Homophobia, heteronormativity, & internalized homophobia: Queer emotion management in mainstream romantic comedies

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Abstract

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Jillian Nauss

In many cases, movie audiences internalize the values they see expressed on-screen (Hall, 1997; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). For North American audiences, this often means internalizing heteronormative values (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). This does not mean queer characters are excluded from North American film and television, but when they are included, the queer community is presented from heteronormative perspectives (Chung, 2007; Raley & Lucas, 2006). Despite this, queer audiences watch these performances and may learn how others expect them to cope when facing similar struggles, conflicts, or intolerances (Chung, 2007; Raley & Lucas, 2006). While many studies examine the representation and reception of the queer community in media (e.g., Cooley & Burkholder, 2011; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Sink & Mastro, 2018), fewer studies investigate or recognize the role of emotions in queer discourse. To address this, the following study conducted a thematic decomposition analysis (e.g., Bower et al., 2002; Stenner, 1993; Wollett et al., 1998) of seven North American films that were cross-listed as both gay/lesbian and romantic comedies, and were produced and released between 1996 and 2018. In combination with the analysis and a symbolic interactionist approach to understanding emotions (e.g., Armon-Jones, 1988; Hochschild, 1983; Goffman, 1959; Scheff, 1977, 1988), I proposed five coping strategies used by queer film characters: humor, conforming, avoiding, ignoring, and accepting. While some characters are able to accept their sexual orientation despite intolerances, other characters struggle to overcome shame associated with their identity. While these films may validate the queer community by providing visibility, with only a few examples of pride, these same films suggest that there is an abundance of shame associated with being queer.

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Introduction

While North American movie audiences are eager to support romantic narratives between two hobbits or two ogres, the same audiences struggle to accept romantic storylines between two men or two women (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). As a bisexual woman growing up in Canada, I had near-effortless access to heterosexual humans and fantasy creatures falling in love in the books, movies, and television shows I consumed. Queer storylines featuring two human women proved more challenging to find. Like many queer people (McDavitt et al., 2008), I came from a heterosexual home that rarely discussed queer topics, but when I did find these stories in TV or movies, I savored them. However, as McLaughlin and Rodriguez (2017) explain, I learned that "inclusion does not always equal representation" (p. 1196).

Indeed, like straight audiences, many queer people report turning to television and movies to cope with the stress they experience in real life (Craig et al., 2015; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). Comedy films, in particular, serve as escapes by playing with the social norms and expectations of everyday life (Hochschild, 1983; Neale & Krutnik, 1990; Pinedo, 1997). Typically, the norms and expectations displayed in these films derive from the time and place of their production (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Craig et al., 2015; Dhaenens, 2012; Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000; Stevens, 2020; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). In this sense, films can be understood as cultural artifacts, providing deeper understandings of how a culture values and normalizes sexuality, gender, and other forms of identity (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). As artifacts, the films used in this thesis provide insight into North American social values around the time of their production and subsequent release.

North American comedies from their inception and continuing today often feature a second, romantic storyline, which includes a man and woman falling in love (Grant, 2007; Stevens, 2020). These films are romantic comedies (Grant, 2007; Stevens, 2020). Researchers argue queer characters and relationships have not received the same recognition as heterosexuals in romantic comedies (Dhaenens, 2012; Raley & Lucas, 2006). Instead, queer characters adopt a comedic role, where the majority of the characters' comedy centers on jokes about their sexual orientation (Cabosky, 2015; Dhaenens, 2012; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006). To exploit these characters for humor, film and television rely on their audiences' knowledge of queer stereotypes and social sexual orientation expectations (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Dhaenens, 2012; Fisher et al., 2007; Gorton, 2009; Manuel, 2009; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). By relying on these stereotypes, filmmakers often portray inaccurate depictions of the queer community (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Dhaenens, 2012; Fisher et al., 2007; Gorton, 2009; Manuel, 2009; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). Due to this, members of the queer community not only feel alienated from each other and their society, but straight audiences also adopt false perceptions of the community (Cooley & Burkholder, 2011; Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Sink & Mastro, 2018).

By utilizing a symbolic interactionist approach, I recognize that movie audiences internalize the values they see expressed on-screen (Hall, 1997; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). As the majority of filmmakers are straight, so are the perceptions of these films (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Bond, 2015b; Chung, 2007; Gorton, 2009; Manuel, 2009; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). Watching these characters, queer audiences

learn and internalize straight filmmakers' perceptions of the community (Bond, 2015a; Chung, 2007; Fisher et al., 2007; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Raley & Lucas, 2006). Seeing these characters experience similar conflicts and struggles, queer audiences learn how these characters cope (Chung, 2007; Fisher al., 2007; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Raley & Lucas, 2006). In this thesis, I will examine how queer characters in romantic comedies cope with emotions, specifically those related to their sexual orientations. To do this, I will conduct a thematic decomposition analysis (e.g., Bower et al., 2002; Stenner, 1993; Wollett et al., 1998) following Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis. While extensive literature exists regarding how queer characters' representations change audiences' attitudes towards the queer community (e.g., Cooley & Burkholder, 2011; Levina et al., 2000; Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018; Manuel, 2009; Moddelmog, 2009; Padva, 2008; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Sink & Mastro, 2018; Vaughn et al., 2017), fewer studies examine the quality of this inclusion (e.g., Grant, 2007; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017) or recognize the influence of emotions in queer discourse. While the current research cannot fill the gap in the literature entirely, it does seek to answer questions regarding how mainstream North American film includes the queer community and their emotional experiences. Specifically, in this thesis, I look to examine how queer characters cope with their emotions during social interactions that question their sexual orientations and whether they can resolve conflicting emotions.

This thesis will begin by situating its research within the existing literature on queer representation in North American television and film, with specific emphasis on comedies. I will provide a brief history of queer roles in Hollywood before describing the current influence of queer characters on audiences today. I will then go on to present the theoretical frameworks that

guide this thesis. Using a combination of frameworks, I outline a symbolic interactionist approach. Evring Goffman's (1959) concept of the personal front allows me to acknowledge the performative nature of social interaction. Understanding this performance, I discuss the functions, performance, and management of emotions using the works of Peggy Thoits (1989), Claire Armon-Jones (1988), Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983), and Thomas Scheff (1988). By acknowledging the influence of emotions and society, I can further elaborate on emotional predicaments (Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983), and the experiences and functions of emotions such as guilt, shame, and humor (Armon-Jones, 1988; Pinedo, 1997; Scheff, 1977, 1988; Scheff & Scheele, 1980; Simpson, 1996). Following these explanations, I will detail the coping strategies outlined by Allison Pugh (2009), including concealing, claiming, and patrolling. My methodology section begins with descriptions of the seven romantic comedies that comprise my sample. Afterward, I outline Braun and Clarke's (2006) process for conducting thematic analysis before describing thematic decomposition analysis using Stenner (1993), Hall (1997), and Bower et al. (2002). Finally, I present my findings, their implications, and the limitations of this piece of work. Below I define critical key terms going forward, including homophobia, queer, heteronormativity, and internalized homophobia.

Homophobia

Until 1974, the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) included homosexuality as a mental illness (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Herek, 1984). The pathologization of homosexuality was the result of North America's heterosexual standards, which continue to marginalize and discriminate against people who identify as queer (Derbyshire, 1994; McDavitt et al., 2008; Reyna et al., 2014). Simply put,

North America stigmatizes queer sexual orientations when queer individuals deviate from these standards (Cooley & Burkholder, 2011; Craig et al., 2015; Reyna et al., 2014; Theodore et al., 2013). Sexual orientation, like other social categories such as race or gender, is used, and has historically been used, to classify people based on attraction to certain genders (Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Herek, 1984; Serpen et al., 2018). Within these categories, people feel not only a sense of community but may learn to identify with its label like other social groups (Brown & Alderson, 2010). Many of these social categories, including sexual orientation, are assumed and accepted to be innate facts of social life (Brown & Alderson, 2010; Herek, 1984). In contrast, some researchers argue that social interactions construct these categories (Brown & Alderson, 2010; Herek, 1984). I discuss social construction in more detail in the sections below.

In North America, heterosexuality, or the sole attraction to another gender, is accepted as the default sexual orientation (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Brown & Alderson, 2010; Herek, 1984). People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, or any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality do not fit into social expectations regarding sexual attraction (Brown & Alderson, 2010; Herek, 1984). Researchers refer to these sexual orientations as queer (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dhaenens, 2012; Jones, 2018). Not to be diminished, each of these sexual orientations holds their own unique characteristics and experiences that cannot go unacknowledged. However, for this thesis, each of these communities will be referred to as the collective queer community. Using the term queer in this thesis allows me to recognize all non-straight sexual orientations and their violations and deconstruction of heteronormative expectations (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dhaenens, 2012; Jones, 2018).

Despite numerous achievements initiated by queer activists, such as having homosexuality removed from the *DSM* and the legalization of queer marriage, North American culture continues to stereotype and marginalize the queer community (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Herek, 1984; Serpen et al., 2018; Sink & Mastro, 2018; Stevens, 2020; Theodore et al., 2013). People express fear, hatred, or intolerance through verbal, physical, and emotional means that promote feelings of abnormality, exclusion, and stigma in queer individuals (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Brown & Alderson, 2010; Burn et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2017). Behaviors that marginalize queer people may be direct, such as with insults, or implied, such as through subtle jokes (Burn et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2017). Expressions of homophobia such as these draw attention to and alienate queer individuals from heterosexual society (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Brown & Alderson, 2010; Evans et al., 2017; Serpen et al., 2018). Serpen et al. (2018) explain that individuals' homophobic attitudes and beliefs represent a dominant social mindset. The culturally dominant perception of heterosexuality as innate promotes the view and feeling that queer attraction is abnormal and different (Brown & Alderson, 2010; Herek, 1984; Serpen et al., 2018). While homophobia can refer to the intolerance of all queer attractions, more specific vocabularly, such as biphobia, refers especially to the intolerance of bisexual attraction (Burn et al., 2005). Without greater acceptance, validation, and visibility, this othering of the queer community will likely continue (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Sink & Mastro, 2018; Theodore et al., 2013).

Due to homophobia, some people in the queer community choose to conceal their sexual orientation (Burn et al., 2005; Cooley & Burkholder, 2011; Edwards, 1996; Ryan et al., 2017). Concealment is motivated by the desire to both avoid homophobia, a social punishment, and

maintain group membership, a social reward (Burn et al., 2005; Cooley & Burkholder, 2011; Derbyshire, 1994; Evans et al., 2017; Habarth, 2013). Queer individuals, then, must be disingenuous with their real identity to stay safe in public and avoid unwanted attention. However, this can lead to feelings of exclusion and stress (Burn et al., 2005; Cooley & Burkholder, 2011; Craig et al., 2015; Derbyshire, 1994; Habarth, 2013). Researchers report that without overcoming these feelings and learning to cope with homophobia, queer people will continue to struggle to reduce stress and increase self-esteem (Burn et al., 2005; Craig et al., 2015; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Ryan et al., 2017).

Heteronormativity

Physical and sexual attraction solely to a gender other than one's own refers to heterosexuality or being straight (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Brown & Alderson, 2010; Herek, 1984). As mentioned above, in North American society, heterosexuality was, and sometimes continues to be, the standard and the only acceptable sexual orientation (Brown & Alderson, 2010; Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Habarth, 2013; Kawale, 2004; Manuel, 2009). Katz (1995) refers to these standards as heteronormativity, describing to the value placed on heterosexuality over queer sexual orientations. Due to this, heteronormative attitudes and beliefs influence social norms and expectations. As these beliefs change, so do their norms and expectations (Habarth, 2013). Although not extinct, with growing tolerance for the queer community, heteronormative influences have reduced over time (Dhaenens, 2012; Habarth, 2013). However, despite shifting paradigms and higher tolerance, some queer sexual orientations are still associated with stigma and prejudice (Brown & Alderson, 2010; Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Habarth, 2013; Kawale, 2004; Manuel, 2009).

Although heteronormativity is an invisible social force, it is an ingrained belief for straight and queer people alike in North America (Habarth, 2013). Regardless of actual sexual orientation, anyone who violates heteronormative standards is likely to experience negative social consequences (Habarth, 2013). A man perceived as too feminine or a woman perceived as too masculine may face discrimination, isolation, or public humiliation, all due to deviance from social norms and expectations (Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Levina et al., 2000; McDavitt et al., 2008). Queer individuals may hide their sexual orientation in favor of being perceived as straight to ensure continued group membership and to avoid punishment and homophobia (Burn et al., 2005; Cooley & Burkholder, 2011; Kawale, 2004). This indicates that heteronormativity's social influence goes as far as regulating individual and collective emotions (Kawale, 2004). While heterosexual couples can get married and show affection in public, queer couples receive questions, curiosity, and scrutiny regarding their relationship (Vinjamuri, 2015). Heteronormativity ensures that queer people do not have the same freedoms and privacies in their relationships as their straight equivalents.

Internalized Homophobia

When a straight person is intolerant of a queer person due to their sexual orientation, this is homophobia (Burn et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2017; Herek, 1984). When a queer person is intolerant of their own sexual orientation and directs homophobic attitudes towards themselves, researchers refer to this as internalized homophobia (Evans et al., 2017; Flebus & Montano, 2012; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Puckett et al., 2017). Growing up in a heteronormative society, queer people learn about the rejection, stigma, and prejudice directed towards the queer community (Burn et al., 2005; Flebus & Montano, 2012; Frost & Meyer, 2009; la Roi et al.,

2016; Ryan et al., 2017). Queer people internalize these attitudes and beliefs after repeated exposure, believing themselves that they are abnormal or different (Burn et al., 2005; Flebus & Montano, 2012; Frost & Meyer, 2009; la Roi et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2017). Falling into this mindset, queer people no longer suffer only from society's homophobia, but their own homophobic thoughts as well (Burn et al., 2005; Edwards, 1996; Evans et al., 2017). In some cases, queer individuals report concealing their sexual orientations to cope with internalized homophobia (Burn et al., 2005; Flebus & Montano, 2012; Ryan et al., 2017). One participant in Chester et al.'s (2016) study captures this sentiment when he explains, "I was just really worried about other people's perceptions. The worst thing that I could be called was gay. So I did everything in my power to not be perceived as gay" (p. 322-323). However, despite the ability to hide their sexual orientations, researchers argue that queer people cannot always hide their true selves. Overcoming internalized homophobia is an essential step in self-acceptance (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Ryan et al., 2017; Theodore et al., 2013).

Literature Review

Despite producing hundreds of films annually, the North American film industry continues to feature heterosexual characters significantly more often than their queer counterparts (Grant, 2007; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017; Stevens, 2020). For meaningful interpretation of their narratives, the film industry relies on its audiences' knowledge of social standards and values (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Craig et al., 2015; Dhaenens, 2012; Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000; Stevens, 2020; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). In North America, audiences expect movies to reflect the heteronormative standards their society values (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Craig et al., 2015; Dhaenens, 2012; Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000; Stevens, 2020; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). Thus, the majority of film characters in the North American industry are straight (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Cabosky, 2015; Dhaenens, 2012; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Stevens, 2020). When films do include queer characters, their roles are minor and often serve as comic relief (especially when the laugh is at their expense) (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Cabosky, 2015; Dhaenens, 2012; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Stevens, 2020). Moreso, films use stereotyped speech patterns, mannerisms, and clothing styles to identify queer characters quickly (Brown & Groscup, 2009; Chung, 2007; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Reyna et al., 2014). However, many researchers have found that these stereotypes are arguably inaccurate depictions of the queer community, and as a result, demonstrate stances of heteronormativity and homophobia (Grant, 2007; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017; Stevens, 2020). With a disconnect between representations on-screen and real-life experiences, films can further

marginalize audiences from unfamiliar communities (Grant, 2007; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017; Stevens, 2020). If queer individuals have limited access to others in the community, they may turn to film, television, and other accessible media to learn about queer identities (Craig et al., 2015). Should this be the case, queer audiences will not necessarily learn about the queer community in movies, but rather the film industry's heteronormative interpretation of the group. Movies, then, teach queer audiences how to act in a heteronormative society. For this reason, it is vital to examine how films portray their queer characters. Do they experience homophobia? How do they react to homophobia? How do queer characters manage the feelings associated with their sexual orientation in a heteronormative world?

In the following literature review, I will present a brief history of the North American film industry. Mainly, I will discuss how film narratives, notably comedy and romantic comedy, reflect the social and cultural climate in which they are produced, and the influence this has on their audiences. I will then go on to discuss the consequences of queer visibility and representation. Finally, I will highlight the history of queer representation in scripted North American media, and where that representation currently stands today with respect to audiences' perceptions and agency.

Hollywood and Mainstream Cinema

Established as early as 1917, Hollywood cinema has become a unique film practice, characterized by its high production value and seamless storytelling (Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000). As movie-going and watching became common and accessible, movie producers sought to capitalize on the industry's success (Bond, 2015b; Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000). Aiming to profit at

the box office, Hollywood experimented with conventions of storytelling, leading to genre formulae as we know them today (Bond, 2015b; Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000). By following specific formulae of conventions, filmmakers could rapidly produce movies that were almost guaranteed to be well received and financially successful (Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000; Visch et al., 2010). Audiences can recognize which genre they are watching when they see certain conventions together onscreen (Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000; Visch et al., 2010). Such conventions include characters' appearances, behaviors, and social statuses, or representations of gender, class, race, or ethnicity, all of which influence what audiences can expect from a film (Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000; Visch et al., 2010). For many genre films, physical space and time are their defining features (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000). In these films, characters' narratives involve overcoming challenges that are relevant to the social and political climates at the time of production (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Craig et al., 2015; Dhaenens, 2012; Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). Comedy is one of these genres (Grant, 2007; Neale & Krutnik, 1990).

In Hollywood, comedies use a light tone to reflect everyday life, usually reflecting the time of their production (Neale & Krutnik, 1990). Comedies often center around a character or group of characters who must overcome unforeseen obstacles to achieve an important goal (Grant, 2007). These obstacles transpire out of a change in the character's status quo or a conflict between themselves and the rules of their society (Craig et al., 2015; Grant, 2007). The film can only end once the character overcomes this conflict to achieve their ultimate goal (Craig et al., 2015; Grant, 2007; Neale & Krutnik, 1990). While these storylines do depict everyday life, it is conventional for comedies to present daily life in a nuanced form, that is, by bending and

sometimes abandoning social and cultural expectations (Neale & Krutnik, 1990). Like the emotion of humor discussed in the sections below, comedy and jokes are created by expressing the unpredictable, which often includes deviating from social rules and norms (Hochschild, 1983; Neale & Krutnik, 1990). By abandoning the predictable, comedic characters can find novel solutions to their conflicts that may not translate from the movie screen to the real world (Neale & Krutnik, 1990). Unlike the movie world, social rules and norms still exist, unabandoned in the real world after audiences turn off their movie screens. Film audiences, then, must be able to negotiate and differentiate what can happen in the real world and what is exclusive to the cinema world.

In addition to their main storyline, Hollywood comedies often feature a second, romantic storyline (Grant, 2007; Stevens, 2020). Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Hollywood produced comedies about getting re-married after going through a divorce, and by the 1950s, filmmakers were telling comedic stories about sex outside of marriage (Stevens, 2020). These films reflected the relevant social issues in America at the time, such as the rising divorce rate and new ideologies surrounding pre-marital sex (Stevens, 2020). Into the 1960s, Hollywood's comedies began focusing on the interpersonal relationships of their characters rather than broader social issues at the time (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Stevens, 2020). Stevens (2020) suggests this change arose from the social movements occurring around North America and the world at the time: intertwined now were identities and politics. These changes led comedies with romantic subplots to focus on character interaction, rather than serve as commentaries for broader social issues (Stevens, 2020). With the repeated success of combining comedic and romantic conventions, Hollywood established a subgenre of comedy, the romantic comedy (Grant, 2007;

Stevens, 2020). By the 1990s, with the releases of movies like *Four Weddings and a Funeral, The Birdcage,* and *My Best Friend's Wedding*, romantic comedy became the first major genre to spotlight queer characters in the mainstream (Stevens, 2020). While these three films suggested an initial revolution of queer romantic comedies, following their releases, queer characters continued to be limited in not only romantic comedies but the mainstream altogether (Grant, 2007; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017). When queer characters have been included in comedies and romantic comedies since, their sexual orientations are often at the center of jokes (Cabosky, 2015; Dhaenens, 2012; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006). Surprisingly, queer characters are often the ones sharing these jokes, suggesting that filmmakers believe that queer-themed jokes are more socially acceptable if a queer character says them versus a straight character (Cabosky, 2015; Dhaenens, 2012; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006). This indicates that while progress has been made to include queer roles in the mainstream, Hollywood still has work to do.

Queer Media History

To provide a better understanding of queer representation, in this section, I will outline a brief history of queer roles in the North American film industry. With the inception of the industry in the 1910s, queer characters were included but regulated to minor roles (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). During this time, their main defining feature was gender deviance, and, occasionally, also comedy (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Manuel, 2009). By the 1920s, American society created and spread stereotypes about queer men both in film and in real life (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Queer men became associated with being effeminate, liking the colors lavender or

pink, walking with tiny steps, or having feminine mannerisms: Americans referred to this as the pansy, a role associated with comedy (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Manuel, 2009). The pansy was not considered a real man at this time, and further reinforced society's stereotypes about queer men (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). However, with the introduction of the Production Code in the 1930s, films could no longer include sexual perversion, including the pansy (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Hollywood did not exclude queer characters altogether but instead made them less obvious (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). The pansy was now either a heterosexual, married man or uninterested in sex entirely (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Also during this time, if a film included a queer woman, she was an asexual tomboy or an old, unmarried woman; however, many films chose not to introduce lesbian characters at all (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006).

During the Second World War, Hollywood began including more coded references to the queer community (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Queer people from rural communities migrated to larger cities to help with the war effort, where, for the first time, they were able to meet people like themselves (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Groups of queer people became more common in America, and with women's help in winning the war, gender expectations and discourses began changing (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). With an increased awareness of the queer community, Hollywood introduced more queer characters in its films (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). However, these were no longer only minor characters with occasional comedic relief; instead, films presented many queer characters as sick or dangerous (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). This indicates that despite the Production Code, sexual perversion could be displayed so long as it characterized a villainous role (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Throughout the 1940s, perceptions of queer characters shifted from something to laugh at to something to be afraid of in America.

By the 1950s, Hollywood was depicting teenagers as delinquents who went out of their way to disobey the law (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). To make careless teenagers appear even more deviant, Hollywood began coding them as queer (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Often by the end of the film, these characters were killed, and usually in a violent way (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). The inclusion of queer characters continued to be in line with the regulations of the Production Code, as they served to teach a moral lesson to the film's audience (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006): if one deviates from the social rules of society, they will receive punishment. At the height of the Cold War, American films often conveyed messages to fear the Other due to their differences (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Queer characters, then, continued to be based on homophobic stereotypes, suggesting "homosexuality was silly and comedic, villainous and scary, shameful and tragic" (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006, p. 94; Manuel, 2009). However, with the abolition of the Production Code in the 1960s, Hollywood was now able to make characters unquestionably queer as opposed to merely hinting at it (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Fisher et al., 2007). With constant homophobic depictions of the queer community, movie audiences came to accept homophobia as a natural aspect of life rather than a reaction out of prejudice and discrimination (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). It was during this decade, in 1969, that the modern queer rights movement began with the Stonewall Riots in New York City (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). These riots brought queer rights into the mainstream, not just in North American but around the world, and allowed for new discussions surrounding queer self-acceptance and the community's struggle for equality (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006).

In the 1970s, with a more visible and vocal community, queer organizations called on filmmakers to improve the representations of their queer characters (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006).

However, despite the organizations' efforts, queer characters in Hollywood continued to be based on homophobic stereotypes (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Unsatisfied with Hollywood's response, queer people began producing their own films, which focused on queer communities and queer issues (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). These queer-produced films provided queer audiences with representations of their community that would otherwise be unseen, allowing queer people to see that they are not different or something to be feared, as Hollywood suggested (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Now with the ability to compare queer films to Hollywood films, queer audiences increased their criticism of their community's representation in the mainstream (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006).

Throughout the beginning of the 1980s, as queer communities continued to make their voices heard, some Hollywood films attempted to show queer acceptance, while others continued to exhibit intolerance and fear (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dean, 2007). When films did introduce queer roles, they did not address queer issues but instead suggested queer characters were just like their heterosexual counterparts, albeit excluding a romantic life (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Representing queer characters in this lens suggested that queer people were only accepted in North America at the time if they maintained heteronormative expectations despite their sexual orientation. However, queer representation changed dramatically by the mid-1980s as the AIDS epidemic grew throughout North America (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dean, 2007). To combat American fears of AIDS, Hollywood downplayed or removed queer characters from their films altogether (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Throughout the epidemic of the 1980s, many North American audiences viewed the queer community, both in real life and in cinema, as diseased, which bolstered persistent avoidance and discrimination of the already marginalized

community (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dean, 2007). Hollywood and other institutions felt comfortable publicly marginalizing the queer community without consequences, allowing other members of society to accept this perception (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dean, 2007; Grant, 2007).

As the alarm regarding the AIDS epidemic quieted into the mid-1990s, queer characters began to appear in Hollywood films again (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dean, 2007; Fisher et al., 2007; Grant, 2007; Manuel, 2009). Despite films including more openly queer themes, instances of North American heteronormativity and homophobia persisted (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dean, 2007; Manuel, 2009). Like in years previous, queer organizations spoke out against these representations, calling for Hollywood to improve their community's visibility for queer and straight audiences alike (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Addressing feedback, Hollywood attempted to make marginalized communities like the queer community more visible in their films (Dean, 2007; Grant, 2007). However, Benshoff and Griffin (2006) and Chung (2007) argue that Hollywood maintained stereotyped representations that evolved very little into the 2000s. Despite increased visibility and the appearance of solidarity with the queer community, Hollywood's depictions of queer characters have slowed improvements to North America's knowledge of queer people and their struggles (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dean, 2007). Queer roles in films are now used as tokens of inclusivity, offering minimal visibility while still claiming representation (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dean, 2007). Without more diverse images, queer audiences are left to assimilate into heteronormative society, just like the characters they see on their screens (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dean, 2007; Manuel, 2009).

However, as North American society and culture change, Hollywood's representation of the queer community shifts with these changes (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Dean, 2007; Grant, 2007; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). While the queer community continues to play a comedic role in Hollywood, researchers argue that increased queer representation in North America will have a positive influence on queer individuals' self-perception and pride (Craig et al., 2015; Dhaenens, 2012). These findings emphasize the need for continued to research on the relationship between queer representation and audience interpretation.

Socialization

Having established the past and current trends of queer representation, I now wish to reiterate why this is critical. In the twentieth century, immigrants to America were encouraged to attend special movie features "to educate and familiarize [themselves] with the customs, principles, and institutions of American life" (Sutherland & Feltey, 2013, p. 2). In other words, newcomers were encouraged to attend movies to assimilate themselves with American social norms, values, and expectations (Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). While these films aimed to be educational, researchers argue that audiences can learn American culture from any American film depending on its genre (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Neale, 2000; Stevens, 2020; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). As mentioned above, this is because of some Hollywood genres, such as comedies, which mirror the society and culture in which they are made (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Craig et al., 2015; Dhaenens, 2012; Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000; Stevens, 2020; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). By reflecting culture, films, television, and other forms of media are mediums for knowledge, allowing audiences to interpret their own world through the media's demonstrations of right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, or expected and

unexpected (Bond, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Chung, 2007; Craig et al., 2015; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Stevens, 2020). Of particular concern are topics that individuals often learn of first through the media, such as the case with human sexuality in North America (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Bond, 2015b; Chung, 2007; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013).

While sexuality of any form is commonly considered taboo in North American media, queer sexual orientations, compared to heterosexuality, are deemed especially taboo (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Manuel, 2009). Despite media teaching both straight and queer audiences alike about human sexuality, the majority of Hollywood characters are heterosexual (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Bond, 2015b; Chung, 2007; Gorton, 2009; Manuel, 2009; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). Straight audiences can see themselves represented in an abundance of heterosexual characters, whereas queer audiences rarely see themselves reflected in mainstream narratives (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Dhaenens, 2012; Fisher et al., 2007; Gorton, 2009; Manuel, 2009; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). Although straight audiences can see themselves represented in an abundance of heterosexual characters, queer audiences rarely see themselves reflected in mainstream narratives, and when they are, they are often stereotyped to the point of inaccuracy (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Dhaenens, 2012; Fisher et al., 2007; Gorton, 2009; Manuel, 2009; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). This can lead queer audiences to not only struggle with their identity development but also struggle to find acceptance in heteronormative society (Chung, 2007; Craig et al., 2015).

Whereas some researchers argue that family and friends are more influential than mainstream media (Raley & Lucas, 2006), other researchers contend that, in some cases, media provides audiences with more information about human sexuality than the family does (Chung,

2007; McDavitt et al., 2008). Unlike some other marginalized communities, families and friends do not always share sexual orientations, and, as a result, cannot always pass on knowledge or guidance to queer individuals (McDavitt et al., 2008). Lacking direct access to the queer community can lead queer individuals to turn to television and movies to gain information (Chung, 2007; Fisher et al., 2007; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Raley & Lucas, 2006). Consuming television, films, and other forms of media allow audiences to learn about the internalization of sexual beliefs and perceptions, which Bond (2014) calls sexual scripts. With repeated exposure, audiences come to accept Hollywood's sexual scripts just as they do other social norms, values, and beliefs (Bond, 2014; Chung, 2007; Stevens, 2020). In other words, heteronormativity becomes accepted in Hollywood just as it does in North American society.

As audiences watch storylines play out before them, they interpret meaning from character interactions by internalizing the values they see on screen (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Bond, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Chung, 2007; Fisher et al., 2007; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Stevens, 2020; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). If characters allude to or discuss homophobic beliefs, queer audiences will see and hear what is said. By internalizing these beliefs and directing them at themselves, queer people will perceive themselves as society does, deviant (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Bond, 2015a; Chung, 2007; Fisher et al., 2007; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Raley & Lucas, 2006). To cope with the heteronormativity and homophobia they experience in their own lives, queer audiences may look to queer characters for guidance. If Hollywood mirrors appropriate real-life behaviors, heteronormative institutions teach queer audiences how to react to homophobia appropriately.

How Hollywood chooses to represent the queer community influences not only queer people but heterosexual audiences as well (Cooley & Burkholder, 2011; Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Sink & Mastro, 2018). After watching positive and respectful videos featuring queer individuals, participants in both Cooley and Burkholder (2011) and Madžarević and Soto-Sanfiel's (2018) studies reported a decrease in negative attitudes held towards the queer community compared to before watching the videos. In similar studies, McLaughlin and Rodriguez (2017) and Sink and Mastro (2018) found that participants who reported watching more television with queer characters also reported having fewer homophobic views than participants who watched less diverse programming. The findings of these studies emphasize the influence media can have on changing attitudes towards sexual orientations. Media provides audiences with opportunities to see the world through perspectives other than their own; without media, some straight audiences would otherwise have little experience with the queer community (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Sink & Mastro, 2018). Bond (2015b) and Manuel (2009) attribute Hollywood's lack of queer visibility to North America's fear of the other. This reiterates the importance of queer representation for straight audiences; with enhanced knowledge comes increased tolerance.

Consequences

Stereotypes

While mainstream North American films frequently exclude queer characters from their narratives, the few queer roles that do exist, rely on the use of stereotypes (Brown & Groscup, 2009; Chung, 2007; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Reyna et al., 2014). A stereotype is a process of agreed-upon simplification (Chung, 2007). Based on categories and

concepts, society makes generalizations about social groups to explain various attributes (Brown & Groscup, 2009; Chung, 2007). Knowing the stereotypes associated with particular groups allows for immediate group identification (Brown & Groscup, 2009; Chung, 2007). However, some stereotypes have negative connotations and are used to marginalize groups of people who deviate from traditional values and beliefs (Chung, 2007; Reyna et al., 2014). This implies that stereotypes influence social control (Chung, 2007). As discussed above, queer audiences may internalize the characteristics displayed by queer characters onscreen, with stereotypes being no exception (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Bond, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Chung, 2007; Fisher et al., 2007; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). When this occurs, queer audiences internalize inaccurate stereotypes about the queer community and their identities, further marginalizing them from not only heteronormative society but the queer community itself.

Conformity

Due to homophobic attitudes and beliefs in North America, many queer people feel the need to hide their sexual orientation (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Burn et al., 2005; Chung, 2007; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Jones, 2018). With Hollywood characters being typically straight, white, and middle class, audiences may feel an incongruence between their own beliefs and desires, and the expectations of society (both in film and real-life) (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Burn et al., 2005; Chung, 2007; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Jones, 2018). Without seeing characters that reflect themselves, queer people may perceive themselves as deviant to heteronormative expectations (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Burn et al., 2005; Chung, 2007; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Jones, 2018). This becomes concerning when characters defy social norms and expectations in movies and

receive punishments (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Burn et al., 2005; Chung, 2007; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Jones, 2018). Seeing this treatment, queer people attempt to avoid similar sanctions in real life, such as violence, prejudice, or hatred by adopting a heterosexual front (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Burn et al., 2005; Chung, 2007; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Jones, 2018). To avoid this, queer people report managing others' perceptions of them by appearing heterosexual (Burn et al., 2005; Chung, 2007; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Jones, 2018). Due to heteronormativity and homophobia, queer people pretend to be someone they are not to stay safe in society.

Reading Hollywood as Queer

Without visible representation throughout much of Hollywood's history, North American queer audiences have had to learn how to read mainstream media as queer (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). As the majority of Hollywood films involve a heteronormative society, queer audiences interpret situations or characters as queer based on codes, such as appearance or mannerisms (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). While straight audiences may ignore a lingering stare between two same-gender characters, queer audiences may read this as queer subtext (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Although these instances may be covert and infrequent, discovering queer subtext in mainstream movies validates queer people's existence and feelings in an otherwise opposing society (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). Some Hollywood classics, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, do not necessarily include queer themes but have become popular among the community as they address the struggles of the queer experience, such as being social outsiders (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). By the 1950s, having a shared appreciation for films that speak to their existence, North American queer filmmakers came together to create a queer community and culture (Benshoff &

Griffin, 2006). For queer audiences, then, watching movies became not just an escape from heteronormative reality but also a shared social experience within their community that continues today (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

As I conduct the following analysis, I implement several theoretical frameworks. To explain how individuals present themselves during social interactions, I use Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of the personal front, a malleable impression of one's self that must be maintained when interacting with different individuals. Goffman's work on performance during social interactions influenced Arlie Russell Hochschild's (1983) understanding of emotions, resulting in her concepts of emotion management and feeling rules. Due to this, I argue that emotions influence the personal front due to the complimenting theories. I further adopt a symbolic interactionist perspective by drawing on Thoits (1989), Armon-Jones (1988), Hochschild (1983), Scheff (1988), and Davis (2012) to describe emotions and their functions. Individuals will display appropriate emotions to gain or maintain social acceptance, a valued trait in society (Hochschild, 1983). Accordingly, individuals will adopt approved and expected personal fronts to retain inclusion in society. Pugh's (2009) economy of dignity explains this adoption; as individuals patrol their personal fronts, they conceal aspects they perceive as inappropriate and instead make false claims to ensure their group membership. As a result of balancing one's internal feelings with the external expectations of the social world, individuals may experience guilt, shame, or other emotional predicaments (Armon-Jones, 1988; Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988). I finish addressing my theoretical framework by explaining the necessity to overcome these emotions.

Personal Front During Social Interactions

In his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) outlines his dramaturgical analysis approach. He argues that during social interactions, people put on

performances to ensure their audiences see them in a particular way. Goffman describes a performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (1959, p. 15). Performance, therefore, is the conscious or unconscious act of engaging with others while portraying an inauthentic impression of oneself. By knowing the rules of society, performances become more deliberate and coordinated as individuals try to hide their inappropriate but genuine emotions by displaying expressions and mannerisms that match social expectations (Goffman, 1959). Knowledge of social expectations is essential if the performance is to be accepted and approved by others during social interactions.

A personal front is the basis on which an audience judges a performance. For the impression to be successful, the performer must align all aspects of their personal front, including clothing, looks, posture, speech patterns, facial expressions, bodily gestures, sex, and age (Goffman, 1959). Social status influences an individual's appearance and mannerisms, allowing audiences to expect particular stereotypes based on the individual's personal front (Goffman, 1959). Given an individual's culture, their audience will have certain expectations about the norms and values of their performance, which the performer must adhere to for a believable impression. Therefore, a performer calculates and adapts their personal front to be perceived in a particular way by their audience.

By knowing the expectations of their culture, performers can adapt their personal front to display the idealized norms of their society; Goffman refers to this as idealization. Idealization emphasizes the values and expectations of a society whereby those who abide by social norms earn more power and respect (Goffman, 1959). Maintaining an idealized impression, then,

involves displaying an inauthentic version of one's self during interactions for social benefit. Concealing any emotion or action which contradicts this performance ensures that the idealized impression is further maintained (Goffman, 1959). However, Goffman explains, by the time their audience will see this performance, the performer will have rehearsed and edited out any inconsistencies. The end product of this embodied idealization becomes the impression that the audience knows the performer by and the impression which the performer must subsequently keep (Goffman, 1959). This impression, however, can change depending on the environment and the audience that the performer is interacting with (Goffman, 1959). An individual is unlikely to give the same impression to their children and friends as different perceptions allow for different goals.

Goffman refers to the management of performance as the maintenance of expressive control. The performer is responsible for correcting errors or miscommunications in their interactions, such as accidental gestures or incorrect language (Goffman, 1959). During interactions, audiences are skeptical of new impressions and seek out errors in the individual's performance to confirm their suspicions (Goffman, 1959). If it becomes apparent that someone in the interaction is lying about their impression, the audience will become alarmed, and the performance will be called into question (Goffman, 1959). In social interactions, the maintenance of expressive control allows individuals to both consciously and unconsciously create misrepresentations about themselves (Goffman, 1959). By performing particular expressions and mannerisms, the individual can convince their audience of their idealized impression (Goffman, 1959). Individuals who misrepresent themselves must continue to perform this impression in front of their audience. Once the interaction is underway, and the individual's

impression is accepted, the audience will stop looking for errors in the performance as they are no longer skeptical (Goffman, 1959). Although many people can perform, shame, guilt, and fear often inhibit people from misrepresenting themselves (Goffman, 1959). Many performers avoid these emotions by carefully crafting how they share information about themselves. Rather than lying directly, some performers use "[c]ommunication techniques such as innuendo, strategic ambiguity, and crucial omissions" to avoid telling the whole truth (Goffman, 1959, p. 62). By not telling a lie, the performer maintains social values and avoids unwanted consequences if anyone discovers the truth.

As an individual constructs and performs an idealized representation of themselves for others, their audience becomes fascinated with this impression (Goffman, 1959). Goffman refers to this as mystification, whereby the audience holds the performer to a high standard of admiration. To preserve this mystification, the performer must keep social distance between themselves and their audience (Goffman, 1959). However, maintaining this social distance is not the sole responsibility of the performer but also respected by the audience as well (Goffman, 1959). Keeping social distance allows the performer to continue to misrepresent themselves and hide characteristics that go against social expectations. Goffman explains that if the audience were to discover the truth, the mystification surrounding the performer would be gone, and the performer would feel ashamed at having their truth come out.

Finally, to believe an individual's performance, they must come across as sincere in their impression (Goffman, 1959). If their audience is skeptical of their sincerity, the individual's performance will be unsuccessful. Even if the individual has been performing the same impression for years, they still must ensure that they manage all aspects of their appearance when

they are in front of an audience (Goffman, 1959). Additionally, as performers take on new positions in society, they are not told how they construct their new impression (Goffman, 1959). As a result, individuals must take information from past experiences and cues during social interaction to fill in the gaps in their new performance (Goffman, 1959).

Defining Emotion

Emotions influence management of the personal front. To help define an emotion, Peggy Thoits (1989) compares similar definitions used by multiple authors. Thoits found that most descriptions included aspects of the environment, bodily sensations, expressive gestures, and labeling of the emotion, based on cultural understanding. These four components do not need to all be present at once to experience or recognize an emotion (Thoits, 1989). Due to the variability among definitions, Thoits speculates that emotions are products of social influence. Symbolic interactionists argue that defining emotion is dependent on the situation, emotion vocabulary, and emotional beliefs at the time and location of the experience (Hochschild, 1983; Thoits, 1989). In other words, cultural beliefs influence the warrantedness, interpretation, and labeling of an emotion (Armon-Jones, 1988; Hochschild, 1983). Society determines which emotions are appropriate when and where, creating social expectations about emotional conformity (Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988; Thoits, 1989). These expectations are what Hochschild (1983) refers to as feeling rules. Discussed in more detail below, Hochschild suggests that society creates regulations regarding the appropriate time, place, and intensity of emotional experiences. According to Thoits (1989), the emotional socialization of feeling rules and emotional vocabularies occurs through reinforcement, role modeling, imitation, identification, and instruction.

Functions of Emotions

Acknowledging the above definition of emotion, symbolic interactionists argue that emotions manage and regulate social control (Armon-Jones, 1988; Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988; Thoits, 1989). Thoits (1989) argues that without social emotions, society would not be able to function. Symbolic interactionists suggest that "[e]motion becomes a meaningful object to be interpreted, controlled, used, or managed by social actors, who are engaged in understanding themselves and managing others' impressions of them" (Thoits, 1989, p. 331). Depending on a society's emotional expectations, an individual may internalize these beliefs and suppress their real emotions in favor of displaying socially acceptable emotions (Armon-Jones, 1988; de Courville Nicol, 2011; Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988; Thoits, 1989). Emotions are objects, and therefore can be interpreted, transformed, and regulated as either appropriate or inappropriate; experiencing inappropriate emotions results in social sanctions (Armon-Jones, 1988; Davis, 2012; de Courville Nicol, 2011; Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988; Thoits, 1989). While these sanctions can come in the form of teasing or scolding, experiencing guilt or shame are other possibilities (Armon-Jones, 1988; Davis, 2012; de Courville Nicol, 2011; Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988; Thoits, 1989). Feeling guilty or ashamed motivates individuals to regulate their emotions to conform to social norms (Armon-Jones, 1988; Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988; Thoits, 1989).

Emotion Regulation

After observing their training, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) found that in addition to performing physical labor such as pushing metal carts or helping passengers with their luggage, flight attendants also participate in emotional labor. Emotional labor involves

producing or concealing feelings to meet social expectations (Hochschild, 1983). Through emotion management, facial and bodily expressions ensure that socially appropriate emotions are expressed (Hochschild, 1983). As described below, Hochschild argues that unwritten social rules govern individual emotional experience.

Like Goffman, Hochschild argues that emotions do not exist naturally within humans, but instead are the result of interactions with others and the environment. Rather than being innate, Hochschild believes that emotions are "something we *do*" (1983, p. 27, emphasis in original). Hochschild notes that people often try "getting in touch with" their feelings (1983, p. 17), suggesting that people actively influence the creation of their own emotions. If emotions are interpretations of the social values in a society based on settings, interactions, and bodily expressions, emotions, then, ensure the maintenance of social expectations through internalization (Hochschild, 1983). Experiencing a feeling at an inappropriate time, place, or intensity results in feelings of guilt or shame to correct and preserve the status quo (Hochschild, 1983). With feelings properly managed internally, bodily expressions must represent this management, too. Hochschild argues that culturally labeled physical sensations construct emotions.

Hochschild also draws on Goffman's writing on face-to-face interactions. Goffman focused much of his work on the interpretation of body language; Hochschild refers to this as surface acting. Surface acting, such as a raised eyebrow, a tightened upper lip, or a controlled sigh, can hide internal feelings and convince others of outwardly expressed emotions (Hochschild, 1983). While the goal of surface acting is to convince the audience that the performer is experiencing a particular feeling, the purpose of deep acting, another form of acting,

is to convince the individual of their performance as well (Hochschild, 1983). When Hochschild asked her students to describe moments of deep acting, she found that most responses contained the will to evoke, the intention to suppress, and the will to allow a feeling. Suppressing inappropriate emotions in favor of appropriate ones ensures not only the maintenance of social expectations but also social acceptance.

Hochschild argues that knowing how to act in social interactions involves knowing what script to follow. She refers to this as feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983). Feeling rules ensure that society shapes and maintains emotions based on the moral values of its culture (Hochschild, 1983). Feeling rules may not be legally binding laws, but they are social regulations that require individuals to reflect on how they are feeling versus what they should be feeling (Hochschild, 1983). While this process of reflection recognizes feeling rules, they can also be acknowledged when inappropriate emotions occur during social interactions (Hochschild, 1983). Hochschild explains that if during a social interaction, an individual's feelings do not appear appropriate for the situation, they may receive social sanctions, such as teasing, scolding, or shunning. Emotions are managed and regulated to avoid these sanctions and produce feelings that meet social expectations (Hochschild, 1983). The purpose of social sanctions is to pressure the feeling rule violator into correcting their feelings (Hochschild, 1983). As a result, individuals may feel an internal struggle between what they truly feel and what they should feel. Abiding by feeling rules not only gains and maintains social acceptance but also avoids social sanctions, such as the pain of rejection (Hochschild, 1983).

Emotional Predicament

To avoid social sanctions and maintain social inclusion, some people may experience contradictory emotions (Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983). This refers to an emotional predicament (Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983). An emotional predicament begins to occur when an individual believes others perceive them negatively (Davis, 2012). The individual does not necessarily have a predicament with the social interaction, but with the resulting contradictory emotions (Davis, 2012). As explained above, emotions serve to maintain social values, norms, and expectations (Armon-Jones, 1988; Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988; Thoits, 1989). If an individual displays a socially inappropriate emotion, they may experience other emotions such as shame or guilt as forms of emotional social sanctions (Armon-Jones, 1988; Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988; Thoits, 1989). Individuals who cannot manage this shame or guilt experience an emotional predicament (Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983). In addition to individual struggles, emotional predicaments highlight societal definitions of emotional deviance and represent broader societal emotional expectations and norms (Davis, 2012).

Guilt

In addition to lower self-esteem and increased anxiety, queer people report increased feelings of guilt related to their sexual orientation. (Gould, 2001; McDavitt et al., 2008; Puckett et al., 2017). When an individual experiences an inappropriate emotion, they change it into a more appropriate emotion; guilt manages this process (Armon-Jones, 1988; Hochschild, 1983; Thoits, 1989). If an individual can recognize and identify an emotion as inappropriate, they are aware of the feeling rules governing their society (Armon-Jones, 1988; Hochschild, 1983; Thoits, 1989). Due to this, individuals are aware that there are rewards and punishments for both socially desirable and deviant behavior. Thus, Armon-Jones (1988) refers to guilt as the fear of

punishment. Guilt serves a self-reflective purpose, whereby the individual internalizes social values to maintain social acceptance (Armon-Jones, 1988; Hochschild, 1983).

Shame

Thomas Scheff (1988) argues that following social rejection, an individual may experience shame as they self-monitor their behavior and reflect on others' opinions of them. Shame holds such negative connotations that people become ashamed of experiencing shame in the first place (de Courville Nicol, 2011; Scheff, 1988). Scheff distinguishes two types of shame: overt, undifferentiated shame, and bypassed shame. Overt, undifferentiated shame transpires when an individual perceives themselves negatively when they sense that others are perceiving them negatively (Loveday, 2015; Scheff, 1988). The individual may comment that they feel awkward, inadequate, vulnerable, or foolish, and as a result, attempt to conceal their pain by averting their gaze, speaking quietly, or blushing (Davis, 2012; Scheff, 1988). Like overt, undifferentiated shame, bypassed shame arises with the sense that others disapprove of oneself; however, bypassed shame differs as the individual avoids feeling this disapproval through strategies like countershaming (Scheff, 1988). Bypassed shame often goes unacknowledged, as individuals prefer to distract themselves from the resulting emotional pain (Scheff, 1988). In addition to these two forms of shame, V. de Courville Nicol (personal communication, April 24, 2020) identifies a third form of shame, processed shame. This occurs when the individual overcomes, or processes, overt, undifferentiated shame, and bypassed shame (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020). To process shame, individuals separate their emotions from the occurring social conflict by recognizing that other people may not always agree with their perspectives (de Courville Nicol, 2011; Scheff, 1988). If the

individual agrees that their emotion or behavior was inappropriate, they can make changes to fix this (de Courville Nicol, 2011; Scheff, 1988). However, if they feel the shame is unwarranted, the individual will not conform to reduce social tension (de Courville Nicol, 2011; Scheff, 1988). Experiencing processed shame indicates the individual has overcome either their overt, undifferentiated shame, or their bypassed shame (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020).

Structure, Humor, & the Cathartic Effect

Researching social movements, Goodwin and Pfaff (2001) found that activists often use encouragement mechanisms to manage fears associated with the movement. Similarly, queer individuals use coping strategies to manage their fears while living in a heteronormative society (Chung, 2007; Fisher al., 2007; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Raley & Lucas, 2006). Guilt is the fear of punishment, while shame is the fear of humiliation (Armon-Jones, 1988). However, sometimes fear is confronted by taking risks (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002). In these moments, individuals feel in control of their emotions and able to overcome the fear of the other.

When interpreting the world, Simpson (1996) argues that using a neutral framework assumes that the world is neither dangerous nor safe, but only extraordinary instances of danger and safety are visible (Simpson, 1996). With repeated exposure to people, places, and things, objects in the world can be recognized and labeled as safe or dangerous (Douglas, 1966; Simpson, 1996). Like stereotypes, assumptions can be made about patterns in safety and danger, allowing for easier identification in the future (Douglas, 1966). However, if a community is associated with negative assumptions, others will avoid the community (Douglas, 1966). Aware that straight people may interpret them as dangerous, queer people may begin to adopt a cautious

framework. Until proven safe, the cautious framework perceives the world as dangerous (Simpson, 1996). Like a tourist afraid of having their wallet stolen in New York City, a queer person may hide their sexual orientation to stay safe, assuming they are in danger.

Simpson (1996) argues that safety and danger are, to a substantial extent, social constructions, the products of a collective agreement, and socialization. Due to this shared understanding, there are specific frameworks associated with particular situations; a deviation from this is inappropriate (Simpson, 1996). The violation of an expected framework results in experiencing emotions such as humor, horror, excitement, or fear (Simpson, 1996). Safe or neutral objects that become dangerous create horror, while the inverse is true for humor (Simpson, 1996). A queer person may experience this when they hear a homophobic comment, but discover the opinion comes from another queer person; while a homophobic person would be dangerous, a queer person sharing homophobic values would be a contradiction – herein lies the humor.

Humor, like horror, challenges assumptions about reality (Pinedo, 1997). Humor draws attention to cultural norms that are otherwise unaddressed by violating expectations and predictability (Pinedo, 1997). In horror, a monster embodies contradictions, disrupting social order with its deviant qualities (Pinedo, 1997). Likewise, then, humor disrupts social order by highlighting society's contradictions. Horror exposes terror in everyday life, allowing audiences to cope with their personal struggles (Pinedo, 1997). If this is true for horror, then it is also true for humor; humor allows the audience to cope by recognizing their conflicts. Horror, and by extension humor, let their audiences experience repressed feelings that they ordinarily must manage (Pinedo, 1997). Scheff (1977) refers to this as the cathartic effect.

Like Pinedo, Scheff and Scheele (1980) suggest that individuals hide inappropriate emotions due to the internalization of social values. Shame manages emotions, allowing the individual to experience a more socially appropriate feeling (Scheff & Scheele, 1980). However, despite regulating their emotions, their shame is still internalized (Scheff & Scheele, 1980). To cope with shame and other emotions, Scheff and Scheele suggest an embodied approach: cry or laugh the feeling away. Scheff (1977) refers to this as the cathartic effect. Scheff defines catharsis as "the discharge of one or more of four distressful emotions: grief, fear, embarrassment, or anger" (1977, p. 485). Scheff highlights these emotions as they create tension in the body due to stress, allowing for physical relief, or discharge, of one's emotions. For example, during a stressful conversation, a person may start laughing to alleviate some of their stress; laughter is the external expression that catharsis is taking place internally (Scheff & Scheele, 1980). In numerous studies, laughter reduces tension and casts a relaxing effect on the individual (Scheff, 1977; Scheff & Scheele, 1980). However, it is after the individual experiences an accelerated variation between emotional distress and social safety that catharsis can only take place (Scheff, 1977; Scheff & Scheele, 1980). The tension that catharsis alleviates does not need to be conscious but can be a conflict from an earlier time (Scheff & Scheele, 1980). Laughter and humor, then, allow for the physical relief of suppressed emotions.

Fitting In & Maintaining Belonging

In her book, *Longing and Belonging*, Allison Pugh (2009) uses a symbolic interactionist approach to describe the invisible rules of belonging in American elementary schools. Like adults, children make meaning in the world through social interactions, which are influenced by cultural norms and values established in the classroom (Pugh, 2009). To gain group membership,

children use facework to present a dignified impression of themselves to others (Pugh, 2009). Similar to Goffman's personal front, facework refers to performers purposefully displaying feelings that conform to culturally expected norms and values (Pugh, 2009). Pugh argues that individuals who maintain this facework ensure their continued group membership. Like Goffman and Hochschild, Pugh explains this is a social reward. Children do not want others to think of them as unaware, awkward, or unfortunate, and therefore make their membership to the group known by showcasing their knowledge of pop culture or valued possessions (Pugh, 2009). Without this vocalization, Pugh notes that individuals risk being socially invisible. In North American society, heterosexuality is of value, and due to this, queer people have often remained silent. This silence has reinforced the community's invisibility.

To perform their facework, Pugh found that children participated in different maintenance strategies. If children perceive themselves as lacking something culturally valuable, they may make up for it by claiming to know or own something equally as valuable (Pugh, 2009). Pugh refers to this as claiming. When an individual perceives themselves as carrying a negative trait, they will work to hide it from others (Pugh, 2009). Similar to managing Scheff's (1988) concept of overt, undifferentiated shame, Pugh (2009) calls this concealing. To ensure that social standards are met, individuals monitor their behavior and others', referred to by Pugh as patrolling. When patrolling, individuals look for inconsistencies or lies, ready to evaluate or challenge the claims of others (Pugh, 2009). Knowing that others are patrolling their facework, individuals must use strategies such as claiming or concealing to avoid the punishment of social rejection (Pugh, 2009).

Methodology

Using a sample of mainstream films featuring queer characters, I examine how queer characters cope when struggling with homophobia, heteronormativity, or internalized homophobia. These actions and feelings become references as audiences use media to know how to respond to unfamiliar situations. The films in the sample were chosen based on their box office success to analyze both widely viewed films and films with diverse sexual orientations. The following section will elaborate on the sample in more detail before describing the steps to Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis and eventually describing thematic decomposition analysis (Bower et al., 2002; Stenner, 1993; Wollett et al., 1998).

Description of the Sample

Although a master list of all mainstream movies, including queer characters and themes, does not exist, many researchers (e.g., Cabosky, 2015; Johnson & Holmes, 2009) turn to BoxOfficeMojo's archives of gay- and lesbian-themed movies. Owned by Internet Movie Database (IMDb) (Cabosky, 2015), BoxOfficeMojo describes their "gay/lesbian" category as "movies that primarily deal with homosexual themes or where the main characters are gay," and includes a list from 1979 to today (“Gay / Lesbian,” 2018). Sorting by top lifetime grossing films, only considered were those released between 1990 and 2018; this ensured that only accessible, recently released movies comprised the sample. Finally, to complete the sample, films had to be cross-listed with comedy or romantic comedy. Despite meeting these criteria, not included were *Threesome*, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, *The Kids Are All Right*, and *Battle of the Sexes* as they did not necessarily focus on queer themes like sexual orientation, but did feature queer characters or focused on gender. The following seven films met

all of the criteria (the top lifetime grossing gay/lesbian films; cross-listed with comedy or romantic comedy; released between 1990 and 2018; contained themes surrounding sexual orientation):

The Birdcage (Nichols & Machlis, 1996) – "A gay cabaret owner and his drag queen companion agree to put up a false front so that their son can introduce them to his fiancée's right-wing moralistic parents."

In & Out (Brown et al., 1997) – "A midwestern teacher questions his sexuality after a former student makes a comment about him at the Academy Awards."

Chasing Amy (Mosier, 1997) – "Holden and Banky are comic book artists. Everything's going good for them until they meet Alyssa, also a comic book artist. Holden falls for her, but his hopes are crushed when he finds out she's a lesbian."

The Object of My Affection (Mark, 1998) – "A pregnant New York City social worker begins to develop romantic feelings for her gay best friend, and decides she'd rather raise her child with him, much to the dismay of her overbearing boyfriend."

Kissing Jessica Stein (Wurmfeld & Zions, 2002) – "A woman searching for the perfect man instead discovers the perfect woman."

Boat Trip (Müller et al., 2003) – "Two straight men mistakenly end up on a 'gays only' cruise."

Love, Simon (Bowen et al., 2018) – "Simon Spier keeps a huge secret from this family, his friends and all of his classmates: he's gay. When that secret is threatened, Simon must face everyone and come to terms with this identity."

As this thesis is concerned with mainstream movies, I choose the above criteria to build an accessible sample, as the highest-grossing films suggest that audiences have widely viewed these films. While queer cinema (i.e., movies produced by and for queer people) more accurately capture queer experiences, its films are more difficult to access (Cabosky, 2015). With smaller audiences, queer cinema does not have a comparable influence on the film industry like

Hollywood films. By using mainstream films, I can examine how queer characters' emotional experiences are represented relative to Hollywood's heteronormative audience expectations.

Thematic (Decomposition) Analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis provides "a method for identifying, analyzing, reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 82). Unlike other methods, thematic analysis allows for flexible research with variations in its approach, whether it is its epistemology, theoretically- or data-driven, or concerned with explicit or latent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to this flexibility, however, thematic analysis is challenging to define and employ. To help with this, Braun and Clarke propose outlining six steps to thematic analysis. The first step encourages the researcher to familiarize themselves with their data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To do this, I recorded all data from my sample in Excel. While watching the sample films, I took note of scenes in which queer characters faced homophobia, heteronormativity, or internalized homophobia. I noted which characters were present, who spoke, what they said, how they said it, and the facial expressions and bodily gestures associated with the interaction. The next steps Braun and Clarke propose are generating initial codes for the data before organizing these codes into themes. Looking at the data I accumulated, I identified five main coping strategies used by queer characters: humor, conforming, avoiding, ignoring, and accepting. After ensuring accurately coded data, I defined the themes as the following:

Humor references the unexpected breaking of feeling rules, sometimes including a cathartic release (Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1977). In the examples below, humor is produced by violating North American emotional expectations (Hochschild, 1983; Pinedo, 1997; Simpson, 1996). If the humor is created in response to stressful emotions, a physical release of these

emotions may take place. Scheff (1977) describes this as the cathartic effect, where laughing or crying, for example, allows for the physical release of stressful emotions, such as grief, fear, or embarrassment. Laughter not only alleviates stress but has been shown to reduce tension and have a relaxing effect on the individual (Braniecka et al., 2019; Scheff, 1977; Scheff & Scheele, 1980). Therefore, humor is a coping strategy during stressful situations.

Conforming involves bridging individual interactions with the expectations of the social world around them (Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988). Individuals adhere to these expectations for two reasons: receiving social acceptance and other social rewards, and avoiding social punishment (Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988). For individuals who do not conform, feelings of guilt and shame can serve to correct deviant emotions (Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988).

In many instances, queer people report feeling invisible and excluded in social life (Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Kawale, 2004; Levina et al., 2000). Due to heteronormativity, there are few places for queer people to feel accepted regardless of their sexual orientation (Vinjamuri, 2015). When heteronormative spaces marginalize queer people, queer individuals can be othered, referred to as "those people," a "special interest group," or, more bluntly, "fags" (Dalley & Campbell, 2006, p. 17). Invisibility, then, provides a shield from homophobic and heteronormative attitudes and beliefs by dismissing the queer community altogether. Rather than draw attention to themselves, many queer characters instead choose to remain silent and ignore comments against their community. This was defined as ignoring.

With the choice of sharing their sexual orientation, some queer people report avoiding the topic altogether (Jones, 2018; Vinjamuri, 2015). Participants in Jones' (2018) study shared that they avoided "throwing it in peoples' faces," with "it" being their sexual orientation (p. 73).

Participants in both Jones' (2018) and Vinjamuri's (2015) studies reported that while they avoided the topic of their sexual orientation during social interactions, they do not necessarily put in efforts to conceal it. I defined this as avoiding.

Coming out is a significant milestone in queer peoples' lives. It signifies overcoming societal expectations and the rejection, fear, and shame that comes along with them (Burn et al., 2005; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Ryan et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2014). In this respect, coming out is processed shame (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020). By processing shame, queer people can recognize that not everyone will support their sexual orientations, but that does not mean that they need to change their identity. Coming out indicates that individuals can separate their feelings from the social conflicts surrounding homophobia or heteronormativity. By processing their shame and coming out, queer individuals decrease their desire to conceal or avoid their sexual orientation and instead accept their identity despite how others may perceive them. This is how I defined accepting.

While the final step that Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest is producing a report of the data, this thesis goes on to describe thematic decomposition analysis. Thematic decomposition analysis builds off of thematic analysis while acknowledging the influence of social interaction and discourse (Stenner, 1993). It understands that interactions and discourse create objects, events, and institutions, which in turn create meaning (Bower et al., 2002; Stenner, 1993). I use Stuart Hall's (1997) concept of representation to develop this further. Hall argues that by seeing representations in the real world, individuals create meaning for the concepts in their minds. Without giving meaning to these concepts, they can only exist within the mind (Hall, 1997). Social interactions surrounding a particular concept cannot occur without the language for that

concept (Hall, 1997). If a concept is not represented in a particular culture, the concept does not have meaning and, therefore, cannot be discussed, shared, or critiqued. In this context, these concepts and discourses will refer to the content of the films, including the characters' language, emotions, and mannerisms. The objective of the following analysis is to identify patterns of characters' emotional experiences in films. The patterns identified will give rise to broader cultural contexts, representing how queer people are expected to act and feel in certain situations.

Analysis

The following analysis is divided into three sections: coping with homophobia, coping with heterosexuality, and coping with internalized homophobia. Homophobic instances were identified when a heterosexual character used language or behaviors that were likely to make members of the queer community feel abnormal, excluded, and different from other members of society (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Brown & Alderson, 2010; Burn et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2017). Social interactions between characters that implied that heterosexuality is natural compared to other sexual orientations were labelled as instances of heteronormativity (Brown & Alderson, 2010; Dalley & Campbell, 2006). Instances of internalized homophobia were recognized when queer characters directed negative attitudes about the queer community toward themselves (Burn et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2017; Flebus & Montano, 2012; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Gould, 2001; Puckett et al., 2017). Each of the above sections is divided into at least four of the following categories: humor, conforming, avoiding, ignoring, and accepting.

Coping with Homophobia

Humor

With a sample of romantic comedies, it is not surprising that many characters use humor as a coping technique. Like horror, humor relies on knowing cultural expectations and predictions, but works by violating them (Hochschild, 1983; Pinedo, 1997; Simpson, 1996). Hochschild (1983) refers to this as an improvisational exchange. By violating social expectations, humor not only disrupts social order but exposes social contradictions (Hochschild 1983; Pinedo, 1997). Consider the following scenes:

In *Boat Trip* (Müller et al., 2003), Jerry and Nick are at the buffet on their (accidental) gay cruise when Jerry sees Gabriella, a dance teacher on the ship that Jerry likes. Gabriella believes that Jerry is gay, and Nick is his partner. Due to this, Jerry asks Nick to grab his ass, wet his lips, and look at him lovingly. Nick quickly rejects this, asking, "What, do I look like a homo to you?" On the other side of the buffet, another gay passenger responds, "Yes, an out of shape one, but we have those too." Without waiting to see Nick or Jerry's reactions, the passenger walks away.

In *Chasing Amy* (Mosier, 1997), Banky and Hooper argue over the sexual orientations of characters in the *Archie Comics*. When Hooper insists that Archie and Jughead are lovers, Banky tells him he "feels a hate crime coming on," suggesting that he wants to hurt Hooper for claiming two comic book characters are gay. Rather than be concerned, Hooper listens to Banky's argument for a moment longer before handing him a dollar, and saying, "Here, I want you to go down to the corner store and buy yourself a clue." Sitting across the table, Holden and Alyssa laugh.

Queer characters in both of these scenes use humor to acknowledge homophobic social contradictions. Nick uses "homo" as an insult, which results in a queer person insulting him back. Banky is so upset at the idea of a queer comic book character that he wants to hurt Hooper for the insinuation. Hooper, meanwhile, makes this joke to advise Banky to calm down. In both of these examples, straight characters make insults and threats against queer characters. As straight men in a heteronormative society, Nick and Banky would not expect opposition to their homophobic views; Hooper and the passenger create improvisation exchanges by doing just that

(Hochschild, 1983). Hooper and the passenger disrupt heteronormative order and expose the double standard the exists when discussing sexual orientations.

In addition to disrupting social order, humor also distracts from stressful situations and reduces tension (Braniecka et al., 2019; Scheff, 1977; Scheff & Scheele, 1980). Armand uses humor to reduce tension in *The Birdcage* (Nichols & Machlis, 1996) following an emotional discussion with his partner, Albert, and son, Val. After hearing that Armand and Val do not want him to meet Val's fiancée's conservative parents, Albert dramatically flees the room. Following the emotional exit, Armand smiles at Val and says, "That went well." The irony in Armand's tone and his quickly fading smile suggest that the interaction went anything but well. Rather than directly address the tension in the room, Armand's joke both acknowledges the tension and aims to bring it down.

Avoiding

When an individual perceives themselves negatively or believes others perceive them negatively, they experience shame (Scheff, 1988). To cope with this shame, people will conceal inappropriate behaviors or avoid inappropriate behaviors (Pugh, 2009; Scheff,1988). When an individual chooses to distract themselves and leave their shame unacknowledged, Scheff (1988) refers to this as bypassed shame. Rather than overcome it, individuals who experience bypassed shame avoid the resulting pain (Scheff, 1988).

In *The Birdcage* (Nichols & Machlis, 1996), Armand takes a moment alone after Val tells him they must lie to his fiancée's conservative parents, creating a false impression of their family. Armand sits alone at the bar with a glass of wine and a cigarette. How can he consciously adapt himself to please other people? Despite these feelings, Armand goes home and agrees to

change his appearance, mannerisms, and apartment décor. He appears confident but worries about how he will get Albert out of the house before dinner. Listening to his father's mumbling, Val thanks Armand, but all Armand can offer back is a pained expression and requests to not talk to him for a while.

Later that day, Albert comes home in the middle of the apartment's transformation. Armand cannot look Albert in the eye but tells him the truth: he and Val think it would be better if Albert did not meet the Keeleys. Albert looks disappointed, but Val reassures him that it is just for one night. With a weak smile, Albert says, "I understand, it's just while people are here. It's all right, my darling. It's nothing. It's painful, but it's not important… I'm leaving." Armand reminds him it is only for one night, but Albert, who is hurt, continues, "The monster… the freak… is leaving. You're safe." With that, he turns and leaves, more upset than ever.

Here, Albert is experiencing undifferentiated shame in feeling poorly about himself, while Armand and Val might be said to be experiencing bypassed shame by projecting their own ill-ease onto Albert (Scheff, 1988). By excluding him from dinner, Armand and Val are reminding Albert that his feelings and behaviors are inappropriately perceived as they do not always adhere to social expectations and values. Albert acknowledges this by calling himself a monster and a freak. Now perceiving himself negatively, Albert leaves before he can experience more shame. This is an emotional predicament for Albert (Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983). Armand and Val are Albert's family, who accept him and love him for who he is, and yet they are asking him to leave so as not to ruin their reputation. How does Albert cope with this? Albert tries to convince himself, Armand, and Val that everything is fine. Hochschild (1983) calls this deep acting. Albert tries to suppress his hurt feelings further by telling himself and the others that

it is not important. If it were not important, Albert would not be so upset. Albert begins his response by avoiding his feelings and continues to avoid the situation by leaving the apartment altogether.

Ignoring

Where humor and avoidance are active coping responses, ignorance is more passive. Indirectly, humor and avoidance acknowledge inappropriate behavior (Hochschild, 1983; Pinedo, 1997; Scheff, 1977), while ignorance leaves things unsaid. Howard Brackett, of *In & Out* (Brown et al., 1997), chooses to do just this when his boss, the school principal, threatens his job. Days before, during an Academy Award acceptance speech, one of Howard's former students thanked him for being a gay role model. The problem is, Howard identifies as straight, but that does not stop rumors from spreading in his small town. Hearing these rumors, the principal threatens to fire Howard if the claims are valid. Howard reassures the principal he is getting married to his fiancée, Emily, and firing him will be unnecessary. Howard leaves the principal's office without acknowledging the homophobic threat against his job.

Similar situations occur in *Chasing Amy* (Mosier, 1997). As Alyssa gets called on stage to perform to a cheering crowd, Banky asks, "What am I doing? This is so fucking gay." Hooper, a queer character standing next to him, only gives Banky a side glance, uninterested, before looking back at the stage. Later in the film, once she starts dating Holden, Alyssa tells her friends about her relationship. Her friends are all excited for her until Alyssa reveals that she is dating a man. Everyone looks amongst each other uncomfortably, silent, before one of Alyssa's friends says, "Another one bites the dust." Alyssa remains silent. While Howard and Hooper's situations

exemplify homophobia, Alyssa has a biphobic experience. Having only dated women in the past, Alyssa's friends are intolerant of her now dating a man.

These characters remain silent due to emotional predicaments (Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983). Do they risk further disapproval by confronting the other individuals? Or do they keep quiet, unable to advocate for themselves, allowing these comments to go unchecked? To ignore these comments, Howard, Hooper, and Alyssa manage their personal fronts (Goffman, 1959). Recalling from above, the personal front involves aligning characteristics of the individual's performance, such as facial expressions, speech patterns, and bodily gestures (Goffman, 1959). Personal fronts correspond with social status, indicating that the personal front should display social expectations and values (Goffman, 1959). If these characteristics are asynchronous, the individual will not convince others of their performance (Goffman, 1959). Howard, Hooper, and Alyssa manage their personal fronts by keeping them unchanged. In a heteronormative society, it is not common to challenge homophobic attitudes and beliefs (Raley & Lucas, 2006). These characters not only ignore these homophobic or biphobic comments by maintaining their personal fronts but avoid further social rejection and other sanctions. If Howard were to stand up against the principal, he would risk losing his job. Earlier in the night, Banky made a homophobic threat; perhaps Hooper ignores this second comment in fear of Banky's intolerance. And for Alyssa, by staying silent, she keeps both her relationship with Holden and her friends.

Accepting

Queer people can be selective when it comes to sharing their sexual orientation (Ryan et al., 2017). The phrase "coming out" refers to this process (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Ryan et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2014; Theodore et al., 2013). Researchers have found that after coming out,

queer people report feeling increased self-esteem and well-being, as well as decreased shame associated with their sexual orientation (Ryan et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2014). With decreased shame, queer people are less likely to conceal their sexual orientation (Ryan et al., 2017).

In *Love, Simon* (Bowen et al., 2018), the titular character gets outed as gay online by his classmate, Martin. In the days following the incident, after the news has spread around their high school, Martin tries to reach out to Simon to apologize. As Martin tries to justify his actions, Simon explains, "I don't care that you didn't think my coming out was going to be a big thing, Martin! Look, you don't get to decide that! I'm supposed to be the one that decides when and where and how, and who knows and how I get to say it! That's supposed to be my thing! And you took that away from me! So look, can you please just get the fuck away from me!"

Martin forces Simon into a position where he needs to accept his sexual orientation publicly before he is ready. Throughout the film, Simon takes calculated steps not to raise suspicions about his sexual orientation; this is Simon managing his personal front (Goffman, 1959). By taking these measures to feign heterosexuality, Simon created emotional distance between himself and his family and friends. Goffman (1959) refers to this as mystification. With Martin revealing his secret, Simon can no longer mystify his audience with his performance. Instead, Simon chooses to stand up to Martin to cope with this loss. Simon advocates for himself by telling Martin how he feels and addresses what Martin took from him. By doing this, Simon takes back control that Martin stole.

While some queer characters take entire films to learn self-acceptance, others are quick to demonstrate pride for their identities. One such character is Armand in *The Birdcage* (Nichols & Machlis, 1996). When Val first tells Armand about his engagement, he shares that his fiancée's

father is a conservative senator. With both of Val's parents being gay men, Val and his fiancée, Barbara, lie to her parents about Armand and Albert's careers and Albert's gender. Val wants to have the Keeleys over for dinner and maintain the facade, but Armand states that he does not want to be somebody else. Val, however, clarifies that it is not just Armand who will need to change; their apartment will need new décor and Albert will need to stay away for the evening. After going back and forth, Armand finally says, "Yes, I live with a man. Yes, I'm a middle-aged fag. But I know who I am, Val. Took me twenty years to get here, and I'm not going to let some idiot senator destroy that. Fuck the senator. I don't give a damn what he thinks."

Like Simon, Armand's personal front feels threatened. His son is asking him to pretend to be someone else in his own house. Although he concedes to the changes later in the film, in this scene, Armand stands up to Val's homophobia and makes clear that despite what other people think, he is proud of himself. At this moment, Armand has processed shame regarding his sexual orientation (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020). While Val is concerned about the Keeleys' perception of his family, Armand understands that he and the Keeleys may not see eye-to-eye, but it is not his responsibility to reduce the resulting tension.

Coping with Heteronormativity

Humor

To cope with shame, guilt, and other emotions, Scheff and Scheele (1980) suggest using an embodied release. Laughing or crying, for example, release distressful emotions such as these above, reducing tension in the body and allowing for physical relief (Braniecka et al., 2019; Scheff, 1977; Scheff & Scheele, 1980). This is the cathartic effect (Scheff & Scheele, 1980).

When an individual is experiencing a stressful event, and they laugh to alleviate stress, their laughter is the external expression that catharsis is taking place internally (Scheff & Scheele, 1980).

The day after Holden and Alyssa meet in *Chasing Amy* (Mosier, 1997), Alyssa shows up at his apartment. Before discovering she identifies as a lesbian, Holden appeared to enjoy Alyssa's company and their conversation. However, after seeing her kiss a girl, he immediately became quiet around her for the rest of the night. When Holden answers the door the next day, Alyssa animatedly says, "Yeah, hi, somebody told me they make comic books here, which is so weird because I have this great idea for a story. It's about a guy who comes to this club, and hightails it when he finds out – ready for this?" Alyssa dramatically leans in and speaks in a fake whisper: "This girl is gay!" Alyssa pauses before asking Holden, "Any interest in a story like that?"

With such a dramatic shift from the beginning of the evening to the end of the end, it is not surprising that Holden's reaction caused Alyssa to feel distressed. Rather than directly confront Holden or keep her stress bottled in, Alyssa releases it through humor, or catharsis (Scheff, 1977; Scheff & Scheele, 1980). Having made the joke, Alyssa and Holden walk to the park together, with the original tension at the door faded. The cathartic experience allows Alyssa to continue her friendship with Holden despite the stress at the beginning.

In another example, before his wedding to Felicia in *Boat Trip* (Müller et al., 2003), Jerry introduces his future father-in-law to his guests, Steven, Tom (who is in drag), and Ron, all friends he met on the recent cruise. Felicia's father chuckles, asking them if they accidentally ended up on the "Guytanic," too. "How's it going?" is all Tom says in reply; his feminine

appearance not matching his deep, masculine voice. Felicia's father appears startled, and as he walks away, he warns Jerry that he will be keeping an eye on him. Steven, Tom, and Ron appear otherwise unfazed by Felicia's father's comments and start a new conversation with Nick.

The humor here lies in the unexpected. Felicia's father is an older man and uses his introduction to suggest there was an issue with taking gay cruises. As Steven and Ron wear suits and Tom dresses as a woman, no distinct features suggest they are different from the other wedding guests. This is an improvisational exchange (Hochschild, 1983). Felicia's father expected Tom to sound like a woman due to his appearance. However, it is humorous because Tom does not sound like a woman.

Conforming

Due to heteronormative standards, many queer people feel the need to conform to social expectations (Dhaenens, 2012; Evans et al., 2017; Habarth, 2013). Engaging in appropriate behavior and depreciating those that are inappropriate, queer people can avoid sanctions for perceived deviant behavior (Dhaenens, 2012; Evans et al., 2017; Habarth, 2013). This conformity is no different for queer film characters.

The Object of My Affection (Mark, 1998) opens with the elementary school's musical performance, put on by a beloved teacher, George. Following the performance, the mother of one of his students invites George to dinner. George declines because he says he is meeting a friend. Constance, the mother of the student, tells George to bring his friend to dinner too. George agrees, but when his friend finally arrives, the audience discovers this is George's boyfriend. However, when they greet each other, George and his boyfriend, Dr. Joley, platonically touch each other's arms.

One night at a football game in *Love, Simon* (Bowen et al., 2018), Simon's crush walks up to talk to him. Unfortunately, the boy asks Simon if his friend, Abby, is single. Simon's crush, Lyle, examines that he could never be just friends with someone that hot. Simon awkwardly says, "Yeah, every day's a struggle," before excusing himself and walking away.

In a scene during *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Wurmfeld & Zions, 2002), the titular character has dinner with her family and their friends. Jessica brings Helen with her, a girl she has been secretly dating. Unaware of this, Jessica's mother tries to set her up with one of her friends present, Stanley. Jessica and Helen try to indulge Jessica's mother, agreeing that Stanley seems great, but neither show interest in dating him. Jessica's mother moves on and tries to set Helen up with another man at dinner, but Helen insists she is too busy to date. Jessica's mother accepts this, suggesting men are probably falling over Helen left and right. Helen agrees with this to end the conversation.

In these scenes, George, Simon, and Helen all try to conceal their truth. This is the result of overt, undifferentiated shame (Scheff, 1988). When an individual perceives themselves negatively or believes others will perceive them negatively, they may choose to conceal this difference (Pugh, 2009; Scheff, 1988). George, Simon, and Helen believe others will perceive them negatively due to their sexual orientations. In addition to concealing this shame, these characters also make claims to make their performances more convincing (Pugh, 2009). George tries to excuse himself from dinner, claiming he is meeting a friend; if he were to use the word boyfriend, there could be social consequences. Simon claims being friends with Abby is an everyday struggle when he is more attracted to the guy in front of him. Helen could have told Jessica's mother she was already dating someone, but instead claimed she was too busy. Making

these claims, George, Simon, and Helen not only aim to conform to expectations but also maintain their dignity throughout the social interactions (Pugh, 2009).

In *The Birdcage* (Nichols & Machlis, 1996), Armand catches up to Albert following his abrupt exit from their conversation with Val. Together, Armand and Albert weigh their options and agree that they cannot introduce Albert as Val's other father. Albert suggests pretending to be Val's Uncle Al, but Armand argues that he will be Val's gay Uncle Al. With his pinky finger delicately away from his other fingers, Albert takes a sip from his glass of water and tells Armand he could play it straight. Armand immediately challenges Albert, exclaiming, "Oh, please, look at you! Look at the way you're holding your glass! Look at your pinky! Look at your posture!" Perched on the edge of his chair, Albert argues back. After some back and forth, Armand agrees that Albert can play Val's straight uncle, but under one condition – Armand gets to make Albert look and act like a man.

Armand tries to fix Albert's posture, but Albert cries out, uncomfortable with the changes. Armand changes tactics and teaches Albert how to spread mustard on toast like a man. Albert cries out again when he breaks his piece of toast. Armand reminds Albert to handle things "like a man," calmly, which improves Albert's mood. Seeing this renewed enthusiasm, Armand suggests learning to walk like a man. When Albert's natural walk involves tiny steps and swaying hips, Armand suggests he tries walking like John Wayne. Albert happily tries to follow Armand's suggestion, not only re-creating John Wayne's walk but his facial expressions too. Armand thinks it is perfect.

In the following scene, Armand teaches Albert how to have a manly conversation. During one of their rehearsals, Albert's voice starts deep, but eventually reaches his higher, natural pitch.

Armand critiques Albert's handshake and proceeds to go through each step of a manly handshake. Albert appears flustered by all of the information, but remains optimistic about his transformation, going so far as to say, "This is very exciting!" As Armand and Albert become more comfortable in their roles, they high five, but it is too hard, and Albert cries out in pain, making him flustered again.

Albert is managing his personal front (Goffman, 1959). According to Armand, Albert's posture, appearance, speech, and mannerisms lead others to perceive him as gay. By changing these aspects of himself, Albert can pretend to be Val's straight Uncle Al in front of the Keeleys. Like George, Simon, and Helen above, Albert is acting out of overt, undifferentiated shame (Scheff, 1988). Albert worries the Keeleys will judge him because he is gay, and therefore conceals himself so as not to give them the opportunity. This is how Albert copes with shame. Albert not only conceals his personal front, he adopts a new one. Personal fronts are not always created, but can instead be selected (Goffman, 1959). To help with Albert's gait, Armand suggests walking like John Wayne, a symbol of American values and ideals (McGhee, 1999). Albert has adopted an idealized impression (Goffman, 1959). The more someone represents the idealized expectations and values of society, the more respected they are by others (Goffman, 1959). By aiming to be John Wayne, Albert is protecting himself against the Keeleys' potential queer intolerance.

Avoiding

A scene from *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Wurmfeld & Zions, 2002) features Jessica at work, smiling at her cellphone. Her boss and ex-boyfriend, Josh, catches her and immediately assumes

she has a date with a guy. Jessica tells him there is no date or guy, but Josh insists that she must be lying. Jessica reassures him before walking away, "Trust me, there's no guy."

In *The Object of My Affection* (Mark, 1998), Dr. Joley breaks up with George, resulting in George moving in with Constance's younger step-sister, Nina. Nina and George quickly become best friends. One night, while lying in bed, Nina asks George about losing his virginity. George tells her he first slept with a girl during high school prom, which surprises Nina. George explains that she had been his high school girlfriend until he went to college and realized he was gay. Nina starts asking more questions about George's ex-girlfriend – what happened to her? How did she look? George starts to describe a girl, but his description quickly begins to describe Nina. George reaches out to tap Nina's nose, which turns into play wrestling on the bed.

In both of these scenes, Jessica and George try to avoid talking about their dating lives. Avoiding the topic indicates that they feel bypassed shame (Scheff, 1988). Jessica does not lie to Josh, but also does not provide the full truth. Instead, she quickly leaves the room before the conversation can go on. George begins to give in to Nina's questions, but eventually changes the topic from his dating past to Nina and playing around. While Nina was eager to hear more, George did not wish to go on. To cope with the shame, Jessica and George avoid it.

Accepting

After showing up to his apartment door in *Chasing Amy* (Mosier, 1997), Alyssa asks Holden if he would like to talk more about her being gay. Alyssa wants to be friends with Holden, and so she allows him to ask her any questions if he thinks it will help. Holden immediately asks, "Why girls?" When Alyssa turns the question around and asks why men, Holden replies, "Because that's the standard!" Alyssa explains that she was never attracted to

men, which prompts Holden to ask, "So you're still a virgin then?" When Alyssa argues no, she and Holden begin debating the definitions of sexual intercourse, virginity, and penetration. Holden again discredits Alyssa losing her virginity to her high school girlfriend, which results in Alyssa calling Holden naive and infantile.

Before the Keeley's arrive for dinner in *The Birdcage* (Nichols & Machlis, 1996), Albert agrees he will not play Val's Uncle Al upon Armand and Val's request. However, when the Keeleys enter the apartment, Albert emerges from the bedroom dressed in drag, ready to act the part of Val's mother. The dinner goes well as Barbara's father and Albert hit it off. However, by the end of the evening, the truth comes out. Even after Albert removes his wig and introduces himself, Barbara's father still stands confused. Barbara clarifies, "They're gay. They own the drag club downstairs. They're two men." Armand tries to look confident, but when Mr. Keeley remains silent, Albert steps forward. Albert reassures Mr. Keeley that their earlier conversation about returning to family values and a stricter moral code was genuine. In silence, Mr. Keeley backs away with crossed arms. In a final effort, Albert says, "Kevin, nothing's changed. It's still me… with one tiny difference." Mrs. Keeley leads her husband away, telling him that she will explain everything in the car. Armand looks on, somewhat amused at the senator's naivety.

In both of these examples, Alyssa, Armand, and Albert are accepting of their identities, experiencing processed shame (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020). While experiencing shame, people conceal, avoid, or falsify their feelings to cope with the pain (Pugh, 2009; Scheff, 1988). With others knowing their truth, these characters no longer need to strive for idealized standards (Goffman, 1959). Instead, they can stop managing their personal fronts and act like themselves. By no longer concealing, avoiding, or

falsifying their truth, Alyssa, Armand, and Albert can accept themselves for who they are and feel free of their previous shame.

Coping with Internalized Homophobia

Conforming

In *Love, Simon* (Bowen et al., 2018), Simon uses the pseudonym Jacques to write emails back and forth with another gay student who goes by Blue. In one email, Blue asks Simon if he has come out yet. Simon explains that his family and friends do not know yet, but he also does not know why he has not told. Simon says that he knows his family will be okay with it, and when another student at school came out as gay, no one seemed to care. Simon claims in the future, when he is at college, he will come out, but for now, he wants things to be as they always have been.

By not coming out to his family or friends, Simon is concealing a part of himself (Pugh, 2009; Scheff, 1988). He wants everything to stay the same out of fear of humiliation. This is due to overt, undifferentiated shame (Scheff, 1988). Simon believes that people will perceive him differently once they know he is gay. By concealing his sexual orientation, Simon is ensuring that this will not happen. However, Simon acknowledges that his family and friends will be accepting, which suggests that Simon also perceives his sexual orientation negatively. Rather than confront his internalized homophobia, Simon chooses to conceal his shame.

In *In & Out* (Brown et al., 1997), during an Academy Award acceptance speech, Cameron Drake credits his former teacher, Howard Brackett, with helping him win the award. At home, Howard and his fiancée, Emily, watch with excitement, but this ends when Cameron adds that he is dedicating the whole night to "a great, gay teacher." Howard and Emily stare blankly at

the television screen in silence before turning it off. Howard's parents appear at the door, immediately asking questions about the speech. Howard quickly and repeatedly denies being gay, going so far as saying he is going to hire an attorney and sue Cameron. Howard's mother begs him to go through with the wedding to Emily, which Howard agrees to, promising his parents and Emily that they are getting married. The next day, reporters swarm Howard on his way into the school. Without stopping or listening, Howard yells, "I am getting married! I am not gay!"

Unlike Simon, Howard is unaware he is concealing a part of himself. While this suggests that Howard experiences overt, undifferentiated shame (Scheff, 1988), it also suggests that Howard is using deep acting to cope (Hochschild, 1983). Using deep acting, individuals attempt to convince both themselves and their audiences of a particular emotional experience (Hochschild, 1983). Howard denies being gay and acts as confused as everyone else following the speech. To further prove his heterosexuality, Howard begins making claims (Pugh, 2009). Hiring an attorney to sue for defamation and reminding reporters that he is getting married suggests Howard perceives these as social expectations. By making these claims, Howard can convince himself and others of these feelings, and further conceal his internalized homophobia.

Avoiding

Scheff (1988) defines bypassed shame in terms of avoidance. When an individual perceives their behaviors negatively, they avoid these actions to limit additional negative perceptions (Scheff, 1988). Perhaps some of the best examples of avoiding one's internalized homophobia come from Jessica's character in *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Wurmfeld & Zions, 2002).

Arriving on her first date with a woman, Jessica tries to leave before her date, Helen sees her. Too late for Jessica, Helen calls after her, forcing Jessica to pause and decide whether to stay or go. She chooses to stay but appears very uncomfortable and awkward; she stutters over her words before finally saying, "You should really know that this isn't the real me." When Helen questions this, Jessica apologizes again before she leaves the bar and tries to hail a cab. Helen follows her and questions Jessica again. Jessica quickly explains, "Well, the truth is I've been trying to be a little less me lately, and that's why this, but really I'm still me. See?" Jessica appears panicked and desperate to leave while Helen remains calm, doing her best to convince Jessica to stay. Finally, when she fails to get a cab, Jessica agrees to one drink with Helen.

Having a successful first date, Jessica continues seeing Helen. Helen tries to progress their physical relationship, but Jessica stops it and tells Helen that she needs to go slow. Days later, Jessica is still not ready and continues to panic. Helen asks what Jessica's therapist says. "Oh, I could never tell my therapist," Jessica explains. Helen asks why, and Jessica clarifies, "Because it's private." The next day, Jessica and Helen run into Jessica's boss and ex-boyfriend, Josh. Jessica introduces Helen as a friend from the gym, which surprises Helen. Later, when her co-worker, Joan, asks if she can meet the person Jessica is dating, Jessica lets Joan believe it is a guy without clarifying that she is dating a woman.

Helen eventually confronts Jessica about this when she discovers Jessica has kept her upcoming brother's wedding a secret. Jessica tries to reason with Helen that she never imagined that she would be in a relationship with a woman, making it challenging to introduce Helen to her family. Helen argues, "When you don't acknowledge who I am to the people that matter to

you, it makes me feel like you're ashamed of me!" Jessica apologizes, but remains firm; she cannot bring Helen to her brother's wedding and tell her family the truth.

Jessica is experiencing an emotional predicament (Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983). While she likes Helen and their relationship, she is nervous about others' reactions to her dating a woman in a heteronormative society. To balance her queer relationship and the heteronormative world, Jessica chooses to avoid the truth. This balancing suggests that Jessica experiences bypassed shame (Scheff, 1988). By avoiding telling her family the truth, Jessica avoids the potential pain of her family's rejection or humiliation. To cope with this, Jessica carefully patrols who she tells about her relationship with Helen (Pugh, 2009). While on the one hand, Jessica chooses not to tell her family or co-workers, she also chooses to keep Helen a secret from her therapist due to privacy. Patrolling her relationship to this extent does not resolve her emotional predicament, but suggests Jessica is concealing her relationship (Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983; Pugh, 2009). This concealment indicates that in addition to bypassed shame, Jessica also experiences overt, undifferentiated shame (Scheff, 1988). In these examples, Jessica is unable to resolve her emotional predicament using concealment and patrolling, but Helen can voice her processed shame (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020). By acknowledging Jessica's concealment and avoidance strategies, Helen asserts herself and her feelings. Helen recognizes that Jessica is ashamed of their relationship, but Helen does not share this shame.

Following Cameron Drake's acceptance speech in *In & Out* (Brown et al., 1997), Howard's phone rings non-stop. He angrily rips it off the wall, making it so no one can contact him. The next day, Howard becomes more agitated when people ask him if he is gay. In an

attempt to prove he is straight, Howard rushes into Emily's house, pushes her against the bed, and repeats, "We are getting married," over and over again. However, when Howard catches a glimpse of a man on the nearby television screen, he is brought back to reality and stops. Emily comforts him, saying she knows he is under pressure with the press and the wedding coming up. None of that matters to Emily, though, because they love each other. After hearing this, Howard kisses her firmly, says he loves her, puts on his clothes, and runs out the door.

While he is out, Howard runs into Peter, a reporter who has been following him for days. Peter asks how Howard is, Howard lets out how his life has changed, "Why? Why is this happening? I haven't changed! One little word and everybody changes. I'm still the same person! Why doesn't anyone believe me?" Peter confides in Howard that he is gay too and tells Howard his coming out story. When he finishes, Howard re-affirms that he needs to get married to Emily. At this, Peter leans in and kisses Howard full on the mouth. The kiss takes Howard aback; he is unsure about what to say or how to react, and so he gets on his bicycle and rides away.

Like Jessica, Howard is in an emotional predicament (Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983). As he starts to accept his sexual orientation, he struggles with other people's perceptions of him. Howard is experiencing bypassed shame (Scheff, 1988). Howard and his community perceive being gay as inappropriate and unexpected, and as a result, shameful. Fearing this reaction from his community and the resulting pain of humiliation, Howard avoids the topic. When Emily tries to reassure Howard about their wedding, he leaves due to shame. When Peter kisses him, Howard leaves out of shame. Howard cannot cope with the shame his internalized homophobia brings him, and so he chooses to avoid these feelings.

In his emails to Blue in *Love, Simon* (Bowen et al., 2018), Simon writes that while he has not come out yet, he will once he moves away for college. However, Simon's classmate, Martin, ruins this plan. Martin shares Simon and Blue's email conversation online for their whole high school to see. Leah, Simon's best friend, calls him to tell him the news. Simon becomes panicked and frantically hangs up on Leah despite her protests. Simon's younger sister, Nora, sees the emails and checks on Simon. Nora suggests he denies what Martin is saying. Aggressively, Simon says, "Why would I deny it, Nora? I'm not ashamed of it!" Nora leaves, and Simon tries to email Blue, but when messages start pouring in from his friends, Simon closes his laptop. He takes gasping breaths and looks around his room as though confused. He throws his phone away and gets on his bed. Simon thrashes around, putting a pillow over his face and screaming into it. Eventually, he curls up in bed and cries.

While Martin outing Simon is a homophobic act, Simon must now cope with the internal experience of being outed, which involves overcoming his internalized homophobia. Although Simon tells his sister he is not ashamed, his reaction says otherwise. Throughout the film, Simon has been careful to conceal his sexual orientation (Pugh, 2009; Scheff, 1988), but now that concealment is gone. By telling Nora he is not ashamed, Simon is deep acting (Hochschild, 1983). Simon is not only trying to convince Nora he is unashamed, but Simon is also crying to convince himself. To cope with this, Simon has a cathartic release (Scheff, 1977; Scheff & Scheele, 1980). While laughter is a common cathartic technique, so too is crying (Scheff, 1977; Scheff & Scheele, 1980). Like laughter, crying serves to physically release stressful and negative emotions (Scheff, 1977; Scheff & Scheele, 1980). Having just been outed, it is unsurprising that

Simon is experiencing stress. While Simon had friends and family reach out to him, he chose to cope with his stress by avoiding them and crying.

Ignoring

With rumors swirling that he is gay, Howard goes to church in *In & Out* (Brown et al., 1997). When he greets the priest for his confession, Howard insists he is confessing on behalf of a friend, not for himself. Howard tells the priest that his friend has been engaged for three years, but people are saying that he is gay. It takes several tries of mumbling before Howard can say gay clearly. The priest is surprised and states that Howard's friend's situation is very similar to Howard Brackett's situation. Howard sits further down to hide from the priest, exclaiming, "It's not him! This is a different guy!" Howard goes on to ask the priest what his friend should do; he does not want to disappoint his mother or fiancée. When the priest discovers that Howard's friend has never had a physical relationship with his fiancée, the priest insists he must be with her, or he must be gay. With that, the priest leaves, and Howard goes to find Emily.

During his confession, Howard cannot even admit to the priest who he is. Concealing his identity suggests Howard is feeling overt, undifferentiated shame (Scheff, 1988). Howard is trying to ignore his sexual orientation in favor of meeting social expectations due to the threat to his personal front (Goffman, 1959). Throughout Howard's life, he has lived to up expectations without exception until now. With a personal front catering to social values and norms, Howard was able to mystify his audience (Goffman, 1959). Howard created space between himself and his audience, not allowing others always to see his true identity. As rumors circulate that he is gay, the space that Howard tried to create grows smaller and loses its mystification.

During a scene in *Love, Simon* (Bowen et al., 2018), Simon and his family discuss what to watch on television. When Simon's mother suggests they watch *The Bachelor*, Simon's father questions how the guy even became the bachelor: "He's clearly gay." As he finishes saying this, he makes eye contact with Simon. Simon looks away and remains silent, but his younger sister disagrees with their father. As his father and sister jokingly argue over the bachelor's sexual orientation, Simon sits back with his arms crossed over his chest, looking away from the rest of his family. The longer his father speaks, the more Simon begins to fidget in his seat. Eventually, Simon's mother and sister tell his father to stop. Simon remains silent, crosses his arms again, and sinks further into the couch. The conversation changes without Simon saying anything.

Like Howard, Simon struggles to conceal his sexual orientation. Simon exemplifies overt, undifferentiated shame when he looks away from his father at the first mention of being gay (Scheff, 1988). Unlike Howard, Simon uses surface acting to cope with his shame (Hochschild, 1983). By staying silent, Simon is trying to convince his family he is uninterested in their conversation. If he were to argue with his father, there might be consequences. Therefore, rather than risk his established personal front, Simon ignores the conversation, but still experiences shame.

Accepting

On his high school's online confession forum, Simon, of *Love, Simon* (Bowen et al., 2018), reads a secret from a classmate. Blue writes that they are gay. After reading the confession, Simon sits back in his chair. He holds his head in his hands, rubs his hands on his thighs, and looks around the room, letting out big breaths of air. Simon shares the same secret as

Blue. Eventually, Simon makes a new email account, and after pacing back and forth in his room, works up with the courage to send Blue a message using a fake name.

For the first time in his life, Simon can come out to someone and share his true self. Simon does not have to reply to Blue's confession, but he chooses too; he does not choose to avoid it. Simon tells Blue the truth, accepting that he is gay too. With Blue, Simon does not need to conceal his sexual orientation or pretend to be someone else. Free of these restrictions at this moment, Simon is also free of bypassed shame and overt, undifferentiated shame (Scheff, 1988). Unlike with other people in his life, with Blue, Simon no longer needs to act, patrol, or make claims about his identity (Hochschild, 1983; Pugh, 2009; Scheff, 1988). Unworried about Blue's perception of him, Simon has processed shame and is accepting his sexual orientation (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020).

In a final attempt to prove his heterosexuality in *In & Out* (Brown et al., 1997), Howard listens to a tape titled "Be a Man: Exploring Your Masculinity." Howard follows along as the tape tells him to stand up straight and untuck his shirt, but just one side. The tape mocks Howard, asking him if he wants to be neat while calling him a sissy man and trying to trick him. After many games, the tape ends its first portion with "the most critical area of masculine behavior – dancing," as "truly manly men do not dance." Music starts playing, and the tape warns Howard not to dance, but when Howard cannot stop himself any longer, he begins to dance. The tape tells Howard to stop dancing and be a man, but Howard continues. Eventually, the music stops, and Howard's dancing comes to an end. The tape asks Howard how he did, but Howard presses stop before it can go on. He looks around the room, reflecting on what happened.

In this scene, Howard is attempting to manage his personal front (Goffman, 1959). He believes that by fixing his posture, appearance, and overall presentation, people will stop spreading rumors about him. The tape aims to conceal Howard's feminine traits and create the idealized, collective representation of a masculine man (Goffman, 1959). By using an identifiable personal front, people will see Howard as a stereotypical man, and because this matches their social expectations, they will not question Howard. However, in his attempt to get through the tape, Howard finds he cannot always hide his femininity and gives in to the music and dancing. The end of the music marks a crucial moment for Howard; he cannot achieve the idealized man because he is not the idealized man. Despite his attempts, Howard cannot manage his personal front. In realizing this, Howard breaks his illusion of reality and must accept the truth (Hochschild, 1983). By suppressing some feelings in favor of experiencing others, Howard has fabricated his personal front beyond recognition. Who is the real Howard? Once an illusion of reality breaks, a new personal front forms after the former becomes a visible lie (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983). With new clarity, Howard can acknowledge suppressing his sexual orientation and move forward in processing his shame and accepting his sexual orientation.

Summary of Findings

When experiencing shame, Scheff (1988) highlights concealment as a popular coping strategy. Queer characters in North American romantic comedies show that this remains consistent over time. In this analysis, I found that concealment was the coping strategy queer characters relied on the most frequently, regardless of their intention (i.e., to avoid, to conform, etc.) or intolerance experienced. Concealing allows queer characters to blend into heteronormative society and its expectations without raising suspicion (Pugh, 2009; Scheff,

1988). Specifically, many characters concealed their sexual orientations by managing their personal fronts (Goffman, 1959). To do this, some characters choose to adopt collective representations of North American ideals (Goffman, 1959).

Characters choose other strategies to aid in their concealment as well. By carefully patroling their behaviors, characters increased their awareness of negative perceptions and would make claims to mitigate or distract from the consequences of these perceptions (Pugh, 2009). To assist with this, characters engaged with both surface acting and deep acting, sometimes convincing not only their audience but themselves of their falsified feelings (Hochschild, 1983). Using these techniques allowed for the management of individuals' personal fronts to be more convincing. For some characters, after cycling through several strategies to cope with their shame, they were able to achieve processed shame (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020). By processing their experiences with shame, these characters can recognize heteronormative attitudes and queer intolerance, while accepting their authentic sexual orientations (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020).

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to contribute to the existing literature on queer representation in North American film. While accounting for the display and influence of emotions, I wished to explore how queer characters react to intolerance in the form of homophobia and internalized homophobia, as well as everyday heteronormative assumptions. As mediated messages influence public perception (Sink & Mastro, 2018), it was important for me to examine the quality of this inclusion over its quantity. With this thesis, I aimed to better understand the emotional management of queer characters in film.

I hypothesized that queer characters would react following heteronormative standards and queer stereotypes for the time. I assumed that these representations would become less restricted throughout the 1990s, 2000s, and into the 2010s, lessening the need for queer characters to resort to coping strategies. With a reduced need for coping strategies, I hypothesized that queer characters would display processed shame more frequently in recent movies compared to those released later. Instead, I found that these strategies have remained relatively unchanged over the 22 year-span of my sample. Albert conceals his sexual orientation in *The Birdcage* (Nichols & Machlis, 1996), just as Jessica does in *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Wurmfeld & Zions, 2002) and Simon does in *Love, Simon* (Bowen et al., 2018). With numerous examples of concealment, avoidance, and other strategies, but little evidence of processed shame, these films suggest there is limited pride associated with queer sexual orientations.

This thesis reflects only a sample of seven comedies produced in North America over 22 years. However, the sample is comprised of the highest-grossing queer-themed comedies, suggesting they have reached the most audiences in North America for this category. If this is the

case, audiences rarely see queer self-acceptance on screen. McLaughlin and Rodriguez's (2017) claim that "inclusion does not always equal representation" resonates here (p. 1196). Despite being included on-screen and in storylines, queer characters' sexual orientations are called into question and hidden to avoid negative perceptions from interactions with straight characters. While these attitudes and beliefs are displayed in cinematic worlds, it is important to remember that this is not where they originate. When individuals see concepts from their mind represented in the real world, they create meaning (Hall, 1997). After consistently viewing queer characters experience shame due to their sexual orientations, queer audiences who already perceive themselves negatively (i.e., experience internalized homophobia) may further internalize this shame. When queer characters display processed shame (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020), queer audiences can interpret this as a possible experience for themselves as well.

Summary of Thesis

In this thesis, I examined how queer romantic comedy characters cope with negative emotions during social interactions and how they can resolve these feelings. To situate my analysis in terms of the current trends in research on queer representation in media, I gave a brief account of the industry's history of approaches to the queer community. I argue that while Hollywood produces hundreds of movies each year, only a fraction of these include queer characters let alone contain queer themes (Grant, 2007; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017; Stevens, 2020). This is a reflection of society's heteronormative standards (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Chung, 2007; Craig et al., 2015; Dhaenens, 2012; Grant, 2007; Neale, 2000; Stevens, 2020; Sutherland & Feltey, 2013). When

queer roles are included, the characters are often left in the background, but quickly identified due to known coded stereotypes (Brown & Groscup, 2009; Chung, 2007; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Reyna et al., 2014). These stereotypes typically offer inaccurate accounts of the queer community based on heteronormative ideals (Grant, 2007; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017; Stevens, 2020). With limited access to information about the queer community, queer individuals may seek out queer characters in media to model their behavior (Craig et al., 2015). Should this be the case, queer audiences will not necessarily learn about the queer community in movies, but rather the film industry's heteronormative interpretation of the group. Hollywood movies, then, can teach queer audiences how to act in a heteronormative society.

After situating this thesis in the context of past research, I detailed my theoretical approach using symbolic interactionism. I first used Goffman's (1959) concept of the personal front to describe how individuals present themselves during social interactions. Goffman argues that individuals alter their impressions during social interactions, sometimes hiding or exaggerating characteristics based on perception. By managing their personal fronts in this manner, individuals are aware of socially appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Goffman, 1959). This suggests that emotions influence the personal front. Individuals display appropriate emotions or behavior to gain or maintain social acceptance and inclusion, a valued trait in society (Armon-Jones, 1988; Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988; Thoits, 1989). Accordingly, individuals may adopt approved and expected personal fronts to retain inclusion in society (Goffman, 1959). Hochschild (1983) argues these standards are reinforced by feeling rules, an invisible set of social values, norms, and expectations that require individuals to reflect on how

they are feeling versus what they should be feeling. When individuals express inappropriate emotions, social sanctions such as teasing, scolding, or exclusion are some of the ways used to correct the behavior (Hochschild, 1983). By experiencing an emotional predicament such as this, an individual can recognize and acknowledge how they have misbehaved (Davis, 2012; Hochschild, 1983).

I also argue that certain emotions serve as social sanctions. After experiencing inappropriate emotions, some people may experience guilt or shame (Armon-Jones, 1988; Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988). Guilt manages the process of changing an inappropriate emotion to one deemed more acceptable (Armon-Jones, 1988; Hochschild, 1983; Thoits, 1989). Feeling guilty serves a self-reflective purpose, whereby the individual internalizes social values to maintain social acceptance (Armon-Jones, 1988; Hochschild, 1983). While guilt is the fear of punishment, shame is the fear of humiliation (Armon-Jones, 1988). Following social rejection, an individual may experience humiliation as they self-monitor their behavior and reflect on others' perceptions of them (Scheff, 1988). Different forms of shame initiate different forms of reaction; overt, undifferentiated shame focuses on concealment of inappropriate behaviors, while bypassed shame focuses on distraction from these behaviors (Scheff, 1988). When individuals can balance their self-perceptions with social norms, they experience processed shame (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020). To cope with feelings of inadequacy, individuals adopt strategies such as concealing, claiming, and patrolling to protect themselves from these negative perceptions (Pugh, 2009).

My analysis began with a sample of seven romantic comedy films produced in North America between 1996 and 2018: *The Birdcage* (Nichols & Machlis, 1996)*, In & Out* (Brown et

al., 1997), *Chasing Amy* (Mosier, 1997), *The Object of My Affection* (Mark, 1998), *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Wurmfeld & Zions, 2002), *Boat Trip* (Müller et al., 2003), and *Love, Simon* (Bowen et al., 2018). These films were among BoxOfficeMojo's highest-grossing gay/lesbians films that were also cross-listed as comedies or romantic comedies. To conduct my analysis, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps to thematic analysis before venturing into a thematic decomposition analysis (Bower et al., 2002; Stenner, 1993; Woollett et al., 1998). I recorded detailed information from each film in Excel, noting the language, appearance, and mannerisms of characters during social interactions. Looking at the accumulated data, I identified five main coping strategies used by queer characters: humor, conformity, ignoring, avoiding, and accepting. Humor was identified as the breaking of expected feeling rules, with the intention of releasing negative emotions, often referred to as the cathartic effect (Scheff, 1977; Scheff & Scheele, 1980). I defined conformity as adhering to social norms to both receive social acceptance and avoid social punishment (Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1988). When queer characters choose not to engage in conversations on queer topics, I labeled this ignoring (Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Kawale, 2004; Levina et al., 2000; Vinjamuri, 2015). Avoiding was identified when characters tried to distract from their sexual orientation without necessarily concealing it (Jones, 2018; Vinjamuri, 2015). Acceptance was identified when characters no longer used concealment, avoidance, or other strategies when they overcame shame about their sexual orientations (Scheff, 1988). With these strategies, I used a thematic decomposition analysis to see how these representations create meaning (Bower et al., 2002; Hall, 1997; Stenner, 1993). By acknowledging that representations on-screen create meaning for the concepts in peoples' minds (Hall, 1997), a thematic decomposition analysis allowed me to

establish the findings of this thesis in terms of broader social and cultural norms and values (Bower et al., 2002; Stenner, 1993).

I divided my analysis into three sections: coping with homophobia, coping with heterosexuality, and coping with internalized homophobia. Homophobia was identified when a heterosexual character used language or behavior to make members of the queer community feel abnormal, excluded, and different from other members of society (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Brown & Alderson, 2010; Burn et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2017). Interactions between characters where heterosexuality was implied as natural compared to other sexual orientations were labeled as instances of heteronormativity (Brown & Alderson, 2010; Dalley & Campbell, 2006). Internalized homophobia was recognized when queer characters directed negative attitudes about the queer community toward themselves (Burn et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2017; Flebus & Montano, 2012; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Gould, 2001; Puckett et al., 2017). Within each of the above sections, I examined coping strategies in terms of humor, conforming, ignoring, avoiding, and accepting. I found that across these sections, concealment was the most frequently used strategy regardless of whether or not the character wished to avoid, conform, or otherwise distract from intolerance towards their sexual orientation (Pugh, 2009; Scheff, 1988). For many characters, concealing their sexual orientations meant managing their personal front (Goffman, 1959). When using this strategy, characters would often patrol their behaviors to ensure they abided by social expectations (Pugh, 2009), using surface acting and deep acting in the process (Hochschild, 1983). In some cases, characters stopped concealing themselves and instead confidently accepted their sexual orientations. For these characters, their shame was processed (Scheff, 1988). These queer characters understand that not everyone will support their sexual

orientations, but these negative perceptions do not mean they need to change (Scheff, 1988; V. de Courville Nicol, personal communication, April 24, 2020). Instead, these characters are proud despite facing instances of intolerance. However, with re-occurring patterns of concealment and limited examples of processed shame, these findings suggest that over 22 years, Hollywood's representation of queer characters has remained relatively unchanged.

Implications

Future research can take hold in many directions with the findings of this analysis, especially with additional work on the emotional experiences of queer characters in mainstream romantic comedies. Do queer characters have similar emotional experiences across other mainstream genres? How do these findings compare to comedies and romantic comedies released before 1996? And how do these findings compare to the emotional representations of queer characters in concurrently produced queer cinema? By examining the representation of queer emotional experiences in films, researchers can gain a greater understanding of queer inclusion in North American media. This is especially important as queer audiences have become increasingly vocal about their dissatisfaction with mainstream media's representation of their community (Waggoner, 2018). With mainstream media's frequent use of the "bury your gays" trope, queer audiences have argued that while their visibility has increased, the quality of this representation is not equal to their heterosexual counterparts (Waggoner, 2018). If queer audiences are unsatisfied with their representation, how do they process the consumption of these programs? Future research can account for how queer viewers react emotionally to the representations they see displayed on-screen. With these findings, researchers can outline the emotional discrepancies between queer emotional experiences in films compared to real-life

experiences. By conducting these investigations, researchers can help advocate for the queer community in their quest for equal representation.

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