

The Horrors Persist:

A thematic analysis of female & AFAB horror fans' perception of gender and sexuality in horror cinema

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ABSTRACT

Like cinematography, horror cinema can be described as a predominantly male-focus field in terms of filmmaking, representation as well as audiences. Historically, the horror genre often excludes or poorly represents the non-male multitude, particularly women and LGBTQ+ individuals. Even though in the past decades there have been made progressions regarding inclusivity, the horror genre remains to lack in intersectionality, thus sustaining patriarchal ideals. Despite that, there is a significant amount of non-male horror fans. As a result the following research question was formed and utilized as a basis for this study: How do female and assigned female at birth (AFAB) horror fans negotiate representations of gender and sexuality in horror movies?

The choice of method for this study was qualitative research, specifically thematic analysis, as a means of understanding audience perception through means of pattern recognition. A total of even in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with self-attested horror fans, comprising of cis women and individuals falling under the trans umbrella. During the interviews subjects such as horror preferences, relatability, impressions, feelings and fandom were discussed.

The results highlighted that non-male fans are more inclined to consume feminist and queer horror, films which showcase more complexities like psychological genres, artistic horror which resonates more deeply with a queer audience, alongside films which don't focus on violence against women. Two main concepts were utilized when discussing representation, such as the final girl and the monstrous-feminine, both of which were analysed in a critical manner. Furthermore, the horror community aspect could be detected within the respondents' closeknit real-life circles, rather than engaging with it online, showcasing the preference for established spaces where preferences and freedom of expression was granted. However, passive consumption within the online horror related communities and websites could be detected, as a way of meaning-making and further horror media consumption,

To conclude, this research has emphasized that horror cinema is interacted with not only for recreational pleasure, but also as a means of meaning-making, self-exploration as well as political opposition. The results stress the need for intersectionality within representation regarding audience perception, drawing attention to cultural shifts and social justice.

KEYWORDS: *Horror cinema, male gaze, representation, femininity, queerness*

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1. Introduction

Male-oriented standpoints are generally prominent in the film industry, but particularly in horror, as it is historically categorized as a male genre both in terms of audience and creators (Kromrie, 2022, p. 10). The focus of the primarily white male perspectives excludes ostracised communities like women, people of colour or individuals falling under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, whether that is from a gender or sexual identity standpoint (Kromrie, 2022; p. 10; Smelik, 2007, p. 494). The latter can be noted in the common types of representation said marginalized identities have been depicted through such as violence against them, detrimental tropes, or absence of representation all together (Kromrie, 2022, p. 10). For example, some classic widespread tropes are the sexually active female characters, alongside black or queer characters, all of which die first in movies (Kromrie, 2022, p. 11). While such depictions posed as quintessential within horror cinema throughout the last 50 years, horror has since evolved and become more inclusive in its contemporary portrayals (Kromrie, 2022, p. 10; Sanders, 2024, p. 1). The emergence of films like *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017), *Titane* (Julia Ducourneau, 2021) and *I Saw the TV Glow* (Jane Schoenbrun, 2024), which can be characterised as black horror, maternal horror and queer horror respectively, showcases the shift in horror representations towards more distinct experiences faced by marginalized people (Aldana Reyes, 2025, p. 3).

Considering the grotesque aspect of the genre, there is something about its contents that is appealing for people to indulge in regardless. According to Tudor (1997, p. 444), there are two main facets through which consumption of horror films can be looked at. First, by assessing the traits of the viewers themselves, and second, by looking at the contents of the movies being enjoyed. According to Norman (2018, p. 59), "...the cross-cultural appeal for horror movies provides useful insights into understanding human evolutionary psychology processes". Even though the audience of horror is presumed to be young, white men, who, as opposed to others, are supposedly able to withstand the gruesome images on the screen, horror viewership embodies diversity, especially given the development and broadness of its subgenres (Hills, 2014, p. 97; Lin & Xu, 2017, p. 654).

Nevertheless, horror audiences often remain to be gendered, particularly when it comes to fan preferences and collectives which are often attributed as masculine or feminine (Hills, 2014, p. 99). However, due to explicit depictions within horror, categorising its audience into groups becomes a challenge due to personal fears influencing said receptions of the films (Hills, 2014, p. 93). The complexities of horror cinema elicit a variety of emotional responses, which can be the straightforward "positive" or "negative" reactions (Hills, 2014, p. 99). In this sense horror surpasses being just entertainment and serves as a commentary of societal anxieties, trauma, gender expectations as well as social power imbalances (Rincon, 2024, n.p.).

The aim of this paper is to understand the appeal of horror for non-male fans, especially taking into consideration how male-centred the genre is, despite its recent progressions towards a

more inclusive space. As previously mentioned, depictions of marginalized communities in horror are often unfavourable or lacking, the latter especially applicable to queer identities which are only now becoming more prevalent in media (Lambert, 2023, p. 6). As opposed, female representation in horror is more widespread and has seen changes throughout the years from victims and objects to more empowered beings (Sanders, 2024, p. 1). For example, the rise of female directed and focused horror films noted in the past few decades have resulted in the emergence of the feminist subgenre (Tremblay, 2023, n.p.; Rincon, 2024, n.p.). The vastness of female representation allows for a more in-depth examination of the female horror fan audience reception to it. Additionally, the assigned female at birth (AFAB) perspective is important to include as well when discussing both female and queer representation. Even though their current identities might not conform to gender norms, the female socialization that AFAB individuals have experienced allows them to relate to and understand certain portrayals on screen while offering unique outlooks on said representation through their own experience of gender (Goitia, 2016, p. 29; Nabi et al., 2021, p. 88).

Considering the latter, the following research question arises: *How do female and assigned female at birth (AFAB) horror fans negotiate gender and sexuality within horror films?* The research question was the basis for a qualitative data analysis of in-depth interviews, which were carried out with female and AFAB horror fans. The interviews allowed for a greater investigation of audience understanding, rendition and engagement with horror cinema.

There has been an assorted number of previous studies on horror and audience reception, which have served as the theoretical foundation of this paper. The genre of horror has been examined in relation to its viewers, including fans, by scholars such as Tudor (1997, 2010), Cherry (1999, 2001) and Hills (2014). Furthermore, horror in relation to gender has been examined by Clover (1992), Creed (1993), Harrington (2014, 2017), Heimberger (2022), focusing primarily on gender roles, representation and gender socialization. Moreover, the work of Mulvey (2001) and Kristeva (1982) and their conceptions of the male gaze and the abjection theory respectively, have added greatly to the research field of horror cinema and audience reception. Lastly, although few, the recent works from Petrocelli (2021), Irving (2024) and Cooper (2018) provide unexplored research on queer horror fans. In this case, the lack of studies on gender-queer identities, particularly AFAB, in relation to horror can be attributed to the limited representation LGBTQ+ individuals have in the said genre, as opposed to their cisgender counterparts. Moreover, while studying women in relation to and in horror has been previously done, it is still an underdeveloped sector and so are overall studies of horror fans, due to the intricacies of the subject as well as lack of intersectionality (Harrington, 2014; Rendell & Egan, 2024, p. 826; Sanders, 2024, p. 1). As a result, this paper aims to address the research gap and expand the existing studies by emphasising contemporary narratives of female and AFAB fans through merging media science with an amalgamation of feminist, queer and audience reception theories.

Through a societal perspective, the relevancy of this paper is favourable, considering that horror, but especially cinema, has been noted to reflect and comment on collective anxieties and fears

(Fu, 2016, p. 19; Fiveson, 2021, p. 2). Likewise, this study emphasizes the significance of marginalized individuals engaging with horror, a genre in which their voice and portrayal has been treated lightly. However, as previously mentioned, modern horror films encompass a more diverse array of representation, creating room where trauma, identities and taboo subjects can be delved into. The actualization of the latter is especially relevant to the current socio-political climate and feminist movements such as Me Too and Time's Up (Langone, 2018, n.p.; UN Women, 2019, n.p.). Violence against women is widespread issue, which has persisted throughout history, and still remains to be an active predicament for not only cis women, but other gender-nonconforming individuals which ultimately get categorized as women because of the gender status quo (Garcia-Moreno, 2015, p. 1). Moreover, besides feminism, topics like racial discrimination and LGBTQ+ rights have become more widespread due to digitalization, which is a step forward to creating space for perspectives of marginalized communities to gather momentum (Sanders, 2024, p. 4). Thereby, examining horror cinema and its ostracised audiences, particularly non-male fans, is fundamental to amplify media discourse alongside socio-cultural politics and shifts.

The remnant of this paper is comprised of four sections, namely theoretical framework, methodology, analysis and conclusion. The theoretical framework, as aforementioned, further explores the theoretical background, previous literature and relevant concepts on the topics at hand. Then, in the methodology section the research design and data collection procedure are thoroughly explained. Consequently, the analysis segment showcases the findings through a thematic assessment. Finally, the main ideas, limitations and implications are integrated within the conclusion.

2. Theoretical framework

The following subsections will be focused on discussing representation, gender, and fandom, all in relation to horror cinema. The theories and authors mentioned vary in the years of publication. The main reason for utilizing seemingly older references is due to their importance and remaining relevance in horror cinema research. Furthermore, the citations used for the queer related topics mentioned are relatively modern, which can be traced back to the previously limited LGBTQ+ representation in media, and therefore limited studies on it. Consequently, previous former research remains to be gendered, emphasizing cis-heterosexual perspectives and not including any gender-queer representation, particularly AFAB. As a result, the terminology for 'female' is used in this paper to refer not only to cisgender people but to indicate the general cultural distinctiveness one might get and relate to when being socially located as a 'woman' in a patriarchal society. This is applicable to the entirety of the paper and is not only specific to the theoretical portion.

2.1 Horror & Representation

Stuart Hall's *representation theory* defines the latter as a procedure through which people constituting within a culture utilize language and symbolism to create meaning (Hall, 2020, p. 45).

This evokes the fact that, as a society, we are meaning makers and attach significance to things, people, occurrences, which do not possess those from the start. The meanings themselves align with cultural relativism in the sense that they differ and continuously change throughout history based on their initial origins (p. 45).

Media studies largely touch upon the social impact of representation. More specifically, it is stressed that television often mirrors cultural norms which it originally derives from, as well as modeling and enhancing said standards in the world (Trnka, 2023, p. 10). The oversaturation of media and channels through which it can be consumed, representation becomes more widespread, which has its own consequences. As a result, the things being depicted or not determine what is socially acceptable and how certain traits or portrayals get categorized, ultimately dictating how one should act based on their grouping position. TV, for example, has been shown to have an impact on establishing sexual identities and their understanding, by providing a space for exploration and self-discovery (Trnka, 2023, p. 10). Similarly, this can be attributed to gender representation.

When discussing the last-mentioned concept, it is first important to remark the distinction between sex and gender, since these two notions can often be misunderstood or equated to each other. According to Johnson & Repta (2012, p. 20) and Butler (2002, p. 14), sex and gender are both social constructs due to their predisposition to change with the passage of time. Sex, which is biologically located, was previously limited to either male or female, however, overtime different anatomical variations have been uncovered and given more attention (Popa & Gavriliu, 2014, p. 1200). For example, intersex, which is attributed to individuals whose anatomy does not distinctly align with male or female, on the accounts of either genitals, reproductive system, chromosomes or other indicators (Johnson & Repta, 2012, p. 20). As opposed to sex, gender alludes to cultural and socially constructed standards and roles which are traditionally aligned to individuals based upon their perceived sex (Popa & Gavriliu, 2014, p. 1200). Gender and how one should act, and look is predetermined by institutional systems, like religion, media, education, politics and such (Johnson & Repta, 2012, p. 21). Men typically hold more privilege than women or other individuals identifying beyond the binary. An example can be seen in work environments where women often do not get equal treatment and pay as their male counterparts, for doing the same tasks as them (Johnson & Repta, 2012, p. 21). Additionally, individuals whose identity denounces the gender system, which is often aligned with the previous definition of sex as in ‘male’ and ‘female’, can consequently face prejudice and violence for expressing themselves (Johnson & Repta, 2012, p. 25). Furthermore, gender systems also collide with other structures like race, sexuality, class, facilitating further hierarchical categorization of privilege (Johnson & Repta, 2012, p. 21). The differentiation between sex and gender is not only relevant for correctness but also for inclusivity purposes, since gender-queer audiences were investigated and their perception of identity frames their comprehension and relation to the world and the media they consume.

Since the media of choice for this paper is horror, it is imperative to locate the definition of it and what it represents as a cinema genre. The *genre of horror* features gruesome imagery and storylines, often involving mythical beings, however, is not limited to that only and can take many other forms (Shaw, 1997, p. 2). Regardless of the subgenres of horror the main objective is to evoke physical and emotional responses from the viewers, often utilizing audiovisual means to induce feelings of fright and distress (Williamson, 2025, p. 10). Furthermore, horror movies often reflect societal fears and anxieties (Fiveson, 2021, p. 2). This is done through mixing fictional unsettling themes with realistic ones as a means of critique on things like patriarchy, capitalism, media control and so on, therefore making the audience aware of said things they encounter in their day-to-day life as a collective (Fiveson, 2021, p. 5-6).

As previously mentioned in the introduction, the film industry, but horror especially, is a white male dominated field, and therefore prioritizes male perspectives more than of others. As a result, representation of marginalized communities, namely LGBTQ+, women and non-white individuals is insufficient or showcased poorly (Kromrie, 2022, p. 10). However, current horror films encompass displays of a larger variety and intersectionality more than ever before, emulating the cultural change towards inclusiveness and empowerment of marginalized voices (Sanders, 2024, p. 19). This can be largely attributed to cultural shifts towards more need for diversity and representation overall, not just in media (Silbereisen & Tomasik, 2011, p. 5). Due to things like globalization, digital development, personal redirections and population changes people have developed a broader outlook on the world, which translates into their demands for non-traditional representation on a socio-political level (Silbereisen & Tomasik, 2011, p. 48). For example, the film studio A24, which started off as indie, has managed to become one of the dominating forces in the modern horror era (Simms, 2024, p. 47-48). The achievement of the latter is by virtue of the artistically exalted, uncanny and socially relevant takes showcased in the released films, which has led to the company gaining public recognition (Simms, 2024, p. 55). Furthermore, besides studios, particular film directors are also noted to be commanding the horror genre nowadays such as Halina Reijn with the horror comedy *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies* (2022) which focuses on digitalization and female empowerment, while showcasing queer characters, alongside Jordan Peele with his unique work in *Get Out* (2017), which addresses post-racial topics (Sanders, 2024, p. 39; Simms, 2024, p. 52). Additionally, Julia Ducourneau's work in *Raw* (2016) and *Titane* (2021), discussing topics like coming-of-age, sexuality, femininity and queerness through the lens of body horror (Schiøth, 2022, p. 5 - 9). While the latter few are some of the prominent highlights in modern horror cinema, there is still room for more diversity in terms of representation, as the focus remains to be the cis-heterosexual white men (Kromrie, 2022, p. 93).

2.2 Horror & Gender

Since cinema, but especially horror, has historically been dominated by cis-heterosexual white men in terms of the filmmaking process, their perspectives and desires have been brought to the

forefront (Kromrie, 2022, p. 10). As stated by Laura Mulvey (2001, p. 7), initial feminist theories discuss the fetishization and visual pleasure derived from the positioning of both the female and male body on the screen as the ones who are watched versus the ones who watch accordingly. This has led to the conception of the *male gaze*, which evolved throughout the 20th century Hollywood. To specify, the cinematography itself locates women as spectacles, whereas the male depictions fail to do so, focusing less on the sexualisation of the body and more so other qualities (Laura Mulvey, 2001, p. 7). As a result, the sole existence of the male gaze implies that the viewers are its equivalents, namely other cis-heterosexual white men (Fisher, 2020, p. 4). This poses a difficult situation in terms of identification for non-male viewers, who must either adjust themselves to the masculine gaze or separate themselves from it (Mulvey, 2007, p. 7). Furthermore, while femme-presenting people are sexually objectified, queer individuals are perceived as threats or completely dismissed (Fisher, 2020, p. 4). However, in certain cases, such as with lesbian representation, sexual objectification can remain when male creators are involved (Amador, 2013, p. 9). Taking that into consideration, the following two subsections will be discussing the positioning of female and queer representation in relation to horror.

2.2.1 *Women in horror*

Its impossible do discuss female representation without bringing up the hyper-sexualisation of the female body and how that has evolved over the years. As stated by Oliver (2017, p. 454), we live in the culture of the male gaze, which is continuously getting sustained through the internet and social media. Digitalization has made women's bodies become more readily available for people, mainly men, to consume and collect, compared to the old-fashioned physical media like posters, pin-ups, DVDs and more (Oliver, 2017, p. 452). Distribution of pornography through the web has greatly added to the dehumanization of the female body through positioning women as sex objects, which is especially impactful when consumed by younger audiences (Malamuth et al., 2012, p. 427; Oliver 2017, p. 453). While there are different types of pornography there are some common patterns, which reinforce patriarchal gender roles as a means of control (Zhang, 2024, p. 61). Such patterns prevail within certain subcategories whose designated audience are cis-heterosexual male viewers (Morrison, 2005, p. 7). Mulvey's concept of male gaze translates in that area of entertainment even more so as both the male actors and viewers primarily hold dominant footings against the submissive located women (Thorneycroft et al., 2025, p. 5).

According to Salmon (2012, p. 194), like porn, popular TV and cinema showcase violence against women correspondingly. The film director Alfred Hitchcock's statement "Torture the women!" remains relevant in relation to cinema, especially the genre of horror (Vosper, 2021, p. 15). The portrayal of women in horror films is often superficial, lacking actual depth and the characters are mostly on the screen as means of objectification or victimization for the voyeuristic male gaze (Cherry, 1999, p. 166; Smelik, 2007, p. 495). Moreover, contrary to other characters, femme-presenting ones more often undergo emotional and physical horrors in extremist subgenres like rape-

revenge movies, torture porn, or snuff films (Alamo, 2025, p. 6; Mee, 2022, p. 137). Torture porn stands for vivid depictions of torture which are prolonged throughout the film, whereas snuff is more complex than that (Pinedo, 2014, p. 346). Snuff films, which can also be categorized as pornography, pose an even more gruesome depiction of real violation of one's, often female, body, followed by massacre as the climax of the movie (Johnson & Schaefer, 1993, p. 40). While snuff films are part of the cinematic world, its supposedly fictional renderings blur the lines of fantasy and reality leaving audiences concerned and speculating about the actual existence of such disturbing flicks (Riccobene, 2024, p. 28).

Despite the horrific maltreatment of the female body in the previously mentioned subgenres, there are other forms of representation, which are less extreme and more well known. The two main tropes which serve as the basis for understanding female representation in horror in this paper are the final girl and the monstrous-feminine. The latter two will be discussed in depth in the following paragraphs. However, it is important to mention that their conception by their respective authors has been done with the assumption that the horror genre is predominantly consumed by cis-heterosexual male viewers (Harrington, 2017, p. 5).

The term '*final girl*' was conceived by Carol Clover in her 1992 study "Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film" and by definition it relays the portrayal of a the last standing female heroine, who uses her intelligence and survivalism to face off or escape the killer, who is often times masculine coded through the character design (Almwaka, 2022, p. 3). While the character archetype can be found in multiple horror subgenres, slashers are the ones where it is more predominantly located. Furthermore, slasher films are more representative of the gender portrayals and the conjunction of the male aggressor and female martyrdom (Almwaka, 2022, p. 2-3). The scholar Rockoff (2002, p. 13) criticises the trope by stating the following:

On reflection, the Final Girl is a congenial double for the adolescent male. She is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, unapproved for adult males, the terms and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structure of male competence and sexuality.

Indeed, the final girl can often be detected representing typically masculine assigned traits which are often linked with survival, such as bravery and ingenuity (Fujii, 2022, p. 40). Furthermore, they are also depicted having non-feminine interests and only manifesting her more prominent feminine sides though her dismal fear, as well as being puritanical (Harrington, 2014, p. 27). As a result, men find the ability for identification within the virgin discerned female protagonist, even though she is the one to typically exterminate the main male-coded villain (Harrington, 2014, p. 28). It is thus unsurprising that the slasher films attract a more male audience overall, as it amplifies patriarchal markers (Almwaka, 2022, p. 4).

There are changes within said type of representation and that can be seen in the emergence of ‘good for her’ cinema, which sometimes utilises the same final girl blueprint, has been on the rise in the past decade (Fujii, 2022, p. 3). The term itself originated from a meme, however throughout the years it became frequently used in relation to horror films which include the final girl trope, but are not limited to it (Heimberger, 2022, p. 5). The ‘good for her’ identifies itself through accentuating rampage and revenge of its female characters (Heimberger, 2022, p. 14). This directly overturns the negation femme-presenting individuals face when exhibiting prominent emotions in real life (Heimberger, 2022, p. 15). Therefore, the endorsement of emotional purging stemming from female characters allows its viewers to feel represented affirmed (Sanders, 2024, p. 15).

Fujii (2022, p. 40) argues that while the good for her subgenre can be considered more respectable representation, in the sense that it does, ultimately, position the female character as a champion, rather than a victim, regardless of her perceived femininity, it does so by aligning itself with neoliberal feminism. The latter is also regarded as “girbossification”, as it largely focuses on the internal changes to achieve success in a corporate world, rather than identifying the system issues posing to gender inequality (Fujii, 2022, p. 11). Furthermore, neoliberal feminism does not take into account the aspect of intersectionality and mostly focuses on predominantly white individuals, women in this case (Ulus, 2018, p. 165). Additionally, according to Vazquez (2024, p. 104), *female rage* advanced by white, cis-heterosexual, working class women is often considered more appropriate than those expressed by women of colour and other ostracised groups.

Although lacking in intersectionality, the emergence of the ‘good for her’ genre has made room for expression of more complex emotions and contribute to different outlooks of what *female rage*, revenge and monstrousness (Vazquez, 2024, p. 104). In opposition to the previously noted desired puritan woman is the *monstrous-feminine* portrayal, the term corresponding with Barbara Creed’s theory, which suggests subversion of the typical victim female character in horror (Harrington, 2017, p. 3). In her work, Creed discusses how the female monsters, as opposed to the male or neutral counterparts, remain to be gendered despite their form. The latter can be seen in the way the monsters align with womanhood and femininity through depictions of the reproductive body, menstruation or other bodily fluids, and sexuality (Harrington, 2017, p. 4). For example, this can be noted through some of the following renderings: vindictive mothers, cruel pregnancies and births along with sexual coercion and violation, insatiable demons and creatures as well as the transgressive portrayal of the mad and spiritual women, especially emphasized in the old witch typecasting, which suggests a woman aging equals with atrocity (Harrington, 2017, p. 7).

In the West the association of femininity and monstrosity is by virtue of philosophy, medicine and science, all which position men superior to anyone else, women and other identities included (Harrington, 2017, p. 9). As a result, this not only influences the media being produced and published but also people’s real-life experiences when it comes to institutions. The monstrous feminine and female rage is therefore a political act in the way it challenges the portrayal of monsters in horror and,

most importantly, womanhood as it showcases its characters as terrifying, gross, perverted and generally abnormal, thus departing from traditional expectations of femininity, based on misogynistic presumptions (Cherry, 1999, p. 147; Vazquez, 2024, p. 103). Moreover, Freeland (1996, p. 744) states that the coalition of the female body with the monstrous on the screen postures itself as danger to the patriarchy and therefore demands to be eradicated, to comply with the norms and ultimately satisfy the viewers. Additionally, Harrington (2017, p. 9) suggests that the interpretation of whether certain representation is misogynistic or a critique of it depends on the movies themselves, their cinematography, director's vision and the viewers accordingly. For instance, according to Cherry (1999, p. 205) female viewers are more prone to finding enjoyment and empowerment within the representation of the monstrous feminine, compared to their male peers.

2.2.2 *Queerness in horror*

According to Petrocelli (2022, p. 21), queerness, at its essence, aligns with activism and intersectionality, as well as feminist theory. Considering that queer theory aims to “resist, reframe, recycle, negotiate, and subvert the cis-heteronormative status quo”, some scholars, such as Browne and Nash have even favoured to not specify the term queer, declaring that in doing so it confines it to merely certain interpretations (Petrocelli, 2022, p. 19). The theory emphasizes the usage of queer as an umbrella term, that goes beyond just gender and sexuality (Cooper, 2018, p. 2; Petrocelli, 2022, p. 18).

Horror is considered closely associated with queerness by default, through equally invoking apprehension in the normative spectator (Cooper, 2018, p. 13). Since being queer is often attributed as “the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny”, it can be argued that horror cinema is a place of solace for some of its LGBTQ+ audience members (Petrocelli, 2021, p. 8). Previous studies showcase that queer people are more inclined to indulge in horror due to its remedial functionality, high absurdity, dark humour as well as the relatability found in the monstrous abnormalities (Petrocelli, 2021, p. 131). Irving (2024, p. 8) suggests that the affinity with the monstrous characters is allegorical as it opposes the cis-heteronormative social structure. Moreover, horror allows for more relatability in the sense that it showcases uncanniness, which suggests that something is disturbing but feels rather familiar, like how some queer people feel estranged in terms of their own identities, bodies or society (Petrocelli, 2021, p. 15).

Additionally, horror is the genre in which *queer-coded* and even openly queer characters can be frequently detected, thus being appealing to the target audience (Cooper, 2018, p. 2). Queer-coded refers characters whose depiction as part of the LGBTQ+ community is not explicitly stated but is implied through their characterization or design (Veera, 2023, p. 62). Some examples of characters as such are the entities called cenobites from Clive Barker's Hellraiser franchise. Besides its gay creator, the films encapsulate subjects motivated by the BDSM lifestyle, body modifications and exposure, all which are often adversely ascribed to the LGBTQ+ community as a way of othering them (Adams,

2017, p. 20). Some other queer coded examples are monster of Frankenstein or the Babadook. The first mentioned can be seen in multiple different adaptions besides the original film released in 1931, which was directed by a publicly open gay man (Lambert, 2023, p. 9). The existence of said monster directly correlates with the notion of transness, not only through the embodiment of the other, but also through showcasing physical alterations (Westengard, 2022, p. 125). Moreover, The Babadook (2014), has gained popularity through the positioning of the main monstrous depiction as a LGBTQ+ icon by its queer viewers, due to sexual suppression, grief and once again the otherness (Middlemost, 2019, p. 9).

Queer characters have historically been lacking in direct representation or, otherwise, positioned in antagonist roles in cinema. The latter is attributed to general exclusion of authentic queerness in media through vilified depictions, in particular when it came to queer-coded individuals (Veera, 2023, p. 62). Said characteristics often use harmful stereotyping of the LGBTQ+ community, generally on the basis of maltreatment and hostility (Veera, 2023, p. 63). In other instances, direct representation of queer characters can be considered even more extreme, as some of the depictions of said individuals were of them as sex offenders, contaminated individuals and propagandists, which has further maintained discrimination (Lambert, 2023, p. 6). This and other portrayals and restrictions in media as such were on account of the Hays Code, that was created in opposition to films deemed to be averse to morals and conservative ideals, as stated by religious and political establishments (Irvig, 2024, p. 8; Veera, 2023, p. 64). The films restricted would be ones depicting subject matters related to feminism, homosexuality, violence, sexual themes and so on. While the code has not been active since the late 60s and representation has since evolved, its impact remains in the way the portrayal of certain identities as “other” has dictated how they are perceived by the public for a prolonged time (Veera, 2023, p. 65).

While the creation of queer-coded antagonists in media was inherently driven by antipathy, it also led to queer people finding relatability within that kind of representation, since that what all that was being provided (Veera, 2023, p. 66). Namely, Disney films are notorious for their queer-coded villains, whose flamboyant images and actions do not comply with established ideals, therefore positioning them as separate from the others (Veera, 2023, p. 67). Consequently, Disney villains were reclaimed and designated as symbols by its queer audience who found the peculiarity of said characters alluring and empowering (Veera, 2023, p. 72). Furthermore, the exaggerated portrayal of villains has been noted to strengthen LGBTQ+ people’s own conviction when it comes to self-expression as well as lead to community-building through the comfort of the misfit characters they align with.

Like cartoons, the horror genre enhances detachment from reality through its different aesthetics and heavy stylization (Petrocelli, 2021, p. 184; Waller, 1987, p. 149). This is also related to the favouritism the LGBTQ+ community has with celebrating Halloween, as it allows for more freedom of gender expression and crossing boundaries through modifying one’s appearance (Irving, 2024, p.

30). According to Joseph et.al. (2023, p. 17), the metamorphic prospective of costumes and attires as such showcase the beneficial aspects of masquerading for flourishing queer identification through body positivity and reconsidering heteronormative gender expectations. This is especially relevant for the people falling under the trans umbrella who experience gender dysphoria, which is the affliction and uneasiness regarding one's body in the case of their sex and gender identities not corresponding with each other (Atkinson & Russell, 2015, p. 792).

2.3 Horror & Fandom

This subsection of the theoretical framework focuses on the aspect of the horror fandom. However, first it would be necessary to mention theory regarding audience reception. The latter is significant to bring up in relation to the previously discussed representation, as well as fan activity. It is first necessary to consume said media and form opinions on it to be able to make the decision to categorize oneself as a fan.

2.3.1 Audience reception

Following Hall's representation theory, his *audience reception theory* discusses the concepts of encoding and decoding as a method of communication and understanding of representation. When looking at this method from the lens of cinema, encoding is done through the efforts of the film maker who puts their ideas and the meanings behind them into their pieces, whereas decoding is done by the audience who perceives the movies based on their own background and experiences (Barker, 2008, p. 327; Martin, 2007, p. 1). Moreover, according to Petrocelli (2021, p. 93) "A person's intersectional subjectivity directly relates to their sociopolitical access to safety and power", which impacts all aspects of their life, since the way one experiences the world changes how they perceive it and vice versa.

Walmsley (2021, p. 308) suggests that audiences partake in media consumption beyond passiveness as an attempt of sense-making. Engagement with horror cinema in this case might be considered paradoxical, since viewers gain satisfaction from the disturbing imagery portrayed on the screen (Nabi et al., 2021, p. 90). Scrivner (2022, p. 2) argues that the latter is a result of *morbid curiosity*, which, as the name implies, is the interest in the strange and unusual things. James William (1890, p. 1010) has noted there to be two types of curiosity. First, the instinctive type existing in humans and most animals, which indicates the need for knowledge acquisition about unknown things, often for preservation reasons. The second type, which is called the "scientific curiosity and...metaphysical wonder", is solely attributed to humans and has to do with the act of conceptualising the things one is curious about, to fill knowledge gaps. According to Scrivner (2021, p. 2), curiosity can lead people to expose themselves to disturbing occurrences as a means of incomparable knowledge acquisition and assessing the hazard for future reference. However, to reduce the risk of damage, it is important for the consumption to happen over distance. As a result,

consumption of fictional media of said nature becomes an ideal source for morbidly curious individuals (Scrivner, 2021, p. 3).

Considering the latter, horror in particular, offers a *sense of control* to the viewers by allowing them to engage with it from a comfortable environment, rather than experiencing it firsthand (Osowiecka, 2016, p. 99). Moreover, while the on-screen depictions in horror are not real, individuals can still find personal or cultural relevancy within terrors, or generally understand the experience of thanatophobia, which stands for fear of dying. Julia Kristeva's (1982, p. 125) theory of abjection suggests that the attraction one has for the grotesque, despite its abhorrence, is the proximity it has to the vulnerable human life and in other cases the fascination with the unnatural other. The fictionality of horror does not adversely elevate these experiences further and if it does, it is often counterbalanced with films having an ending (Osowiecka, 2016, p. 99; Scrivner, 2021, p. 3).

Furthermore, passive engagement with horror cinema from a safe distance is known to help process emotions through *catharsis*. Aristotle's theory of emotional catharsis states that "tragedy arouses unsavoury emotions precisely in order to accomplish their catharsis" (Baker, 2022, p. 63). The theory suggests that the existence of an outlet to discard certain feelings through finding meaning can ultimately lead to positive outcomes (Barker, 2022, p. 65). In this case horror cinema poses as the outlet, which propels fear, pain and death through an artistic lens, detaching itself from real-life dangers, which ultimately leads to enjoyment (Baker, 2022, p. 66).

2.3.2 *Fandom*

Matt Hills (2003, p. 8) argues that while the notion of 'fan' is commonly known as someone who is enthusiastically immersed in certain types of media or celebrities, being a fan showcases more complexities than that and cannot be defined or explained as a sole thing. Being a fan and partaking in fandoms poses as identity formation through media consumption and rendition alongside cultural involvement. Digitalization, the internet and the increased number of media being produced has led to the creation of online communities, therefore changing the notions of what fandom can be (Pearson, 2010, p. 84). Previous research indicates that online fan communities have the possibility to meet the same criterion of satisfaction as do in person connections (Pearson, 2010, p. 93). Scholar Henry Jenkins has noted that participation within fan communities can be both passive and active, positioning the fans as either consumers or producers (Mason, 2013, p. 211-212). By producers, it is meant that fans can actively re-produce the content they consume in different ways, such as proposing their own theories or writing fanfiction, which are then distributed through intercultural fan networks (Mason, 2013, p. 213; Bangun, 2019, p. 222). In fact, online fan production is observed to be more inclusive of marginalised communities than traditional media like TV and such, which are male-focused (Mason, 2013, p. 104). Nonetheless, same as in person fandom, the online fan communities are abounding in hierarchies, inner circles and disputes that frequently mirror social matters (Hills, 2004, p. 20; Mason, 2013, p. 104).

The anonymous functionality of the internet allows for trolling, anti-fandom and other more radical groups to be evident (Meier & Sharp, 2024, p. 2). The notion of anti-fandom contradicts what a fandom is and conveys “Disinterest. Dislike. Disgust. Hate” (Click, 2019, p. 1). Meier & Sharp (2024, p. 3) argues that while studies have shown that anti-fandom and hate speech overlap, they should not be confused with one another, which is noted in the example of incel communities. The term incel, which stands for “involuntary celibacy”, is used to describe the online assembled communities consisting of desolate men, typically white and cis-heterosexual, whose identities are based on blaming and detesting women for their own woeful conduct and misery (Pelzer et al., 2021, p. 213). Overall extremist takes against women and other marginalized communities alike are present in a multitude of other collectives outside of incels, all of which are generalized under the name “mansphere” (Judge & Steel, 2025, p. 2; Meier & Sharp, 2024, p. 10; Van Valkenburgh, 2021, p. 2). As a result, said communities being marginalised, such as women, people of colour or LGBTQ+ individuals, form their own divisions, where they can safely build their own collectives (Scales, 2015, p. 22).

According to Rendell & Egan (2024, p. 829), the horror fandom differs from other groups of audience enthusiasts, as it is a “network of networks, or a loose affiliation of sub-subcultures, all specializing in different modes of fan activity”, as opposed to just one singular category. The complexity of the horror fandom lies in its variety of sub-genres, as well as one’s self-actualization as a horror fan and operation within the community, which can be highly based on their socio-political background (Rendell & Egan, 2024, p. 830; Scales, 2015, p. 21). Furthermore, Hills (2014, p. 93) suggests that the horror genre viewers or fans cannot be condensed into notions of fandom due to the variety of provocative content which elicit distinct boundaries in people due to their personal anxieties. The latter, which are influenced by individual fears, cultural significance and selfhood can create difficulty in fan participation, especially when it comes to identities which are emphasized more in horror cinema. While, aforesaid, considering the long history of exclusion, belittlement and exploitation of non-male individuals in horror and the general presumption that the genre’s audience is mainly young men, there is still a notably large female and gender-nonconforming fanbase (Hill, 2014, p. 93; Scales, 2015, p. 21; Vosper, 2021, p. 5).

In some cases, the audience showcases their gender identity by means of anti-fandom in opposition to certain movies or subgenres (Hills, 2014, p. 99). For example, vampire films, which are noted to have a predominantly female audience, are not good according to male horror fans, for the movies are popular, romanticised, not scary, pseudo horror and therefore consumed by fake horror fans, in this case women (Cherry, 2002, p. 172; Hills, 2014, p. 98). Furthermore, the gendered audience intake can be noted in the previously mentioned slasher films, which are more often indulged in by men, versus the monstrous feminine enjoyed more by women and other non-men (Cherry, 1999, p. 88). According to Scales (2015, p. 21), gender partitioning is mandatory in the expulsion of the mainstream cinema, as a means of elitism in the community. This is particularly

distinguished within the horror community, where, predominantly, male fans engage with extreme and disturbing films aiming to distance themselves from the mainstream and its assumed female audience, while also reiterating their durable manliness (Scales, 2015, p. 22).

Generally, since horror is noted to be a genre that is unladylike, female viewership poses as a revolt on a broader level (Cherry, 1999, p. 211). According to Cherry (1999, p. 87) female audiences of horror gravitate towards a variety of subgenres including, supernatural, the previously mentioned vampire centric films which can be included in the latter due to the presence of a mythical creature, alongside psychological horror and thrillers. The affliction for the psychological genre is attributed to the more refined and complex themes discussed as well as the reduced amount of violence and gore on screen, as opposed to other subgenres (Cherry, 1999, p. 111). Furthermore, the interest female audiences have in terms of vampires in horror and the general monstrous-feminine antagonists as empowering due to its emotional factors and the sexual liberation which can be often found in certain portrayals, especially the erotic vampirism (Cherry, 1999, p. 205-211). Lastly, female horror fans are noted to favour higher quality cinema, which refers to output value, good acting, intricate narratives, creative direction and visually aesthetic imagery in terms of production design and costuming (Cherry, 1999, p. 138-139; Cherry, 2002, p. 172). Ultimately, female horror audiences obtain a sense of belonging to a community through a mutual experience of being a horror fan and sharing their similar preferences with each other (Cherry, 1999, p. 209).

The connection of horror and queerness can be explained through a psychoanalytical theory, which suggests that horror showcases repressed feelings, desires and anxiety and as discussed prior, the ‘other’, as a result attracting queer audiences (Scales, 2015, p. 14). For example, like female audiences, queer fans overall enjoy the vampire subgenres of horror. Besides the clear relation to the depiction of the monstrous ‘other’, other factors play a role in the favouritism of the genre as well. As it appears, the junction of queerness and horror in media can be dated back to the 19th century gothic literature (Scales, 2015, p. 14). Some of the earlier works like the 1872 “Carmilla”, the predecessor of the infamous Dracula, features lesbian vampires and homosexual yearning therefore solidifying the convergence of the LGBTQ+ community with horror (Lau, 2018, p. 7; Uygur, 2013, p. 53). Like female horror audiences, queer fans have similarly been noted to share community building with each other, which further reiterates their queer identities beyond the theatrical and remedial horror cinema experience (Petrocelli, 2021, p. 219-220). Moreover, the social bonding is a direct outcome of their shared experiences and alienation in society (Scales, 2015, p. 74).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The method chosen for this project is qualitative analysis, which often aims to comprehend and clarify social phenomena from its core (Flick, 2018, p. 5). There are multiple ways in which said

analysis can be done, however for this case, thematic analysis will be utilized. The latter is typically applied in content analysis as a means of determining and exploring emerging patterns in the data (Schreier, 2012, p. 37). According to Clarke & Braun (2006, p. 298), an important characteristic of thematic analysis is the malleability it can offer regarding “research question, sample size and constitution, data collection method, and approaches to meaning generation”. Moreover, thematic analysis is optimal when attempting to determine the personal experiences, opinions, habits and behaviours of participants, alongside their emotions (Clarke & Braun, 298). Considering that the aim of the research is to explore audience perception, particularly how female and AFAB horror fans negotiate sexuality and gender representation in horror, the chosen method is fitting. Thematic analysis is especially useful when analysing interviews, which was the main collection of data for this research. The approach of the data gathering is further elaborated in the following section. Furthermore, a detailed description of the analysis process can be found in the data analysis subsection in this chapter, alongside the subsections for operationalization, reliability and validity and, finally, the ethical concerns.

3.2 Data collection & sampling

The data collection was done through in-depth interviews over the course of two weeks. While most interviews took place in person, the online option was given to all participants to accommodate their preferences. The online interviews, which took place over Zoom, were mainly due to the interviewees residing in different countries at the time being. A total of 11 interviews took place, all of which varied from being 45 minutes to almost two hours long.

The target group for this study were women and AFAB individuals, all of whom self-identify as horror fans. Given the poor representation of women in horror, the choice for female fan participants came naturally. Furthermore, AFAB fans were chosen due to their female socialization, as well as deviation from the binary, which allows for a more complex perspective on things due to their gender non-conforming identity. Out of the 11 participants, there were four AFAB individuals, six cis women and one intersex-trans woman. In terms of sexuality there were eight queer individuals and 3 heterosexual women, one of which mentioned that she is questioning her sexuality at times. More detailed information about the participants can be found in the sample overview (see Appendix A). Furthermore, although it was expected that the participants would be young people, namely in their 20s, it was not a specific requirement. In the end, all the respondents turned out to be in the predicted age group, apart from one who happened to be in her early 30s.

The sample method to recruit participants was purposive, since it was required that the individuals are self-identified horror fans, therefore familiar with and interested in the horror genre. Snowball sampling, which is part of purposive sampling, was applied as well. Some participants were able to suggest potential new candidates, who meet the requirements to be part of this research, who they know through previous engagement on the common topic of being fans of horror. Furthermore, some

interviewees were recruited online, through Instagram story posting and re-sharing through the network of people.

3.3 Operationalization

Since the subject of this study was audience perception, the latter concept was operationalized through the in-depth interviewing, as it aligns with the goals of a more nuanced understanding of the personal positions of the participants (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 7). The interviews followed a thorough topic list encapsulating the theoretical background provided in the previous section of the paper (see Appendix B).

Initially, general demographic questions were asked to become more familiarized with the respondents' background. The interviewees' pronouns, sexuality, cultural background and occupations in particular are relevant when examining their connection with horror. The latter details can be found in Appendix A, which showcases the sample overview.

Furthermore, since horror is a broad genre and can attract audiences based on a multitude of reasons, the interview questions were structured in a way that allows to discover the connections between participants' identities and their affiliation for horror, while maintaining the focus of representation. Additionally, horror preferences can be very specific varying from one individual to another, depending on someone's own anxieties and boundaries. Prior to the interviews all participants were asked to make a list of some of their favourite and least favourite horror films. In the case that they did not have any least favourite films it was suggested that they bring examples of movies or subgenres which they typically avoid watching. Participants were asked to prepare in this way to make sure that they contributed as much as possible. The main concern which led to this decision was that often when asked to name preferences and things as such people tend to forget and can only later recall their answers. Moreover, questions regarding how and why one engages with horror cinema the way they do were present. Participants were asked in what settings they watch the movies, whether they do it on their own or in company of others, what is the location and so on to have a better understanding of their fan practices. Additionally, questions regarding consumption of other horror media were asked. Media like video games, books, podcasts and such were brought up, which led to an interesting deepening of the respondents' tastes beyond just cinema enjoyment. As a result, learning which films and subgenres the interviewees preferred, as well as their reasoning behind it and how they engage with the media at hand allowed for a deeper understanding of their horror fan identity.

To proceed, questions about the interviewees' participation or lack thereof within the horror fandom were also urged. The main goal was to determine if and how the participants engage with horror beyond just watching. The subset of questions was written with possible online community engagement in mind, however real-life communities were also offered as an option, in the case that some respondents might have experience with that instead. Furthermore, questions about the horror

community environment were asked, to understand the respondents' opinions on it both from a general perspective as well as personal. The latter would especially explicate how the participants navigate horror communities and engagement with others. Considering the Horror & Fandom section in the theoretical framework, it is expected that female and even AFAB fans would find horror communities at large to be complex to navigate at times, mostly due to male fans being exclusionary. However, the existence of smaller communities, often consisting of minorities, can also be expected to be ones that people might refer to when speaking of the horror community. However, as it appeared, almost all the participants stated that they do not partake in any online or real-life horror communities, therefore some further questions were omitted as they could not be answered due to a lack of knowledge and engagement.

Questions regarding horror cinema changes were asked to determine the respondent's opinion on any shifts they might have noticed. Moreover, this query reflected more of the respondents' preferences of horror, therefore giving more insight into their fan identities. For instance, some individuals were more familiar and invested with the history of horror, whereas others preferred more modern takes on it for their own reasons. Although, regardless of that, almost all participants had mentioned their admiration for older cinema classics, which still are significant pieces of media. To proceed the discussion about shifts in horror cinema, particularly regarding representation, two trailers were shown to each person involved. The choice of trailers, rather than random clips from said movies was to avoid any confusion that some people might have in the case that they are not familiar with the films. Furthermore, the trailers encompassed the feel of the movie, therefore showcasing the representation in it in a better way. The trailers in question were *Carrie* (1976) and *Titane* (2021), which were found on YouTube. The main elements based on which they were chosen was the almost 50-year gap in between their releases, as well as the female rage and monstrous feminine aspect showcased through the main characters, namely Carrie White and Alexia (Ducourneau et al., 2021, n.p.; King & Cohen, 1997, n.p.). Both are in line with the theory presented previously regarding female representation and it was expected that the interviewees would have something to contribute in respect to it. Additionally, besides discussing the latter, *Titane* (2021) touches upon queer themes as well, showcasing the progressed queer representation in horror which was scarce in older films. Finally, although the trailers were good enough to attain the needed information from respondents, it posed as a slight limitation. For example, some participants were able to hold a longer and more insightful discussion due to their familiarity with the films, whereas others were only able to comment on the trailers they were shown. As an alternative to the trailers, a thorough compilation of clips showcasing changes of representation could be compiled and displayed instead. The clips should be carefully chosen to not confuse the respondents in case they are not acquainted with the movies they are derived from. Furthermore, with a well-curated compilation it would be possible to include more diverse representation, including more than just female rage and hints of queerness, therefore leaving more room for discussion.

Furthermore, following the representation theory aspect, questions regarding displays of specifically gender and sexuality were formulated. First, people were asked how one's identity affects their perception of horror and their preferences. This allowed for a more in-depth descent into their self-perception alongside horror media. Second, their thoughts on different portrayals in horror cinema were required, such as men, women or any queer representation they might have encountered, regardless of whether it is related to gender or sexuality. Following that, questions about relatability to characters were asked to gain more understanding of whether people can find the representation they see applicable to themselves.

The next round of questions revolved around the two main female representations mentioned in the theoretical framework, namely the final girl and monstrous feminine. For the latter, the main reference was equating it to female antagonists, as that would be a clearer and easier distinguishable character trope. It was expected that for the final girl term it would be the same, however it was expected that some may be confused by the term. In that case people were first asked if they are familiar with the said trope and what they think of it, after which clips were shown to solidify their understanding. As expected, due to the popularity and standing relevance of the trope most people were able to recognise it once it was explained to them. The clips that followed were like the previous two trailers in the sense that there was also a similar age gap in between the releases of the films. As opposed to the first batch of videos, which were trailers, the second batch were of specific clips from the movies, namely the endings. The latter were essential to showcase the concept of a final girl, since it stands for the last person, in this case woman, standing in opposition to the killer. The clips shown were found on YouTube as were the first batch. The two movies in question were Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) and X (2022), both of which are slasher films, and the final girls displayed were Sally Hardesty and Maxine Minx respectively (Henkel & Hooper, 1976, n.p.; West, 2022, n.p.). By showing the participants the ending clips, depicting the last encounters of the final girls with the killers, interviewees were able to compare the different representations and the changes they could notice, as well as give their opinion about that and the trope itself on a broader aspect. While for the monstrous-feminine it was expected that the participants were going to have positive responses, for the final girl trope it was expected to have assorted opinions, due to the ambivalent position of said trope in the genre of horror.

Generally, all participants were asked the same questions, regardless of their identification. This is mostly in relation to the queer theory part as well as the horror community. While the queer theory was not applicable for cisgender female participants, most were still able to answer the question based on their own assumptions in addition to their experiences of having queer friends and acquaintances. As expected, their queer counterparts were able to answer the queries more accurately as being part of the LGBTQ+ community themselves, regardless of whether or not they were gender queer.

Overall, while some specific themes were derived from the previous theoretical framework, most questions were formulated to assess the participants' personal fan opinions and own perceptions of the horror genre. Once again, the latter is very broad and it was expected that people would have very personal and distinct answers for most things, especially when it comes to their own interpretations and predilections. It was anticipated however, that most would agree on certain topics such as the things they dislike in horror, like violence against women. Additionally, in terms of community it was also expected that participants would be more predisposed to engaging with likeminded fans or people with similar identities to them, as they would have a common understanding in relation to horror representation.

3.4 Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed with the help of Clipto.AI software. However, while the use of AI helped to have the transcriptions down in a faster way it was not entirely perfect since it could not detect the different voices and therefore allocated the dialogue incorrectly. Furthermore, there were grammar mistakes and other things as such. As a result, it was necessary to go through all transcripts manually to correct the mistakes and to make the content visually comprehensible to assure a better coding process.

Delving deeper into the understanding of the data was done through the previously mentioned thematic analysis and coding, in which the data was sectioned into categories, based on its significance (Boeije, 2010, p. 94; Joffe, 2011, p. 217). There are three forms of coding which took place, that is open, axial and selective, all which are essential to decoding the meaning and attaining findings. Open coding is the first step in which the researcher disintegrates pieces or quotes from the data into different codes, based on their interpretation and relevancy (Boeije, 2010, p. 96). This part of the coding procedure was mainly achieved through the Atlas.ti software. The following step was axial coding, in which the open codes are combined and categorized based on similarities (Boeije, 2010, p. 108). Finally, the last step of the coding process was selective coding, during which one or more overarching themes are established, based on the previous patterns (Boeije, 2010, p. 115). After the coding was done, a coding tree was created, which can be found in Appendix C.

3.5 Reliability & Validity

Research reliability, which is more commonly seen in quantitative research, can be achieved when it is possible to achieve similar results to a study, if following the same methods utilized (Golafshani, 2003, p. 598). However, since this is a qualitative study, reliability can be more difficult to reach. While a topic list was followed for all interviews, it is not ensured that there will be exact results if repeated. First, that is due to the complexity of the themes discussed, which can vary from all participants and their personal thoughts and feelings. Second, it is due the fact that the interviews conducted were semi-structured, meaning that even though the topic list served as a basis for the

procedure, certain things varied and could be adapted differently based on each respondents' answers (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 3).

Like reliability, research validity is standard to quantitative research design and stands for evaluating what is meant to be evaluated (Golafshani, 2003, p. 602). To ensure validity the research process required transparency in terms of the interviewing process and its documentation, as well as the personal position as a researcher in relation to it. Furthermore, in terms of the data analysis, to ensure clarity and correct evaluation, it was necessary to go over the coding thoroughly and more than once, namely through double coding (Arije et al., 2021, p. 4). Since there was a lot of text being analysed, which was done throughout a week and a half, some codes ended up being similar or way too broad, in which case it was necessary to either merge or split them for a more accurate analysis later.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Prior to conducting the interviews, participants were thoroughly informed about the whole process, as well as given consent forms. Furthermore, it was made clear that if any of the things discussed makes the respondents uncomfortable, they have the right to not speak about it or withdraw from the interviews at any given time. Additionally, the confidentiality of the interviews was stressed alongside the anonymity of the respondents' identities. Moreover, participants were aware of the audio recordings taking place and the later analysis using the obtained content. All the interviews were done in a way that resembled a normal conversation as a means of creating a more relaxed atmosphere so the people being interviewed felt at ease and comfortable to talk about the topic of horror, which can sometimes be unnerving and provoking. However, since all the people involved were self-attested fans they had a pleasant time discussing things they enjoy in horror, as they would mention their enthusiasm about it during the interviews and after.

In terms of researcher positionality, as a AFAB individual and occasional horror enjoyer myself, it was imperative that this topic was approached as objective as possible. Furthermore, due to proximity in identity with some of the respondents it was important to constantly practice introspection in relation to the topics discussed and how personal responses can influence the research process at hand. In addition, as mentioned above, the interviews were conducted in a more informal manner, which was mandatory to make sure that the respondents did not feel the presence of a researcher-interviewee hierarchy and were able to comfortably express their true opinions in relation to the topics discussed. Ultimately, the goal of this study was to honour to everyone's personal and intricate identities, thoughts and experiences and critically reflect that in this paper, while remaining considerate, respectful and unbiased.

4. Analysis

The following sections are structured in accordance with the code tree (see Appendix C). The main sections, namely Horror & Preferences, Horror & Identity and Horror & Community were established as the main themes, each having 3 sub-sections of their own. Each participant mentioned is established to have a number from one to 11, as noted in the sample overview (see Appendix A). For convenience, it was opted to refer to respondents with a shorter term, such as P1, P2, P3 and so on, as opposed to Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3 and so forth.

4.1 Horror & Preferences

Before launching into investigating horror fan audience perception, it is important to identify and understand what their preferences are. Since horror offers a broad array of subgenres and topics being explored it attracts, or repulses viewers based on their individual identities and sociopolitical backgrounds. The comprehension of people's likes and dislikes establishes the groundwork for researching why certain subjects, subgenres and such resonate more with certain individuals while not with others and further explains their kinship to the genre.

4.1.1 *Subgenres*

To preface, when asked about their favourite horror films and reasonings for liking those, the following subgenres were detected: body horror, gore, feminist horror, psychological horror and supernatural horror. The latter is broad, having multiple other sub-subgenres namely the haunting aspect, particularly enjoyed in Japanese horror by a couple of participants. Furthermore, the presence of creatures like vampires, werewolves or other human-creature metamorphoses, as well as mentions of religious themes, all of which can be categorized as part of the supernatural subgenre.

Among all subgenres, psychological horror seems to be the one most of the participants gravitate towards. The movies of said subgenre do not have to be strict to real-life depictions but can have elements from the other subgenres mentioned above. This directly aligns with previous studies done on horror fans, which have detected that female viewers are often more attracted to the psychological genre due to its complexity (Cherry, 1999). The findings denote the latter and additionally include the genderqueer participants. The predominant psychological aspect in the stories and the impact it has on the viewers happens to be the main attraction. Participants enjoy the subtlety of the suspense, and the uncomfortable feeling displayed, which ultimately leads to reflections post-watch. The ability to reflect, whether that is on the content of the movie itself, or life has been a common denominator among respondents, as psychological horror often has political and sociological implications and deeper meanings behind it. The latter goes in accordance with Walmsley's (2021, p. 308) suggestion that audiences engage with media as a way of sense-making. As noted by the respondents it often times leaves them pondering, whether that is about the movie plot or life itself. P6, for example, has accentuated how one her favourite films, of the psychological subgenre, has changed her life, leading

her to take up a volunteering job at Red Cross as a means of helping others and not being a bystander. Furthermore, it can be argued that the realistic aspect of psychological horror is what draws in the respondents, as the stories on screen resemble complexities of the human psyche abjection and their personal identities in relation to that (Kristeva, 1982, p. 125).

Despite the supernatural genre being favoured, it is also highly disliked by a lot of the participants, which contradicts some of the findings, especially those related to female audience preferences (Cherry, 1999, p. 87). P8, states the following:

I guess that's like a theme of what I don't like in horror movies in general is like when it's really like monster shit with nothing behind it, unless it's like you know a cult classic or like um I don't know something where it's like really visually interesting. It just doesn't do much for me, like it doesn't scare me that much...

Cherry (2002, p. 172) highlights the importance of good quality horror for female viewers, meaning that the storyline and characters should not be one-dimensional and should have good development. Additionally, this includes well-made background designs and other such things, which is especially important in supernatural horror, as the things depicted are not necessarily real. Despite that, multiple other aspect of supernatural horror is relevant to majority of participants and not just the cis women, on account of complexity and symbolism. This further confirms the need for complexities and in-depth storytelling, beyond just visual appreciation, thus combining the supernatural with more psychological elements.

As noted by Almwaka (2022, p. 4) and Harrington (2014, p. 28), men are more often both the target and active viewers of slashers, as those are highly gendered and uphold patriarchal ideals. All participants dislike slashers on accounts of unoriginality, bad plots or total lack thereof, reliance on the shock factor and mindless violence. Since slashers often don't have a deeper meaning to them, respondents opt for other films instead. The only redeeming quality of slasher movies mentioned, was the fact that it can potentially be fun to watch along with a group of people, serving as community building material. Lastly, although slashers are disliked, participants do recognise that some franchises are films are classics, and they showcase appreciation for the campiness, the craft and history of horror, regardless of whether those are their go-to films to watch. While the cis-heterosexual male audience of slasher films is evident it can also be argued that queer people can find it enjoyable as well. LGBTQ+ individuals can identify with the “otherness” of the monsters and killers, as well as valuing the cheesiness and theatricality of it, especially in the more old-school films (Petrocelli, 2021, p. 131).

4.1.2 *Cinematography*

Non-male audiences opt for queer and feminist horror as opposed to cis-heterosexual male directed films, as a means of critique and challenge to the status quo and to deprioritize male focused standpoints in cinema. P9 has stated the following

You can tell when a movie is made by a man because you can tell that the female character is kind of seen through this male gaze...I feel like sometimes, not just in horror, but just in movies in general, that sometimes female characters-they don't really have any substance or any like, their whole like reason for being there is to like kind of be like a plot device for either another character or like oh look at this woman she's going through something terrible let's look at this woman suffering for the next two hours.

The latter statement agrees with previous feminist studies, particularly Laura Mulvey's (2001, p. 7) and Fisher (2020, p. 4) takes on the male gaze and maltreatment of both female and queer characters in cinema to satisfy the male audience. The substantial amount of bad representation for the latter two groups can be attributed to the male dominated perspectives in cinema, as men have been historically more involved in filmmaking than other minorities, due to the privilege they hold on a socio-political level (Johnson & Repta, 2012, p. 21; Kromrie, 2022, p. 10). Multiple respondents have stressed the significance of directors, as it is a matter of who makes the films and for what audience it is intended for. P7 has mentioned the following in relation to male horror directors and audiences "that's what you see as horror, just your fantasies being brought to the screen by men that are as perverted as you.". This highlights the inclination men who are creators and audiences have for horror depicting brutalization of the female body and simultaneously stressing the ostracization of female and AFAB audiences. P5 stated the following: "I'm the opposite, like, give me demons, give me cult, give me whatever else, but i don't want to see this. Like this is a little girl and she gets violently murdered or raped. How is this good horror?". The sexual exploitation and violation in predominantly male-directed movies, which is often just torture porn, is closely reflecting the real-life horrors women and individuals adjacent to that face (Garcia-Moreno, 2015, p. 1). As a result, female or queer directed movies are more relevant for a non-male audience who value their aim to confront the male gaze, showcase less violence towards minorities, include more diverse representation and showcase authentic female and queer characters.

There is a high correspondence between queerness, artistic creation and horror, which showcases the impact of the genre on personal identification and self-expression. As it appears, majority of the participants who have artistic inclinations are part of the LGBTQ+ community, which further asserts the connection between horror and self-expression of queer individuals. The noted assortment of art directions is character design, make-up, fashion design and illustration. P2, who designates their own artistic work and finds inspiration for it from horror character deigns as well as their own identification as non-binary, can be used as an example. They state the following in relation to the body horror subgenre and human-monster amalgamations: "the merging of characters... queer people,

we don't really get the chance to see it played out so thoroughly. And in such like almost in a raw way that's like, whoa, is this even allowed?". The latter aligns with previous theory regarding the lack of queer representation as well as being queer and creative as a means of self-actualization, especially when it comes to visual design and costuming (Irving, 2024, p. 30; Lambert, 2023, p. 6). Furthermore, horror as a genre is noted to be high in terms of creative liberty and possibilities of stylization (Waller, 1987, p. 149). Therefore, the freedom of artistic creation allows for further enjoyment and emotional well-being for queer audiences to engage in active production and consumption of artistic horror in this way (Joseph et.al., 2023, p. 17). Additionally, the artistic side of horror is not exclusive to the AFAB audience but also includes their cis female counterparts, regardless of their sexuality. Most respondents have highlighted their preference for the craft of artistic horror, as it showcases more innovation, aesthetic pleasure and inspiration. This directly correlates with Cherry's (1999, p. 138-139; Cherry, 2002, p. 172) findings of female horror audience enjoyment of good cinematography in terms of visual and creative direction and imagery.

4.1.3 Emotional responsiveness

Besides subgenres and cinematography there are other factors which influence the participants' love for horror. Morbid curiosity plays a big role in this, as proposed by Scrivner (2022, p. 2). The argument presented here is that, while morbid curiosity is what commences participant's interest in the first place, morbid fascination is what makes them stay and self-identify as horror fans. There is fascination with and interest in the macabre and the unknown, especially when it comes to the human nature and psyche, hence the appeal of psychological horror in the first place.

Moreover, horror films create a safe space, allowing the audience, but also its creators, to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings in a healthy manner. P7 has mentioned the subsequent in terms of her identity as a horror fan:

I feel that once you've accepted what's rotten in you, you're just willing to accept anything. I think that liking horror is first liking what's already different, what's most horrific inside of you, so when you've reached that level of self-acceptance, you have no hatred for the world because you managed to conquer the hatred you had for yourself, you know? And then it's just forgiveness and love. Now I'm kind of like a hippie and all my friends that are horror fans are also hippies.

Osowickla's (2016, p. 99) suggestion of the sense of control offered by horror cinema, alongside Aristotle's emotional catharsis theory can be used to back up this statement (Barker, 2022, p. 65). Horror cinema becomes a playground, which allows non-male fans to tap into, often taboo, emotions inscribed by the patriarchal system, through depicting similar topics on the screen (Cherry, 1999, p. 147; Vazquez, 2024, p. 103). Additionally, from an audience perspective, which is what the participants have communicated, is that horror provides them with a sense of control and satisfaction to witness absurd, gruesome and shocking things on screen, from the comfort of their homes. Horror

teaches them lessons and taps into darker parts of themselves, leading to exploration and self-acceptance. It was specifically highlighted in terms of female characters and female rage seen in films, which can be validating to experience for the non-male audience, as noted by Cherry (1999, p. 205)

Relating back to the topic of violence in horror, personal limitations and critical evaluation of the media consumed influences how one perceives it. As seen previously, violence against women is hard to engage with for the respondents, mainly because it is often senseless and is just there for the shock factor, rather than to contribute anything for the storyline. P4 offers an alternative position in how they perceive certain depictions of violence against women, namely in the film *Irreversible* (2002): “But if it is represented well, I'll appreciate it. Even if the man is the evil and the woman is a victim because...if that feels accurate or relevant or topical to me, then I will appreciate it.”. In line with Cherry's (1999, p. 138-139; 2002, p. 172) findings regarding female fan preference for complexities in terms of plot and character development, it can be argued that female and AFAB fans can appreciate horror when it is narratively justified, regardless of what sub-genre they are consuming. However, perceptions of horror remain to be subjective and aligned with personal boundaries influenced by one's selfhood, experience and socio-political background (Barker, 2008, p. 327; Martin, 2007, p. 1). Therefore, while one person might be able to withstand graphic content of a certain kind, other people might not have the same capability, which has been noted in the findings, hence the general aversion to barbaric treatment of the female body in film.

4.2 Horror & Identity

Horror cinema has expanded over the decades, and a lot of changes can be noted, from upgrades in the media consumption and cinematography itself to the portrayal of characters and storylines now available. The rise of diversity within the horror genre, for example, whether that is in terms of race, gender or sexuality has made the respondents feel enthusiastic and hopeful for what will follow as they can now have more relevant alternatives to choose from. The following subsections delve into women, queerness and other identity factors in relation to horror.

4.2.1 Women & horror

With major changes in representation, horror female characters have prominently shifted from victims to empowered individuals, which correlates more with female and AFAB fans. To showcase this shift, the final girl trope was utilized. P5 has stated the subsequent in relation to the trope: “I'm always tired of ‘oh, poor helpless woman will fight throughout the entire movie, but big man's scary, and she's so helpless, she's such a victim’.”. Furthermore, P6 declared the following:

We are tired of seeing women being tortured in the film in general, not just horror movies. So, we have the need to see strong women, or just in general strong characters that fight for themselves. And I think it's more related to the society, It's more a trend for the culture at this era.

The latter two quotes firmly showcase the perception of female victimhood representation as overused, unoriginal and lacking in relatability for female and AFAB viewers. As a result, audiences demand better representation to satisfy their needs, which falls in accordance with Silbereisen & Tomaszik (2011, p. 5- 48), who emphasize the changing cultural shift and need for diversity in media. Furthermore, as the final girl trope in older cinema focuses on complying with patriarchal principles and portraying the women as puritan, modest and aligning herself with the adolescent male viewers, newer renditions focus on directly contradicting said representations (Rockoff, 2002, p. 13). The new final girl, or alternatively the good for her, trope subverts traditional expectations of how women should act, which ultimately displays a feminist take and as a result uplifts female and AFAB audiences through its mere existence, complexity and displayed strength (Heimberger, 2022, p. 15; Sanders, 2024, p. 15). However, while acknowledgements and commends of the representation shift were made, majority of participants remain to be ambiguous about the trope in question. This can be explained through the initial dislike for slasher films, in which said final girls reside the most. Moreover, Fujii (2022, p. 11) and Ulus (2018, p. 165) highlight the lack of intersectionality in the said representation, therefore remaining highly gendered, and not managing to resonate with certain audiences, despite its new empowering aspect.

In contrast to the final girl, the monstrous feminine representation, which is also referred to as female antagonism, has always resonated with female and AFAB viewers, but especially now with the rise of female directors and feminist horror. The following assertions are accentuated in relation to this:

But when you see horror antagonist it's gross. you need the grossness; you need the image of holiness of women to be broken. And when this purity, where the makeup is off, where the smell comes back, when the senses come back, when we're brought back to our animality, that's when we're brought back to our divinity, you know. And that's when we go crazy, you know, so I think it's the best. (P7)

The position of women in horror has kind of shifted in a way that it used to be like, oh, kill her off like brutally. And like, you would always feel that like. a man like directed this and like wanted this to happen. Whereas now also more like female directors coming up and stuff. Women can be put in more in the opposite position. Like in Raw, to take on the scary role kind of. (P10)

I also like how often the female villain is...I almost want to say spiritual, but that's not the word I'm looking for...Monstrous feminine...But I like how that comes with a more philosophical element

or psychological element, whereas like a male villain is often just like a bad guy...And I feel like when it's a woman, it also has a lot more to do with like female horrors. Again, the monstrous feminine, the theory of Barbara Creed. And I just feel it's so interesting to analyze and see. Also, I feel like God forbid a woman catches a vibe, you know, like I love a woman going batshit crazy and just like crashing out. I think...that's beautiful, especially if it's portrayed well. (P4)

Besides the subversive nature of the female antagonist, it makes room for exploration for the audience to feel represented within the unconventional portrayals of what a woman can be (Barker, 2022, p. 63). The appreciation for female antagonists can be directly linked to the aspect of horror as a safe space, which allows female and AFAB fans to vicariously live through the display of female rampage and revenge, therefore leaving them to feel validated (Heimberger, 2022, p. 15; Sanders, 2024, p. 15). The interviewees find satisfaction, enjoyment and empowerment in seeing women do bad things on the screen, whether they have reasoning or not. Some specified it is even better when the female antagonists are purely evil with no motive to back up their actions. The preference for lack of reasoning can be explained through the abuse women and AFAB individuals have been subjected to through history (Garcia-Moreno, 2015, p. 1). Moreover, the latter still remains to be applicable to this day, hence the rage does not need further justification, as it is implied in the existence of the female body in a patriarchal society.

4.2.2 *Queerness & horror*

Like the monstrous feminine, queer fans find comfort in the monstrous characters in horror, as the representation of the taboo ‘other’ directly relates people’s own experiences as part of the LGBTQ+ community both in terms of gender identity and sexuality. P10 declares the following:

It's also the camp, heavy stylization. There's also so many queer-coded characters that are like visually appealing. Like gay people love villains. It's also just like, there's so much can be so much expression in it. It can be very like reflective of the author's style and identity.

The latter directly relates to Irving’s (2024, p. 8) take on the metaphorical position of the monster in opposition to the cis-heteronormative status quo. It is thus unsurprising that queerness and horror are so closely associated and resonate with the LGBTQ+ fans, as being queer has generally been equated with creativity, more so in the said genre, which allows more liberty in exploring unknown, forbidden subjects and self-expression (Cooper, 2018, p. 13; Petrocelli, 2021, p. 131). P8 suggests that “there's something maybe about your relationship to your body and like a strangeness to that that you represent in very exaggerated and cathartic ways I think through like monstrosity or gore...”. This draws back on Aristotle’s catharsis theory, alongside discussion of the metamorphous power of self-expression through visual change (Baker, 2022, p. 63; Joseph et al., 2023, p. 17). The monstrous uncanny representation permits the queer viewer to encounter representation which exceeds the

expectations one has in terms of gender binary, therefore strengthening their identity and granting acceptance of self. Furthermore, the affinity for monsters, which are often portrayed as deviant creatures, can be linked to the sexual repression queer people face both in terms of internal and external factors (Adams, 2017, p. 20; Middlemost, 2019, p. 9). P9 stated the following: “all queer people love vampires, and all vampires are somehow queer, it's like they're connected...it's like sort of relatable to see a character that's also kind of different, you know?”. The affiliation for the vampire subgenre can be attributed to the romantic and lustful lens they generally are viewed through (Cherry, 1999, p. 205-211). In addition, vampires specifically are fundamentally queer, as their origins portray lesbian yearning and homoeroticism, therefore the LGBTQ+ audience gravitation towards it is innate (Lau, 2018, p. 7; Uygur, 2013, p. 53).

While on the topic of sexuality, it is important to mention that most of the findings were primarily focused on gender representation, while representation of the aforementioned has only been significant for participants who identify as lesbians, namely P1, P5 and P11. P5 retold her first exposure to queerness in media:

First time seeing a lesbian character for me was in a horror movie...’she kills people she has freaky bugs, but she's also the one weakness’, and they show like women, and there's like a scene where she undresses in front of a woman, and she's like, 'Oh please come to me'.

As opposed, P11 states the following: “I was like why don't I see like a masc...like I'm still a woman but like why don't I see a hot masc being the hero.”. The clear contrast of the existence of representation here can be explained through the male gaze. The first lesbian representation was impactful, the portrayal of the lesbian character can be assumed to be gender conforming, namely a feminine presenting woman, despite her non-traditional orientation. Regardless of sexual orientation, the sexualization of the female body through the male gaze remains, as the physical appearance entices the male viewers (Amador, 2013, p. 9). Meanwhile, the lack of masculine lesbian representation is due to cis-normativity opposition through self-expression, which male audiences disagree with. Moreover, the importance of sexuality representation for the lesbian respondents can be explicated through the difficulty finding relatability within male-oriented and primarily cis-heteronormative portrayals in media, which happen to be the majority (Kromrie, 2022, p. 93). In this regard, most of the other participants found that, while being non-heterosexual, they do not think of or seek out that kind of portrayal on screen, mostly noticing the gender delineation.

Although queerness has always been part of media through queer coding, nowadays there are more selections of distinctly queer media and characters, especially in horror. While it is a step towards better representation and inclusivity, there are still some drawbacks. P6 states the following

I think the queer characters are always just it's sort of like female characters in the past; it's just some sort of characters that are there to be there, to make an audience, uh, happy, that there is that

kind of character in this movie. It's like you have to have an Asian character, queer, black...to check the box...to make it political correct.

Due to cultural shifts audiences expect better representation and more intersectionality within the media they consume (Silbereisen & Tomasik, 2011, p. 48). However, it cannot be expected that all filmmakers have the same mindset, as the industry still downplays marginalized communities (Kromrie, 2022, p. 10). As a result, to satisfy the consumers, some adhere to their needs, but the representation in question remains to be lackluster and bordering on performative activism, as the portrayals are often seen as inauthentic, due to things like stereotypes and lack of character depth (Veera, 2023, p. 63). Moreover, such representations continue to upkeep the portrayal of queer individuals as the 'other' and continue to influence people's opinions regarding the LGBTQ+ community, especially when they are not familiar with it. (Veera, 2023, p. 65).

4.2.3 Other identity factors

Other identity factors have resurfaced which go beyond an individual's gender but remain aligned with previous theory, particularly those of representation and audience reception. An interesting discovery was the influence of cultural background on how some people view and consume horror. This was particularly noted within P3 and P6 who are Filipino and Chinese correspondingly. P6 stated the following:

I especially like the Asian horror movies. Because their life is more, more related to our real life in our high school experience...you can see the things are similar, the dress are similar, the cultures are similar...But when you're watching movies from Western countries, for example, the Hollywood horror movies, that's completely different than ours. So, you really have to get to know the culture then you can understand a bit more.

The disjuncture experienced by P6 directly reflects Hall's reception theory, which indicates that audience members understand certain media based on their own identity, experience and background, in this case cultural background (Barker, 2008, p. 327; Martin, 2007, p. 1). Furthermore, due to their background both P3 and P6 their predisposition for engaging with Asian horror cinema, as that was their focal position. However, a common western influence for both respondents growing up has been the Final Destination franchise. This suggests that representation in the film surpassed the cultural aspect and resonated with both based on personal fears, interests and general understanding of death (Osowiecka, 2016, p. 99). Other influential factors besides cultural background were things like mental health, neurodivergence, being an outsider and childhood upbringing, all of which relate back to how one perceives and relates to media based on their identification and experiences. The horror genre celebrates weirdness and often displays representation of complex topics, as a result posing as a safe outlet through which people can find solace and relatability (Baker, 2022, p. 66; Kristeva, 1982, p. 125).

4.3 Horror & Community

The final partition of the analysis chapter focuses on the online horror fandom aspect. However, due to the lack of active engagement within a community for all the participants, the findings are limited. Nevertheless, despite the passive engagement and little knowledge, respondents were able to share their experiences and impressions of the fandom.

4.3.1 *Horror fans*

While the horror community is inherently alternative and therefore attracts and represents unconventionality, making room for such things to be explored, more so than any other genres, there are visible divisions within it primarily due to misogyny. This can firstly be noted in the film preferences of male versus non-male fans, which was previously mentioned. The following common patterns were noted:

I feel like just in any other space, first of all, your opinions get disregarded all the time... 'you're women, so you're upset that women get hurt. It doesn't matter. Two, you think it's scary, but women are more easily scared, so your opinion matters less'. There were people who literally said that. (P5)

I feel like men take over a lot of spheres and they have done so in horror as well. I feel like I enjoy movies that I feel like are more feminist, so therefore their fans, the fans would be more feminist. But like the well-known scary movies are very male dominated in terms of like their fans. (P4)

Something really annoying about the horror fans and the horror community is the people that will always be in the comment section, like, but that's not as bad as, like, a Serbian film or, like... Everywhere, I feel like that's always the case and you always have these, like, kind of dude bros who have seen a worse horror movie than you and it's always the stupidest fucking shit. (P8)

Pretentiousness among male fans has been expected, according to previous studies. The elitism and disparaging of minorities, particularly female fans, is done as a means of showcasing and ultimately validating their own masculinity (Scales, 2015, p. 22). The dismissing of non-male fans goes beyond the horror cinema community and follows into other horror branches, such as video gaming. P1 reiterated her encounter as such: "Some people would hate crime... They even write like rape comments and stuff, that's how horrible it was. And then that's why we would play in closed community, you know?". The horror video game community has been noted to display even more misogynistic behavior than the cinema sphere, which is assumed to be due to the interactive aspect some video games offer, as opposed to watching movies. Regardless, hate speech and prejudice from

male fans prevails regardless. As a result, ostracised individuals form their own communities (Scales, 2015, p. 22). Furthermore, the passive engagement with primarily female content creators has been noted by some respondents, therefore creating an eco-chamber. All the latter can be seen as attempts to escape the ‘manosphere’ as a means of feeling comfort within the community (Judge & Steel, 2025, p. 2; Meier & Sharp, 2024, p. 10; Van Valkenburgh, 2021, p. 2).

4.3.2 Activity in the community

Active engagement within the online community is absent primarily due to fans already partaking in an existing personal collective. P10 shared the following: “I feel like I get that from friends and stuff, this sort of communal interaction with cinema and with horror. In particular, I think a lot of my friends like similar stuff as I do.”. Moreover, P7 added the following in relation to: “if my company are people that are really special and as twisted as me and take it seriously, then usually we have fun around it.”. In fact, majority of the participants mentioned their in-person relations and common watching practices as such, which allow them to engage in community building with people in their proximity who share similar interests and identities for the most part. This can be related back to previous studies, which highlight the idea of social bonding among female and queer horror fans based on their shared experiences, alongside common feature of being a horror fan and sharing similar tastes in cinema (Cherry, 1999, p. 209; Petrocelli, 2021, p. 219-220; Scales, 2015, p. 74).

Moreover, some participants showcased interest in joining an online community, for the prospect of community building, despite already having real-life connection.

I think I would really love it, because I feel like in general, especially with movies, like half of my enjoyment is to be able to discuss it with people and like really go back and forth and like to have a space where you know...this community of people that you can do that with. (P8)

This further highlights the former studies, which indicate that online fan communities can equally satisfy an individual, as do real-life connection (Pearson, 2010, p. 93). Furthermore, there is a larger array of horror related media to be consumed within the web, as fans become producers of media of their own, such as theories or fanfiction (Mason, 2013, p. 213; Bangun, 2019, p. 222). Majority of the passive engagement noted by the respondents contains consuming such productions, particularly commentary and theories regarding horror films. The existence of said produced media allows fans to broaden their perspectives on things and critically assess the movies they watch. However, considering the previous discussion regarding male horror fan behaviours within the fandom it can also be argued that the latter poses as a barrier, which partially averts any aspiration to join any online communities. Although, it can be assumed that when talking about wanting to join an online community, respondents refer to the closed communities created by marginalized groups, which are more welcoming environments.

4.3.3 *Changes in the community*

According to the findings, changes in the horror community display digital and generational transformation. P1 states the following in relation to official and fan made production: “I like the community. how, now that there's more media, there's more interaction yeah um you get more like merchandise or just collaborations and i think that changed for good because this was not a thing before.”. P5 states the following in relation to the popularization of horror cinema: “people nowadays get very carried away with over analyzing stuff more than they used to...when the whole genre got really popular and like I would say that, you know, those video essays about horror movies got popular”. This change is ultimately a result of globalization and cultural evolution, which allows for a broader and more analytical consumption of media, especially requiring political correctness (Silbereisen & Tomaszik, 2011, p. 48). Furthermore, this can be attributed to the uprise of socially relevant, unique and diverse takes in horror cinema as seen by studio A24 and multiple filmmakers (Simms, 2024, p. 55). P6, discloses the following observation when browsing Douban, a Chinese platform dedicated to cinema: “if it comes to A24, that movie producer company, there are lots of female fans, so it's always a female talking about the story.”. This further ratifies the significance of discussing socially important topics, which can empower and bring closer marginalized individuals within the community.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research paper was to investigate how female and AFAB horror fans negotiate gender and sexuality within the horror genre. After conducting the analysis, it was determined that although horror fans recognise and honour developments in terms of representation, particularly female and queer characters, they acknowledge the still remaining constraints and lack of intersectionality and often authenticity. Respondents showcased analytical assessment of the horror genre and the variety of subgenres within it, which indicates that their identity as fans are not as passive spectators, but ultimately active decoders, who take into account cultural shifts, presence of diversity and social equity. The results further support that representation in horror cinema is particular to each individual, encouraging the view that horror fans engage with the genre beyond entertainment purposes, with the intention of discussing empowerment, identity politics and critical analysis. Horror cinema serves as a reflection of shifting cultural standards, while addressing fears surrounding divergence and ostracization.

There are few limitations which came up during this study. First, the time constraints placed had significantly limited the research process. As a result, it was necessary to resort to a smaller sample size as well as reduce the content of the paper itself. Second, since the sample used was too small it was therefore not accurately indicative of the whole female and AFAB horror fan community. The small sample size is especially limiting due to the subjectivity of the topic at hand. Third, the

sample used, while diverse, could potentially be richer in intersectionality, especially when it comes to more people of colour and queer identities, to fully showcase a broader array of horror fans and further. Fourth, there was a significant lack of fans who were actively engaging in horror communities, which limited the research of online fandom.

Taking the latter into consideration, the following things are recommended. First, to conduct a research on the topic of horror cinema and corresponding fans would require a longer duration to be able to achieve more diverse takes. Second, a broader sample size will thus be needed, as the horror genre encompasses a large variation of categories, all of which have their own specifics and attract audiences for a multitude of reasons. Furthermore, as Rendell & Egan (2024, p. 829) suggest, horror fans are different from other fan groupings, as they are a “network of networks, or a loose affiliation of sub-subcultures, all specializing in different modes of fan activity”. The latter was also notable while interviewing the participants. Even though there were common patterns and intersections, all had their own personal reasonings behind their preferences. Third, more the sample should aim to be as diverse as possible, especially including more people of colour and different LGBTQ+ individuals to gain insight into their perspectives as horror fans. Fourth, to avoid the limitation regarding fan communities, it should be noted that recruiting participants through different online communities would solve this issue.

Regarding academic implication, this study serves as an extension of the existing literature, combining horror media, queer and feminist studies, as well as audience reception. This paper accentuates the junction of audience reception and horror cinema representation, showcasing the importance of rendering and meaning making from a personalized horror fan perspective. Furthermore, the inclusion of AFAB horror fans particularly addresses the previous absence of focus on the said group within horror cinema research. Moreover, in terms of societal implications, this paper confirms the importance of inclusiveness within representation beyond the moral implications and highlighting the emotional potency of authenticity and the empowerment it can have for one’s identity. Additionally, this study sustains discussions surrounding the political movement non-male audiences partake in as fans of horror, and generally cinema, which is historically a male-dominated field.

Ultimately, this paper accentuates the changes of horror from both filmmaking perspectives and cultural occurrence. The necessitation for more inclusivity and intricacies mirrors the cultural shifts and showcases immense advancements. As a result, the genre of horror is transforming into a safer space for marginalized communities to make themselves heard and retrieve their strength. evolution

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Appendix A: Sample overview

	Pronouns	Sexuality	Age	Occupation	Cultural background
Participant 1	She/her (trans & intersex)	Lesbian	25	History PhD major	Turkish
Participant 2	They/them	Pansexual	24	Warehouse employee, part-time art freelancer	Chilean, Dutch
Participant 3	She/her	Heterosexual	23	Business student	Filipino, Korean
Participant 4	She/they	Pansexual	24	Media student	Dutch
Participant 5	She/her	Lesbian	28	Content creator/Writer	Moldovan, Belarus
Participant 6	She/her	Heterosexual	32	Full time self-support, part time digital designer/illustrator	Chinese
Participant 7	She/her	Heterosexual but questioning	20	Fashion student	French, Bulgarian
Participant 8	She/her	Bisexual	25	Psychology student	French, Algerian
Participant 9	She/they	Bisexual/Queer	24	Makeup artist	Dutch
Participant 10	She/they	Queer	23	Film/Media student	Sebian, Montenegrian, Bosnian
Participant 11	She/her	Lesbian	23	Software tester	Dutch

Appendix B: Topic list

1. Demographics

- Name?
- Age?
- Gender identity?
- Sexuality?
- Cultural background?
- Occupation & education?

2. Horror fan identity + preferences

- How long have u been a horror fan?
- How often do you watch horror?
- Where would you say you are on a scale from 1-10 of being a horror fan? Can you explain why?
(1 – casual enjoyer; 10 – horror fanatic/horror is life)
- Do you have a preferred way to watch it? (location, company etc) Why?
- What are your favourite horror films? Why?
 - Was it always those? If no, explain why/what changed
- Least favourite horror films and/or films & subgenres you avoid? Why?
 - Any preferred subgenres? If yes, why those?
- Do you engage with other horror media? (books, video games, podcasts, events etc)
- What is the appeal of horror for you?
 - What do you feel when you watch horror? Does It depend on subgenre?
- Do you think others find horror appealing for the same reasons?

3. Horror fan community

- Do you partake in any horror fandoms/communities (in real life /online)?
 - If no, why not?
 - If yes:
 - Which ones exactly?
 - Do you contribute anything to the community? (e.g. art, writing etc)
 - What kind of interactions have you had with other fans?
 - Have you noticed changes in the community?
 - Has being part of a community like that changed your experience of being a fan?
- Do you think the horror community is a welcoming environment?

- Do you think it's inclusive of female/queer (or both) fans?

4. Horror & societal impact

- Horror has always been a space where societal fears and anxieties can be reflected. Can you recall any changes you might've noticed in horror cinema?
 - If yes, any examples you can think of? Why do you think that is?

[Show clips – old/new trailers]

5. Gender, horror & representation

- Do you think someone's gender identity affects how they perceive horror/their preferences? Why?
 - Would you say that applies to you as well?
 - Do other factors influence your horror preferences? (e.g. background)
- Have you felt alienated by the representation on screen based on your gender/sexuality?
- Do you have any thoughts on the portrayal of women in horror?
 - What about portrayal of men in horror?
 - Can you recall any queer portrayals (explicit/queer-coded)? If yes, how do you feel about that?
- Have you personally felt a connection with a film or character(s) based on your identity?
 - If yes, which one and what did you find relatable?

5.1 Feminism in horror

- People love the "Final Girl" trope. Are you familiar with it?

[Show clips – final girls end scenes old/new rep]

- If no, tell them what it is?
- If yes, what do you think about it?
- What do you think is the appeal of this trope for audiences?
- Do you have any tropes you are (not) fond of?
- Thoughts on female antagonist?
 - Preferred examples?
 - If villains are not your thing, are there any other (female) characters you find yourself rooting for? Why?
- Would you say horror is a feminist genre? Why, why not?
- Can you think of any examples of good female representation in horror?

- Is good representation important to you?

5.2 Queerness in horror

- Queer people appear to be very fond of horror. Why do you think that is?
 - Do you think horror is an empowering genre for queer people? Why, why not?
- Which horror subgenres do you think resonate more with a queer audience? Why?
 - Which subgenres do you think don't resonate at all?
- Thoughts on queerness being related to monstrosity? E.g. Frankenstein, cenobites from Hellraiser, Dren splice

Appendix C: Code tree

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feminist horror - Vampires - Psychological - Body horror - Supernatural horror - Gore - Dislike for slashers 	Subgenres	Horror & preferences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Director influence - Aesthetic/artistic horror - Room for self-expression - Personal artistic influence 	Cinematography	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Morbid curiosity - Horror as safe space - horror as sense of control - dislike for (sexual) violence - preference for narratively justified choices - ability to reflect 	Emotional reception	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need for complex characters - Female rage - Women as antagonists - Female sexual empowerment - Feeling of anger - Feeling of frustration - Feminist horror 	Women in horror	Horror & identity
- Queer-coded	Queerness in horror	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Performative activism - Importance of queer representation 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nostalgia factor - Religious influence - Neurodivergence - Being an outcast - Mental health factor 	Other identity factors	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alternative community - Misogyny - Judgement within community - Pretentiousness - 	Horror fans	Horror & community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Passive consumption - Lack of time for engagement - Lack of interest - Lack of knowledge - 	Activity in the community	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generational difference - Analytical approach to horror - Cross media existence 	Changes in the community	