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Queer Representation in the *Scream* Franchise

I. Introduction

Queer representation is ever growing and important in our society today. Representation in media is particularly important as it is a place where unrepresented individuals get the opportunity to see themselves being represented. This type of representation is important these communities so that they can feel seen and understood. Unfortunately, many individuals do not see or understand the value of this representation, particularly when it come to showing queer individuals on screen. Quite often characters will be hinted at being queer but are never canonically shown expressing their queerness be that related to sexually or gender presentation. This type of representation is oftended referred to as “queerbaiting” which is a marketing strategy used to hint at LGBTQ+ representation but never actually confirm it (Scott, 2019). Another unfortunate result of attempts to add representation to the screen is when no queer individuals are actually consulted on the characters’ presentation. This can lead to poor representations that are dramatized and stereotyped, which can ultimately harm the LGBTQ+ community. When viewing representation on screen it is important that viewers analyze not only the quantity (does this represent the real world) but also the quality (Is this queerbaiting? Is this poor representation?). In this paper I will analyze the progress of queer representation over time, specifically looking at the *Scream* films.

II. Literature Review

Much research has been done on the importance of having diversity and representation of all individuals on screen and how the portrayal of these characters can heavily impact and influence society to think a certain way about minority or under represented groups. Secondary research on these concepts proved to me the importance of my research in answering the questions of how quantity and quality have evolved over time and accessing if representation has progressed with the times.

The first aspect of research I wanted to investigate was quality. I knew there would be plenty of research proving why having representation on screen is important because whether we like it or not, messages in films are internalized and interpolated into the real world every day, as Tascon (2012) emphasizes in her article, stating that:

The explosion in acceptance and use of this form of communication carries with it, however, a commensurate need to examine and analyze more closely the cultural meanings and social effects this visual form carries. Thus, the interaction between film as a visual art, communication form, and a vehicle for the spread of human rights cannot remain a purely mechanical or instrumental one; that is, film must be viewed as a tool for the promotion of human rights. As the above quote illustrates, this communication form is a powerful tool. Its power does not lie simply in its utilitarian application, but rather, like all media and communications modes, in its ability to be non-neutral; it is ideologically and culturally loaded (Tascon, 2012, pg. 865).

As her quote indicates the film as pure entertainment cannot be separated from the ideas of visual representation and rhetoric. It is a part of the fabric of our lives to analyze and unpack the things we view and film cannot be thought of as any different in terms of

rhetoric impact as say literature is. Every film is indeed “culturally loaded” and in order to ensure positive and equal representations the questions of quantity and quality must be answered (Tascon, 2012).

Brumemett (2013) demonstrates how the actions and words of on screen characters can influence the way we think about individuals in real life. He states:

If a homology can show audiences that this film is about that neighborhood quarrel you are having, then the ways in which characters, for instance, must have race, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth can carry powerful rhetorical effects (Brumemett, 2013, pg. 64).

He further discusses how values can be encoded in the visual rhetoric of films and how these images can be used to reinforce certain values or opinions. This demonstrates how important it is that the characters we see on screen be accurate representations because harmful representations have a real life impact on how certain communities are viewed. This especially applies when studios decide to include characters just to seem like their production is diverse, as this often leads to the exploitation of under represented groups through poorly written portrayals that follow harmful stereotypes, as Hefner (2012) investigates in his article “Rethinking Blacula.” He investigates the harms of “blaxploitation” in films, particularly horror films which typically thrive on and profit off of stereotyped characters (Hefner, 2012). He describes how “blaxploitation” is a movement that “exploits the ‘fantasies’ of a black audience while simultaneously exploiting stereotypical conceptions of blackness” to get black audiences into the theaters (Hefner, 2012, pg. 64). A similar phenomenon occurs with queerness as studios utilize easy stereotypes of queerness to seem as though they are providing a diverse and representative film that queer audiences can relate to. This often results in shallow, unsubstantial characters as

Brooks (2014) addresses in her article. She analyzes representations of black women in zombie films and find that there really aren't any substantial representations. She ends her argument by stating, "It is not enough to simply include black female characters; horror creators must also make them individuated figures woven into the main narrative" (Brooks, 2014, pg. 8). This is true for all unrepresented groups. These characters must be shown to be valuable to the plot and have their own narratives, otherwise they are simply there to provide the illusion of diversity. Diversity has to be more than simply seeing color or queerness on screen, it must be valuable representation. This idea leads us to the concept of "queerbaiting." Queerbaiting is the label given to the common occurrence of shows and movies appealing to queer audiences by hinting that a character may be queer but never actually confirming it. Queerbaiting can be extremely harmful to the queer community as Lucia Scott proves in their thesis. They state:

...the harmful effects of queerbaiting go beyond the effects felt from the show itself. Fans are often attacked for feeling as though two characters could potentially be queer. They are told they are delusional or projecting onto these fictional characters. These discursive strategies are familiar tools for heteropatriarchy and maintain its power. (Scott, 2019, pg. 5).

As Scott demonstrates, "queerbaiting" not only deceives the audience into feeling represented or seeing themselves on screen, but also has negative impacts outside the show or film. It is extremely harmful to a community to be essentially gaslit into thinking that they could ever potentially see themselves represented. My research is essential in contributing evidence of how the quality and quantity of representation has aged over time because there is not a lot of research being done in regards to evolution through time but also on these two concepts of quality and quantity put together.

III. Research Questions

The goal of my research in this paper is to address two specific aspects of on screen representation: quantity and quality. When looking at representation on screen, the goal is for real life to be reflected. This often does not happen, with primarily cis straight white characters shown in heterosexual relationships been shown across media. More recently productions are working towards adding more diversity on screen, but the desire to be seen as diverse creates the other issue of quality. Many tv shows and movies will add diverse characters purely to capitalize on the fact that they are a “diverse” production. Quality checking these characters to see if they are given a main role, have a complex character, and are more than just a stereotype is more important than ever. My goal is to access these factors and how they have change over time by comparing *Scream* (1996) and the reboot of the franchise *Scream* (2022). Ultimately, I will answer the research question, “How has the quality and quantity of queer representation in the *Scream* franchise changed over time to reflect modern values?”

IV. Approach/Method

My method for this study will follow the interpretive paradigm in that I will seek to understand human behavior rather than predict it. I am examining the evolution of queer representation in film through a critical cultural lens. I collected qualitative data by watching these films and coding the instances of queer-ness into categories. This lens will allow me to draw conclusions how about different cultural identities are presented in film, specifically in reference to queer-ness and the LGBTQ+ community.

This was done by watching two films *Scream* (1996) and *Scream* (2022) since the most recent film is technically a reboot of the franchise even though it has characters from the original franchise it has a new set of characters that mirror the original film. The first aspect I accessed

was quantity which will simply include a count of queer characters or queer-coded characters, the subtextual coding of characters as queer in media, in each film. The next level of analysis was assessing the quality of the queer characters by answering the following questions: Are they shown to actually be queer? (ie: are they shown in a homoromantic relationship, do they openly discuss their sexuality or identity, etc...) Do they embody queer stereotypes? Are they a main character? Do they have a personality and exhibit behaviors beyond their queerness? From these questions I compared how the representation has changed in the twenty-six years inbetween these films.

V. Findings

In *Scream* (1996) there are no explicit queer characters what-so-ever, but there are many moments in the film that are queer-coded. These coded moments have even been confirmed by openly gay screenwriting Kevin Williamson. One of the main characters, Gale Weathers is often mentioned for her queer appearance, wearing pants suits and other unconventional outfits that are stereotypically assigned to lesbians and inspired by many feminist icons that typically wear a more masculine style of clothing. The most prominent instant of queercoding though is between the two villains of the film, Stu Macher and Billy Loomis. In the film, it is ultimately revealed that the infamous Ghostface is actually two different individuals taking turns wearing the costume. At the end of the film it is often remarked upon how these two share a very tight bond, and have many moments of closeness physically and emotionally, that suggest perhaps a deeper bond than just murderous friends.

As for *Scream* (2022), there is a confirmed queer character in the film, that being the character of Mindy Meeks-Martin. She is a black lesbian, two forms of representation that are

often lacking in film in general, and is shown actually kissing other females in the movie and is shown being very open, vocal, and fluid when it comes to her sexuality, kissing multiple different characters throughout the film. Mindy is one of the central characters of the film and is portrayed as “horror expert” of the film used to lead the audience through stereotyped assumption about who dies first and who the killer usually is in the horror genre. This demonstrates that she does have a personality outside of just her queerness, although she does seem only serve as the expert like the character’s father did in the *Scream 2*.

VI. Discussion

Comparing *Scream* (1996) and *Scream* (2022) revealed a lot about how queer characters are presented on screen. In *Scream* (1996), we are presented with the heavily queer-coded characters of Billy Loomis and Stu Macher. Ultimately this film has a very poor representation of queer characters. Not only are Billy and Stu never actually confirmed to be gay, they are also the villains of the entire film and ultimately end up dead. Killing the only queer-coded characters and villainizing them reaffirms the concept of a heteronormativity by getting rid of the characters that are seen as “different” and do not fit inside this idea of heteronormativity. This poor representation is emphasized by the fact that fans may consider these characters actually queer and this can lead to a poor overall image of not only gay relationships but of the fact that we deserve to see queer representation on screen, not just have it suggested to us. When this is compared with *Scream* (2022) we can see a huge jump in the quality of representation in particular. While Mandy is the only openly queer character we do get actual confirmation that she is a lesbian and is open and proud of it. The way her friends also interact with her, seeing her as an authority on all things horror, having her be a central character of the main friend group, shows that her identity is loved and supported. She also survives the film after a close call,

another indication that she is a valued character. While Mandy does seem to align with some of the lesser known stereotypes of queerness such as the way she dresses and being very open and fluid with her sexuality, she ultimately is a positive representation, given purpose in the film beyond just being a lesbian. With this I can conclude that queer representation particularly in the Scream franchise has improved in quantity and in quality. While there is still a long way to go before we see a world that reflects the one we actually live in, this represents a massive jump in progress and representation in modern media.

VII. Conclusion

Representation in film is an essential part of our society and rhetorical meaning making, and as our society progresses in making sure there is better representation and equality it is essential that we hold studios to the standard that our films positively and equally represent all groups, not just the cis het white norm. When looking at examples of diversity in film it is essential to look at the quantity, if it represents the world around us, but also the quality of the representations as studios are not afraid to exploit and profit off of poorly represented diversity. This study is crucial in adding to the rhetoric surrounding these ideas and ensuring that we hold film to a higher standard of positive, quality representation across the board. The findings of this research demonstrate how queer representation has come very far from queercoded characters to explicitly queer lesbians, and although it is not perfect it is an improvement compared to the first film. The research done in this paper could be expanded in a number of ways, especially by exploring representations of other under represented groups in regards to areas such as disability and race. Research could also be done across multiple franchises of horror films or across other genres of film in. It might also be beneficial to investigate films with a large time gap, or multiple films across generations to gauge the progress through a longer span of time.

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I pledge... Amber Harvey