lesbian, 26) says: "*Then we'll no longer look back to where it came from and what the struggles were, and what its cultural heritage was*". Janet (bisexual, 24) and Dolly (bisexual/queer, 21) think that this is already happening. For instance, it is seen in how RuPaul's Drag Race is now also appealing to, and gaining popularity with, straight audiences. Similarly, Roxie (queer, 23) describes how straight people also attend Pride, but think of it as just another party, dismissing its origin as a queer protest. Participants add that when Camp's queer roots are forgotten, it can be misused by non-queer people for financial gain. "*[There's] pink washing or greenwashing*," Lola (asexual, 26) mentions, "*maybe there's Camp washing*".

If Camp is considered normal by a mass audience, it is questioned whether it then still counters the dominant culture. As Cherry (lesbian, she/they, 21) says: "*You can't fit that [Camp] for everyone. If that does get fit for everyone, it's no longer what it was originally intended to be*," meaning it will no longer be an opposite to the norm. On a more hopeful note, some participants

believe that if the current form of Camp becomes mainstream, a new version will pop up that opposes the norm again.

These concerns presented by queer women are similar to what previous scholars already feared: mainstream appropriation of Camp will lead to its death (Harris, 1997, p.34-39), or at least to a misuse that dismisses its queerness (Dyer, 2001, p.112-115; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Meyer, 2010c, p.103; O'Connell, 2019, p.29). However, these queer women offer a more hopeful outlook by suggesting that new forms of Camp will always pop up to try and set itself apart from the dominant norm, because that is its purpose in society. This aligns with Sontag's (1966) belief that Camp's meaning will evolve with time (p.283).

4.2 Camp as the art of being "too much"

This theme describes how queer women define Camp as an over-the-top expression through fashion and performance. It has two subthemes: (1) Camp as over-the-top fashion with intention, and (2) (Drag) performances as the epitome of Camp. This sheds light on the meanings queer women ascribe to Camp.

4.2.1 Camp as over-the-top fashion with intention

All participants define Camp as an expression by people that is over-the-top. They use words such as exaggerated, extravagant, and loud, which are considered identifiable qualities or aesthetics that people express in their fashion style. For instance, Lola (asexual, 26) mentions that Camp is making your queerness or difference obvious in "*a very shiny way*", and consequently Roxie (queer, 23) mentions that Camp is really "*something you can see*". This can be connected to Sontag (1966) who suggested that Camp is a quality found in people, objects, and media (p.275-277). Additionally, it further adds to the scholars who asserted Camp as a love for exaggeration and dramatics (LaValley, 1995, p.63; Newton, 2002, p.443-444; Nielsen, 2016, p.118; Sontag, 1996, p.278; Wolf, 2013, p.293).

Camp fashion is considered extravagant and eccentric, often pushing boundaries so far that it is considered trashy by most people. For instance, Frenchy (bisexual, 22) explains that overdressing for classy events is Camp: "*You sacrifice some elegance for the extravagance […] you prioritize being 'so much' over being on concept*". Others see Camp fashion as taking a concept to the extreme, leading to theatrical outfits that are not considered regular or even convenient to wear. Examples of this are giant wigs, ball gowns, or as Cherry (lesbian, she/they, 21) mentions: "*There's this TikTok person […] She'll wear an aquarium, and I think that's Camp*". This further aligns with the idea that Camp is a love for artifice, putting more emphasis on the artistry rather than the naturalness

(LaValley, 1995, p.63; Newton, 2002, p.443-444; Nielsen, 2016, p.118; Sontag, 1996, p.278; Wolf, 2013, p.293).

However, all participants admit that Camp is more than just putting on an over-the-top outfit, it is about the intention too. "*To be honest,*" Marilyn (lesbian/queer, 21) begins, "*anyone can put on Camp clothing, of course, but not everyone can express it. So, I think it's something you need to be convinced of*". Participants further explain that this can be expressed through a "*sassy attitude*" (Roxie, queer, 23), by being aware of one's irony, or by having a political intention. For instance, Frenchy (bisexual, 22) explains that Katy Perry's Burger Dress would have seemed trashy on anyone else, but it was Camp because she purposefully challenged the elegant norm of red-carpet events.

This aligns with the idea that Camp is not merely a thing or an aesthetic quality that can be identified within an object or person (Dyer, 2001, p.113; Newton, 2002, p.442; Pero, 2016, p.31). Namely, as Newton (2002) exemplified, context is important: a gay man wearing a certain dress was Camp, but a straight woman wearing the same dress was not (p.443). This shows that queer women oppose the belief that all over-the-top expressions in fashion are Camp. The context, and the intention behind the expression, play an important role for them too.

4.2.2 (Drag) performances as the epitome of Camp

All participants connect Camp to over-the-top performances for an audience, most notably those of drag queens because they are "*the epitome of ridiculousness and queerness of Camp as a concept*" (Audrey, bisexual/queer, 22). This is consistent with Newton (2002), who identified drag queens as Camp because of the theatrical way they perform their femininity (p.443-444). As explained by the participants, a drag queen is someone in over-exaggerated make-up, crazy hair, and an almost costume-y outfit, who performs a song in an over-the-top way. By nature, drag queens are considered as queer, challenging the norm and dismissing seriousness—three staples of Camp mentioned by the participants. Michelle (bisexual/lesbian, 24) adds: "*When you look at the clothes they [drag queens] make, and the way they interact with specific objects, or songs, or lyrics—it's a kind of purposive message they try to convey*". Moreover, drag is considered deliberate Camp: "*You're spending hours on make-up, and you do characters that you rehearse […] that is indeed intentional*" (Louise, queer, 22).

As these queer women consider drag queens and their performances as part of Camp, they directly oppose Sontag's (1966) statement that deliberate Camp is not pure Camp because it was intentional (p.280-281). Instead, they align with the authors who assert camping out or camping it up as a true form of Camp, referring to deliberately performing flamboyant or theatrical behavior as a Camp act (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Meyer, 2010a, p.142; Newton, 2002, p.443-444; O'Connell, 2019, p.43).

As these queer women emphasize that Camp is expressed by drag queens through their behavior and clothing styles, it can be connected to Meyer's (2010c) definition of low Camp (p.82-102). Ultimately, contemporary queer women view drag performances, and thus deliberate Camp, as pure Camp expressions.

4.3 Feeling more queer through Camp

This theme describes how queer women feel more connected with their queer identity and community through Camp. It has four subthemes: (1) Camp makes queerness visible, (2) Camp as permission to be yourself, (3) Camp as community building, and (4) Camp and the gaydar. This theme shows queer women's motivations for engaging with Camp, and which purpose it serves for themselves and other queer people.

4.3.1 Camp makes queerness visible

Although participants expressed concerns regarding Camp becoming mainstream, all participants did believe that because of its loudness, it helps make queerness visible. Cherry (lesbian, she/they, 22) explains that Camp is "*a way for people who might not necessarily be the norm […] to express themselves loudly in a way that makes space for them and the people like them*". Through mainstream expressions of Camp, queer people can show that they exist and should be accepted. Pride parades and RuPaul's Drag Race are considered examples of this.

Six participants express that queer celebrities or celebrities that use the Camp aesthetic should utilize their platforms to advocate for queer rights. Participants give the examples of Chappell Roan and Lady Gaga—both queer singers who reference Camp in their stage outfits and performances, and speak up about queer politics. Thelma (bisexual/pansexual, 28) explains that these types of people can "*make some kind of change in the world*", and "*maybe it wasn't like a revolution or something, but somebody's homophobic uncle changed maybe 10% because of it*". It is emphasized that just expressing Camp is not enough, it needs to have a political message behind it. Velma (bisexual, 21) brings up Harry Styles, who often challenges gender norms through his clothing: "*For all we know, he's a white, straight man. And then he is the first man on Vogue in a dress*". She is disappointed that he has never used his platform to speak up about queer rights. Janet (bisexual, 24), too, expresses disappointment: "*Theoretically, I think Camp should be about challenging and re-empowering things. But right now, I don't think that many Camp examples that I see are doing such".*

Ultimately, these queer women believe the purpose of Camp is making queer identities visible, which leads to normalization and acceptance. This aligns with Meyer (1994, p.4; 2010a, p.142), who argued that Camp expressions function as producers of queer social visibility, by being

overly dramatic about one's sexuality. However, instead of giving examples of gay activist organizations like Meyer (2010a, p.142-147), contemporary queer women express how queer or Camp celebrities have the power to make this change. Then again, Meyer (2010b) was aware that Camp's role in producing queer social visibility was shifting to more mainstream expressions, such as reality TV and pride parades (p.5-6), which is confirmed by these queer women. Finally, this subtheme aligns with the assumption that mainstream expressions of Camp can both lead to appropriation by heterosexual people, as well as queer acceptance (O'Connell, 2019, p.29-57).

4.3.2 Camp as permission to be yourself

As Camp makes queer identities visible, all participants viewed Camp as a way for queer people to come to terms with their sexuality, gender, and identity. Audrey (bisexual/queer, 22) explains that Camp is "*a really freeing way of exploring your identity […] it can bring a lot of validation and affirmation*". For instance, Camp allows transgender and non-binary people to explore their gender in non-conforming ways. Six participants applied it to themselves too, with Thelma (bisexual/pansexual, 28) explaining:

> "*I don't necessarily think that I'm the most confident and loud person in the room […] So, to me this [Camp] is like an incredible resource that should be exploited […] it just lifts off a lot of anxiety off my shoulders to tell myself: If you really look at it, everything's a performance. We're all in drag all the time.*"

This was mentioned by more participants, who explained that they felt freer to explore unconventional fashion styles because they could always label them as Camp. Participants feel that Camp empowers queer people to unapologetically be themselves because they know there is a specific group of people that would understand. This shows that for queer women, as well as other queer identities, Camp indeed serves as an important form of expression (Nielsen, 2016, p.118). While these queer women do not necessarily connect it to their underrepresentation in media and cultural products (Nielsen, 2016, p.118), they do explain that one can use Camp expressions when they are not considered the norm. While Harris (1997, p.8-39), Meyer (2010c, p.73), and O'Connell (2019, p.55) explained how gay men were able to explore their identities through consuming and talking about popular Camp culture products, these queer women more so connect it to self-expression, like fashion. Ultimately, queer women view Camp's purpose as a way to explore your queer identity and are motivated to engage with it because it gives them permission to be themselves.

4.3.3 Camp as community building

All participants describe how interacting with Camp—through fashion or consuming Camp media products—makes them feel more connected to the queer community. For instance, all participants define drag shows as Camp, and six participants specifically explain how going to these shows in gay clubs makes them feel more connected to the queer community. Romy (lesbian, 26) explains this feeling:

> "*It's such a nice feeling knowing you're all a bit on the same page, and nothing is too crazy or too much, everyone can do what they want. Whether you're on the really extreme side [of Camp], or not at all."*

Moreover, participants describe how consuming, or talking about, Camp media products with other queer people is a bonding experience. Marilyn (lesbian/queer, 21) explains that since she cannot talk about Camp with everyone, it makes her feel more connected to her queer friends. Recognizing campy characteristics in media products also adds to this community feeling. Dolly (bisexual/queer, 21) describes one of these moments:

> "*I was sitting with my friend who is a gay guy, and then my other friend who is a straight girl […] we were watching something, and we immediately went: Oh, that's so campy. And that did not click for her. And we explained: You don't understand. You need to be in the know to understand Camp fully. And I feel like that's also a moment of more connection."*

This example is similar to what Sedgwick (1990, p.156) defines as Camp-recognition, and what Nielsen (2016, p.119) and Wolf (2013, p.293) define as a Camp reading. Furthermore, queer women describe drag shows, and certain media products, as Camp expressions that have been adopted by the queer community. This can be connected to Creekmur and Doty (1995), who explain that queer people can create their own culture and assert their existence through it, which fosters a sense of belonging (p.2). Ultimately, contemporary queer women show that their engagement with Camp is motivated through a want to feel more connected to their community, and view that as a purpose of Camp.

4.3.4 Camp and the gaydar

Nine participants talked about Camp in relation to the gaydar: their ability as queer women to identify others as queer. They described how they could identify queer people by their Camp

fashion, Camp behavior, or their expressed interest in Camp products. "*As a queer person you develop this kind of sense,*" Frenchy (bisexual, 22) explains, "*and for example, asking if they watch RuPaul's Drag Race would be a good way to see if you're right".* The way they describe this can be connected to Queen's (1998, p.203-209) concept of covert communication, and how Meyer (2010c, p.73) and O'Connell (2019, p.55) describe Camp references as part of a secret queer language. Audrey (bisexual/queer, 22) explains that when she was younger, she started talking about RuPaul's to her coworkers, because she had a feeling they were queer as well. Then, she compares it to the following:

> "*I think that is a thing for a lot of people, because if you're not in an environment that is for example accepting, or if you're just really young and you're not as comfortable speaking about it […] I feel like it's been so many variations throughout the years of signals that are connected to media. Like the Oz thing, the Wizard of Oz thing."*

She gives the same example as Harris (1997, p.8-39), who used this Camp media product to find other queer people in unaccepting environments. Louise (queer, 22), too, describes how phrases from RuPaul's have become a shared language in her queer friend group, something her straight friends would not understand. This shows how the Camp media product RuPaul's Drag Race has a similar purpose for queer women, as the Wizard of Oz once had for gay men (Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Queen, 1998, p.209-210). So, queer women are motivated to talk about Camp media products, because it helps them find other queer people. Therefore, in their lives, Camp serves the purpose of identifying like-minded others.

4.4 Camp as members-only

This theme describes the exclusion or distance queer women feel from Camp. It has three subthemes: (1) Is Camp only for gay men? (2) Queer women as consumers not producers, and (3) Camp is not for everyone. This theme reveals queer women's motivations for engaging, or not engaging, with Camp, and how they view its purpose.

4.4.1 Is Camp only for gay men?

Eight participants associate Camp with gay men expressing their femininity. For instance, when giving examples of Camp people, they mention drag queens, men wearing make-up, Prince in heels, and Freddie Mercury and his extravagant outfits. While they also reference Camp women, such as Lady Gaga and Chappell Roan, these are typically seen as drawing inspiration from Camp

aesthetics, such as drag, rather than embodying Camp themselves. When asked if women expressing their masculinity could be Camp, Dolly (bisexual/queer, 21) explains: "*To me, Camp is also somewhat feminine and somewhat over-the-top, and being butch can be over-the-top, but it usually is also a bit toned down*". Others add that drag kings could be Camp, because they express their masculinity in an over-the-top way, but they only said so when asked about it. This shows that Camp is not only considered a gay male experience in academia, but this is also (subconsciously) felt by queer women (Dyer, 2001, p.49-62; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Meyer, 2010b, p.1-2; Sedgwick, 1990, p.144-146; White, 2009, p.271-297).

Similarly, participants assert that gay men need Camp more than queer women. They consider men exploring feminine expressions to be less normalized, while women do not face adversities in exploring masculinity. For instance, Thelma (bisexual/pansexual, 28) says: "*I think I observed it mostly with young men who are queer. Probably because it was the most scariest for them to state that to the greater world*". This suggests that gay men indeed need Camp to validate their sexuality (Dyer, 2001, p.110) but it does not hold the same purpose for queer women. This further supports Creekmur and Doty (1995), who think that Camp is a gay male subculture, and lesbians could have their own, different subculture (p.4). However, as this other subculture was not given and not all participants felt this way, this remains unclear.

4.4.2 Queer women as consumers not producers

All participants appreciate Camp expressions, but eleven participants would not consider themselves more than just a consumer. For this reason, they believe their interaction with Camp is minimal, because they are not producing Camp themselves. For instance, Cherry (lesbian, she/they, 22) explains she thinks her interest in theater is Camp, but she does not use Camp to express her sexuality and gender.

When asked if they would consider themselves Camp, most of the participants replied with a resounding "no" and a laugh, arguing that they do not present themselves in non-conforming ways. Although they would classify some of their outfits as Camp, they do not feel that Camp characterizes their everyday identity or self-expression. Here, the queer women who are also attracted to men, use the term straight passing. They explain that this refers to how they do not look queer from the outside, because they can still be in heterosexual-perceived relationships. Louise (queer, 22) adds: "*I think the people that also really struggle because of how they look and live, I wouldn't want to equate myself with that, because […] I'm not judged in the same way.*" This is echoed by Janet (bisexual, 24) who says that she feels like her "[*bi*]*sexuality almost isn't challenging anything*". Consequently, these

queer women feel that they do not embody Camp because their identities do not visibly subvert heteronormative expectations.

This perspective shows that while Meyer (1994, p.4; 2010a, p.142) and the participants explained that the purpose of Camp is making queer identities visible, these queer women do not feel that their own queer identities are visible through Camp. They do not camp about or camp it up, something that Dyer (2001) identified as an undoubtedly gay male aesthetic (p.110). Namely, they do not feel that they perform their queerness in ways that align with the dominant Camp aesthetic, such as challenging heterosexual norms. This supports Dyer (2001, p.110-111) and Meyer's (2010a, p.141) observations that dominant representations of queerness through Camp do not necessarily include those of queer identities other than homosexual men. Accordingly, these queer women feel that they do not qualify as Camp themselves, which is why they are less motivated to engage with Camp.

4.4.3 Camp is not for everyone

While the prior subtheme showed that queer women personally distance themselves from Camp, seven participants express a deeper sense of exclusion. Camp feels inaccessible, because it requires a certain level of boldness and extravagantness that does not feel natural to them. Marilyn (lesbian/queer, 21) expresses this feeling:

> "*I have to say I don't do anything with it [Camp] per se, because I don't know if it's something for me, or something that fits with me. But when other people do it, I think it's really cool. I'm always a bit jealous."*

Participants suggest that expressing Camp is scary, because it is so out-there. "*I'd rather not have the attention on me,*" Michelle (bisexual/lesbian, 24) explains, "*and I think that's why you have to be confident for Camp and hold your own, because you know you're going to get strange looks*". They also connect this to their fashion styles, explaining that they are not as extravagant and more understated.

Lola (asexual, 26) expressed the strongest sense of exclusion from Camp, connecting this to her asexuality. Feeling no sexual attraction at all, instead of being sexually attracted to the opposite sex, has made her wonder if she is even part of the community, not least Camp. "*I feel like the rest of society only sees the Camp part, but it doesn't define who we [asexuals] are*," she explains, noting how asexual people often have a more reserved personality. As an outsider, she sometimes feels like queer or Camp people are speaking a language she cannot understand. At queer parties or meetings, she finds herself "*sitting still and trying not to say the wrong things. Not to be like an imposter*".

Considering Camp is this loud way of expressing one's sexuality and gender identity, the quieter part of the community can be overlooked. This again shows that while Camp produces queer social visibility (Meyer, 1994, p.4; Meyer, 2010a, p.142), it does not make all queer identities visible, but just the ones with overdramatized and exaggerated personalities. Therefore, these queer women do not necessarily feel this political dimension of Camp and do not engage with it because they feel excluded.

4.5 You know it when you see it

This theme shows how queer women view Camp as a socially constructed phenomenon that is hard to define. It has three subthemes: (1) Camp is a feeling you can't describe, (2) (Social) media as Camp entry points, (3) Shared understanding of Camp through cultural references. This theme describes what meanings queer women ascribe to Camp, their motivations for interacting with it, and which purpose it holds in society.

4.5.1 Camp is felt, not defined

All participants initially struggled to define Camp because they felt it was more something they subconsciously knew based on intuition. "*It's just a feeling, you know?*" Frenchy (bisexual, 22) laughs, "*It's a state of mind!*". Consequently, all participants support their definition of Camp by giving examples of campy people, popular culture products, or art, without describing why those specific expressions are Camp. Moreover, they emphasize that they have never tried to define it before and they feel insecure about their grasp of the concept.

Velma (bisexual, 21) explains why it is so hard to define: "*There's not one definition of it. You can't just google: Hey, what's Camp? You'll get seven different answers*". This is echoed by the rest of the participants, who mention that Camp is subjective and non-constraining, leaving room for different interpretations. This is why both unintentional Camp and deliberate Camp are considered as pure expressions of Camp by the participants. They acknowledge that Camp is both something people, media, and cultural objects purposefully achieve, and something that happens unintentionally, which others can identify and adopt as part of Camp culture.

These queer women share the same thoughts about defining Camp as Sontag (1966, p.275) and her succeeding Camp academics, who acknowledge that it is difficult to do so (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.4; Newton, 2002, p.442; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; Pero, 2016, p.31; Wolf, 2013, p.284). Moreover, they define Camp as both something inherent in people, media, and objects (Sontag, 1966, p.277) and a lens through which one can view people, media, and objects (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Meyer, 2010c, p.73; Pero, 2016, p.29; Sontag, 1966, p.276-277). Finally, they contradict Sontag (1966,

p.280-282) by asserting that both intentional and unintentional expressions classify as Camp, aligning with her critics (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Meyer, 2010a, p.142; Newton, 2002, p.443-444; O'Connell, 2019, p.43).

While the participants initially struggled to pinpoint Camp, they all found the words in the end. As shown in the previous themes, they used similar words—such as queer, over-the-top, challenging norms, and making space for queerness—which raises the question of how they became aware of this. This is explained in the following subthemes.

4.5.2 (Social) media as Camp entry points

All participants describe how they became aware of Camp through social and other media. It is described as something they learned about subconsciously by consuming certain content online or in film and TV, and their awareness gradually grew. As Audrey (bisexual/queer, 22) explains: "*I don't think I ever specifically learned about the concept. I just I feel like I saw that word in relation to stuff I was watching*". There are two examples that were named by most participants as their introductions to Camp: (1) The 2019 Met Gala Theme "Camp: Notes on Fashion", and (2) the Reality TV series RuPaul's Drag Race.

> "*I think the first time I got awareness of it, was when there was that Met Gala Theme and there was that meme as well: Looking Camp straight in the eye. Then I was like: What's Camp? And then I looked it up. And then I got it."* (Frenchy, bisexual, 22)

> "*I was more interested in watching RuPaul for instance, that kind of stuff. And then that word just appears, and you think: What is this? And then other people are using it too, and then you start to get an idea of: This is what it is."* (Louise, queer, 22)

This shows that the first interaction with Camp of these contemporary queer women was through mainstream, commercialized versions that express the Camp aesthetic. As O'Connell (2019) suggested, by becoming mainstream, Camp has the ability to be more visible and reach a larger audience (p.57). In this sense, Camp was not a secret language passed down to these queer women by other queer people (Meyer, 2010c, p.73; O'Connell, 2019, p.55), they learned it through mainstream manifestations that any other person could access. Ultimately, this means that queer women's motivations to interact with Camp did not initially sprout from a need to queer straight culture (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2) or to find other queer people (Harris, 1997, p.8-39; White, 2009, p.271-297), but merely from entertainment.

4.5.3 Shared understanding of Camp through cultural references

All participants view Camp as a socially constructed phenomenon that exists around shared cultural references. Rather than requiring an explicit definition, a shared understanding of Camp has emerged within a specific group of people through the act of recognizing and classifying certain cultural products, people, or media as Camp. Thelma (bisexual/pansexual, 28) reflects on how she realized this with another queer friend:

> "*We are both using the word Camp right now as we speak and we're referring to something that we have seen on the television screen together, but do we even agree on that definition together? […] We're just throwing these terms around as if we have already studied it and we've done a PhD in Camp.*"

There is also no need to explain why something is Camp, if you are with people who are in the know, or as Cherry (lesbian, she/they, 21) puts it: "*Those that get it, get it*". Even among the participants, certain cultural references are shared. For instance, Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, musicals, horror movies, Chappell Roan, RuPaul's Drag Race, and the TV series Pose are Camp classifications that are shared amongst these participants. Some of these examples were never meant to be Camp but were somehow viewed through that lens. As Audrey (bisexual/queer, 22) explains:

> *"There's a lot of Camp cult media that queer people just adopted […] the Wizard of Oz has so many connections to queer history and queer culture […] and that's really funny, because I don't think the movie itself was ever supposed to be queer […] maybe the characters were queer coded*."

Other participants share the same thoughts about the musical genre in general, which they view as a Camp staple in queer culture, while it does not necessarily always portray queer identities. This act can be identified as what Wolf (2013, p.285) defined as an oppositional queer reading strategy, which connects to Hall (1980, p.127), because they adopt media products that are not necessarily queer by employing a Camp reading. Instead of accepting the preferred meaning, which is non-queer and non-Camp, they decode it in the opposite way (Hall, 1980, p.127). This is either because of their unintentional campy features (Nielsen, 2016, p.119) or because of the queer subtext (Doty, 1993, p.8), which Audrey called queer coding. Michelle (bisexual/lesbian, 24) adds: "*Things that did not try to be Camp, those become Camp after […] in their time, it was seen as bad, but 20 years later we look back and think: Oh, it's so bad that it's good."* This shows that Camp readings also

include adopting certain cultural products that are not taken seriously by the mainstream and embracing it as Camp (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Nielsen, 2016, p.119). Moreover, it aligns with Sontag (1966) who mentioned that it is easier to view something as Camp when one has a certain distance from it (p.283).

Finally, these queer women define Camp as a socially constructed phenomenon, established through shared meaning-making by employing Camp readings of popular culture, which aligns with Sontag (1966, p.275-277), Wolf (2013, p.284), and Harris (1997, p.8-39). Camp's purpose is therefore to create a shared culture and queer belonging through the collective act of reading, reinterpreting, and reclassifying cultural products.

4.6 Summary

4.6.1 Meanings

These queer women ascribe several meanings to Camp. Firstly, Camp is inherently connected to queerness. Queer people can express Camp, as well as understand it and interpret it. While non-queer people are not necessarily excluded, they must have some sort of connection to queer people to be able to know about it and express it well.

Secondly, Camp is a dismissal of seriousness, a reminder to take the world and yourself not as seriously. For instance, someone can conduct a Camp reading by embracing a film that has been rejected by the mainstream and taking pleasure in its mockable qualities. These films are usually unintentionally unserious. While Camp is considered a humoristic lens through which one can view the world, the participants agree that it should not be used to escape seriousness.

Thirdly, Camp challenges the norm through its queer connotation, by blurring gender norms and juxtaposing gender binaries. It is viewed as a counterculture that deliberately tries to set itself apart from the mainstream, which can be expressed through fashion, make-up, attitudes, behavior, and cultural taste. Consequently, Camp is hard to understand by people who are the norm, because they do not understand why one has to act that different.

Fourthly, Camp is an over-the-top expression mostly seen through fashion. The participants assert that Camp is more than just putting on an over-the-top outfit, it is about the intention too. This shows that Camp is not just an identifiable quality within a person, but it also depends on the context in which it is identified. Accordingly, drag queens are considered the epitome of Camp, because they have the over-the-top style and also the intention to make a political or ironic statement in their performance. Drag queens embody Camp: they camp it up or camp about.

Lastly, Camp is a socially constructed phenomenon that is hard to define. The participants find it easier to give examples of Camp in popular culture because they believe they have an intuitive

feeling of the concept. Through these popular culture examples, they create their own shared understanding of Camp, and a culture.

4.6.2 Motivations

Queer women express several motivations for engaging with Camp. As Camp is nonjudgmental and gives queer people permission to be unapologetically themselves, it serves as an important form of self-expression for these queer women. Moreover, they are motivated to express, consume, and talk about Camp, because it makes them feel more connected to the rest of the queer community. Finally, Camp is perceived as a recognizable code that can help signal queerness to others in covert ways, similar to the gaydar. Consequently, queer women are motivated to engage with Camp, because it helps them identify and find other queer people.

It is important to note that queer women's initial motivation to engage with Camp did not sprout from this need to find and connect with other queer people, but merely from entertainment. Namely, they learned about the concept through mainstream, commercialized products that expressed the Camp aesthetic, such as The Met Gala and RuPaul's Drag Race. The online discourses around these Camp media products, and others, is how they grew their understanding of the concept.

Queer women explain that their engagement with Camp is minimal, compared to others. Namely, queer women feel that gay men need Camp more for self-expression, because men exploring femininity is less normalized than women exploring masculinity. These queer women feel that they do not embody Camp because their identities do not visibly subvert heteronormative expectations. A few participants even feel excluded from Camp because their personalities are not as extraverted.

4.6.3 Purpose

The purpose of Camp relates to the motivations of queer women to engage with it. Firstly, through Camp, queer women can be unapologetically themselves, because Camp aims to create a space in which queer people can explore their identities without being judged. Secondly, Camp makes them feel more connected to the rest of the queer community, because Camp's purpose is to create a culture for people that fall outside of the mainstream. For instance, they explain how through employing Camp readings, queer people have created a shared culture around popular culture products. Thirdly, Camp helps identify like-minded others, because its purpose is to represent queer identities and make queerness socially visible. These queer women believe that queer or Camp celebrities play an important role in this as they have the platform to speak up about queer politics.

Ultimately, because Camp's purpose is to set itself apart from the mainstream, queer women are concerned it will lose its subversive power once it becomes widely popular. Still, they remain hopeful that new versions of Camp will continue to pop up which will try to counter the norm again.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to understand how queer women (18-28) experience Camp nowadays. Through in-depth interviews this research gained insights into which meanings queer women ascribe to Camp (SQ1), which motivations they have for engaging with it (or not) (SQ2), and how they view its purpose in contemporary society (SQ3).

This study builds on Sontag (1966, p.275-292) and her succeeding scholars. They have defined Camp as a quality identified within people, objects, and media; an aesthetic and a lens through which one can view the world; or how a person can act (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Meyer, 2010a, p.142; Meyer, 2010c, p.73; O'Connell, 2019, p.43; Pero, 2016, p.29; Sontag, 1966; p.276-277). While Camp is a subjective concept that is hard to define, these scholars agree that Camp is a celebration of exaggeration and artifice, a dismissal of dominant norms, unintentionally unserious, and socially constructed (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2-4; Dyer, 2001, p.110; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; LaValley, 1995, p.63; Leslie, 2022, p.92; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Newton, 2002, p.442-444; Nielsen, 2016, p.117-118; Pero, 2016, p.28-31; Sontag, 1966, p.275-289; Wang, 2024, p.2; Wolf, 2013, p.284-293).

In previous literature, it is expressed that queer people are motivated to engage with Camp, because it is a queer subculture that can help make sense of one's queer identity and connect them with other queer people (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2; Dyer, 2001, p.110; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Meyer, 2010c, p.73; O'Connell, 2019, p.44-55; White, 2009, p.271-297; Wolf, 2013, p.284). Moreover, Camp's purpose in society is viewed as a queer political act to advance queer social visibility and their rights, or an oppositional reading strategy to create a queer culture (Dyer, 2001, p.113-115; Knapp, 1995, p.264; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Nielsen, 2016, p.119; O'Connell, 2019, p.55; Sedgwick, 1990, p.156; Wang, 2024, p.2; Wolf, 2013, p.284-293). As queer rights advance, it is wondered whether Camp will still serve this purpose in contemporary society, or whether it will become mainstream and lose its queer political meaning (Dyer, 2001, p.112; Harris, 1997, p.34-39; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Meyer, 2010c, p.103; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; O'Connell, 2019, p.29).

However, there existed several gaps in literature. Firstly, previous literature had primarily focused on the experiences of gay men, with some even stating that Camp was solely something they experienced (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.4; Dyer, 2001, p.49-62; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Meyer, 2010b, p.1-2; Sedgwick, 1990, p.144-146; White, 2009, p.271-297). Secondly, there is gap in contemporary research on the experiences of queer people with Camp, as recent studies on Camp merely involve textual analyses of Camp media and cultural products (Rosenberg, 2020, p.94; Villanueva-Jordán, 2024, p.165; Wolf, 2013, p.288). Lastly, the few studies that did relate queer women to Camp, only considered lesbians, neglecting the experiences of bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and transgender

women (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.4; Lim, 2015, p.301-306; Nielsen, 2016, p.116-118). To address this gap, this study involved in-depth interviews with queer women aged 18-28, to understand how they experience Camp in their daily lives.

5.1 A queer, female perspective on Camp

The findings show that nowadays, queer women (18-28) experience Camp not as a static aesthetic with one, clear definition, but as a multifaceted subculture rooted in queerness, both experienced personally and politically. They find it hard to put to words, as their understanding of Camp is more based on intuitive feelings confirmed by other queer people. Camp is something they can identify within people, objects, and media, but it is also a lens through which they view the world, most notably popular culture. Moreover, while these queer women do not perceive their own engagement with Camp in performative terms, they do believe people—such as drag queens—can deliberately camp it up or camp about. Ultimately, they describe five pillars of Camp: (1) an inherent queerness, (2) a dismissal of seriousness, (3) a defiance of the dominant norm, (4) an over-the-top self-expression, and (5) a social construction through shared cultural references.

Queer women experience Camp as a queer counterculture that creates a space for people that fall outside of dominant societal norms, for instance due to their sexuality or gender identity. It not only validates over-the-top and different forms of self-expression but also creates a culture around cultural and media products that the mainstream has rejected. By having an unserious attitude, they can take pleasure in overexaggerated and mockable qualities of a media or cultural product. Through Camp readings and Camp recognition, queer women have grown a shared understanding around Camp cultural references, which fosters a sense of community between the people that are “in the know”.

At the same time, Camp is not experienced as a central part of their queer experience. Some feel they do not need Camp in the same way gay men do or would not classify themselves as Camp because they feel their sexuality does not subvert the norm as much. Others feel excluded from Camp because it does not represent their personalities, just the extraverted ones. Therefore, queer women consider their engagement with Camp as minimal, and it mainly revolves around (online) entertainment media and popular culture. By consuming and talking about these Camp expressions, sometimes in covert ways, they feel closer to the queer community and are able to identify others like them.

Queer women acknowledge that Camp has the power to advance queer rights by making queer identities socially visible. They emphasize the role queer or Camp celebrities play in this, because they have the platform to advocate for change. However, they also acknowledge that Camp

can be appropriated by non-queer people and will lose its subversive edge if it becomes mainstream. Yet, they do not think Camp will be irrelevant in the future: it will always transform and try to set itself apart from the norm. Ultimately, this research has shown that today, queer women (18-28) experience Camp as a way of seeing and being seen: it validates, entertains, and connects queer people through a shared culture that is over-the-top, dismisses seriousness, subverts norms, and is inherently and undeniably queer.

5.2 Theoretical implications

The present research revealed how queer women (18-28) experience Camp, which has several theoretical implications. The most important finding is that Camp is something Gen-Z queer women experience and engage with today, while it was framed in previous research as solely something gay men experienced in the twentieth century (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.4; Dyer, 2001, p.49-62; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; Meyer, 2010b, p.1-2; Sedgwick, 1990, p.144-146; White, 2009, p.271-297). It further closes the gap in contemporary Camp research by analyzing how queer women experience it in their daily lives, adding to the textual analyses on Camp culture products (Rosenberg, 2020, p.94; Villanueva-Jordán, 2024, p.165; Wolf, 2013, p.288). Finally, by interviewing queer, bisexual, pansexual, and asexual women, aside from just lesbian women, this study aligned with Queer Theory (de Lauretis, 1990, p.iv) and introduced a more diverse perspective on Camp than previous research (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.4; Lim, 2015, p.301-306; Nielsen, 2016, p.118). Besides closing the research gap, this study expanded on existing research of Camp in several ways.

Firstly, this study expands on existing conceptualizations of Camp and further critiques Sontag's (1966) assumption that it goes beyond queerness and is apolitical (p.276-288). Namely, according to these queer women, Camp is not just something identifiable in people, objects, or media (Sontag, 1966, p.277), the identification requires a specific lens, connection to queerness, or an ironic or political context. Additionally, the findings demonstrate that Camp is still defined as a celebration of dramatics and artifice, a dismissal of dominant norms, and unintentionally unserious (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p.2-4; Dyer, 2001, p.110; Harris, 1997, p.8-39; LaValley, 1995, p.63; Leslie, 2022, p.92; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Newton, 2002, p.442-444; Nielsen, 2016, p.117-118; Pero, 2016, p.28-31; Sontag, 1966, p.275-289; Wang, 2024, p.2; Wolf, 2013, p.284-293), but it is now more connected to self-expression through fashion and make-up, and drag queen performances.

Secondly, the findings directly counterpoint Sontag's (1966) claim that intentionality disqualifies something as Camp (p.280-281). Whereas Sontag (1966) viewed camping it up or camping about not as a pure expression of Camp, these queer women identified deliberate expressions such as drag performances as authentic examples of Camp. This suggests that, for queer

women today, Camp is not merely an aesthetic that people, media, and objects unintentionally convey and they can identify, but also as a conscious queer practice, aligning with Sontag's critics (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Meyer, 2010a, p.142; Newton, 2002, p.443-444; O'Connell, 2019, p.43).

Thirdly, this study shows that for contemporary queer women, the social construction of Camp continues to be shaped by popular culture (Harris, 1997, p.8-39), but now mainly occurs in online spaces. As much of the existing literature focuses on the twentieth century, this reveals that in the twenty-first century, Camp has adapted to the rise of the internet and thus evolved with time (Newton, 2002, p.442; Sontag, 1996, p.283). It further supports that Camp can be used as a queer reading strategy (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Nielsen, 2016, p.119), in the case of queer women by adopting media and cultural products that have been rejected by the mainstream, because of their extravagance, mockable qualities, or queer subtext.

Fourthly, this study adds to existing research by revealing how Camp functions as a queer political act for queer women. It expands on Meyer (1994, p.4; 2010a, p.142) by explaining that today, queer and Camp celebrities have the power to combine Camp expressions with queer politics to produce queer social visibility. Moreover, while Meyer (2010c, p.73) and O'Connell (2019, p.55) suggested that Camp was a secret language for gay men to keep their sexual identity under the radar, for contemporary queer women, it functions as part of the gaydar: a way to identify and find other queer people. It is unclear if this is also how Camp has evolved for contemporary gay men, prompting an avenue for future research.

Fifthly, it contradicts assumptions in previous literature that Camp will become irrelevant once it is accepted by the mainstream, or queer rights have advanced (Dyer, 2001, p.112; Harris, 1997, p.34-39; Meyer, 1994, p.1; Meyer, 2010c, p.103; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; O'Connell, 2019, p.29). Namely, these queer women express that Camp will always play a relevant role in uplifting identities that are not considered the norm and try to set itself apart from the mainstream.

Lastly, while this study closed the research gap by showing that not just gay men have an experience with Camp, but queer women as well, there remains a difference in their experience. Specifically, queer women experience a certain distance or exclusion from Camp and consider it more of a gay male phenomenon. This was also suggested by Creekmur and Doty (1995, p.4), who wondered whether queer women have their own subculture that primarily validates their sexualities. This remains unclear but should be explored in future research on Camp.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

There were several limitations to this research, which point to potential directions of future research on Camp.

Firstly, this research provides a Westernized point of view on how queer women experience Camp because the interview sample mainly included individuals that originated from, or currently resided in, Western countries. Specifically, due to the snowball sampling method and my own nationality, ten participants were either Dutch or living in the Netherlands. Considering Camp is a loud way of expressing one's queerness, it is plausible that queer women in less gay-friendly countries might relate to Camp differently. For instance, they may feel more excluded from Camp or avoid engaging with it due to fear of discrimination. Alternatively, as Camp is described as a form of queer resistance and a survival strategy in a heteronormative world (Lim, 2015, p.302-303; Wang, 2024, p.2; Wolf, 2013, p.284-285), it could be that these women have a stronger connection to Camp because their countries are less accepting of queer identities. Future research should focus on queer women in non-Western or more restrictive environments to explore whether and how their experiences with Camp differ.

Secondly, the sexualities and gender identities within the sample were not evenly represented, which leads to a bias. Due to the snowball sampling method, it could not be controlled which type of queer women participated in the study. Consequently, the sample was dominated by bisexual women, only one asexual woman was included, and transgender women were not represented. Initially this was not seen as an obstacle. Namely, to align with Queer Theory (de Lauretis, 1990, p.iv), this study chose to consider all sexualities and gender identities other than heterosexual and/or cisgender under the umbrella of queer, as they have similar experiences of not being the norm (Browne, 2005, p.49-50). However, this one asexual woman expressed markedly different views on Camp compared to the rest of the sample because she did not feel represented by the subculture. Additionally, the queer women that also experienced attraction to men had a stronger sense of distance from Camp than the women that were not, considering they could be in heterosexual-perceived relationships. This suggests that queer women could have different experiences with Camp based on their sexuality or gender identity alone. Future research should aim for a more balanced sample through a purposive sampling method or choose to focus on specific sexualities or gender identities to explore these distinctions in greater depth.

Thirdly, due to the short timeframe of this study, the research only built on in-depth interviews. However, many participants noted how the concept of Camp exists online. They explained how this is the place where the shared meaning-making mainly happened and how their awareness grew because of social media discourse around Camp. This is especially interesting considering previous research on Camp predominantly occurred in the twentieth century, when the internet was less intertwined with people's daily lives. Future research could benefit from a qualitative content analysis in which the discourse around Camp on social media is examined, for

example on Twitter/X. As Camp relies heavily on humor and insider knowledge (Dyer, 2001, p.110; Leslie, 2022, p.95-96; Newton, 2002, p.442; Nielsen, 2016, p.117; O'Connell, 2019, p.29), this type of research could provide insights into how Camp's meaning is shaped through hashtags, retweets and memes. Moreover, it can provide more insights into the tension between authentic Camp and mainstream expressions of Camp, as social media makes it more accessible, and therefore more likely to be appropriated or misused. This would add to the existing research, because instead of showing how it is experienced, it would reveal how Camp's meaning is socially constructed.

Lastly, Camp is considered a concept that evolves with time by scholars (Newton, 2002, p.442; Sontag, 1966, p.283) and the participants in this study, which means the findings depend on the temporal context. The participants connected their experiences with Camp to contemporary popular culture and queer politics, which consequently reflects a specific moment in time. This was an intentional part of this study, as it aimed to explore how queer women experience Camp *today*. It would be interesting to revisit this research in the future, to explore how younger generations, such as Generation Alpha, relate to Camp. This could show how shifting political and cultural contexts might alter their experiences with Camp, similarly to how these Gen-Z participants differed from the twentieth century scholars. Ultimately, Camp remains an underexplored concept in contemporary academia, so there is room to further examine its meanings and the ways in which it is experienced.

5.4 Conclusion and societal implications

The present research reveals that Camp is *not* a solely gay male experience: queer women understand Camp, interact with Camp, express Camp in their fashion, and connect with other queer people by talking about Camp. As previous research on Camp primarily focused on textual analyses of media and literature, or the experiences of gay men in the twentieth century, this study closes the research gap by revealing the experiences of Gen-Z queer women in contemporary society. Importantly, it shows that Camp has not died or faded into irrelevance but remains a staple of queer culture.

Camp continues to challenge dominant norms and serve a political purpose, which has positive implications for society. As Camp shows and queer women express, queer social visibility is created by being loud and proud of one's identity. This not only normalizes these types of identities but also shows people who are questioning their sexuality or gender that these identities exist and are celebrated within Camp culture. Queer women emphasize how celebrities have the opportunity to create this queer social visibility, by representing Camp aesthetics as well as speaking up about queer politics. While there are some concerns around mainstream expressions of Camp, these queer women agree that it can make queerness visible and more accepted within society.

Camp validates queer identities and fosters a sense of community around shared cultural references, which reveals important societal implications. In a society where queer people are discriminated because they are different than the norm (FRA, 2024, para.4; Nielsen, 2016, p.118), Camp can serve as a safe space where they can be unapologetically themselves. However, some queer women mentioned how they feel distanced from Camp or experience exclusion, which reveals negative societal implications. Camp has its roots in gay male culture, expressed in flamboyancy and exaggerated femininity by gay men (Dyer, 2001, p.110-111; Meyer, 2010a, p.141-147). This is not only expressed by academics, but subconsciously felt by queer women, who suggest Camp does not represent them because they are not subverting the norm through femininity or express themselves extravagantly. So, Camp does not create this safe space for every queer identity, making one wonder where queer women then truly belong.

The meaning of Camp is not static but evolves with time and has now adapted to online spaces. Yet, the meanings ascribed to Camp by queer women are similar to how it was conceptualized by previous scholars: it is over-the-top, queer, political, unserious, and defiant. This shows that while Camp's meaning is fluid, its core spirit remains and is understood across generations. Camp is a cultural phenomenon that defies easy explanation but is deeply understood by those who live it as an intuitive feeling. As shown in this research and by previous scholars, this intuitive feeling transcends gender, sexuality, age, time-period, and geography. For the lucky few that have acquired this understanding, through reading this thesis perhaps, they can make meaning of Camp together without ever having to explain *why*, because: when you know, *you know*.

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Appendix A

Interview guide

Introduction

My name is Evie, and I am in the final year of my masters "Media, Culture and Society", at Erasmus University. As I've told you before when I approached you, for my master's thesis, I am researching how queer women experience Camp. Thank you for joining me today. I am really excited to talk to you and learn about your experiences.

- Before we go into the meanings, can you tell me a bit about yourself? What is your name, age, nationality, and what do you do nowadays (e.g. studying, working, gap year)?
- How do you identify within the queer community? I know this could be a sensitive topic, so you can be as vague or precise as you want.

Personal meanings of Camp

So, today we're going to talk about Camp. You told me you have some awareness of the concept.

- How did you learn about it?
- If you had to define Camp in one or two sentences, how would you describe it? (If they give (popular culture) examples: Why are these examples Camp?)

<u>If they list characteristics</u>:

- In your opinion, is the presence of these traits alone what makes it Camp, or does something else need to be present as well?
- How is your own perception of Camp part of this classification?

<u>If they list people/verb</u>:

- Do you think [someone or an act] can be Camp without trying to be, or is it something they have to purposefully do?
- Do you believe that [people or actions] are only Camp in certain contexts, or are they Camp everywhere?

<u>If they list media/objects</u>:

- Do you think the creator of this [media/object] meant for it to be interpreted as Camp, or not?
- How is your own perception of Camp part of this classification?

- How did your understanding of it change over time? Or did you always know?
- How do you think your understanding of Camp compares to how others might see it?
  If very different: How does it make you feel when others might not agree with you?
- Can you think of any reasons why some people might have difficulty understanding Camp?

Motivations

Now, we'll talk a bit more about how Camp personally relates to you.

- How would you describe your personal interaction with Camp?
  If yes/no: - Why do(n't) you personally interact with Camp?
- How is interacting with Camp related to your sexuality or gender identity?
  If no before: How is knowing about Camp related to your sexuality or gender identity?
- Can you describe a moment in which Camp connected you to other (queer) people?

Purposes

- How do you think Camp fits into the larger conversation about gender, sexuality, and identity?
- How does it feel to be able to interpret something as Camp?
- How does Camp help you make sense of the world around you (e.g. media or culture)?
- Can you think of examples in which you—or other people—used Camp in a political way?
  If disagree: - Why can't it be used in a political way?

Appropriation

- If they said it was queer: Can you think of examples where Camp was used by people or groups who aren't queer? How did that make you feel?
- What do you think happens to Camp when it becomes widely popular/mainstream?

Concluding remarks

- Now that we've talked about Camp in-depth, I want to return to one of my first questions. If you had to define Camp in one or two sentences, how would you describe it?
- What is the future of Camp?
- Is there anything about Camp that we didn't talk about, but you would still like to mention?
- Do you have any recommendations of anything Camp that I should watch, listen to, look up?

Thank you so much for participating today. I really enjoyed our conversation. If there are still any questions or concerns about this topic or our conversation, do not hesitate to contact me via email or text. Also, if you want to read the transcript of our interview, or my final use of it in my thesis, you can always ask. I'll provide you with my contact details.

Appendix B

Consent form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Evie Mertens. 608120em@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in research about the experience of queer women with Camp. The purpose of the study is to understand how queer women (Gen-Z) engage with Camp.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, my questions will be related to your personal meanings of Camp, your motivations, and Camp's purpose.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio recording of the interview.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for my master's thesis, and all data will be deleted after the completion of the thesis in August.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information, such as identifiable locations, in the study. Participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, and sexuality (if given), etc.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take approximately 45-60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

DATA COLLECTION AND RETENTION

During the interview, the following personal data will be collected from you: Name, age, gender, sexuality, audio recordings, occupation, cultural/ethnic background, feelings about Camp. In addition, it is also possible that you will talk about your political affiliation or religious/philosophical beliefs and those of others, as these may also relate to your opinion about Camp.

If you want to see the results of the study, I will need your email address so I can send them to you.

Your data [i.e. audio recording] will be retained until the completion of the master's thesis in August. I retain the data so that other researchers have the opportunity to verify that the research was conducted correctly.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact—anonymously, if you wish—Erik Hitters, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, hitters@eshcc.eur.nl.

Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email me at 608120em@eur.nl or visit www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl. (T: 088 - 1805250)

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name Signature Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study:

Name Signature Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix C

AI Declaration

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information
Name: Evie Mertens
Student ID: 608120
Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000
Supervisor Name: Ofra Klein
Date: 23-06-2025

Declaration: I did not use Generative AI Tools.

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

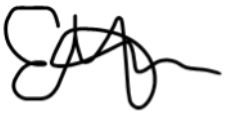
- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☐ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

Extent of AI Usage
☐ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity
☐ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content

☒ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: 

Date of Signature: 23-06-2025

was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: [digital signature]
Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]