

UNDERSTANDING THE (NON)AUDIENCE OF QUEER FILM FESTIVALS.

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ABSTRACT

Queer film festivals have become important cultural platforms that celebrate LGBTQ+ identities while also promoting activism, visibility, and community engagement. Despite ongoing challenges such as global discrimination and recent legal setbacks impacting queer communities, these festivals continue to function as alternative spaces that challenge mainstream narratives and heteronormative frameworks. This thesis aims to understand if queer film festivals successfully function as empowering spaces for the queer community while engaging non-queer audiences. It explores multiple themes including festivals as cultural institutions and as sites of activism, community and cultural space, the public sphere and counterpublic, as well as audience engagement. This research was conducted using survey, a quantitative method of data collection.

KEYWORDS: Queer film festivals, Representation, Audience engagement

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1. Introduction

For queer people, the fight for equality, inclusivity, fairness, and acceptance is most definitely not over. While discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals has been gradually decreasing in Europe, it remains significantly prevalent (EUFRA, 2024 para. 2). Notably, this year has seen several setbacks in the area of inclusivity, including actions taken by government institutions. A well known example is Trump administration's in the United States which has been actively dismantling numerous anti-discrimination protections such as policies related to the recognition of gender identity on official documents which directly attacks the safety and well-being of transgender individuals (ACLU, 2024, para. 3). Furthermore, the issue is not confined to the United States. In Europe, similar developments are occurring. For instance, on the 17th of April 2025, the UK Supreme Court ruled that the term "sex" as used in the Equality Act refers specifically to biological sex, excluding those who possess a Gender Recognition Certificate, effectively denying legal acknowledgment of their affirmed gender (Harris, 2024, para. 2). This decision has sparked widespread protests and public outcry. The situation, underscores the ongoing necessity of advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and equality. The struggle for full acceptance and protection, even under the law, is far from over.

As Fung (p.90) already noted in 1999, "queers for the most part form an 'invisible' minority that reveals itself, even to other queers, only through acts of queerness [...] or sites of community," it is therefore essential to maintain and support these spaces, which include queer film festivals. Originally, queer film festivals which were originally established as safe spaces with awareness-raising endeavours, these festivals continue to serve that purpose today (Loist, 2016, p.57). Indeed, they serve as significant sites of community by showcasing work that is "created by, for, and about a group of people that has traditionally been marginalised" (Coon, 2018a, p. 118). These festivals actively work to reconstruct dominant narratives and challenge preconceived understandings by returning 'voice' to the queer community, offering a more diverse and authentic representation often absent from mainstream media. In contrast, traditional media

portrayals of queer identities can be reductive, caricatured, or outright offensive (Coon, 2018b, p.14). Moreover, as Reilly (2019, p.164) highlights, “many exhibitions that claim to examine LGBTQ issues and histories often omit transgender artists (and also lesbian artists, who are more often than not excluded from group shows, particularly those curated by men)”. Thus, some queer film festivals focus on specific demographics who are often underrepresented even within broader queer cultural events.

While the media has documented film festivals since their inception, academic interest in this area remains relatively recent, allowing for ongoing research opportunities (Loist, 2016; Damiens, 2025, p.53). Film festivals began in the 1930s with the establishment of La Mostra di Venezia (now known as the Venice Film Festival) in 1932. In response, the Cannes Film Festival was launched, with its first screenings taking place in 1946 (Ostrowska, 2016, p.19). From their inception, film festivals have aligned themselves with high art and esteemed cinema by emphasizing artistic merit. The Venice Film Festival operated under the auspices of the Arts Biennale, thereby conferring cultural legitimacy, a status that continues to be integral to their identity (De Valck, 2016a, p.102). This process of legitimation persists today through festival collaborations with governments, Hollywood, and other prominent cultural institutions, which contribute to their growing global recognition and institutional status.

The term ‘queer’ is a reclaimed slur that has evolved into an inclusive umbrella term encompassing individuals who do not conform to traditional gender binaries and/or heterosexual norms. While the acronym LGBTQIA+ (representing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, asexual, and others) could also be employed, queer is often preferred in this context due to its broad and inclusive nature, making it particularly suitable for discussions of diverse identities. Eleftheriadis (2018, p.80) explains that while the term “still [carries] something of its historical connotations of sexual abnormality, [it] quickly covers them up by presenting itself as gender-inclusive, democratic, queer texts, habits, and the issue of a future multicultural, and multispecies, and thus effectively shifts the ground away from the nitty gritty sexuality”. Queer film festivals, therefore, are festivals centered around queer identities and experiences but also so much more. These events fall under the category of specialised film festivals, which as Loist (2011, p.269) defines, aim “to provide exhibition

of a different kind of film for audiences, with either a political or representational agenda". For example, QueerEast's 2025 festival edition featured a collection of feature and short form films, as well as performing arts, visual arts, and literature which collectively offered a rich and diverse range of queer East and Southeast Asian representation ultimately challenging conventional norms and stereotypes about the community they are showcasing (QueerEast, 2025, n.p.).

While structurally similar to mainstream film festivals, in that they involve the screening of multiple films, their thematic focus on identity lends them a political dimension that may not be as obvious in conventional film festivals. The purpose of a film festival is a key factor in its classification regarding academia. For instance, 'industry-based' or 'business festivals' typically cater to cinephiles, investors, and professionals within the film industry, with commercial or artistic goals taking precedence over representational concerns (De Valck, 2016, p.2). It is also important to recognize that scholarly research on queer film festivals, particularly historical ones, is limited due to a lack of archival materials and contemporary documentation at the time of their occurrence (Damien, 2025, p.43).

Queer film festivals have existed for a while and many have appeared and disappeared over the years. The community still needs them as they prevail but it is necessary to see in what ways they may be successful. The research aims to answer the following question: To what extent do queer film festivals function as empowering spaces for the LGBTQ+ community while simultaneously engaging non-queer audiences?

Although queer film festivals serve many purposes, from representation to activism, it is essential to research if these efforts are perceived as meaningful and effective by their intended audiences. Furthermore, it is important to assess the reach of these festivals: Are queer film festivals portraying queer identities in a manner that resonates with and satisfies queer communities themselves? Are they attracting non-queer individuals who may benefit from greater exposure to queer narratives? And which audience is attracted to these events? This study thus aims to move beyond purely academic analysis by engaging directly with members of the community, and non-members, to understand whether their needs and expectations are being met.

The paper is structured as follows; a theoretical framework that outlines the key theories relevant to the research, a methods chapter which goes in-depth regarding the research method used to answer the research question (a quantitative survey approach) and the hypotheses, followed by the results chapter which provides the findings, and finally a conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Film Festivals as Cultural Institutions

According to Falassi (as cited in Cudny, 2014, p. 642), festivals are "a periodically recurring social occasion in which, through various forms and a series of coordinated events, all members of a community participate directly or indirectly to varying degrees, united by shared ethnic, linguistic, religious, or historical bonds, and a common worldview." A film festival can be broadly described as a recurring, organized event where motion pictures are exhibited to a community. The social dimension has always been a fundamental aspect of festivals and is believed to strengthen community bonds (Cudny, 2014, p. 643). In the context of film festivals, the community typically consists of film enthusiasts or cinephiles. Such festivals serve as excellent environments for fostering and nurturing cinephilia. Cudny (2014, p. 643) describes festivals as "organized socio-spatial phenomena that occur at designated times—outside the routine of daily life—augmenting social capital and celebrating selected elements of tangible and intangible culture." This indicates that festivals facilitate community bonding and highlight important cultural aspects. They primarily emerged in the latter part of the 20th century and continue to develop rapidly (Cudny, 2014, p. 651).

Film festivals serve as an alternative platform for film exhibition outside of commercial theaters, art houses, or galleries (De Valck, 2012, p.32). They hold cultural significance and can enhance the visibility and value of films and filmmakers through their structured elements, such as competitions, juries, and awards; for example, the Palme d'Or at Cannes, which is not typically present in standard cinemas (De Valck, 2014; De Valck, 2007). It is important to note that not all film festivals incorporate competitive elements; such features are more commonly associated with prominent international or industry-focused festivals (often referred to as A-list festivals or business festivals) that primarily serve the industry and are deeply interconnected with the film sector. International festivals are characterized by their standardized, professional, and institutionalized nature (Stevens, 2017, p. 662). They generally hold greater cultural significance due to their extensive audience reach and the high caliber

of films they present.

Festivals can take many different forms. Previous research has categorized film festivals in various ways to facilitate analysis; however, it is important to recognize that significant variations exist between individual festivals. Our understanding of what constitutes a film festival continues to evolve, partly influenced by ongoing technological advancements. One way to differentiate festivals is by their size. These range from major international events, such as Cannes, to medium-sized, small, and even micro festivals (De Valk, 2016b, p.1). The size of a festival often correlates with other logistical factors, including the number of films presented, visitor attendance, and organizational budget, with these aspects tending to expand or contract together (De Valk, 2016b, p.2). Generally, larger festivals are indicative of greater success and resource availability. Another criterion is outreach, which pertains to the festival's appeal to various audiences - international, national, or local- as well as specific communities and demographic groups. Large-scale festivals typically target international audiences, whereas smaller festivals often focus on local scenes (De Valck, 2016b, p.3). Concerning community focus, festivals can serve diverse groups such as queer communities, women's groups, Jewish communities, among others, with some festivals merging multiple identities to reflect intersecting interests.

The purpose of festivals has evolved significantly over time. Scholars have identified three distinct phases in their development. Loist (2016, p.58) characterizes these as follows: "the first phase was primarily influenced by national diplomatic strategies, the second by emerging political and social movements, and the third by a complex convergence of intertwined cultural and economic agendas." The processes of institutionalization and commercialization have had profound impacts on film festivals and their roles within contemporary society and the film industry. While some festivals continue to showcase films driven by artistic expression, many of the larger festivals have adopted a more commercial orientation. This shift is largely driven by financial imperatives and expansion strategies, as programmers recognize the necessity of appealing to stakeholders and broader audiences (De Valck, 2014, p.78). This transition predominantly occurred in the 1990s. Importantly, this does not suggest a decline in artistic quality; rather, there is a concomitant emphasis on profitability. This change is

influenced by the infusion of neoliberal corporate logic into cultural institutions (Loist, 2016, p.58). Additionally, the priorities of festivals now focus on self-preservation and maintaining their standing within the festival circuit, which are both closely tied to financial resources. This evolution has elevated the influence of film festivals within broader film culture. Today, festivals possess aesthetic, economic, and symbolic power, a dynamic encompassed within what De Valck describes as the 'festival circuit'. As festivals gain prestige and expand their partnerships with established industry entities, they enhance the value and influence of their awards, increase funding for film production projects, and attract larger audiences. Due to the competitive nature of the festival circuit, film festivals must now maintain the balance between accessibility of subject matter in order to attract and grow their audience while still being a "safe-haven" for cinephiles (Stevens, 2017, p.660). Consequently, some festivals target niche areas or specific social or cultural agendas, such as overlooked genres like horror or science fiction, or issues related to race and sexuality (De Valck, 2007, p.211). While many of these agendas are cultural, they can also be political, shaping perceptions of what qualifies as "artistic, cultural, national, or socio-political interest" (De Valck, 2007, p.211).

The festival circuit comprises multiple interrelated segments, which may overlap yet operate independently (De Valck, 2014, p.77). A hierarchical structure exists within this circuit, with 'business' festivals occupying the top tier. These are internationally renowned festivals that host major competitions and maintain a significant market presence (De Valck, 2014, p.77). Such festivals hold considerable sway over cultural trends, often leveraging their awards as promotional tools. It is important to note that the concept of the "festival circuit" is fluid, encompassing not only the circulation of films but also the movement of people and industry professionals. The framework is predominantly associated with commercial interests. The festival circuit underscores the competitive nature of the industry (focusing on films, industry guests, discoveries, and attention) while also fostering a sense of community through shared objectives, such as screening exceptional films and supporting a diverse cinematic culture (De Valck, 2012, p.33). Festivals also vary greatly in scope and purpose. Specialized or thematic festivals serve different functions within the circuit compared to major

international events. They often do not premiere the year's best productions or feature works from high-profile art cinema directors. Instead, they focus on niche genres or underrepresented themes that are neglected or marginalized at larger festivals (De Valck, 2012, p.35). These specialized festivals can be independent or part of an inner circuit but differ from mainstream festivals regarding programming objectives; for example, they might prioritize political or social issues over aesthetic standards (De Valck, 2012, p.26). Scholars should recognize that the goals of specialized festivals often address gaps or omissions found in the programming of larger festivals (De Valck, 2012, p.35). Overlap between large and specialized festivals can occur; for instance, a major festival might dedicate multiple screenings to a specific genre, even though its overall programming remains commercial in nature. In such cases, screenings resemble those of a specialized festival, despite the broader festival's commercial orientation (Loist & Zielinski, 2012, p.53). BFI Flare is a good example of these circuits overlapping as it is a queer film festival located at BFI Southbank; the British Film Institute is a non-profit organisation in the United Kingdom that promotes, documents, and aids in film production, and is known worldwide. Since the 1990s, the expanding landscape of film festivals has prompted the development of more professional organizations and increased collaboration with distributors, institutions, and networks. Notably, documentary, human rights, and LGBTIQ+ festivals have begun creating alternative distribution channels to compensate for limited commercial release opportunities (Dawson & Loist, 2018, p.8).

As previously discussed, programming plays a key role in distinguishing different festivals. Rastegar (2016, p.182) likens programming at film festivals to the role of curators in museums, as both serve to mediate between artists and various stakeholders while establishing a framework through which audiences engage with artwork. This framework allows for resonance within broader cultural, political, and social contexts. This comparison underscores the significance of effective programming, as it has the potential to influence audience perception and engagement. Consequently, programming is an essential aspect of a film festival's success. Additionally, when film festivals are regarded as cultural gatekeepers, it is largely due to programming decisions, as the programming team determines which films are showcased and valued

by the public (De Valck, 2012, p.26). De Valck (2007, p.174) notes that programming often reflects cinephile passions (such as highlighting new influential filmmakers and movements) as well as political sensitivities, representing social movements or liberation struggles. Furthermore, programming addresses underrepresented issues related to gender, race, and ethnicity that may be absent from mainstream discourse (De Valck, 2012, p.29). Programming also influences the composition of the festival audience. As Tabachnik (2025, p.180) emphasizes, "Festivals must not only nurture audiences but also cultivate them." Therefore, programming teams must understand their existing audience and identify target demographics to develop programming that resonates effectively and attracts engagement.

2.2. Community and Identity-Based Film Festivals

Specialized festivals, also known as community or identity festivals, are one of the many types of festivals. These festivals are part of the 'alternative exhibition circuit' and tend to showcase different types of moving image works than those featured at 'commercial' festivals. They often have a focus on political, representational, or awareness-raising objectives (Loist, 2011, p.269; De Valck, 2016b, p.3). These festivals address themes related to race, gender, nationality, sexuality, or genre, particularly in response to their underrepresentation or inadequate representation in other exhibition venues, such as industry-based film festivals, cinemas, and beyond (Rastegar, 2016, p.183). While industry festivals are generally regarded as platforms where filmmakers and their work achieve broader recognition and make an impact on cinema, community festivals serve as spaces that support specific communities in promoting artists and works that may not receive widespread acknowledgment (Rastegar, 2016, p.182). The development of these festivals was closely linked to broader cultural and societal phenomena. In the 1960s, emerging social movements such as the Black Panther Party and the sexual liberation movement laid the groundwork for the first identity-focused festivals of the 1970s, which included events dedicated to women, Indigenous peoples, gay and lesbian, as well as Black/African American filmmakers (Loist, 2016, p.57; Dawson & Loist, 2018, p.1). Loist (2016, p.57) notes that these festivals were initially

established as safe spaces and gathering points for discussions related to identity issues, aiming to build and strengthen communities centered around specific causes. Over time, while maintaining their role as community spaces, many of these festivals have also evolved to serve as alternative distribution channels and platforms for particular themes, representations, and filmmakers. Additionally, international film festivals have increasingly incorporated representational agendas, reflecting broader societal shifts toward greater diversity and acceptance (Loist & Zielinski, 2012, p.54).

Focusing on queer film festivals, these events have significantly evolved over the years. The earliest known event was the Gay Film Festival of Super-8 Films, now recognized as the Frameline Festival, which remains popular today (Loist & Zielinski, 2012, p.49). In contemporary times, this represents only a minimal aspect of the broader landscape. It is also noteworthy that the festival was initially referred to primarily as a Gay Film Festival. Historically, the festival was predominantly organized by white gay men and offered limited diversity in representation. As women became more vocal, lesbian representation increased, leading to the establishment of Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals (Loist & Zielinski, 2012, p.51). Early queer film festivals were mainly concentrated in North America and Europe, a trend that continues to this day (Dawson & Loist, 2018, p.4), with research predominantly focusing on these regions. However, there has been notable growth in queer film festivals across Asian and South American countries (Dhaenens, 2022, p.838). The emergence of the AIDS crisis also influenced the development of New Queer Cinema, a term coined by B. Ruby Rich to describe independent, non-mainstream LGBTQ+ films that emerged in the early 1990s (Dawson & Loist, 2018, p.2). Subsequently, film festivals began to incorporate greater representation of bisexual and transgender identities, while the concept of 'queer' was redefined to encompass a broader spectrum of gender and sexual identities (Dawson & Loist, 2018, p.3). As societal acceptance of sexual minorities increased, exemplified by the legalization of same-sex marriage, the number of queer film festivals also expanded, and their missions evolved to include diverse forms of representation (Cudny, 2014, p.650; Dawson & Loist, 2018, p.2). Moreover,

Most contemporary film festivals addressing questions of gender and sexuality now identify as queer film festivals rather than LGBTQ+ festivals, as a means of

emphasizing collective identity (Eleftheriadis, 2018, p.78). According to Eleftheriadis (2018, p.84), "Queer festivals choose to focus on fostering an inclusive ethos—encompassing class, race, ability, and gender. Their rhetoric tends to be confrontational and assertive, often combined with humor and parody." The decision to adopt the term "queer" instead of LGBTQ+ is also a political choice, reflecting concerns that the latter has become socially normalized and no longer challenges heteronormative societal structures, thus contributing to what Eleftheriadis (2018, p.86) describes as "homonormativity." Duggan (2002, p.179) explains that homonormativity entails politics that do not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, such as marriage and monogamy, but instead uphold and reproduce them, promoting a depoliticized, privatized gay culture rooted in domesticity and consumption. By positioning themselves as queer, these festivals are expected to address representations of class, disability, race, and other intersecting identities, highlighting that queerness encompasses a diverse range of experiences that may face various forms of discrimination (Eleftheriadis, 2018, pp.88, 92). While LGBTQ+ film festivals may feature "separate identity-based sidebars" alongside a broader mainstream program aimed at general audiences, queer film festivals typically challenge essentialist and homonormative notions of identity through their curatorial choices, actively seeking works that critique societal norms (Dhaenens, 2022, p.839).

In regard to queer film festivals audiences, in general, they represent a "smaller sampling of the larger LGBT community" which brings to question if the queer community feels as though these events are necessary or even if society as a whole benefits from them (Zielinski, 2016, p.145).

Queer film festivals, and identity-based festivals, therefore claim to directly or indirectly play a role in shaping society through the discussions they allow. It is therefore necessary to see if the communities represented attend these festivals and if they are successful once they do.

2.3. Community and Cultural Spaces

Queer film festivals serve as important platforms for the community, offering

opportunities to showcase their stories, film culture, and, in some cases, their history (Grundmann, 1992, p.50). As Coon (2018b, p.10) observes, community spaces that facilitate the sharing of queer stories enable individuals to access additional resources that support their understanding and development of personal narratives. While such stories may be shared directly between acquaintances, many individuals who are in the process of coming out may lack direct connections with other queer persons. In these situations, they often rely on mediated forms of communication that provide insights into queer life and assist them in navigating their own experiences. Queer film festivals offer an opportunity for individuals to engage with media specifically created for them and to connect with others in the community, thereby fostering an environment of inclusion, safety, and acceptance.

Due to their role as alternative venues for exhibition, festivals tend to cultivate an atmosphere of being “out-of-the-ordinary” (De Valck, 2012, p.32). This environment creates an ideal setting for showcasing art that may be unconventional or considered taboo, as audiences are already immersed in a space that challenges the ordinary (De Valck, 2012, p.32). Another feature that contributes to the unique nature of festivals is their temporary, ephemeral quality (Damien, 2025, p.47). This ephemerality can be appealing to audiences, as it fosters a sense of community within a specific time and place that cannot be exactly replicated again (De Valck, Kredell, and Loist, 2008, p.9; Stevens, 2017, p.666). José Esteban Muñoz (1996, p.6) explores this idea of ephemerality in relation to queerness, noting that “leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances meant for engagement by those within its epistemological sphere.” As a result, film festivals can be seen as ideal spaces for exploration and safety within the queer community. The physical components of a film festival, such as audience attendance, director introductions, and discussions between filmmakers and critics, all contribute to building a sense of community (Dawson & Loist, 2018, p.3; De Valck, 2016a, p.106). In particular, integrating screenings with these supportive activities encourages audience interaction and reinforces the community-centered nature of the event (Stevens, 2017, p.667).

2.4. Festivals as Sites of Activism

Art is inherently political by nature, and film as an artistic medium, along with its exhibition practices, reflects this (Rastegar, 2016, p.186). As previously discussed, certain film festivals intentionally adopt an activist stance in how they present themselves and the works they feature, often emphasizing issues such as human rights, social and economic justice, environmental concerns, or promoting intergroup understanding (Davies, 2018, para. 1). While perhaps less immediate than public protests or campaigns, film festivals contribute an important cultural dimension to activist initiatives. They enable engagement that is often more accessible and foster meaningful dialogue (Davies, 2018, para.17).

As previously noted, queer film festivals originate from social movements of the 1970s and have expanded their advocacy to include intersectional identities and related issues (Loist & Zielinski, 2012, p.49). Originally established by activists as grassroots efforts, these festivals may have evolved over time, sometimes shifting toward more homonormative programming (Dhaenens, 2022, p.837). Nonetheless, queer film festivals continue to play a vital role in activism by increasing public awareness and strengthening community bonds (Davies, 2018, para. 1). Research on social movements has identified four categories of individuals to better understand the objectives of activist festivals and their audiences. Davies (2018, para. 4) describes these groups as follows: some attendees are already active supporters of a campaign or movement; others may agree with the message but have not yet taken action. There are also individuals who are neutral and lack a strong opinion, while some attendees may disagree with the message conveyed by the festival or its programming. Furthermore, Davies (2018, para. 11) discusses various ways festivals engage in activism: some aim to reach broad audiences to raise awareness of human rights issues; others focus on providing spaces for in-depth discussions and debates, often attracting experts and policymakers. Certain festivals are dedicated to inspiring activism and using film as a catalyst for social change. Additionally, some festivals adopt a neutral stance, promoting the exchange of diverse perspectives on human rights. Most festivals employ a

combination of these approaches, with the dominant strategy influencing the overall style of the festival—including its promotional activities, location, inclusion of activist workshops, and the demographics of attendees. It is important to see if the ways in which a festival presents itself to the attendees impacts their own experiences and if it has the power to create discussion and self-reflection.

2.5. The Public Sphere and Counterpublics

The Public Sphere theory, developed by Jürgen Habermas, traces the evolution of European bourgeois spaces, emphasizing the transformation of private individuals coming together as a public (Wong, 2016, p.83). Similar to how the public sphere enables individuals to distinguish themselves from political power structures and publicly critique them, film festivals serve as platforms where the public can engage in collective discussions and critique of cinema (Wong, 2016, p.86). For a vibrant public sphere to exist, it is essential that the community has opportunities to convene within an organized setting, with clear information regarding the timing and location of these gatherings to facilitate meaningful debate (Davies, 2018, para. 12).

A 'public' is defined by social theorist Michael Warner (in Davies, 2018, para. 12) as "a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in a visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space". Therefore, film festivals are the perfect space as they offer a space, time, and topic for the audience to be part of (Wong, 2016, p.85). Some scholars argue that queer film festivals actually caters to a counterpublic in society as they are aware of their own "subordinate status" (Wong, 2016, p.90; Zielinski, 2016, p.147; Davies, 2018, para. 13) This does not actually mean that queer people are lower than cisgender heterosexual people, but that socially they face more rejection and struggles.

2.6. Audience Studies

There is ongoing research needed to better understand the audiences of cultural events, regarding queer film festival the audience typically represents a narrower

segment of the broader queer community, as mentioned previously (Walmsley, 2021, p. 311; Zielinski, 2016, p. 145).

In "Encoding, Decoding," Stuart Hall provides valuable insights into how media, such as television, constructs and conveys meaning. These concepts can also be applied to the analysis of festivals as programmers influence the selection and presentation of content, shaping audience perceptions and contributing to the formation of shared meanings (Rastegar, 2016, p.186). Specific messages can become so ingrained that individuals may not recognize their constructed nature, perceiving them as an objective reality. Therefore, audiences may interpret, negotiate, or resist the meanings promoted by a festival in different ways, depending on the media they have consumed prior to attending.

Affect theory offers a framework for understanding the relationships among bodies, signs, and objects within the cultural context (Pettrychyn, 2025, p. 58). When combined with the concept of engagement, it gives rise to the idea of affective engagement, which suggests that eliciting emotional responses can enhance audience involvement (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 266; Walmsley, 2021, p. 302). While audiences may attend cultural events with the intention of being engaged, this does not necessarily guarantee that genuine engagement occurs (Walmsley, 2021, p. 300). When successful, such engagement can foster a sense of loyalty, which can be advantageous for cultural practitioners (Walmsley, 2021, p. 302).

3. Research Method

3.1. Justification

Given the broad scope of the research, which did not focus on a specific festival or region, quantitative methods were deemed most appropriate seeing as they can be used to identify patterns, enable predictions, and support the formulation of generalisations regarding the subject matter (McLeod, 2025, para. 3).

Survey research was chosen to collect data due to its ability to gather standardised and structured information (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p.201). Participants are presented with identical questions in a consistent order; while some participants may respond to additional questions based on their previous answers, the core questions remain the same. Additionally, this approach allows the researcher to tailor the response formats to best suit the research objective, such as with multiple-choice categories, rating scale, or open-ended questions (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p.207). This approach facilitates large-scale data collection on demographics, expectations and outcomes, as well as interest and visitation patterns, aligning well with the research objectives (Roscoe, 2024, para. 13). Indeed, surveys are the most commonly employed method in event research (Fletcher, 2020, p.224). Post-event surveys, in particular, provide valuable insights into attendees' motivations for participation, their perceptions of the event's strengths and areas for improvement, and the benefits they derived (Jensen, 2014, p.563). This approach effectively captures broad patterns related to attendee interests and motivations (Jensen, 2014, p.562). Mixed methods research is considered valuable in event studies, particularly when examining a single event. However, since this research explores queer film festivals broadly, it was not deemed necessary to employ a mixed methods approach.

3.2. Sampling

The research did not focus on a specific target population as it included both individuals who attend queer film festivals and those who do not.

The sampling methodology employed was non-probability sampling. Participants were selected without randomisation from a defined population and the probability of any individual being chosen was not equal (Berman, n.d., para. 8). This method was chosen due to its benefits regarding time, convenience, and cost.

The sampling method is comprised of both voluntary samples and convenience samples. The survey was shared online across three different platforms: Instagram (managed by the researcher), SurveySwap (a free platform designed for data collection), and Prolific (a paid platform specialised for research participant recruitment).

None of the participants were required to complete the survey therefore each participation was completely voluntary (Berman, n.d., para. 11). The participants were recruited on platforms that were easily accessible and no systematic method to ensure representativeness was employed, therefore it can be categorised as convenience sampling (Berman, n.d., para. 13). This includes Prolific as the quota sample and representative sample options were not used. Additionally, there was a form of selective sampling as eligibility was limited to individual over 18 years old who understand English; however, the sampling remains non-probability in nature due to the lack of randomisation in participant selection.

A total of 201 individuals agreed to participate in the study. However, after review, 188 responses (94%) were retained as the remaining responses were excluded due to participants being under 18 or having incomplete surveys, which made their data invalid. Due to the research having no target population, the sample obtained does not differ from the desired population. However, the number of participants who had attended a queer film festival was slightly lower than anticipated.

3.3. Sample Description

The survey was completed by 67 men (35.6%), 109 women (58.0%), 9 non-binary/third gender people (4.8%), 2 who preferred not to say (1.1%), and 1 other (0.5%). The age range was from 18 to 74 years old ($M = 30.6$, $SD = 11.5$). The participants came from 20 different countries with a majority of people from the United States with 75 participants (39.9%), the Netherlands with 41 (21.8%), United Kingdom of Great Britain

and Northern Ireland with 27 (14.4%), France with 17 (9.0%), and Canada with 6 (3.2%). The other countries were Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, and South Korea. In addition, the participants indicated their sexual orientation: heterosexual (61.7%), homosexual (9.6%), bisexual (13.8%), prefer not to say (5.3%), and other (9.6%). Those who chose other indicated their sexual orientation which indicated: pansexual, queer, questioning, and asexual.

3.4. Procedure

To collect the data necessary for the research a survey was built using Qualtrics and shared via internet on the platforms mentioned previously.

Once the participant opened the survey, they would see the introduction in which the participant received general information regarding the purpose of the research. This included the fact that the survey will focus on queer film festivals and their motivations, or lack thereof, behind attending. Additionally, it informed participants that the research is for a Master thesis and that the duration of the survey is around 7 to 9 minutes.

The research followed the principles of informed consent by informing the participants of the nature of the study, stating that participation is voluntary and they are free to withdraw at any time, and that their data will remain anonymous and solely serve research purposes. Two mandatory questions were added in the introduction: "I am over the age of 18 years old" and "If you understand the information above and freely consent to participate in this study, click the 'I agree' button". If the participants were under 18 or did not consent they would be immediately sent to the end of the survey.

Once the participants agreed to the research they were given the definitions of "queer", "queer film festival", and "pride (parade)" so that every participants completing the study would share the same understanding of these terms and ensure data validity.

This was followed by the survey questions; if a participant had attended a queer film festival in the last 5 years they had to answer additional questions regarding their

experience. The survey contains one non-mandatory question asking participants if they think queer film festivals should be exclusive to the queer community. A section regarding demographics was also provided; it included age, gender, sexual orientation, and country of residence.

The survey ended with a closing section where the participants is thanked for their time.

3.5. Operationalisation of Concepts into Variables

This study took different references concerning attitudes towards queer people, motivations to attend festivals, and audience experiences. It included 43 items, some which were only available had the participant been to a queer film festival as it regarded their experience.

a. Perception or attitudes towards queer people.

The scale used to assess this concept is an adapted scale developed by Herek in 1988 regarding the Attitudes toward lesbians and gay men scale (ATLG). The original scale includes two ten-items subscales and uses a 9-point Likert scale but was modernised to include more than only gay men and lesbian women. There was 4 items with a 5-point Likert scale response format (1= *strongly disagree*, 5= *strongly agree*).

b. Motivations

The scale used to assess this concept drew from Uysal, Gahan, and Martin's (1993) scale regarding event (festival) motivations. It was adapted to fit the context of a film festival. The updated scale drew from theory related to community and activist spaces as well. There was 6 items with a 5-point Likert scale response format (1= *strongly disagree*, 5= *strongly agree*).

c. Experience

Developed by Park, Oh, and Park (2015) the scale used to assess this concept builds upon Pine and Gilmore's experience economy concepts but situated in the

context of film festivals. This scale was adapted to fit a queer film festival context. There was 10 items with a 5-point Likert scale response format (1= *strongly disagree*, 5= *strongly agree*).

d. Demographics

Participants were asked to indicate their age, gender, sexuality, and place of residence. In addition, participants were asked in the introduction to indicate if they considered themselves a cinephile, if they had attended a film festival in the last 5 years, if they had attended a queer film festival in the last 5 years, and if they were part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

3.6. Data Preparation

a. Factor Analysis and Reliability Analysis.

A factor analysis was done to reduce the data regarding participants interest in queerness, queer events, and queer film festivals into more manageable subscales. A factor analysis is allowed as there are 14 items, the minimum needed being 3. Additionally, the items are measured on a continuous level, on a 5-point Likert scale, and there are over the required amount of participants of 150 ($N=188$). The factor analysis conducted is appropriate since the correlation coefficients are above .30, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin is over .60, and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is significant.

A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted using direct oblimin rotation based on Eigenvalues (>1.00) to explore the 14 items. Its purpose is to identify underlying dimensions of attitudes and behaviours related to queer representation, community involvement, and event participation in the context of queer film festival and broader community engagement. The sampling adequacy for the analysis is verified as the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value is of .85 which exceeds the acceptable minimum of .60. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant $\chi^2(91) = 1267.57, p < .001$, thus indicating that the correlations between items are sufficiently large for a Principal Component Analysis. The resultant model consisted of 3 components with Eigenvalues above 1 which

together explained 67.7% of participants attitudes and behaviours. The first factor included seven items regarding a pro-queer advocacy mindset, social comfort around queer individuals and queer spaces, which explained 42.8% of the variance. The second factor included six items about situational or practical motivators that influence attendance at queer film festivals which explained 14.1% of the variance. The third factor included one item regarding a general interest in film festivals which explained 10.8% of the variance. However, due to this subscale having only one item it can not be considered a subscale.

The factor analysis revealed that there are three themes which help inform why individuals choose to engage with queer cultural events: commitment to queer advocacy and community (factor 1), contextual factors that increase likelihood of attendance at a queer film festival (factor 2), and a general interest in film festivals (factor 3).

Table 1. Underlying dimensions of attitudes and behaviours related to queer representation, community involvement, and event participation of queer film festivals. Item loadings on a three factor principal components solutions

Items	<i>Advocacy and Community Connection</i>	<i>Festival Attendance Drivers</i>	<i>General Film Interest</i>
Queer people should be represented more prominently in media and education.	.96		
It is important to still advocate for queer people.	.95		
It is important to have spaces dedicated for queer people.	.92		
I am interest in learning more about queerness through community events.	.82		
I am interest in	.78		

attending other types of queer events.			
I feel comfortable around LGBTQIA+ individuals.	.77		
I am interest in attending queer film festivals.	.66		
I would only attend a queer film festival if someone asked me to join.		.74	
I am more likely to attend a queer film festival if there are networking opportunities.		.72	
I would only attend a queer film festival if it was free.		.62	
I am more likely to attend a queer film festival if there is a talk prior or after the screening.		.52	
I am more likely to attend if the festival includes additional forms of artistic expression beyond just moving images.		.50	
I am more likely to attend a queer film festival if the works presented explicitly engage with political themes and advocate for social change.		.48	
I am interested in attending film festivals.			.77
<hr/>			
Cronbach's α	.93	.71	

<i>R</i> ²	.43	.14	.18
Eigenvalue	5.99	1.97	1.51

The first reliability analysis focused on the first component regarding queer advocacy and community engagement. The Cronbach's alpha was of .93 which is desirable seeing as it has good reliability. The reliability of the subscale could not be improved.

The second reliability analysis focused on the second component regarding motivators for attendance. The Cronbach's alpha was .71 which is seen as desirable seeing as the scale is moderately reliable. However, by removing the item A8 ("I would only attend a queer film festival if it was free") the reliability of the subscale could be improved. Once removed the Cronbach's alpha was .72.

There could not be a reliability analysis on the third component regarding general interest in film festivals due to the fact that it had only one item as mentioned previously.

b. Computing New Variables

Two new variables were coded from the subscales found through the factor analysis.

- Factor 1: Advocacy and community connection.
PerceptionQP = MEAN(A7,A10,A11,A39,A40,A41,A42)
- Factor 2: Festival attendance drivers.
MotivationsQFF = MEAN(A9,A35,A36,A37,A38)

c. Recoding

In order to conduct the ANOVA, the data 'A44' which asked the question "What is your age? Please indicate in numbers (eg .22)," was recoded from continuous to categorical data. The new variable was named 'AgeCateg'. The data was categorised into four percentiles:

- 18 years old (lowest) through value 22 years old (*N*= 48). It was named 1 but is referred as the group with teenagers and very young adults.

- 23 years old to 26 years old ($N= 54$). It was named 2 but is referred to as young adults.
- 27 years old to 36 years old ($N= 40$). It was named 3 but is referred to as adults.
- 37 through 74 (highest value) ($N= 46$). It was named 4 but is referred to as older adults.

3.7. Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Teenagers and very young adults (18 to 22 years old) are more likely to have a pro-queer advocacy mindset and be at ease in queer spaces than young adults (23 to 26 years old), adults (27 to 36 years old) and older adults (36 to 74 years old).

Hypothesis 2: Teenagers and very young adults (18 to 22 years old) are more likely to have attended a queer film festival in the last five years than young adults (23 to 26 years old), adults (27 to 36 years old) and older adults (36 to 74 years old).

Hypothesis 3: People with a pro-queer advocacy mindset and are at ease in queer spaces are more likely to have attended a queer film festival in the last five years.

Hypothesis 4: People who are interested in film festivals with additional elements (talks, networking, and other contextual and situational factors) are more likely to have attended a queer film festival in the last five years.

Hypothesis 5: People who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community are more likely to have attended a queer film festival in the last five years.

Hypothesis 6: Cinephiles are more likely to have attended a queer film festival in the last five years.

Hypothesis 7: People planning on attending a queer film festival again are more likely to have attended a queer film festival once or more before.

Hypothesis 8: Attendees with positive experiences during a queer film festival are more likely to re-attend a future festival.

Hypothesis 9: People who have attended a queer film festival in the last five years are more likely to have attended a pride event.

Hypothesis 10: People who are part of the queer community are more likely to have attended a pride event.

4. Results

This chapter presents the results of the statistical analyses conducted to test the study's hypotheses and address the main research question: To what extent do queer film festivals function as empowering spaces for the LGBTQ+ community while simultaneously engaging non-queer audiences? The analyses also explore several sub-questions, including whether queer film festivals portray queer identities in ways that resonate with LGBTQIA+ individuals, whether they attract non-queer audiences who may benefit from exposure to queer narratives, and which demographic groups are drawn to these events.

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

Table 2. Participant answers regarding if they identify as a cinephile (a person who is very interested in and enthusiastic about cinema as an art form, and knows a lot about films).

	<i>N</i>	%
No	60	31.9%
Yes	128	68.1%

Table 3. Participant answers regarding if they have attended a film festival in the last five years.

	<i>N</i>	%
No	102	54.3%
Yes	86	45.7%

Table 4. Participant answers regarding if they have attended a queer film festival in the last five years.

	<i>N</i>	%
No	141	75.0%
Yes	47	25.0%

Table 5. Participant answers regarding if they have ever attended a pride event.

	<i>N</i>	%
No	77	41.0%
Yes	111	59.0%

Table 6. Participant answers regarding if they are part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

	<i>N</i>	%
No	114	60.6%
Yes	74	39.4%

These findings indicate that while a majority of the participants identify as cinephiles (68.1%) not all of them attend film festivals (45.7%) which are seen as places that nurture cinephilia. This may be due to the emergence of new ways of consuming cinema, such as with streaming platforms, which allows individuals to nurture their cinephilia without attending cinemas or film festivals.

Moreover, while only forty seven people attended queer film festivals, eighty six people attended film festivals (which include queer film festivals). Thirty nine people attended non-queer film festivals. Thus indicating that the majority of people who have

attended film festivals also attend queer festivals. However, the population that has attended queer film festivals only represents a quarter of the total sum of participants.

Over half (59.0%) of the participants have attended pride events which is higher than the amount of participants that attended film festivals (45.7%) and queer film festivals (25.0%). Thus indicating that out of all the cultural events presented to the participants, pride events are the most accessible due to the fact that they are free and more widely known by the general public.

Lastly, two fifths (39.4%) of the participants identified as being part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

4.2. Hypothesis 1

An ANOVA was conducted in order to test the hypothesis that teenagers and very young adults (18 to 22 years old) are more likely to have a pro-queer advocacy mindset and be at ease in queer spaces than young adults (23 to 26 years old), adults (27 to 36 years old) and older adults (36 to 74 years old). Queer advocacy and community engagement was the dependent variable, and the recoded variable about the age of the participants was the independent variable.

A one way ANOVA revealed that age significantly influenced the positive perception of queer people $F(3, 184) = 7.19, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$. The model accounted for approximately 10.9% of the variance in perception of queer people ($R^2 = .10$), indicating a moderate effect size.

The Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that teenagers and very young adults, 18 to 22 years old, are significantly more likely to have a pro-queer advocacy mindset and be at ease in queer spaces ($M = 4.45, SD = 0.61$) than adults, 27 to 36 year olds, ($M = 3.59, SD = 1.37$), $M_{\text{difference}} = -0.86, p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.40, -0.32], and older adults ($M = 3.64, SD = 0.99$), $M_{\text{difference}} = -0.81, p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.33, -0.29]. However, there was no significance indicating that teenagers and very young adults are more likely to have a pro-queer advocacy mindset and be at ease in queer spaces than young adults, 23 to 26 year olds ($M = 3.98, SD = 0.85$), $M_{\text{difference}} = -0.47, p = .078$, 95% CI [-0.97, 0.03], indicating

that both age groups have the same likeliness in attitudes towards queer people. No other comparisons among the older age groups were statistically significant ($p > .05$).

These results partially support the hypothesis. Teenagers and very young adult (18 to 22) were significantly more likely to have a pro-queer advocacy mindset and be at ease in queer spaces than adults (27 to 36) and older adults (36 to 74). However there was no significant difference between the 18 to 22 year olds and the 23 to 26 year olds (young adults). This suggest that a pro-queer advocacy mindset and being at ease in queer spaces may be strongest among people under 27, particularly those under 23, but the difference between the two youngest age groups is not statistically meaningful.

4.3. Hypothesis 2

An ANOVA was conducted in order to test the hypothesis that teenagers and very young adults (18 to 22 years old) are more likely to have attended a queer film festival in the last five years than young adults (23 to 26 years old), adults (27 to 36 years old) and older adults (36 to 74 years old). Attendance at a queer film festival in the last five years was used as the dependent variable, and the recoded variable about the age of the participants was the independent variable.

A one way ANOVA revealed that age does not significantly influence the attendance at a queer film festival $F(3, 184) = 0.50, p = .682$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Thus, attendance was not higher with teenagers and very young adults, 18 to 22 years old, ($M = 1.23, SD = 0.42$) than with young adults, 23 to 26 year olds ($M = 1.20, SD = 0.40$), adults, 27 to 36 year olds ($M = 1.30, SD = 0.46$), or older adults ($M = 1.28, SD = 0.43$).

Since the model is insignificant there is no need to interpret or report the post hoc results. Moreover, since it is statistically insignificant, the hypothesis is rejected. This means that age does not influence the attendance at a queer film festival.

4.4. Hypothesis 3, Hypothesis 4, and Hypothesis 5

A multiple linear regression was conducted to test the following hypotheses: people with a pro-queer advocacy mindset and who are at ease in queer spaces are

more likely to have attended a queer film festival in the last five years (H3), people who are interested in film festivals with additional elements (talks, networking, and other contextual and situational factors) are more likely to have attended a queer film festival in the last five years (H4), and people who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community are more likely to have attended a queer film festival in the last five years (H5).

Attendance of a queer film festival in the last five years was used as the dependent variable; and queer advocacy and community engagement, interest in film festivals due to contextual and/or situational factors, and people who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community as independent variables. The model was found to be significant $F(3, 184) = 2.39, p < .001$. The model accounted for approximately 20.4% of the variance in queer film festival attendance ($R^2 = .20$), suggesting a modest but meaningful model fit.

Having a pro-queer advocacy mindset and being at ease in queer spaces was found to be insignificant ($\beta = -.10, t(184) = -1.26, p = .208$). Therefore hypothesis 3 is rejected as it is not supported by the data.

Interest in film festivals with additional elements was found to be a significant positive predictor of attendance of queer film festivals in the last five years ($\beta = .41, t(184) = 5.69, p < .001$). This indicates that individuals who value additional elements at film festivals are significantly more likely to have attended a queer film festival.

People who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community was also a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .21, t(184) = 2.83, p = .005$). This suggest that members of the queer community are more likely to attend queer film festivals.

Therefore, both hypothesis 4 and hypothesis 5 are supported and validated.

The finding suggest that motivations related to enriched festival experiences and being part of the LGBTQIA+ community are meaningful predictors of attendance at queer film festivals. Surprisingly having a positive attitude towards queer people did not significantly influence attendance behaviour. This indicates that personal identity and specific festival motivations may be more impactful in shaping attendance patterns than broader attitudes alone.

4.5. Hypothesis 6

A simple linear regression was conducted to test the hypothesis that cinephiles are more likely to have attended a queer film festival in the last five years. Attendance of a queer film festival in the last five years was the dependent variable and people who self-identify as cinephiles was the independent variable.

The results indicated that the model was significant $F(1, 186) = 8.65, p = .004$, and explained approximately 4.4% of the variance in queer film festival attendance ($R^2 = .04$). Being a cinephile was a significant positive predictor in attendance ($\beta = .21, t(186) = 2.94, p = .004$), indicating that participants who identified as cinephiles were more likely to have attended a queer film festival in the last five year. The hypothesis is supported by the findings.

4.6. Hypothesis 7

A simple linear regression was conducted to test the hypothesis that people planning on attending a queer film festival again are more likely to have attended a queer film festival once or more before.

Attendance of a queer film festival once or more was the dependent variable and people who are planning on re-attending a queer film festival was the independent variable.

The results indicated that the model was not statistically significant $F(1, 45) = 2.46, p = .12$, and explained only 3.4% of the variance in queer film festival attendance ($R^2 = .03$). Attendance of a queer film festival once or more was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .18, t(45) = 1.26, p = .212$).

The finding suggests that attending a queer film festival once or more does not influence the choice to re-attend once more therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

4.7. Hypothesis 8

A multiple linear regression was conducted to test the hypothesis that attendees with positive experiences during a queer film festival are more likely to re-attend a future festival.

Planning on re-attending a queer film festival was the dependent variable. The independent variables were the participants' rating of 10 items related to their experiences at queer film festivals. They are: the films shown represented a wide range of queer experiences, the characters and stories did not follow stereotypical and overused tropes, the festival challenged stereotypes about queer people, the festival displayed films that clearly promote social change, the festival displayed an inclusive range of gender and sexual identities, the festival portrayed different intersecting identities thoughtfully, there was a sense of community during the festival, there was emotional support in this environment.

The model accounted for approximately 19.% of the variance in re-attending a queer film festival ($R^2 = .19$). The model was found to not be statistically significant $F(8, 38) = 0.24, p = .377$. This indicates that the set of experience variables did not significantly predict re-attendance. The hypothesis is rejected.

The finding suggest that the attendees experience at a queer film festival does not significantly impact their choice to re-attend in the future therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

4.8. Hypothesis 9 and Hypothesis 10

A multiple linear regression was conducted to test the hypotheses: people who have attended a queer film festival in the last five years are more likely to have attended a pride event (H9), and people who are part of the queer community are more likely to have attended a pride event (H10).

Attendance of a pride event was the dependent variable. People who have attended a queer film festival in the last five years and people who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community were the independent variables.

The model was found to be significant $F(2, 185) = 3.75, p < .001$. The model accounted for approximately 16.5% of the variance in attendance of a pride event ($R^2 = .16$).

Being part of the LGBTQIA+ community was found to be insignificant ($\beta = .14, t(185) = 2.10, p = .037$). Therefore hypothesis 9 is rejected.

People who have attended a queer film festival in the last five years was found to be a significant positive predictor of attendance of a pride event ($\beta = .34, t(185) = 5.00, p < .001$). This indicates that individuals who value have attended a queer film festival in the last five years are significantly more likely to have attended a pride event therefore, hypothesis 10 is supported.

The finding suggests that attendance at a queer film festival in the last five years is a meaningful predictor of attendance at a pride event. However, being part of the LGBTQIA+ community does not influence attendance at a pride event. This indicates that interest in queer events may be more impactful in shaping attendance than simply being part of the community.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the (non)audiences of queer film festivals and to reply to the following research question: To what extent do queer film festivals function as empowering spaces for the LGBTQ+ community while simultaneously engaging non-queer audiences? Moreover, the study also aimed to answer the following sub-questions : are queer film festivals portraying queer identities in a manner that resonates with and satisfies queer communities themselves? Are they attracting non-queer individuals who may benefit from greater exposure to queer narratives? And which audience is attracted to these events? Through this study and guiding questions the following has been found.

Adults under the age of 27 years old are more likely to have a pro-queer advocacy mindset and be at ease in queer spaces and comfortable around queer people compared to older generations. This may be a reflection of the sociocultural environment in which younger generations have come of age; one that is increasingly inclusive and supportive of queer rights and representations. This upbringing in a more inclusive society likely contributed to their openness and acceptance. However, while young adults may be more socially comfortable around queer individuals this is not necessarily translated into their engagement with queer cultural events such as queer film festivals. The data collected shows that while age may be associated with progressive attitudes, it does not have a significant impact on attendance. This suggest that while young adults may be supportive of queer rights and do not mind being in spaces or events that are explicitly queer, they do not actively seek them out for themselves.

Furthermore, the analysis indicates that high acceptance and social comfort around queer individuals does not significantly predict attendance at queer film festivals. This is interesting as scholars have noted the growth of queer representations in film festivals due to growing societal acceptance, and the overall increase of queer film festivals around the world. (Dhaenens, 2022, p.838; Loist & Zielinski, 2012, p.54). Therefore, one could believe this rise of queer representation in culture is due to a demand from a wider public but it appears to not be so. However, the findings suggests that other external factors must be influencing audience participation. In fact, the

populations that are more likely to attend queer film festivals include self-identified cinephiles, individuals that are part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Moreover, situational or contextual factors (such as networking opportunities, artist talks, or free tickets) increase the likelihood of audience attendance. This aligns with previous academic research that state that film festivals, in general, attract cinephiles due to their reputation as a “safe-haven” thanks to thoughtful programming which showcases films valued by the community (De Valck, 2007, p.174; De Valck, 2012, p.26; Stevens, 2017, p.660); while queer film festivals tend to attract a smaller percentage of the queer community (Zielinski, 2016, p.145). The interest in enriched festival experiences may reflect a pattern among film enthusiasts or frequent festival attendees who attend not only for the content but also to interact more deeply with the artistic, social and cultural dimensions of the event. From the festivals point of view, having additional elements to enhance the experience reflects the competitiveness of the festival circuit and the need to captivate an audience as a means to survival (De Valck, 2012, p.33). Moreover, they also reinforce the community-centered nature of the event by encouraging audience interactions (Dawson & Loist, 2018, p.3; Stevens, 2017, p.667). This is especially important for queer film festivals as part of the LGBTQIA+ audience attending is there to understand more about the community’s history, potentially coming to terms with their own identity and needs these additional resources (Coon, 2018b, p.10). Moreover, if the audience is involved in the conversation it creates the space for affective engagement which ultimately benefits both the festival and the attendees (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 266; Walmsley, 2021, p. 302).

It is also important to consider the role of past experience with queer film festivals. While prior attendance might suggest a likelihood of returning, the findings indicate that having attended a queer film festival once does not guarantee future attendance. Similarly, the perceived quality or impact of the experience at the festival does not significantly predict the decision to return. This suggests that the events themselves do not play a role in determining future participation or that the motivation to attend is based on factors beyond the event's internal programming and atmosphere. While Walmsley (2021, p.300-302) argues that if the audience is engaged correctly they will build an emotional connection with the item and form a sense of

loyalty towards it; this particular finding indicates that the attendees experiences do not impact their decision to attend, which is understandable had there been no affective engagement from the audience. However, the previous finding argues that there is the space for affective engagement at these events therefore, both findings appear to contradict themselves. One possible explanation is that this study did not focus on a specific queer film festival. Therefore, participants' perceptions might be based on diverse experiences varying in enjoyment. For example, a negative experience at one festival might deter them from returning to that particular event, but not necessarily from attending queer film festivals more broadly. This distinction is critical and indicates the importance of accounting for festival-specific variables in future research.

Additionally, while being part of the LGBTQIA+ community does not inherently imply participation in other queer events such as Pride, there is evidence that those who attend queer film festivals are also likely to attend Pride celebrations. This overlap suggests that queer film festival attendees are generally more engaged with community-oriented queer spaces. It is worth noting that both Pride and queer film festivals originate as responses to injustice and representational issues, they are at their core political and activist events (Loist, 2016, p.57; Loist & Zielinski, 2012, p.49). Moreover, both of these community events are public events that were made for counterpublics; the queer community was perceived for a long time, and it could be said still to this day, as 'lesser' than cisgender heterosexual people (Zielinski, 2016, p.147; Davies, 2018, para. 13). It is therefore understandable that attendees of the 'niche' of the two events attends Pride parades. It could be argued that Pride has become a homonormative now that it evolved into a mainstream event that attracts both queer and non-queer individuals. This may signal a broader shift in how queer cultural events are being positioned and consumed by the public seeing as some queer film festivals are seeking mainstream appeal and themselves becoming homonormative (Dhaenens, 2022, p.839). There is a risk that in the hopes of attracting a wider audience, queer events take away the 'safe space' they had created for this counterpublic ultimately failing the community it was meant to serve (Davies, 2018, para.13; Loist, 2016, p.57). However, queer film festivals remain relatively niche and less accessible to the general public and due to their programming they continue to generate meaningful debates

and conversations (Davies, 2018, para. 1). This reflects the tensions between queer cultural authenticity and commercialization.

The evidence is inconclusive on whether or not queer film festivals function as empowering spaces for the LGBTQIA+ community due to a lack of statistical significance. This also applies to the question regarding the satisfaction of queer communities in relation to the queer identities portrayed at queer film festivals. Furthermore, queer film festivals are not attracting non-queer individuals who may benefit from greater exposure to queer narratives because they are not attracting individuals who already have positive perceptions and attitudes towards queer people. In fact, the people attracted to queer film festivals are cinephiles who are attracted to film festivals in general and a niche segment of the queer community. It is valuable to note that age is not a factor in determining attendance.

5.1. Academic Contribution

This research contributes to studies regarding queer film festivals and audiences. It validates the fact that identity-based, or at least queer film festivals, are still niche and unexplored by the general public. Additionally, this research is concurrent with previous academic studies in regard to the type of attendees at a queer film festival: cinephiles and a smaller portion of the queer community. However, the research also highlighted that enriched festival experiences are an equally important motivator in determining attendance. Moreover, the research questions the longevity of authentic and/or purposefully activist queer community events and their counterpublics in the face of commercialisation and the festival circuit's competitiveness.

5.2. Societal Relevance

This research has highlighted that while society may be becoming more accepting of queer identities this does not necessarily mean that they are interested in learning more about the queer experience. Moreover, if the public does seek out queer community events, they tend to go for the more mainstream and homonormative ones

which, arguably, shows that queer individuals are still not accepted as they need to be presented in a 'digestible' way. General society is not intrigued by the nitty gritty and disruption that queer film festivals aim to promote. While this is not a bad thing per se, it might lead to queer film festivals becoming more mainstream as a way to attract broader audiences and survive in the film festival circuit which might go against the community's needs.

5.3. Implications and Limitations

The fact that hypothesis 8 "attendees with positive experiences during a queer film festival are more likely to re-attend a future festival" was insignificant appeared at first as a strange result. However, as stated previously due to the nature of the research which was not case specific there is a potential explanation; one of which was explored previously.

There are limitations regarding the data collection method. A self-filled survey containing self-reflective questions may be influenced by external factors present while the participant is completing the survey thereby affecting the data. Moreover, non-probability sampling does not allow to "estimate the extent to which sample statistics are likely to differ from population parameters" (Stat Trek, 2025, para. 10). The distribution of the survey through personal channel was reflected in the data in regard to the country of residence of participants. There was a majority of people from the Netherlands, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and France which are countries in which I, the researcher, have lived for a while and therefore built connections.

In general, the number of participants who had attended queer film festivals in the last five years was lower than anticipated. This expectation was probably skewed due to my own experiences. However, this meant that some of the analyses that I meant to conduct were not doable, for example, a factor analysis could not be done on the experience items because the number of participants was under 150 ($N= 47$).

5.4. Recommendations for Future Studies

This research can serve as a starting point for deeper research. A study focusing explicitly on attendees of queer film festivals is needed to answer the research question whether it be through quantitative research with another survey, this time with selective sampling, or in-depth interviews. In addition, doing research on the (non)attendees of a specific queer film festival using this research's survey could be fruitful if the purpose of the new study focuses more on branding and logistical insights.

Research concerning the straight cisgender attendees of queer film festivals drawing from Stuart Hall's "Encoding, Decoding" and the concept of homonormativity would shed light on the minority audience of queer film festivals and develop a more detailed understanding of motivations behind attendance.

5.5. Positionality

As a researcher, it is important to acknowledge that my positionality inevitably affects the way in which I view and interpret the world. Similarly to Hall's "Encoding, Decoding" there may be unconscious bias in my research that I may not recognise. In the interest of transparency, I disclose that I am a cisgender, white, middle-class, queer woman. My identity has offered both privileges and specific lived experiences which has shaped how I approached the theoretical framework and empirical aspects of this research. I recognise that my perspective is one among many and that queer identities and experiences are not monolithic. Acknowledging my positionality is intended to situate myself within the research and underline the importance of intersectional approaches when examining cultural institutions, and in research in general.

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Appendix A. Survey

Start of Block: Welcome

Dear participant, Thank you for your interest in this research. You are invited to fill in a questionnaire. In this questionnaire we will ask you to assess your experience regarding queer film festivals. The aim of the study is to analyse the reasoning behind attendance, or lack of. The questionnaire will take approximately 7 minutes to fill in. Please answer each question carefully and honestly. There are no right or wrong answers.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA

All research data remain completely confidential and are collected in anonymous form. We will not identify you. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with participating in this research.

VOLUNTARY

If you now decide not to participate in this research, this will not affect you. If you decide to cease your cooperation while filling in the questionnaire, this will in no way affect you either. You can cease your cooperation without giving reasons.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you have questions about this research, in advance or afterwards, you can contact the responsible researcher: Madeleine Martin - 608484mm@eur.nl This study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Erasmus University Rotterdam. If you want to invoke your rights or if you have a question concerning privacy about this study, you can contact Erasmus University's DPO (Data Protection Officer) at fg@eur.nl.

P.S: This survey contains Karma to get free survey responses at SurveySwap.io

18+ I am over the age of 18 years old.

- ☐ No. (1)
- ☐ Yes. (2)

Consent If you understand the information above and freely consent to participate in this study, click on the 'I agree' button below to start the questionnaire.

- ☐ I agree. (1)
- ☐ I do not agree. (2)

End of Block: Welcome

Start of Block: Definitions

Definitions to Ensure Data Validity:

Queer: This term serves as an inclusive umbrella designation for individuals whose gender identities and/or sexual orientations do not align with traditional binary gender norms or heterosexuality. Alternatively, the acronym LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, asexual, and other non-normative identities) may also be used.

Queer Film Festival: A film festival that showcases works created by and primarily caters to members of the queer community. It is important to note that while a general film festival may feature queer-themed films, it is not classified as a "queer film festival" unless it explicitly identifies and promotes itself as such.

Pride (Parade): A public event that celebrates the LGBTQIA+ community, emphasizing social and self-acceptance, community achievements, and the advancement of legal rights. These events typically take the form of parades or demonstrations.

End of Block: Definitions

Start of Block: Base

1 Are you a cinephile (a person who is very interested in and enthusiastic about cinema as an art form, and knows a lot about films)?

- ☐ No (1)
- ☐ Yes (2)

2 Have you attended a film festival in the last 5 years?

- ☐ No (1)
- ☐ Yes (2)

3 Have you attended a queer film festival in the last 5 years?

- ☐ No (1)
- ☐ Yes (2)

4 Have you ever attended a pride event?

- ☐ No (1)
- ☐ Yes (2)

5 Are you part of the LGBTQIA+ community?

- ☐ No (1)
- ☐ Yes (2)

End of Block: Base

Start of Block: NA

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.

6 I am interested in attending film festivals.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

7 I am interested in attending queer film festivals.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)

- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

8 I would only attend a queer film festival if it was free.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

9 I would only attend a queer film festival if someone asked me to join.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

10 I am interested in attending other types of queer events.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

11 I am interested in learning more about queerness through community events.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

End of Block: NA

Start of Block: A

12 How many queer film festivals have you attended?

- ☐ 1 (1)
- ☐ 2 (2)
- ☐ 3 (3)
- ☐ 4 (4)
- ☐ 5+ (5)

13 What was the format of the last queer film festival you attended?

- ☐ In-person (1)
- ☐ Online (2)
- ☐ Hybrid (3)

14 Did the last queer film festival you attended offer different types of art (such as exhibitions, performance, short film, feature films)?

- ☐ No (1)
- ☐ Yes (2)

15 Are you planning on attending a queer film festival again?

- ☐ No (1)
- ☐ Maybe (2)
- ☐ Yes (3)

End of Block: A

Start of Block: Experience

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements based on your experience at the last queer film festival you attended.

16 The films shown represented a wide range of queer experiences.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

17 The characters and stories I saw didn't follow stereotypical and overused tropes (such as the sassy gay friend, the predatory bisexual, dead lesbian syndrome, the hypersexualised queer person, the 'coming out' as the only plot trope, and more).

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

18 The festival challenged stereotypes about queer people.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

19 The festival displayed films that clearly promote social change.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)

- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

20 The festival displayed an inclusive range of gender and sexual identities (for example bisexual, intersex, asexual).

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

21 The festival portrayed different intersecting identities (such as race, disability, class) thoughtfully.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

22 I felt a sense of community during the festival.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

23 I felt emotionally supported in this environment (as in the festival created a space where you can be vulnerable, connect authentically with others, feel seen and affirmed).

- Strongly disagree (1)

- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

End of Block: Experience

Start of Block: QFFs

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements based on your experiences at queer film festivals.

24 Queer film festivals help me connect with others like me.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

25 Queer film festivals provide a safe space for self-expression.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

26 Queer film festivals have more political importance than Pride.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)

- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

27 Queer film festivals make me think more about social issues than Pride.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

28 Queer film festivals challenge existing power structures more than Pride.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

29 Queer film festivals are spaces that are more favourable for activism than Pride.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

30 Queer film festivals serve more as a 'safe space' than Pride.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

End of Block: QFFs

Start of Block: NQ

Please indicate how much do you agree with the following statements based on your experience at queer film festivals.

31 After attending a queer film festival, I am more empathetic towards queer individuals.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

32 After attending a queer film festival, I have learned new perspectives about queer life and identity.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

33 The films displayed made me reflect on my own biases.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

34 Queer film festivals have changed the way I view LGBTQIA+ issues.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

End of Block: NQ

Start of Block: MLA

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.

35 I am more likely to attend a queer film festival if the works presented explicitly engage with political themes and advocate for social change.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

36 I am more likely to attend if the festival includes additional forms of artistic expression beyond just moving images.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
- ☐ Strongly agree (5)

37 I am more likely to attend a queer film festival if there are networking opportunities.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

38 I am more likely to attend a queer film festival if there is a talk prior or after the screening.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

End of Block: MLA

Start of Block: ATQP

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.

39 I feel comfortable around LGBTQIA+ individuals.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

40 Queer people should be represented more prominently in media and education.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)

- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

41 It is important to still advocate for queer people.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

42 It is important to have spaces dedicated for queer people.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

End of Block: ATQP

Start of Block: OQ

While not required, your perspective on the following question would be greatly appreciated.

43 To what extent, if at all, do you think queer film festivals should be exclusive to the queer community?

End of Block: OQ

Start of Block: Demographic

44 What is your age? Please indicate in numbers (eg. 22)

45 What is your gender?

- ☐ Male (1)
- ☐ Female (2)
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)
- ☐ Other (5) _____

46 What is your sexual orientation?

- ☐ Heterosexual (1)
- ☐ Homosexual (2)
- ☐ Bisexual (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)
- ☐ Other (5) _____

47 In which country do you currently reside?

▼ Afghanistan (1) ... Other (1358)

Display this question:

If List of Countries = Other

48 If your country is not listed, please specify which country below.

End of Block: Demographic

Appendix B. Survey Flow

Block: Welcome (3 Questions)

Branch: New Branch

If

If I am over the age of 18 years old. No. Is Selected

EndSurvey: Advanced

Branch: New Branch

If

If If you understand the information above and freely consent to participate in this study, click on... I do not agree. Is Selected

EndSurvey: Advanced

Standard: Definitions (1 Question)

Standard: Base (5 Questions)

Branch: New Branch

If

If Have you attended a queer film festival in the last 5 years? No Is Selected

Standard: NA (7 Questions)

Branch: New Branch

If

If Have you attended a queer film festival in the last 5 years? Yes Is Selected

Standard: A (4 Questions)

Standard: Experience (9 Questions)

Standard: QFFs (8 Questions)

Branch: New Branch

If

If Are you part of the LGBTQIA+ community? No Is Selected

Standard: NQ (5 Questions)

Standard: MLA (5 Questions)

Standard: ATQP (5 Questions)

Standard: OQ (2 Questions)

Standard: Demographic (5 Questions)

EndSurvey: Advanced

Appendix C. AI Declaration

These are the prompts that were submitted to ChatGPT:

- "Based off the following information (attached was the theoretical framework) how would you build a survey knowing that I need to do a factor analysis, a regression analysis, and an ANOVA." this was used to create a base for the survey.
- "Can you rephrase this: Should queer film festivals have exclusive events solely for the queer community? Should they be exclusive as a whole? Or should they remain open to all public?"