I’m Bi, Actually

Combatting Bisexual Erasure and the Impact of Representation

in Netflix’s *Heartstopper*

Meret Jael Koch

Examiner: Tobias Linné

Supervisor: Joanna Doona

MSc in Media and Communication

Lund University

2024

Abstract

This study explores the engagement of bisexual individuals with the Netflix series *Heartstopper* in the context of media representations of bisexuality. It delves into the intersections of media engagement, representation, and identity through a social constructionist lens. This thesis lends its voice to twelve individuals who experience attraction to multiple genders and identify as bisexual, pansexual, queer, or choose not to label their sexuality. Through qualitative interviews, it poses the questions of how this audience engages with media representations of their identity, particularly the case of *Heartstopper*, how they evaluate them, and lastly whether media representations play a role in the audience's self-perception as well as their feeling of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community. Analytically, it employs the five parameters of media engagement, and identity and representation theory.

The findings showed a strong affective engagement and emotional involvement with the series *Heartstopper*, which was praised for its take on bisexual representation. The participants had developed a high degree of identification with the bisexual main character, Nick Nelson, and saw many of the commonly found stereotypes of bisexuality subverted in his portrayal. Moreover, the study uncovered disappointment with the lack of bisexual representation in the media on the part of the audience, as well as displeasure at misrepresentations of bisexual individuals. The interviewees expressed that they believed the absence of meaningful and nuanced representation had impacted them in their self-perception, and furthermore contributed to the perpetuation of bisexual erasure, binegativity, and biphobia in society. *Heartstopper*, as an example of nuanced and positive representation, was postulated as an opportunity to validate the experiences of young bisexual audience members in particular, and to normalise bisexuality as a viable and stable sexual identity, combatting the discrimination bisexual individuals often face from both straight and queer spaces. This study has therefore underlined the importance of representation for a marginalised community that has historically been rendered invisible and invalid in academia, popular culture, and society at large.

Keywords: *bisexual representation, media representation, LGBTQ+ media, fan engagement, identity*

Acknowledgements

I am forever indebted to the queer people, activists, authors, media producers, and researchers who came before me and made it possible for me to write this thesis without any hesitation or fear of repercussions. You are the reason I get to be who I am.

I am particularly grateful to the bisexual community, even if and precisely because I was unaware of its existence for much of my childhood and youth. I would like to acknowledge the manifold identities of individuals who experience attraction to multiple genders, whether they refer to themselves as bisexual, pansexual, queer, or refrain from labelling themselves. Your identities are equally as valid and the many colours you carry inside are beautifully disruptive and expansive of what words can even begin to describe. Labels can be validation or restriction, and I acknowledge that it is a difficult path to tread. Despite my use of the word bisexual(ity) in this thesis, this is for you too. You are my community. We exist along a continuum of identity and love that I have no interest in pinning down in a single word. This is for all of us.

To my loved ones, your relentless support has made it possible for me to throw myself into this work. Thank you for listening to me when I had to talk just to make sense of my thoughts for this project, thank you for reading my drafts and offering your invaluable feedback, and thank you for simply being there when I needed you. Your encouragement throughout this process and quite frankly, my entire life, is what has kept me going. Thank you for never once doubting me and for believing in me.

To my supervisor Joanna, for your excitement to work with me on this project, your words of wisdom and encouragement, and your insistence that I would get to this point. The only way out truly is through.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The last decade has seen a stellar increase in diversity on screen. Broadcasting channels and streaming services alike have experienced increased pressure to include characters and storylines that shed light on marginalised communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community. This can be attributed in part to an increased sensitivity towards telling stories that historically underrepresented communities have been denied, but there is also a clear economic motive behind this rise in representation: Far from being a niche genre, films and TV series featuring queer characters have accumulated widespread popularity, even with non-LGBTQ+ audiences (Esper & Bowen-Jones, 2023). In addition to monetary motivations, some of the backlash against the increase in queer representation has also included the accusation of corporations including LGBTQ+ characters and stories to tick the box of the "token gay" or to intentionally create controversial headlines (ibid.). Nevertheless, the rise of queer entertainment media does seem to be a result of a heightened interest in narratives of a historically underrepresented group. Between 2022 and 2023, around 10% of all characters in scripted TV productions were LGBTQ+[1] (GLAAD, 2023). Streaming services lead with the highest number of LGBTQ+ characters in comparison to broadcast and cable, out of which Netflix has consistently taken the prime spot in recent years (GLAAD, 2022; ibid., 2023).

This surge in diversity on screen follows a general societal development of more people openly identifying as LGBTQ+: In the United States, around 20% of adult members of Gen Z and roughly 11% of Millennials identify as part of the community (GLAAD, 2023). Around 4% of all US American adults identify as bisexual+, making up the majority within the LGBTQ+ community at 58% (ibid.). Bisexual+ is an umbrella term that refers to people who experience attraction to multiple genders (ibid.). It includes labels such as bisexual, pansexual, or queer. For ease of reading and due to the use of the label in *Heartstopper*, I will be using the term bisexual in this thesis to refer to anyone who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction to more than one gender. However, this is not to take away from individual choices when it comes to labels or choosing not to label one's sexuality, which is why *plurisexual* will be used at times as a more neutral term due to not being attached to a specific identity.

[1] GLAAD's annual "Where We are on TV" report examines the number of LGBTQ+ characters in a given television season. It takes into account scripted series premiering or a new season of such premiering on cable TV, broadcast and/or streaming services between beginning of June the previous and end of May the following year. Regular and recurring characters are tracked under the label(s) that they themselves use in the series or have been confirmed by the production team behind the series (GLAAD, 2023).

Despite constituting over half of the queer community and the overall increase in representation, there is a distinct lack of bisexual representation in entertainment media (GLAAD, 2023; San Filippo, 2013; Corey, 2017; Allen, 2023). Out of all queer characters on TV and streaming services in the 2022-2023 season, only 25% are bisexual (GLAAD, 2023). This dearth of representation fits into a long history of bisexual erasure, where plurisexual identities have been even further confined to the margins than monosexual queer identities, such as gay and lesbian (Corey, 2017; San Filippo, 2013). As San Filippo puts it: "To a surprising extent, bisexuality remains the orientation that dares not speak its name." (2013, p. 4). Bisexual erasure therefore concerns not only the lack of bisexual experiences shown on screen but also the refusal to use the term bisexual to describe characters and instead labelling them as gay or lesbian. This appropriation contributes to the scarcity of bisexual representation in TV series and the invisibility of bisexuality as a valid identity (San Filippo, 2013). Through this, bisexuality remains invisible "even after it became a publicly, politically *articulated* identity" (ibid., p. 19, emphasis added).

The Case of Heartstopper

The Netflix series *Heartstopper* (2022-), based on the graphic novel series of the same name, centres bisexuality and depicts the struggles that result from bisexual erasure. It therefore combats this erasure not only by including bisexual characters but by addressing bisexual erasure explicitly. After falling in love with his classmate Charlie Spring, 16-year-old Nick Nelson navigates the complexity of sexuality and identity by discovering that he is bisexual and subsequently coming out to his friends and family. Over the course of this journey, he is met with common stereotypes surrounding queerness and bisexuality specifically, as he is told that he does not "appear gay". He is forced to correct people several times, stating "I'm bi(sexual), actually" when they assume that he must be homosexual due to his relationship with Charlie. This exemplifies the common pitfall of assuming someone's sexuality based on their partner, which has been identified as a harmful trope in media depicting LGBTQ+ storylines – and a key component in bisexual erasure and compulsory monosexuality, the notion that the only valid sexual identities are straight or gay (GLAAD, 2023; Allen, 2023; Johnson, 2016). The repeated clarifications regarding his identity are indicative of societal attitudes towards bisexuality, namely that it is an invalid identity, a stepping stone or phase of experimentation,

and not worth articulating. Nick's experience depicts the wider problem of the often-forgotten letter B in the acronym.

What might appear as a recurring joke – that Nick is simply being overly insistent on his particular sub-brand of queerness in every conversation – is taken seriously in *Heartstopper*. For bisexual people, being perceived as either homosexual or heterosexual is a familiar issue that has real-life consequences. In 2022, actor Kit Connor, who portrays Nick, felt obligated to publicly address his bisexuality following queerbaiting accusations after being photographed with a young woman (Saunders, 2022). Speculations about Connor's (hetero)sexuality as well as the validity of his portrayal of queerness in the series spread quickly, following the notion that he must be "straight until proven otherwise" (San Filippo, 2013, p. 33). These accusations of queerbaiting, and Connor supposedly selling queerness to the audience in the series but not belonging to the LGBTQ+ community in reality, ultimately pressured Connor to come out. Strikingly, he stated: "I think some of you missed the point of the show" (Connor, 2022 qtd. in Saunders, 2022). Particularly as a series that involves a plethora of queer individuals in its production, from the creator Alice Oseman to actors to the production crew, *Heartstopper* stands out in its take on representation on and beyond the screen (Bitran, 2022). It is this interconnection between bisexual representation and its real-life implications for bisexual individuals and audiences that makes *Heartstopper* a fascinating case for this study.

Why Bisexual Representation Matters

Queerness is too often treated as monolithic and therefore the individual experiences of people with various sexual identities are pushed further to the margins in favour of a seemingly unified "queer experience" (Allen, 2023). This leads to a systematic erasure of bisexuality in the media and connects to societal stigma around bisexuality as an identity. Studies have shown that bisexual people are less likely to be open about their sexuality in comparison to gay men and lesbian women: 28% of bisexual participants in a US American study reported being "fully out" in comparison to over 70% of homosexual participants (GLAAD, 2023). The prevalent belief that sexuality is binary may contribute to the hesitation many bisexual people experience around coming out. Moreover, some scholars have pointed to a mental health crisis in the bisexual community caused by minority stress, social isolation and stigmatisation (Johnson, 2016). Bisexual people often face rejection from both heterosexual and homosexual

communities, which may add to a feeling of not belonging (Eisner, 2013; Johnson, 2016). In a study by Johnson, close to 70% of bisexual participants reported that they had been diagnosed with one or more mental disorders – out of which 40% stated their symptoms were "somewhat affected" by media representations of bisexuality (2016, p. 389). This seems to indicate that representation, or lack thereof, may contribute to shaping attitudes towards bisexuality and the mental health and self-perception of bisexual individuals. It is therefore crucial to examine how bisexual audiences evaluate representation and whether it plays a role in the construction and validation of their identity as well as sense of belonging within the wider LGBTQ+ community.

Even queer theory as an academic perspective dedicated to looking beyond heterosexuality as the default identity has resorted to constructing an "other", a seemingly oppositional pole: homosexuality (Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009). This view of queerness as decisively homosexual leaves little room for plurisexual experiences and identities in queer theory and is a result of monosexism, the structural privileging of monosexual attraction (San Filippo, 2013). At best, bisexuality has been constituted through what it is *not*, homosexuality or heterosexuality, rather than an ontological category in itself. Overall, bisexuality has been "variously noted as absent, under-recognized, under-theorized" until more recently, when it has emerged as "central to conceptualizing sexual identities" (Gammon & Isgro, 2006, p. 160). This centrality stems in part from the threat that bisexuality poses to seemingly fixed categories of oppositional sexualities. It pushes against binaries and boundaries, and through this, holds the capacity to "reveal and disassemble existing regimes of power and knowledge" (Gurevich et al., 2009, p. 236). Bisexuality's defiance of clear categorisation, which this thesis also aims to shed light on by discussing the hesitation around or rejection of specific labels within the community, can be an asset to queer scholarship's questioning of normativities and taken-for-granted categories. Nevertheless, bisexuality continues to be constrained to the margins of queer theory. The research gap on bisexuality is not only indicative of a wider prevalence of bisexual erasure, it is directly involved in the systematic omission of bisexuality as a valid identity.

Aims, Objectives, and Research Questions

My aim for this thesis is, therefore, twofold. Firstly, I want to address the research gap that exists surrounding bisexuality, particularly due to its absorption into queer theory (San Filippo, 2013). Hence, as a bisexual researcher, I aim to contribute to the small but growing body of

research concerned with bisexuality. Moreover, there is a dearth of research on bisexual representation and audiences, perpetuating bisexual erasure also in media studies. My second aim is to understand the complex relationship between bisexual representation and the construction as well as (in)validation of bisexual individuals' identities, including the labelling of such. In line with a social constructionist perspective, I intend to explore whether and how media representation and identity validation are linked for this audience as well as how their feeling of community and belonging is impacted by the (in)visibility of bisexuality. As a series that addresses bisexuality and its erasure so openly, *Heartstopper* provides an excellent example of breaking the tradition of silencing bisexual experiences.

Overarchingly, this thesis aims to uncover the intersections between media representation and identity for a community that has faced and is still facing discrimination, misrepresentation and erasure on and beyond the screen. Not only lending my voice to my community but letting them speak for themselves and in their own words lies at the heart of what this thesis aims to achieve. This thesis therefore follows the objectives of exploring a bisexual audience's engagement with *Heartstopper*, uncovering their evaluations of bisexual representation in the wider context of LGBTQ+ media, and investigating the connections between identity and representation through the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How do bisexual individuals engage with the series *Heartstopper*?

RQ2. How do they evaluate bisexual representation, particularly through the character of Nick in the series? What constitutes "good" representation?

RQ3. What role does bisexual representation play in their identity perception and validation as well as sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community?

This thesis will first outline the complexity of how bisexuality is situated within queer theory, the importance of identity and representation in audience research, and *Heartstopper* as a poster child for bisexual representation. Secondly, I will lay out the methodological setup of this audience study conducted through the means of semi-structured qualitative interviews, which I will subsequently analyse following qualitative text analysis. The findings from this study will be contextualised against the theoretical perspectives synthesised in the literature review in order to reach a conclusion answering the research questions and to close in on the role of representation for this marginalised audience.

2. Literature Review

The following chapter outlines key terminology and perspectives within queer theory as well as media studies, which this research employs as a theoretical framework and as analytical tools. Furthermore, the latter section of this chapter contextualises *Heartstopper* within LGBTQ+ media representation and discusses the under- and misrepresentation of bisexuality through previous studies.

Sex, Gender and Norms of Sexuality

This chapter introduces concepts such as sex, gender, and (bi)sexuality. In order to understand sexuality as an identity within the wider framework of feminist and gender studies discourses, it is critical to examine the historical context of queer theory before applying its terminology to this research. As this thesis deals extensively with questions of sexual identity, the aim of the subsequent sections is to outline bisexuality's place – or, as will become evident, lack thereof – within queer feminist practices.

The emergence of queer theory within academic research has shed light on the way taken-for-granted categories such as sex, gender, and sexuality have shaped, and often constricted, the conceptualisation of identity. Rather than being a single theoretical proposition, queer theory inherently breaks with binaries and boundaries, and has therefore in itself resisted clear categorisation by scholars (Goldberg, 2016). The strength of queer theory lies precisely in this disagreement on what exactly it constitutes, as it lends itself to different viewpoints and a plethora of individual perspectives on how gender and sexuality relate to power relations in cultural contexts (ibid.). Much of the early perspectives centred around the distinction between biological sex and the culturally constructed concept of gender: "[G]ender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. [...] Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders" (Butler, 1990, p. 9). Not only does this impact the understanding of previously uncontested social categories but personal identity:

> [T]he 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. Inasmuch as 'identity' is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of 'the person' is called into question by the cultural emergence of those 'incoherent' or 'discontinuous' gendered beings who appear to be

> persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (ibid., p. 23)

This is relevant in this study for two reasons: Firstly, two out of twelve participants do not (exclusively) identify with the sex assigned to them at birth, which has above been described as biological sex. Their gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth and additionally falls outside of the gender binary of male/female. Non-binary individuals may view their identity as removed from the binary or as fluid and ever-changing. Secondly, this study deals extensively with the question of identity, particularly sexuality as part of an individual's identity. Identity is not treated as a fixed, unchanging concept, but also as a construct characterised by fluidity and plurality.

The nature vs nurture, or essentialist vs constructionist debate prevails, asking whether LGBTQ+ individuals are genetically predisposed to queerness or were influenced by social exposure (Shaw, 2023). Despite arguing from a social constructionist perspective regarding the interplay between representation and identity, I align myself with the current consensus on sexuality and sexual orientation that it likely derives from a combination of genetic and environmental factors (ibid.). Queer theory "challenges the normative social ordering of identities and subjectivities along the heterosexual/homosexual binary as well as the privileging of heterosexuality as 'natural' and homosexuality as its deviant and abhorrent 'other'" (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 5). Butler notes that the *heterosexualisation of desire* is dependent on this constructed binary, on oppositional poles such as male and female, masculine and feminine (1990, p. 24). The concept of heterosexuality thus does not only depend on those binaries to construct and define itself but also to separate itself from the "other", being homosexuality. The privileging of heterosexuality, its interconnection with gender norms and societal expectations, works to enact a compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). Far from being a mere heteronormative expectation towards sexual behaviour, compulsory heterosexuality, too, connects to identity:

> If 'identity' is an *effect* of discursive practices, to what extent is gender identity, construed as a relationship among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire, the effect of a regulatory practice that can be identified as compulsory heterosexuality? (ibid., p. 24)

Compulsory heterosexuality is closely related to heteronormativity, the "Western social norm, or assumption, that the overwhelming majority of sexual relationships in society are heterosexual" (Goldberg, 2016). Heteronormativity constitutes the dominant perspective through which "identities, experiences, regimes of truth and knowledge, and ideologies of gender and sex" are organised (ibid.). This provides an important lens through which the

responses of the participants in this study can be contextualised, as they continue to move through a heteronormative world, even as queer individuals. Moreover, heteronormativity provides the basis for most of the media's portrayals of sexual and romantic attraction, desires and relationships. The aim of this research is to highlight the audience's engagement with a portrayal that, in many ways, deviates from the prevalent notion of heteronormativity as well as addresses it directly. Overall, queer theory can be considered "an emerging aspect of media studies that scrutinizes the social institutions and identities that allow heteronormativity to prevail unchallenged" (Corey, 2017, p. 193).

Notably, what is often absent from this discourse and pushed to its margins is bisexuality (Gammon & Isgro, 2006; San Filippo, 2013). Despite queer theory's revolt against pre-conceived categories, the popular conception of sexuality as binary and dichotomous remains, leaving homosexuality and heterosexuality as the *two* poles of human behaviour and identity (Gammon & Isgro, 2006; Angelides, 2006). If heterosexuality and homosexuality are defined by rejecting one another, this leaves no room for bisexuality (Goldberg, 2016). Yet the concept of bisexuality also appears to not exist without the supposed opposition of homo/heterosexuality, and takes on the character of a middle point or a third category (Angelides, 2006). Several scholars have gone as far as to argue that bisexuality functions as the "other" for both heterosexuality and homosexuality, which stresses its importance not only in its own conceptualisation but, counterintuitively, to the binary system of sexuality (Gammon & Isgro, 2006). In this line of thought, bisexuality is defined through what it is *not*, homosexuality or heterosexuality. This conceptualisation of identity through difference (Hall, 1996) still leaves the question of what does in fact constitute bisexuality as an ontological category, which shall be explored at a later stage. Moreover, Gammon and Isgro (2006) note that "bisexuality, as a lived experience and an epistemological perspective, can be an integral part of queer theory" (p. 161). Yet the overwhelming absence of bisexuality from early contestations of queer theory is indicative of a historically cultivated discomfort with bisexuality as a transgressive category.

Bisexuality

"Bisexuality remains the blind spot of queer formations and queer studies." (San Filippo, 2013, p. 239)

The first recorded use of the word *bisexual* in English was a translation from the German *bisexuell* used by Richard von Kraft-Ebbing in 1892 (Shaw, 2023). Bisexuality then emerged as a category to classify sexuality that is "neither heterosexual nor homosexual" in the wake of the Kinsey scale (Corey, 2017, p. 191). In his research on sexuality, Alfred Kinsey described sexuality on a scale from zero (exclusively heterosexual) to six (exclusively homosexual), with the middle point, three, being "equally heterosexual and homosexual" or bisexual (Shaw, 2023, p. 13). However, much of what lies between the extremes of the scale can be considered bisexual, as a 50-50 understanding of bisexuality has been seen as reductive (San Filippo, p. 209). Kinsey himself notably did not view sexuality as binary (Shaw, 2023). What was in equal parts striking and perhaps revolutionary about Kinsey's view on human sexuality was the descriptive lens he applied, rather than a normative understanding of heterosexuality being privileged over queerness (ibid.). Moreover, Kinsey considered bisexuality the "default" sexuality and the foundational norm for *monosexuality*, attraction to one gender, heterosexuality or homosexuality (ibid.). Other research in the field failed to acknowledge bisexuality as its own category, as "any stain of homosexuality was enough to subsume bisexuality into homosexuality" (Gammon & Isgro, 2006, p. 165). This has also contributed to the absorption of bisexual research into queer theory, treating queerness as a monolith. Despite the concept of sexuality as an identity being a more recent one in human history, historiography has long struggled with the unclear distinction between sexual behaviour and sexual identity, again leading to the absorption of what may have been bisexual history into homosexual history (Angelides, 2006).

Later conceptualisations of bisexuality have strained against localising bisexuality as a "middle ground" between heterosexuality and homosexuality, instead considering it "a pervasive organizing logic for sexual subjectivity which epitomizes any deviation from a fixed object choice" (Gammon & Isgro, 2006, p. 167). This places bisexuality in a position that in itself defies clear categorisation, which some scholars have hailed as a postmodern revelation that deconstructs not only sexual orientation as a category in itself but also gender identity, while some have criticised this claim as a privileging of bisexuality over other sexualities (Gammon & Isgro, 2006). According to Gurevich et al.:

> Bisexuality's capacity to reveal and disassemble existing regimes of power and knowledge [...] that shape gendered and sexed discourses, identities and politics would appear to make it an obvious ally to queer theory and politics. Yet queer theory has variously sidestepped, marginalized and even arguably erased bisexuality. (2009, p. 236)

If bisexuality challenges, even *threatens*, the binaries and boundaries that queer theory has aimed to dismantle, is it not in line with the ambitions of queer research? Why is it then, that bisexuality has been so decisively absent from queer theory?

At present, a common definition of bisexuality is "the potential to be attracted, romantically and/or sexually, to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree" (Ochs, 2009, p. 7). The distinction between romantic and sexual attraction is an important one to make, as the two are not necessarily the same for the individuals in this study. Bi*sexual* individuals may also consider themselves hetero- or homo*romantic*, depending on who they experience romantic attraction to. Similarly, an individual may be bi*romantic* but hetero- or homo*sexual*, therefore not experiencing sexual attraction to multiple genders.

In recent years, there has been much contestation over the prefix *bi* and whether it should mean two genders, as in male and female. This has also led to intra-community discussions over the inclusion of trans and particularly non-binary people under the label bisexual as well as some attempts to differentiate bisexuality from pansexuality, often defined as attraction regardless of gender (Shaw, 2023). As a bisexual individual myself, I have chosen to use the above definition of bisexuality as attraction to "more than one gender" (Corey, 2017), which also covers identities such as pansexual or queer with attraction to multiple genders. In addition to often functioning as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community, *queer* has emerged as a powerful, reclaimed individual identity that reflects the fluidity and plurality many non-heterosexual individuals emphasise (Butler, 1993). It has been termed a "linguistic shortcut" that precisely due to its ambiguity and instability offers a safe space for otherwise stigmatised identities (Gammon & Isgro, 2006, p. 173). I have also explicitly included unlabelled individuals in this research, as I see tremendous value in including their experiences, particularly in terms of the rejection or hesitation around specific labels. In the words of Julia Shaw: "[I]t is not practical for us to get rid of labels entirely, but we must also not attribute too much power or elegance to them" (Shaw, 2023, p. 21). Labels provide an opportunity to not only categorise but to construct identities by giving feelings such as sexual and/or romantic attraction a name, liberating those who feel validated by being able to label themselves.

However, they can also fail to cover the plurality and fluidity of individual experiences and act more as restriction than liberation, especially if they are used to divide people within the LGBTQ+ community. Queerness is most definitely not a monolith and the term queer may not be the great uniter that it sometimes promises to be, yet there is an opportunity in bridging the gaps between sub-communities of the LGBTQ+ umbrella by recognising the ways in which our experiences are similar.

Bisexual Erasure, Monosexism, and Compulsory Monosexuality

Returning to the absence of bisexuality in queer theory, it is critical to outline societal attitudes towards bisexuality, which form the foundation for what Shiri Eisner termed *bisexual erasure*: "the widespread social phenomenon of erasing bisexuality from any discussion in which it is relevant or otherwise invoked (with or without being named)" (2013, p. 66). One reason for this erasure is the tendency to categorise sexuality based on sexual activity rather than attraction (Corey, 2017). This means that conclusions regarding someone's identity are often drawn based on the gender of their sexual and/or romantic partner(s). For bisexual individuals, who experience attraction to multiple genders, this leads to constant misidentification and misclassification as either heterosexual or homosexual, but never as bisexual (ibid.). Bisexuality is therefore made invisible, as it is absorbed into whatever monosexual identity is deemed fitting based on current partner choice.

Not only is this erasure a perpetuation of invisibility, it positions monosexual identities as more – and sometimes the only – valid identities (San Filippo, 2013). This hierarchisation is not a mere reflection of individual negative attitudes towards bisexuality, called *biphobia* or *binegativity*, but a symptom of a structural system called *monosexism* (Goldberg, 2016). This system legitimises and rewards monosexuality – in this instance, lumping heterosexuality and homosexuality together as privileged identities – and oppresses bisexuality (Corey, 2017). Bisexuality therefore becomes the deviant "other" that both heterosexuals and homosexuals continue to erase in order to stabilise their own identities (ibid.). This *double discrimination* from both heterosexual and queer communities is connected to *compulsory monosexuality* as an ideological and institutionalised privileging of monosexual identities (San Filippo, 2013). Together, monosexism and compulsory monosexuality systematically erase bisexuality as a valid identity by placing it on the "lowest rung" in the hierarchy (Corey, 2017, p. 191). As Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell summarise: "Ultimately, the figure of the bisexual is a threat to

the existing infrastructure of sexuality that bases itself entirely upon a dominant heterosexual population and an oppositional homosexual one" (2009, p. 302). Therefore, both heterosexual and homosexual communities have an interest in upholding bisexual erasure.

Born out of the concept of heteronormativity, some scholars have identified *homonormativity* as an additional term in the context of bisexuality as posing a threat to neatly separated sexual identities (San Filippo, 2013). Homonormativity essentially upholds heteronormative assumptions about relationships, and merely inserts queer people into heteronormativity's ideals such as domesticity (ibid.). Society tolerates queerness if it follows the same institutional and normative concepts as heterosexuality, if it fits into the preconceived mould of what partnerships should be and merely interchanges the "opposite" sex partners for same-sex ones. It therefore depoliticises queerness and prevents it from unfolding and developing outside of normative ideals (ibid.). Homonormativity is therefore complicit in the previously defined concept of compulsory heterosexuality (ibid.).

In summary, bisexual erasure thus questions, or outright denies, the existence or legitimacy of bisexuality (GLAAD, 2016). Against this backdrop of stigma around the term and the concept of bisexuality, it has become evident why even queer theory, with its attempts of "theorizing nonheterosexual identity, [...] has unfortunately come to theorize only homosexual identity." (Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009, p. 298). Bisexuality is so often left out of the conversation around queerness as to prompt the term *queer bisexuality* to emphasise the place bisexual experiences and individuals should have in queer spaces, academic or otherwise (San Filippo, 2013).

This thesis aims to shed light on the importance of including bisexuality in queer theory and thereby contribute to a relatively small body of research that centres bisexual experiences. This is also imperative in the context of media studies. In the following, I will outline the theoretical perspectives that aid as tools in exploring the connections between engagement, identity and representation with the overarching framework of social constructionism in this thesis.

The Parameters of Media Engagement

How the audience of this study engages with *Heartstopper* forms the foundation for understanding the impact it may have on their perceptions of their identity as well as their sense of belonging within the wider LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, the first research question

focuses on their engagement by applying the five parameters of media engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). The concept is particularly useful here, as it postulates engagement as linked with subjectivity, affect and identity (ibid.). In researching the engagement of a marginalised group, these aspects are crucial understanding them as an audience. The parameters also place a clear emphasis on how media engagement relates to social and cultural issues as well as politics. It is understood as a "process whereby we develop relationships with media that are not solely about consumption and economic value, but that also enable us to participate in politics, to recognise the social and cultural [...] values of media in our lived experiences" (ibid., p. 2). Not only does this study explore the relationships between media and identity, it also discusses the role and importance of representation in societal power structures.

The five parameters consist of contexts, motivations, modalities, intensities, and consequences (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). The *contexts* involve the entry points to engagement, the time and place of both production and reception, the distribution and the underlying contexts of political discourse (ibid.). The intentionality behind engagement is expressed in the *motivations*, which can range from mere interest to escapism to peer recommendations and group membership to obligation and social value, reflecting a broad spectrum of how audience members select what to engage with (ibid.). Particularly the motivator *group membership* is of interest in this study, as representation of one's own identity can act as a strong motivation to engage with media, as this thesis will show. The modalities of engagement are split into *cognitive* and *affective modes of engagement*, with the former focusing on critical thinking, social, political and moral issues, and taking action, while the latter lies in evoking emotions through storytelling and engaging with subjective narratives (ibid.). Affective engagement can also be linked to the parameter of *intensities*, such as the binge watching or, in particular, rewatching of episodes (ibid.). Lastly, media engagement culminates in *consequences*, be it a sense of empowerment, connecting to like-minded audience members or even disengagement (ibid.).

Identity influences engagement, and in turn, engagement can shape identity (ibid.). For the participants, representation of their bisexual identity is an emotionally-loaded issue. Not least for me as a researcher and a bisexual individual myself is it a matter of existential importance. Dahlgren and Hill acknowledge this, by emphasising that media engagement is "an emotional experience, that can embody for example, moral passion, resentment, pleasure, curiosity, fear, anxiety, anger, humour, and not least identity processes – which in turn relate to the subjectivity of the self, both individual and collective" (2020, p. 5). Just as engagement is

closely linked with affect, so is disengagement. Emotionally sensitive topics, such as sexuality and identity, may also be "*too* intensive, too emotionally upsetting", leading audience members to disengage (ibid., p. 11). Disengagement can tell us equally as much about this audience as intense engagement can, as it uncovers the expectations and desires these individuals hold towards representations of their identity.

Identity

This thesis builds on the idea that sexuality and romantic and/or sexual attraction have evolved into an identity, particularly for non-heterosexual or queer individuals. In part, this may stem from the ostracisation and persecution that LGBTQ+ people have faced and, in many cases, continue to be subjected to, their personhood having been somewhat overridden by an aspect of their identity being considered deviant. If we are excluded or even persecuted for one part of who we are, that part overshadows and absorbs all of the other parts of us. However, claiming queerness as an identity has also contributed to a sense of empowerment in the community and has certainly united LGBTQ+ individuals through a common cause: the fight for acceptance.

The concept of identity I am applying in this research builds on Hall's definition of identity as a "construction, a process never completed" (1996, p. 3). I therefore do not argue for an essentialist approach to identity, in which it would be seen as fixed (Woodward, 1997). Identities can develop, change and even break apart over time. They are "never unified, and [...] increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different [...] positions" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). The individuals in this study are not merely bisexual or queer. Their identities consist of a multitude of factors, of which queerness is only one of them, even if it is the decisive factor in this research. Intersectionality and recognising the plurality of human identity is key to contextualising the responses of this audience. The notion of identity as both plural and fluid also emphasises how it can change over time and is not an immovable, unchangeable component of us as human beings. The definition of bisexuality used in this thesis emphasises that attraction to multiple does not have to manifest in the same manner or remain the same over time. This makes bisexuality an inherently fluid identity category.

Identity is an important term as well as an analytical tool utilised in this research. It bridges the gap between the individual identities and perceptions of such of the participants as well as the shared identity as people with attraction to multiple genders. To an extent, it employs

the idea of identity through difference (Hall, 1996), as the participants in this study are also characterised by what they are not – monosexual and heterosexual – in relation to hierarchical and hegemonic systems in society mapped out in the previous chapters. Most importantly, identity according to Hall is "constituted within, not outside representation" and "constructed within, not outside discourse" (ibid., p. 4). This highlights that identity is dependent on representational systems, which will be explored in the following sections. Notably, I do not intend to apply Hall's concept of identity in line with a purely constructionist argument of human sexuality as nurture, i.e. that sexual and/or romantic attraction are influenced by society. Instead, I intend to explore the way bisexuality as an identity is constituted, perceived, evaluated, and (in)validated through media representation. Further in line with a social constructionist view, identity development theories see an individual's environment as a factor in identity development and, in particular, validation, and media constitutes a crucial part of the environment (Allen, 2023). Implicit and explicit messages that are present in the media thus "impact how and what we think about ourselves" (ibid., p. 203).

Representation and Media Audiences: Through a Constructionist Lens

At the foundational level, representation is the production and construction of meaning through language (Hall, 1997). In representation,

> we use signs, organized into languages of different kinds, to communicate meaningfully with others. [...] The world is not accurately or otherwise reflected in the mirror of language. [...] Meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems [...]. (ibid., p. 28)

Through language, we create "shared conceptual maps" that become our culture (ibid., p. 21). In order to grow into culturally competent subjects, we absorb the systems and conventions of representation (Hall, 1997). The words we use – or do not use – to refer to and represent things and concepts around us therefore have a direct influence on whether we perceive them as valid, possible and real. The same way in which homosexuality emerged as an identity through being given a name, bisexuality, too, depends on being named. Bisexuality being "discursively un(der)spoken" therefore has an effect on whether it is perceived as a real and valid identity (San Filippo, 2013, p. 4). The emergence of a plethora of labels within the LGBTQ+ community renders those identities visible, viable, and most importantly valid. Yet San Filippo argues that bisexuality largely remains invisible in the media (ibid.).

Not only does language constitute a representational system, but so does media. It does not merely mirror real life, rather it constructs and shapes meaning. In the context of identity,

> [r]epresentation as a cultural process establishes individual and collective identities and symbolic systems provide possible answers to the questions: who am I?; what could I be?; who do I want to be? Discourses and systems of representation construct places from which individuals position themselves and from which they can speak. (Woodward, 1997)

Particularly the idea of *speaking* from a place of representation is an important factor in this study on media representation and the aim of lending my voice to a marginalised community. Hall et al. position the media as a "major cultural and ideological force" that plays a role in the "circulation and securing of *dominant* ideological definitions and representations" (2005, pp. 104-105). Media representations therefore impact whose identities are visible, how they are represented and discursively constructed, and their positioning within society and politics. Hence, identity is dependent on representational systems, both on the language level and on the level of media representation, for visibility and validation. Bisexuality is not constructed in the sense that it can be induced by representation, but whether it is articulated and made visible impacts its positioning as a valid identity. The question of validity plays a role for the self-perception of bisexual individuals and may impact the attitudes of monosexual audiences towards bisexuality.

Through Hall's representation theory and the later phases of audience research, the media is positioned as defining reality, rather than reproducing it (Hall, 1997; Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Couldry and Hepp further focus on the mediatisation of the social world, by arguing that the social world is not merely mediated mimetically but "*changed* in its dynamics and structure by the role that media continuously (indeed recursively) play in its construction" (2017, p. 27). Similarly to how Hall emphasises the role of language, Couldry and Hepp view communication as a sense- and meaning-making practice (2017). There is also a clear link to identity, as the self is constructed through communicational processes (ibid.). In summary, the meanings constructed and circulated through media representations influence our notions of self and identity as well as power structures by either reinforcing existing attitudes or breaking with them.

Contextualisation of Bisexual Representation and the Case of Heartstopper

In order to understand how *Heartstopper* fits into or breaks with representational conventions, the following sections discuss the historical context of queer representation through the example of two harmful tropes, *queerbaiting* and *bury your gays*, and discusses bisexual visibility and representation in the streaming age. It concludes with the claim that *Heartstopper* is a positive, trope-defying depiction of bisexuality, providing a basis for understanding the audience's engagement with and evaluation of the series.

Historical Context and Harmful Tropes

We have arguably come relatively far in terms of LGBTQ+ representation on screen considering the increase in queer characters and narratives in entertainment media. Nevertheless, the historical context of queer under- and misrepresentation prevails in tropes that are still commonly found in fictional media. For instance, hinting at characters being queer to draw in a queer audience, but not overtly depicting them as LGBTQ+ as to not alienate heterosexual viewers has been a common media strategy, even after restrictions on queer representation were lifted in the 20th century (Bridges, 2018). Within media studies, the term queerbaiting refers to

> (1) any in-canon inference or subtext suggesting queerness, or (2) actual occurrence of queerness that results in the luring of queer viewers to engage, become fans, and given today's fully interactive fandom cultures, to serve as vectors for deep promotion of a media franchise. (ibid., p. 119)

This trope has prevailed despite the increase of overtly LGBTQ+ characters on screen in recent years. However, even characters who are clearly identified and explored as queer tend to fall victim to tragic storylines ending in their death, which has been termed the *bury your gays* trope (Bridges, 2018). These types of representations are problematic:

> (1) Queerbaiting erases or sidelines LGBTQ characters by limiting their sexuality to the level of subtext, eliminating them altogether, or relegating them to opposite-sex relationships despite any previous queer coding. Similarly, (2) the BYG [bury your gays] trope punishes these characters by erasing them from the narrative entirely if the depiction indeed goes beyond subtext to include acknowledged queer identity. Both queerbaiting and BYG also punish queer audiences by the suggestion (or even promise) of quality LGBTQ representation, only to have their hopes dashed. (ibid., p. 116)

Queerbaiting feeds into a competency that queer audiences have acquired due to the historical lack of meaningful representation: noticing and interpreting queer subtext. This is a skill that this marginalised audience has had to develop in order to gain access to any representation at

all, yet heterosexual viewers may lack (Bridges, 2018). Through this, media producers are able to attract and retain queer audiences without alienating straight viewers with overtly LGBTQ+ content. The term emerged in the 2010s in online fan cultures and has great significance within fan discourses to this day, more recently having spilt over into real life through accusing public figures of hinting at queerness yet not publicly disclosing their identity (ibid.). It carries particular importance for this study, as the line between fictional representation and real-life consequences became increasingly blurred in the context of Kit Connor's coming out. Not only does this follow the "heterosexist fallacy of 'straight until proven otherwise'" (San Filippo, 2013, p. 33), it also perpetuates the idea that queerness is only valid when it is articulated openly as well as the dangerous notion that those in the spotlight owe their fan community full disclosure of their private lives. It does, however, also reflect the dearth of representation that continues to exist for LGBTQ+ individuals and the tendency to cling to any hint of queerness, however small. Together with the BYG trope, queerbaiting subtly perpetuates societal attitudes towards plurisexual identities: "The dearth – and death – of confirmable bisexual characters has to do both with compulsory monosexuality and the correlated issue of bisexual *representability*" (ibid., pp. 18-19).

Visibility in the Streaming Era – Good Representation at Last?

Is bisexuality really as invisible nowadays? GLAAD Media Institute's statistics show that out of 596 LGBTQ+ characters only 149, or 25%, identified as bisexual+ (GLAAD, 2023) . Considering that bisexuals make up almost two-thirds of the queer community (ibid.), this is indicative of a continuous underrepresentation of bisexuality in fictional entertainment media. According to Ng, although the golden age of streaming "might seem to expand the possibilities for 'LGBT interest' programming, it general promotes a relatively narrow set of representations" (Ng, 2013, p. 259).

Hence underrepresentation is not the only pain point: Representations of bisexuality have been and continue to be riddled with stereotypes of what it means to be bisexual. Bisexual characters have often been characterised as attention-seeking, confused, overly sexual and promiscuous, greedy, or unfaithful (McInroy & Craig, 2017; Corey, 2017; Johnson, 2016). Moreover, bisexual women tend to be oversexualised while bisexual men are often erased through being absorbed into narratives about homosexuality (Johnson, 2016). Bisexuality is also frequently only shallowly addressed or implemented as a plot device (GLAAD, 2023).

These misrepresentations do not fill the gap or heal the wound that the lack of bisexual representation has left for bisexual audiences. Instead, they reinforce societal stigma and biphobic attitudes, leaving bisexual individuals without realistic and nuanced examples for identification. The concept of *tokenism*, originally a theory concerning the experiences of minorities, *tokens*, in the workplace (Watkins et al., 2019), has increasingly been applied in popular culture discourse surrounding media representation (Dias, 2020; Bates, 2021). Tokenism entails the inclusion of marginalised identities only to *appear* inclusive and progressive (Drenten et al., 2023). Applied to entertainment media, tokenism is yet another way in which marginalised groups are denied meaningful representation by merely being included to satisfy the increasing call for diversity on screen.

This under- and misrepresentation of bisexuality as a result of monosexism has been linked to poor mental health in bisexual communities (Goldberg, 2016; Johnson, 2016). Not only are bisexual individuals less likely to be open about their sexuality in comparison to gay men and lesbian women (GLAAD, 2023), there is also a much higher rate of mental health conditions and suicidality (Johnson, 2016). Bisexual individuals report higher rates of online bullying (GLAAD, 2023) and often face discrimination in both straight and queer spaces (Eisner, 2013). Furthermore, bisexual women are sexually assaulted at a considerably higher rate than straight and lesbian women (Goldberg, 2016). In a study by Johnson, 40% of bisexual individuals with mental health conditions stated that their symptoms had been affected by media representations of bisexuality (Johnson, 2016).

Several studies suggest that the framing of sexuality in media representations impacts identity development (Bond et al., 2018; Allen, 2023). McInroy and Craig for instance note that the lack of role models for queer individuals can lead to "negatively impacting identity validation" and that media representations "may remain crucial in facilitating LGBTQ identity development" (2017, p. 12). Despite the relative dearth of academic research on bisexuality and the effects of media representations on bisexual audiences, the importance of media representation to bisexual audiences becomes evident. Representation plays a crucial role in shaping both the perceptions of the general public as well as the self-perception of bisexual audiences. Media portrayals of queerness can also function as a "catalyst for resilience by buffering discriminatory experiences" (Craig et al., 2015, p. 262). These catalysts include coping through escapism, feeling stronger, fighting back, and finding and fostering community (Craig et al., 2015). This shows that representation can also empower a marginalised audience,

which makes the issue of the engagement of bisexual individuals with *how* bisexuality is represented even more pressing.

The Netflix adaptation of *Heartstopper* received positive acclaim, particularly online (Bromberger, 2022; Bitran, 2022). In terms of bisexuality, Allen refers to *Heartstopper* as a "positive, trope-defying depiction" that avoids and subverts the common pitfalls of bisexual representation, such as compulsory binarisation, bisexuality as an illegitimate queer identity, and the promiscuous bisexual (Allen, 2023, p. 197). Not only does the series avoid these misrepresentations of bisexuality, it explicitly addresses biphobic statements and binegativity. Through this, the creator of *Heartstopper*, Alice Oseman is

> arguing that it is not individual people that uphold the negative stereotypes that are often used to distinguish bisexuals from other queer identities but rather the greater cultural systems that uphold and perpetuate these damaging stereotypes and expectations, such as compulsory binarization. (ibid., p. 212)

The series therefore integrates the stigma around bisexuality rather than pretending that it does not exist. It "allows the characters to combat it in a way that legitimizes bisexuality" without ignoring the reality of existing as a bisexual individual, even in more accepting environments (ibid., p. 214). Allen's research focuses on the media's influence on sexual identity development, which has also been explored by Bond (2023) and Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) in the context of identity validation. For instance, LGBTQ+ individuals tend to seek out media representation, particularly during adolescence, and are more likely to rely on media for guidance rather than people in their day-to-day lives (Bond, 2023). This underlines the paramount importance of representation that does not rely on negative stereotypes, such as *Heartstopper*. Specifically positive depictions are "crucial for developing a positive association with sexual identity" (Allen, 2023, p. 199).

In summary, media representations contribute to discourses around acceptable and legitimate identities and the role this plays for both LGBTQ+ individuals as well as societal attitudes at large, either perpetuating stigma or contributing to making a change (Billard & Gross, 2020). Fictional entertainment media does not exist in a vacuum separate from the "real" world, rather it influences cultural values which in turn shape political beliefs that have tangible consequences for marginalised communities (ibid.). Systematic erasure from the media landscape and misrepresentations continuously confine those communities to the margins of society (ibid.). It is therefore crucial to grant more academic attention to bisexual audiences

who have historically been neglected not only in queer theory and media theory, but society at large.

3. Methodology and Methods

> Is research 'queer' if it is undertaken by queer researchers? Is such research about queer subjects and/or research that employs a queer conceptual framework? And what does it mean when we speak of a queer methodology or a queering of methodologies? (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 12)

As this research deals extensively with queerness, the question arises to what extent established methods within the social sciences can be utilised to explore the defiance of categorisation that is inherent in the study of this marginalised group. "Can social science methods be 'queered' or even made 'queer enough'?" is a question Browne and Nash pose in their approach to queer methodologies (2010, p. 3). Not only is queer theory a necessary theoretical lens in this research, the methods used in order to gather and analyse data are equally influenced by questions of power relations, boundaries, and binaries. Queer research can be considered "any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations" (ibid., p. 4). What I aim to do in this study as a queer researcher is shed light on the experiences of queer individuals with queer media representation through a queer framework, theoretical and methodological. I do not intend to define *queer* any further than positioning it as a breaking up of norms, societal and academic, to explore a marginalised group within the LGBTQ+ community. My position aligns with that of Browne and Nash, who stress the importance of exploring "internal 'boundary policing' that often takes place" in academic research concerning queerness by asking: "Who can speak? How? Using what terms?" (2010, p. 9). The breaking of boundaries is precisely what has plagued researchers (and society) in trying to box in bisexuality and queerness, so I do not intend to attempt to contain what cannot be contained in simple terminology. Overarchingly, "[q]ueer scholarship [...] in its contemporary form is anti-normative and seeks to subvert, challenge and critique a host of taken for granted 'stabilities' in our social lives" (ibid., p. 7).

As another research tradition concerned with power relations, this thesis also builds on the principles of phronetic research (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Phronetic research highlights the importance of "difference, diversity, and the politics of identity" to not only understand existing power relations but also to affect real change (ibid., p. 104). This thesis deals extensively with questions of identity, and how it is postulated within systems of power. What we know, whether and how we come to know it is dictated by hegemonic structures in society (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In other words, power "produc[es] the knowledge that serve[s] its purpose best" and "ignores or designs knowledge at its convenience" (ibid., p. 142 f.). Not only does this apply to the

erasure of bisexuality within queer theory and academic discourses as I have shown, it also applies to media representations that both reproduce and shape discourses around which identities are visible and ultimately valid. Societal power structures therefore have an influence on who gets to speak (Browne & Nash, 2010) and what gets to "count as knowledge" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 155). In order to challenge those, this research aims to amplify both queer research and the voices of a bisexual audience. For social science that, in Flyvbjerg's words, *matters*, phronetic research follows four value-rational questions that have guided me in this study: Where are we going? Who gains, and who loses, by which mechanisms of power? Is this desirable? What should be done? (ibid., p. 162).

This thesis is postulated as science from below and follows a standpoint theory perspective (Harding, 2008). I am researching the "standpoint of the oppressed and disempowered" to reveal not only the experiences of the marginalised but the privileges of the dominant groups (ibid., p. 14) – which, as this thesis will show, is not merely the heterosexual community but at times monosexual members of the queer community. The oppressor in this relationship is not as easily defined as it may seem at first glance – and in other fields of research following science from below. It is precisely this breaking of preconceived categories, the threat that plurisexual identities and their representations pose to binary systems and neatly drawn boundaries that make this case a valuable endeavour from a standpoint theory perspective.

Research Design

The choice of methods in this study is decisively qualitative, as qualitative research lends itself to queer-feminist approaches, a critical response to the realities of marginalised groups lost to quantitative data (Browne & Nash, 2010). Qualitative research does not strive to uncover measurable, objective truths, rather does it focus on marginalised subjectivities. Even if there is no singular queer method but a plethora of suitable research techniques, the guiding principle is that of questioning normativities and infusing "research processes with ethical considerations" (ibid., 12). Qualitative interviews, as undertaken in this study, allow not only the exploration of individual attitudes but also to amplify voices that have been "ignored, misrepresented or suppressed in the past" (Byrne, 2005, pp. 209-210). This enables the researcher, queer or otherwise, to pay attention to the subtleties in experiences of marginalised individuals, to broach sensitive topics and to close in on the complexities present in their

answers (Byrne, 2005). However, reflexivity and ethical considerations in the potential hierarchies between interviewer and interviewee are of utmost importance. Investing the researcher's own identity, as I did by disclosing my own bisexual identity and my being a fan of the series *Heartstopper*, is one way of attempting to decrease this hierarchy (ibid.). Nevertheless, intersecting factors such as gender identity, age, ethnicity, and class may have influenced the level of comfort participants experienced during the interviews and may therefore have had an impact on the data gathered. Applying a high degree of self-scrutiny on my part and my own role in the process, especially as part of the in-group as bisexual and a fan of *Heartstopper*, has therefore been required of me at every stage of the research.

Recruitment of Participants

Participants were recruited through a call for interviewees shared on my personal Instagram account (see Appendix 6.3). Due to my own queer network, I was able to recruit twelve interviewees through friends of friends and snowball sampling wherever possible (Byrne, 2005). The only requirements for participation were self-identification as bisexual, pansexual, queer or unlabelled with attraction to multiple genders and having watched seasons one and two of *Heartstopper*. Regardless of the use of *bisexual(ity)* in this research, I considered it fundamental to include participants who identified with other labels or none at all yet experience attraction to multiple genders. This was another way of ensuring that they could use their own words for their experiences and that I did not impose any identity language onto any of the interviewees. Similarly, I ensured that, if they felt comfortable sharing, I gained an understanding of the interviewees' gender identities and preferred pronouns. Despite aiming for gender parity, only two male participants could be recruited regardless of continuous efforts to find more willing interviewees. Two interviewees identified as non-binary and the remaining eight as women. Considering that *Heartstopper* focuses on a male bisexual character, it was unfortunate that no more than two respondents with the same gender identity could be recruited. This may have been influenced by several factors, such as my own gender identity and that of my close friends, the audience and fandom of *Heartstopper* and the reluctance felt by male audience members due to heightened experiences of bisexual erasure in queer male communities. The fact that no additional men could be recruited may very well be indicative of what this study aims to show: the far-reaching consequences of bisexual erasure and the impact this has on bisexual individuals, men in particular. Age, ethnicity or country of residence

were not decisive factors in my search for interviewees. Instead, a breadth of backgrounds was desired. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 33 and their ethnic and cultural background was largely white and, with the exceptions of two interviewees, European. Countries of origin and residence included Germany, the UK, Ireland, Portugal, and Canada. Although a more diverse sample would have shed light on the perceptions of individuals from different cultural backgrounds, the language and country of origin of *Heartstopper* will undoubtedly have influenced the sample, as well as the recruitment strategy and time frame.

Interviewing

The twelve interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner over the course of four weeks. The participants were interviewed either on Zoom or, in one case due to geographical proximity, in person. Conducting this research largely online allowed me to interview audience members in other countries whose responses I would not have been able to gather otherwise. Moreover, it provided them with the option to be interviewed in a place of their choosing where they felt safe to disclose potentially sensitive topics to me (Byrne, 2005). Nevertheless, the interview conducted in person allowed for a more nuanced exploration of body language, the observation of which was considerably limited during the Zoom interviews. The length of the interviews varied between 35 minutes and one hour and a half, with some answers being short but dense and others more detailed. The in-person interview was the longest, which may point to participants feeling more willing to elaborate on their thoughts in this setting, as the turn-taking in Zoom calls was at times negatively impacted by delays and issues in the internet connection. These factors were taken into account during the data analysis to remain reflective of how online/offline interviews may have influenced the participants' level of comfort.

Eleven out of twelve interviews were conducted in English, while one was conducted in German. The interviewees who were German were given the opportunity to participate in the interview in either language, depending on which they felt most comfortable in. The interview guide was translated from English into German, but the transcript was not translated into English. Nevertheless, all coding was done in English to ensure consistency in the code book (see Appendix 6.5). All interviews followed the question guide (see Appendix 6.1), but a degree of flexibility was required in case the participants brought up topics themselves or the questions had to be rearranged to allow for a smoother, more coherent flow of the interview (Byrne, 2005). Some core questions were posed to each interviewee, others could be neglected

or reworded in case the participant touched on those themselves and merely a deeper exploration of themes was required. The majority of questions were worded in a manner that was open-ended and allowed for the participants to interpret the questions themselves, rather than me as the researcher steering them in a particular direction. However, some clarifications were needed at times. Despite having constructed the questions based on the theoretical framework of this research, the wording and progression of questions were flexible enough to ensure that the participants could respond in their own words and were encouraged to share their opinions freely (ibid). It is worth noting that the first interview was initially treated as a pilot. As none of the questions were amended after the pilot and due to the difficulty of finding male participants, the pilot was eventually included in the analysis to allow space for two male voices in this project.

As this research concerns sexuality, identity, and personal attitudes, ethical considerations were of paramount importance (Byrne, 2005). The call for interviewees explicitly stated that anonymity would be ensured, as did the consent form sent to and signed by all participants. Moreover, verbal consent was given at the beginning of the interviews before starting the recording. I disclosed my own identity and reminded the interviewees that they could say as little or as much as they liked, skip questions, and stop the interview at any time. They were given the space to ask questions both at the beginning and end of the interview after the recording had been stopped. I placed an emphasis on psychological safety by asking all interviewees how they were feeling at the end of the interview and remained in conversation with them to make sure no harm had been inflicted on them through any of the questions (ibid). Some of the sentiments shared after the recording had been stopped were of interest to the analysis. In those cases, I took notes of what the interviewees had disclosed and asked for consent to include those quotes in addition to what they had shared during the recording. They were made aware that they could contact me at any time if any further questions or concerns arose. Notably, almost all participants thanked me for conducting this research. This again shows the importance of researching queer topics and queer audiences that may have been neglected in the past, as the academic exploration of their lived reality appeared to be very valuable to those who expressed their thanks.

Coding and Text Analysis

Following the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and a first analysis was conducted following open coding (Rivas, 2005) and qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014). During this first stage, codes of interest were extracted from the transcript in a descriptive manner, then grouped together in categories, and lastly at the thematic and theoretical levels (Rivas, 2005). I also collected individual codes that did not fit into larger categories but were of interest as they conveyed additional information that may be of use at a later stage. After this initial analysis, which followed a mixture of largely inductive and some deductive coding, particularly at the thematic and theoretical stage, the codes were added to a code book and separated into several sub-categories, larger categories, and theoretical themes (Rivas, 2005). Many of the descriptive codes could be connected to several themes and a great degree of flexibility was required. The data gathering and analysis were iterative, with me returning to the transcripts to refine the categories continuously (ibid.).

The analysis placed tremendous importance on the language used by participants. This was critical in a study of identity and particularly the choice of labels. The language used by bisexual audiences is integral to their experience of media representation, as representation is the production of meaning through and within language (Hall, 1997). This applies to both the language used in media representations of bisexuality and to the language participants utilise for their own identities. Therefore, nuances in meaning and the interviewees' linguistic choices were of particular importance during the qualitative text analysis.

4. Analysis

The subsequent chapters first delve into the engagement of this audience with *Heartstopper*, then explore their evaluation of bisexual representation through the example of Nick but contextualised within queer media representation, including the under- and misrepresentation of bisexuality. Through the audience's evaluation of *Heartstopper*, the question of what constitutes "good" representation is also investigated. Lastly, the analysis discusses the connection between identity and representation for this audience. The latter chapters tackle issues such as the articulation of a bisexual identity, the choice (or rejection) of labels, and finally, the role or purpose of media representation within wider societal discourses.

4.1 Media Engagement

The way individuals engage with media is a crucial element that contributes to understanding them as an audience. At the beginning of each interview, the participants were asked to share what kind of films and/or TV series they enjoyed. Not only was this question posed to ensure a smooth start to the interview, it was targeted to find out about the *contexts* of this audience's engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). The interviewees mentioned a variety of genres, but what stood out was the connections they drew to *Heartstopper*. For instance, one interviewee compared it to other teen dramas, highlighting the difference: "[*Heartstopper*] was very non-toxic, especially compared to other shows with teenagers in them." (Interviewee 6). Several interviewees listed romance, comedy, and feel-good as their preferred genres, which they linked to their engagement with *Heartstopper* and why it spoke to them. This shows an awareness of the generic conventions the series finds itself in and the participants used those conventions as a foundation to both contextualise and differentiate *Heartstopper* from other popular entertainment media.

Another aspect related not only to the genre but also to the interviewees' *motivations* developed from the opening questions: the importance of queerness. Queerness was mentioned as a strong motivator for this audience, with Interviewee 4 stating: "I like everything queer." This is in line with what Bond suggests regarding the interplay of identity and media engagement and seeking out characters to identify with (2023). Searching for a new film or series was also connected to queer representation for Interviewee 12, who described his refusal to watch "straight romance movies" and searching for queer portrayals specifically. Pointing to a perceived lack of this type of content, Interviewee 8 elaborated on their experience as

having felt "starved" for queer representation and therefore going out of their way to look for it. What already became evident in the participants' motivations was the strong need for identification within the media they engaged with. According to Bond, this connects to the "social identity needs of LGBTQ people [...], especially during adolescence when sexual and gender identities are most likely under construction" (2023, p. 293). Despite the age range of the interviewees being 20 to 33, a common denominator was having sought out queer content since their youth.

The participants' contextualisation of *Heartstopper* as providing much-needed queer representation placed a considerable amount of affective importance on the series. Recommendations from queer friends, LGBTQ+ news outlets and general trends also constituted driving forces in the participants' engagement and were for many the first point of contact with the series. According to Bradbury-Rance,

> LGBTQ viewers are well used to shared practices of queer curation that fly under the radar of mainstream categorisation, promotion and archive. [...] Recommendations – from teachers, friends, books, magazines, blogs or film festivals – reveal the potential for queer identifications [...] (2023, pp. 135-136)

This has however not gone unnoticed by the platforms that produce and distribute queer media content. The context of streaming platforms was also connected to recommendations, as the algorithms suggesting new content to the users played a role in what the interviewees engaged with. Through the introduction of these algorithms that analyse and, in the case of Netflix, even openly predict how much a user is going to like the content being suggested to them, streaming services have claimed to understand viewers' predilections (Bradbury-Rance, 2023). Interviewee 5 mentioned that the "percentage of a match" that Netflix includes in its recommendations felt accurate to her, and that she frequently relied on it to decide what to watch next. In the case of queer media, these algorithms support what LGBTQ+ viewers have long engaged in within the safety of the community: queer curation. While it certainly does not replace the social component of sharing and discussing queer media, it opens up possibilities for LGBTQ+ individuals who may not have direct and personal touchpoints with other queer people. It is therefore particularly important for audience members in less queer-friendly environments. For instance, one interviewee pointed out that she had only met other queer people at university and had therefore relied on seeking out LGBTQ+ media in order to connect to that part of her identity.

While some participants described *cognitive modes of engagement*, such as wanting to learn about queer topics and other experiences, *affective engagement* was by far the prominent *modality* in this study (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). The interviewees characterised *Heartstopper* as making them feel happy, light-hearted, and excited, overwhelmingly referring to positive feelings. Interviewee 12, a Ukrainian man who discovered *Heartstopper* during the onset of the war in Ukraine referred to his experience as follows:

> I just pressed the button and it felt so good because I felt like that was the part that had not been stolen from me. [...] It brought me back to who I am and also helped me [...] not get my identity shattered completely.

He further elaborated how he at times even felt guilty for engaging in escapism through watching *Heartstopper*. Having fled Ukraine, he also lamented the loss of speaking his native language, which he also connected closely to his identity. This highlights the affective *and* emotional importance that the series played for him and how the representation of one of his identity markers, namely bisexuality, created a sense of safety in severely troubling times. Interviewee 1 described a similar sentiment and stressed that "in a world where everything is chaos and madness and anger and wars and whatnot, it's very important to still have the opportunity to be embraced by this." These experiences clearly outline how critical of a role representation plays in the lives of these two bisexual men. Across the interviews, several participants noted that *Heartstopper* made them think about their childhood and adolescence and how they had wished for experiences like those portrayed in *Heartstopper* as well as representations of queerness in the media in general. Interviewee 1 noted that it was "a sort of cure for [his] inner child, just saying 'everything will be alright'". The emotional impact the series had had on the audience was striking, and the connection to representation became clear in every interview.

The strong engagement was also evident through the parameter of *intensities*, with several interviewees having rewatched the series, ranging from three up to eleven times. Some noted that they had binge-watched the series, while others described intentionally prolonging the experience to make it last longer. Several participants shared aspects of the *consequences* of their engagement, such as recommending it to and speaking to friends about *Heartstopper*. Two participants however found some of the heavier themes addressed in season two "depressing" (Interviewee 8) and had to "stop and put it away" (Interviewee 2). While several interviewees praised the series for dealing with mental health topics alongside queerness, this shows that these aspects also led to some disengagement with *Heartstopper*. This can be

connected to escapism as an affective mode of engagement, but also as a motivation. If these two interviewees were mainly engaging with *Heartstopper* for the feel-good factor and to distance themselves from the complicated realities of the world, the series' depiction of mental health issues and interpersonal conflicts may have defeated this motivation and engagement. As many other queer narratives focus on coming out and the perceived difficulties of being queer, two interviewees mentioned a kind of fatigue with "trauma porn" (Interviewee 4; Interviewee 9). Although those two participants distanced *Heartstopper* from this trope, which will be explored later on, the two interviewees who at least momentarily disengaged with the series may have been reminded of this type of queer media.

Interestingly, only three participants considered themselves part of the *Heartstopper* fandom, with several interviewees stating that they were "not that kind of fan" or would not necessarily consider themselves a fan. It appeared that for them, fandom involved active participation and, in some cases, also production, such as writing fanfiction or creating fan art. Due to the willingness of the participants to partake in the interviews, the positive reception and frequent rewatching of *Heartstopper*, this was an unexpected finding. Moreover, distancing themselves from the fan community became increasingly common when prompted to talk about Kit Connor's coming out, which will be explored in chapter 4.3.

4.2 Representations of Bisexuality

As this research centres around bisexual representation, it was crucial to explore how the audience evaluated the character of Nick Nelson. This section deals with the audience's perception and characterisation of Nick, which is relevant to RQ2, their evaluation of bisexual representation. Moreover, it explores the under- and misrepresentation of bisexuality in the wider context of LGBTQ+ media, and lastly investigates the question of what constitutes "good" representation for this particular audience.

4.2.1 Evaluation of Nick

The participants characterised Nick as a sweet and gentle character, who does not fall into common stereotypes and therefore "breaks the mould" (Interviewee 2). These stereotypes, which were outlined in the contextualisation of bisexual representation in the literature review,

will be granted more attention in the later sections on misrepresentation and what constitutes "good" representation.

Particular importance was placed on Nick's struggle with his bisexuality and the journey he goes on while coming to terms with his queerness. Interviewee 9 perceived Nick as a character with a lot of depth, who seems "less like a character and more like a real person". This portrayal of a young bisexual man who does not perpetuate stereotypes resonated with the participants, underlining the need for complex and nuanced characters. The complexity of Nick as a character may be supported by *Heartstopper's* serial format. According to San Filippo, the format of television drama particularly lends itself to the exploration of bisexuality, as it allows "time for bisexuality to develop" and creates space for sexual fluidity (San Filippo, 2013, p. 35). She terms this *bi-potential*, which is necessary not to render bisexuality viable but "rather representationally legible" (ibid., p. 204). The setup of a series consisting of episodes and seasons allows for a much more detailed exploration of a character's sexual and romantic *attraction*, even if the character does not engage in relationships with different genders. For instance, Interviewee 1 expressed that the scene in which Nick is shown watching a film with his mother and feeling some sort of attraction to both the male and female actors resonated with him: "I felt very connected to him in that moment because that happened to me before." Interviewee 12 found himself wondering whether Nick's bisexuality could have been explored more by showing him in romantic contexts with a person of a different gender – rather than just with Charlie – but upon reflection concluded that Nick's bisexuality nevertheless came across as valid due to the series' insistence that Nick is bisexual regardless of his partner choice. This legibility of bisexuality will be explored later on in the context of bisexual (in)visibility and compulsory hetero- and monosexuality.

Not only was Nick perceived as a likeable character, he also provided a source of identification for the participants. Interviewee 4 stated that they could "very much relate to Nick googling and taking quizzes" to find out whether he was queer. Interviewee 5 supported this by stating: "I feel like it depicted the process of coming to terms with being bisexual in a way that I felt was very representative, at least for me." A lot of emphasis was placed on the confusion and pressure Nick felt during the exploration of his sexuality. The interviewees noted that they felt seen and could identify with the feelings that Nick experienced, particularly when it came to the question of him being gay or bisexual. Interviewee 4 described this "constant questioning" as "something a lot of bisexual people can relate to". As Allen notes: "[T]he cultural expectation that an individual falls on either end of the homosexual-heterosexual

binary kept [Nick] from simply being aware that being bisexual was a possibility" (2023, p. 206). Strikingly, in the series Nick himself is depicted as searching for representation, by engaging with articles and YouTube videos on the topic of bisexuality. This desire to understand oneself is summarised by Allen: "Oftentimes, when an individual is discovering and exploring their identity, they will search for *mirror* characters: examples of themselves in media as a way to understand what it means to identify a particular way" (2023, p. 199, emphasis added). Here, the *mimetic* aspect of representation (Hall, 1997) is stressed, that to represent means to depict, in this case, a shared experience of bisexuality. This is further supported by Bond, who points out that "LGBTQ youth trust in their favourite LGBTQ media personae for information and guidance because of their perceived similarity, which in turn helps LGBTQ youth navigate their identities" (2023, p. 294). The search for role models is a key component in how representation and identity interconnect. If identities are "constituted within [...] representation" (Hall, 1996, p. 4), seeking out representation becomes foundational in the construction and validation of identity. Role models in the media play an important part in the self-perception of LGBTQ+ individuals and can provide a great deal of comfort (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Craig et al., 2015), as the interviewees and the character of Nick have shown. In both cases, that of Nick looking for shared experiences and that of the audience looking to Nick as a source of representation, it becomes evident that bisexual visibility plays a considerable role.

Particularly the importance of representing a bisexual *experience* is highlighted through the ways in which the interviewees evaluated the character of Nick. The emphasis was on what it means to experience attraction to multiple genders and less on the specific label bisexual. San Filippo suggests that "the explicit articulation of the B word itself matters less than its enunciation in practice" (2013, p. 239), which is consistent with what the interviewees, some of whom do not use the label bisexual for themselves, shared. If it is less about the label, then why is Nick so insistent when it comes to stating that he is bi, actually?

After the release of season 2, much of the online discourse around *Heartstopper* focused on Nick's reiteration of his sexuality in several instances throughout the series. Interviewee 7 said that she had seen "people [...] complaining about that, that he said it so often". She contextualised that Nick is mistaken for gay upon coming out to his classmates due to his romantic involvement with Charlie. The assumption that sexuality and identity are directly correlated with present partner choice is one of the ways in which bisexuality is rendered invisible and invalid in a monosexist society. This resonated deeply with the interviewees, who

emphasised that it was important “not to erase [Nick’s] bisexuality despite him being with someone of the same gender” (Interviewee 1). Overall, the interviewees seemed to identify with Nick’s recurring emphasis on his bisexual identity: “I felt that a lot in my life, I have said that a lot in my life. [...] I think it can seem weird or unnecessary for other people, but I think it’s very important for the person who identifies as that” (Interviewee 10). Several interviewees recounted moments in which they themselves had had to clarify that they were not homosexual or heterosexual depending on their partners. This highlighted the importance of articulating bisexuality in order to generate visibility for a bisexual identity that exists as a queer identity separate from homosexuality. The fact that the interviewees underlined the validity of Nick’s attempts to create space for a bisexual identity once again emphasises the need this audience has for recognition of bisexuality as a viable sexual identity. In short, how can bisexuality exist if it is absorbed into monosexist assumptions and if it is not continuously articulated?

Two participants viewed Nick’s reiteration more critically, aligning with the fan discourse in online media on it being “too much at times” (Interviewee 8) and hypothesising that Nick may have insisted on his bisexuality in order to avoid identifying with the “extreme”, being homosexuality. In the context of widespread homophobia and the prevalence of heteronormativity in today’s society, there may be some safety in identifying as bisexual rather than homosexual, if bisexuality is perceived as a halfway point between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Bisexuality renders the possibility of outwardly conforming to heteronormativity in pursuing relationships with the “opposite” gender. It also raises the question of sexuality being a choice, which came up in one interviewee’s account of potentially coming out. This instance and the notion of quantifying queerness will be given particular attention in subsequent subchapters. These diverging views on Nick’s insistence on his bisexuality moreover expose the difficulty of representing bisexual identities. Just as queerness cannot be treated as a monolith into which bisexuality has been frequently absorbed, there is no universal plurisexual experience. Especially by including individuals who identify as pansexual, queer, or do not label their sexuality, this research uncovers the complexities in media representations of attraction to multiple genders and the reception of this multifaceted audience.

4.2.2 Representation: The Lack, the Bad, and Finally, the Nuanced

"What good representation would entail is to just have more of it", Interviewee 6 said when I asked her whether she thinks that there is such thing as good representation. According to Interviewee 8, "*Heartstopper* feels like positive representation and other things feel like negative representation, but what is good or bad? I don't think it's that easy." The subsequent chapter will explore the interviewees' perceptions of bisexual representation more broadly.

Under- and Misrepresentation

In order to explore whether and why the participants think of *Heartstopper* as an example of good or positive representation, a number of questions focused on other portrayals of bisexuality. Overwhelmingly, the participants struggled to think of examples other than *Heartstopper*. Interviewee 12 noted: "I'm trying to recall at least one case and I can't." None of the twelve interviewees could point to a specific character who is overtly identified as bisexual. Instead, it prompted many to expand on how they perceived bisexuality to be mostly absent from queer representations, with more emphasis placed on gay or lesbian characters. Statistics show that gay men lead as the main demographic in LGBTQ+ representation with 37% of all queer characters, with lesbian representation following closely behind at 30% (GLAAD, 2023). Despite there not being a great disparity to the current percentage of bisexual characters, 25%, the number of gay and lesbian characters continues to increase, while that of bisexual characters has been decreasing in recent years (GLAAD, 2023). Thus, the representational gap is widening rather than closing for plurisexual identities regardless of generally increasing acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. Bisexuality continues to be left behind in favour of representing monosexual queer identities: "We may be beyond the B word, but we are not yet beyond compulsory monosexuality" (San Filippo, 2013, p. 239). When asked why she believed bisexual characters to be largely absent from queer representation, Interviewee 6 noted:

> People find it a bit scary somehow because it seems kind of less orderly and less controlled than other sexualities. Maybe if you're only attracted to the other gender or your own gender, then it's kind of more contained, more neatly contained. With being attracted to multiple genders, it's a bit more complicated, especially if you're in a relationship with either a person of your own gender or the other gender because [bisexuality] is never visible at first sight. (Interviewee 6)

This relates to the idea of bisexuality as a transgressive category that defies notions of both the gender binary and the homosexual-heterosexual binary: "Ultimately, the figure of the bisexual is a threat to the existing infrastructure of sexuality that bases itself entirely upon a dominant heterosexual population and an oppositional homosexual one" (Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009, p. 302). The perception of bisexuality as a threat explains – although it does not warrant – the pervasiveness of biphobia, binegativity and bisexual erasure, even in queer spaces. Interviewee 2 noted that representations of gay men were more common and connected this to the relative ease of representing those identities narratively. This again points to the problem of bisexual *representability* that San Filippo (2013) has identified as related to compulsory monosexuality, which raises the question of whether a bisexual character must be shown in relationships with multiple genders throughout their on-screen life in order to avoid being absorbed into a narrative of either hetero- or homosexuality. This clearly connects to Nick's experience of being presumed gay due to his relationship with Charlie, and other media representations in which a character discovers their attraction for someone of the same gender and is treated as having discovered their "real" homosexual identity, rather than being classified as bisexual (San Filippo, 2013).

Regardless of not having specific examples at hand, several interviewees pointed to gendered differences in the (lack of) bisexual representation. It was striking how clear and consistent a picture the participants could paint of how bisexual characters are portrayed or, in the case of men, omitted, even without noteworthy examples. This is a testament to a shared notion among this audience of how bisexuality is underrepresented in the media. Interviewee 6 stated that "for men, there's virtually no representation" with no explicitly bisexual characters that came to mind other than Nick. In addition to a greater number of homosexual characters, this underlines the prevailing "tendency to claim bisexually suggestive characters and narratives as queer, gay, or lesbian" (San Filippo, 2013, p. 15). This appropriation appears especially applicable to male bisexual characters, where the idea of any "stain of homosexuality" being sufficient to classify a queer man as gay still exists to this day (Gammon & Isgro, 2006, p. 165). The participants of this study emphasised that for female bisexual characters, "it is not represented as bisexuality, it is just represented as her experimenting" (Interviewee 12). In short, bisexual men are absorbed into homosexual narratives, and bisexual women into heteronormativity by suggesting that their queerness is mere experimentation. Both symptoms of compulsory monosexuality and monosexism render bisexuality invisible and create no space for bisexual representation.

Although none of the twelve interviewees could refer to other examples of bisexual representation, they were still able to share their thoughts on tropes and stereotypes related to bisexual and queer representation. This was striking, as these seemed to exist in the interviewees' consciousness regardless of specific cases. It underlines the pervasiveness of the cultural discourse around bisexuality, where ideas of stereotypes and misrepresentations seem to circulate almost independently of the media examples that they stemmed from. Together with the aforementioned gendered differences, the knowledge and awareness of stereotypes form a *shared conceptual map* for this audience (Hall, 1997). The concept of bisexual stereotypes had been absorbed by this audience, so much so that it had played a role in their self-perception, which will be explored in detail in the penultimate subchapter of this analysis. Commonly identified stereotypes were indecisiveness, hypersexuality, and bisexuals being unfaithful, prone to cheating and "not safe to date" (Interviewee 12). The interviewees underlined the impact of these negative stereotypes by connecting them to internalised biphobia on their part and binegativity directed towards them. This impact of (mis)representation will be investigated further in the last chapter of the analysis.

Media tropes, such as the aforementioned *bury your gays* and *trauma porn*, were also explored in the context of misrepresentation. Notably, the dissatisfaction with coming-out stories was emphasised: "[E]ven though they are kind of created for me to relate to the pain of what we experience, at the same time, I feel like it is also institutionalising that pain" (Interviewee 12). While these narratives may generally be relatable for a queer audience, the interviewees pointed out that they dwell on queerness as the only notable identity marker and lead to one-dimensional characters, failing to recognise the plurality and intersectionality of identity. Moreover, the "institutionalisation" or in particular the monetisation of dramatic and often trauma-riddled stories, counts on the relatability factor for queer audiences. At its core, it perpetuates the idea that LGBTQ+ individuals will inevitably suffer. Despite the relatability, as many queer people will experience queerphobic attitudes or struggle with coming to terms with their identity, such narratives ignore the complexity of LGBTQ+ characters. Simultaneously, they sensationalise the queer experience for heterosexual viewers.

The lack of nuanced portrayals also led to a feeling of hopelessness, which several participants described in connection to media tropes. The "closeted bully", a queer character that is so affected by internalised queerphobia that they lash out against other people, was also mentioned as a harmful trope (Interviewee 8). Those portrayals of queerness as painful to the point of harming others may shed light on the far-reaching consequences of queerphobia, but

they did not appeal to the audience interviewed in this study. Furthermore, female bisexual characters were linked to the male gaze due to the oversexualisation of queer women. Furthermore, bisexuality was frequently considered to be employed as a plot device, which Interviewee 6 pointed out: "A lot of the time it's just used as a device to kind of create new plots, but the complexities of sexuality, especially of bisexuality or being attracted to multiple genders... it doesn't really have a big place." Similarly to queerbaiting, using bisexuality as a plot device aims to draw in a diverse audience of both LGBTQ+ viewers and heterosexual audiences. It mobilises "bisexuality to appeal to a queer audience without threatening straight spectators" (San Filippo, 2013, p. 22).

A much-discussed trope was also the concept of *tokenism,* including a queer character merely for the sake of compliance with enforced or perceived diversity quotas (Bates, 2021). Several interviewees shared that they were displeased with such quotas and referred to this type of representation as "forced" or "artificial" (Interviewee 10; Interviewee 12). Tokenism does not serve the audience it is intended to represent, instead, it monetises queerness by profiting from the call for more representation. Interviewee 12 also noted that he felt like it was more divisive and counterproductive, as it alienates audiences that may perceive an increase in queer characters and content as threatening. He went as far as to say that he would "never watch something that was done for the sake of representation" (Interviewee 12). Moreover, he elaborated that tokenism only concerns marginalised groups:

> Because most straight people are never placed in these movies to be represented. They are just there because they have the right to be there. I have the right to be there only when they intentionally want to put me there. I'm seen as a plot line – I'm not a plot line, you know, my life is not less worthy than straight people's lives. (Interviewee 12)

This is reminiscent of the concept of *symbolic annihilation*, a feminist term coined by Gaye Tuchman (1978) concerning the systematic underrepresentation of women in the media, that, according to Scarcelli et al. (2021) can be extended to the LGBTQ+ community. The annihilation of bisexual characters through the systematic refusal to represent them, particularly in meaningful ways, is one way in which bisexual erasure is perpetuated in the media. Interviewee 12, further underlined the frustration that he feels with tokenism: "Why can't I just see the movie and see that I am naturally there, that I belong there?" This is compelling on two levels. One, it supposes the "natural" occurrence of bisexuality in a (fictional) population, meaning that bisexual representation should not have to be inserted into the narrative through a token character, but that due to the actual prevalence of bisexuality, it would mirror real life more accurately if bisexual characters were included. Two, it underlines

the perceived *right* to inclusion in the media and the right to a meaningful portrayal of bisexuality that goes beyond diversity quotas.

"Good" Representation

Having outlined the manifold problems with the lack of bisexual representation and the widespread misrepresentation this audience experiences, the following section aims to understand how positive or good representation manifests through the example of *Heartstopper*. Just like media engagement is a subjective experience overall, the perception of what constitutes "good" or positive representation is equally as subjective. The questions posed to the interviewees were deliberately vague on this topic to encourage them to think critically and share their opinions freely and without being steered in any direction. What emerged from the answers was an emphasis on casual representation, nuanced representation as well as plurality and fluidity.

The previous section has already shed light on what kind of representation is needed, in the words of Interviewee 2: casual representation. This became evident through the accounts of other interviewees too, who expressed that they enjoyed seeing "just a normal story" and characters who simply "happened to be gay or bisexual" in *Heartstopper* (Interviewee 10). This tied in with the previously discussed dissatisfaction with repetitive coming-out stories, and "making the whole thing about these characters being gay" (Interviewee 2). Hence, the desire for casual representation lies in shifting the focus to the underlying, often universal themes. The participants stressed *Heartstopper's* theme of first love, mental health, and conflict in friendships and relationships as the pressing matters within the series, not only queerness. This was in part surprising, as so much of the series deals with LGBTQ+ identities and in particular with Nick's discovery of his bisexuality. Nevertheless, the perception of this audience underlined that *Heartstopper* seemed to find the much-needed middle ground between accurately representing bisexuality while focusing on the topic of navigating young love, something that arguably appeals to a wider audience.

This notion of casual representation is connected to the need for nuanced representation. The interviewees praised *Heartstopper* for not being a "full utopia", but for highlighting issues, both between LGBTQ+ individuals and society as well as within their relationships (Interviewee 6). This particularly resonated with Interviewee 8: "It's nice to have something that has a very light tone, but at the same time also discusses these negative issues. Like, I don't

think *Heartstopper* pretends like transphobia and biphobia or ignorance don't exist." They emphasised the complexity of the characters throughout, noting that none of them were perfect and all had a "hint of grey", making them more relatable and realistic (Interviewee 10). Moreover, the participants also noted that queerness was treated as a complex matter and was not reduced to stereotypes. Particularly the portrayal of bisexuality was considered more nuanced and humane than other representations:

> I felt like it was one of the first times that I actually saw bisexuality being treated not like someone that is indecisive about something or two people, but as someone who was human and just realised he is capable of loving people of his gender and the opposite gender. (Interviewee 1)

Overarchingly, the notion of a *right* to a multi-faceted, truthful and realistic depiction of queerness and bisexuality was once again emphasised. Interviewee 4 contextualised *Heartstopper* in comparison to other queer representations as follows:

> The last 15 years of queer storytelling were on the trauma of not being able to embrace your sexuality and who you are as a person. So I hope and think with *Heartstopper* we saw a shift that queer people deserve stories that are just very sweet and cute. (Interviewee 4)

This shows the process – or perhaps progress – from a lack of representation to portrayals discussing the impact of queerphobia to series such as *Heartstopper*, which remain conscious of the implications of being openly queer, yet insist on a hopeful depiction of queerness that focuses more on universal themes. With regards to more light-hearted narratives around queerness, Interviewee 1 concluded that "we're here, we're queer and we also have the right to a happy portrayal of us". The use of the words *right* and *deserve* in these two quotes highlights the feeling of having been denied meaningful representation in the past, and the persistent need for media portrayals that feel genuine to the community they aim to represent.

Another important component was plurality and fluidity. This became evident through the interviewees' perception of *Heartstopper's* characters as complex, most importantly that their distinguishing characteristic was not their queerness (Interviewee 6). Instead, the participants noted that the series incorporates a variety of young queer people with well-thought-out backstories and personalities (Interviewee 7). They further noted the absence of stereotypes and praised the intersectionality of the series due to the inclusion of several LGBTQ+ identities as well as different ethnic backgrounds. Representing fictional characters as human beings with complexity and a multitude of identity factors echoes Hall's concept of identity as "never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and

antagonistic discourses, practices and positions" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). The participants themselves viewed their own identities in a similar manner, which will be explored in the following chapter, and therefore expected meaningful representation to mirror this complexity.

4.3 Beyond the Screen: The Impact of Representation

Beyond the aim of investigating the engagement of bisexual individuals with *Heartstopper* as well as their evaluation of bisexual representation, this thesis intends to answer the question of whether media representations have an impact on this audience's perception of their identity and sense of belonging within the wider LGBTQ+ community. RQ3 closes in on the constructionist approach of media shaping reality. This subchapter discusses the participants' perception of Kit Connor's coming out. It further explores whether and how they felt media representations had impacted their perception of their identity, as well as their views on the queer community and whether they felt like they belonged. This chapter concludes with an outlook on the role that representation plays in constructing societal discourses around bisexuality and queerness as a whole.

4.3.1 The Case of Kit Connor: An Accusation of Queerbaiting

In 2022, actor Kit Connor publicly addressed his sexuality on X, formerly Twitter, after speculations and queerbaiting accusations had spread on the platform (Saunders, 2022). These accusations were prompted by a photograph of Connor holding hands with a young woman, which led some fans of *Heartstopper* to the conclusion that Connor must be straight and had therefore engaged in queerbaiting through his role in the series (ibid.). They expressed their dissatisfaction with casting a presumed heterosexual actor in a queer role, which then pressured Connor into coming out as bisexual (ibid.). For the purpose of this research, this instance highlights two crucial issues: The widespread tendency to assume someone's sexuality based on partner choice, enacting compulsory monosexuality and bisexual erasure, and the far-reaching consequences of the way media shapes reality, to the extent that the lines between fact and fiction are increasingly blurred and terminology from media studies is used in the case of real people.

With the exception of one interviewee, all participants were at least somewhat familiar with Connor's coming out. The perceptions and evaluations of this instance were unanimous, with

all interviewees expressing their displeasure with the treatment of Connor by supposed fans. Reactions ranged from calling the situation "stupid" to "sad" and "horrible", with one interviewee noting that it represents the "core experience of being bisexual" (Interviewee 4). According to them, this core experience entails the invisibility and erasure of Connor's bisexual identity by assuming that he is heterosexual based on a monosexist view of sexuality. In general, several interviewees expressed their solidarity and mentioned that they had been subjected to similar experiences. The use of the term *queerbaiting*, in particular, was viewed critically, as some of the participants were familiar with the origin of the term. They considered applying terminology used to describe the hinting at queerness in entertainment media without the intention of actually representing it to a person in the public eye as a misuse of the term: "I feel like real people can't really queerbait" (Interviewee 7). Moreover, distinguishing Connor from his character Nick was emphasised: "Kit Connor is not a storyline. Nick is a storyline. Kit Connor is a real person" (Interviewee 12). Interviewee 8 further elaborated that they understood that fans had an interest in knowing the actor's sexuality due to discourses around queer actors not being given opportunities in the industry: "I understand where those impulses come from, they come from stories that have caused a lot of hurt for different communities, but it's still not acceptable."

The need to know a public figure's sexuality was also contextualised in relation to fandom. Interviewee 12 noted:

> I think when fans are watching something, they tend to privatise these characters and feel like they belong to them. [...] But I feel like it's kind of a problem because people who act in movies are real people. [...] And that's why I'm really sceptical about fan culture in general.

Several other participants distanced themselves from the *Heartstopper* fandom for this exact reason, stating that they did not consider those who pressured Connor into coming out as fans. This once again underlined the disappointment these audience members felt about Connor being forced to make his bisexuality public and their reluctance to associate themselves with fans who had engaged in this kind of discourse.

4.3.2 Identity: On the Nexus of (In)visibility and (In)validation

The following chapters close in on the experienced impact media representations of bisexuality have on this audience, relevant to RQ3. In the last portion of the interview, the participants were asked to reflect on whether and how the media had affected their perception of themselves. Moreover, they were encouraged to explore how their bisexual identity fits into the context of the LGBTQ+ community.

Overwhelmingly, all twelve participants believed that the media had had an effect on their perception of their identity. Interviewee 11 stated:

> I think I have used media over the years as an exploration of my identity. [...] I guess it helped me control the media in a way that it was a tool. [...] It was quite nice to see positive media, but there's a lot of damaging media too.

This highlights how queer individuals do not only seek out media that will provide them with representation but also the role that the framing of bisexuality within that media plays. Interviewee 1 pointed out that "with more representation, [he] felt more confident about [himself]" and that it provided a source of authenticity for him. This sense of empowerment relates to the idea of media as a catalyst for resilience (Craig et al., 2015). Interviewee 6 also stressed the importance of media, going as far as to call it "personality forming". This notion was supported by two other interviewees, who both noted that bisexual visibility in the media had enabled them to reflect on their sexuality: "I believe when those things are depicted there, you can maybe feel a bit more secure in your feelings or have kind of a revelation" (Interviewee 3, translated from German). She referred to *Heartstopper* as having helped her understand her romantic and sexual attraction. This underlines the importance of media representation for the "conceivability and plausibility of bisexuality as an explanation for [bisexual individuals'] plural desires" (Kneen, 2015, p. 363). None of the interviewees hypothesised that media representations had caused their bisexuality, following a strictly constructionist argument of sexual identity development, rather had it confirmed and, particularly in the case of positive depictions, validated their feelings of attraction to multiple genders. Interviewee 12 even explored this narrow constructionist approach by stating: "That is the answer I always give to people who say kids are not supposed to see gays in movies because it'll turn them gay. Like what? Okay, show them a straight movie afterwards, make them straight again."

The consensus was that media representations – including the lack thereof – had had at least somewhat of an impact on the interviewees' conception of their bisexual identity. Nevertheless, the term bisexuality as well as other labels at the participants' disposal were

discussed critically in the context of representation. Although the utterance of the word bisexual may matter less than the visibility of plurisexual attraction (San Filippo, 2013), language as a representational system does shape our construction of identity (Hall, 1997). As Corey emphasises: "By failing to name 'bisexuality', the media reinforces the heterosexual/homosexual binary" (Corey, 2017, p. 197). Hence, the following section will discuss the participants' perceptions on labelling or not labelling their sexual identity at length.

Labels and Fluidity

"I felt like I could breathe again when I found the label", Interviewee 7 said while reflecting on her journey of finding out about pansexuality. Often described as attraction regardless of gender, pansexuality was intentionally included in this study. To her, it validated and confirmed the attraction she had experienced towards people of various genders and finding a word to describe that experience provided a great sense of relief. Interviewee 2 described having questioned her sexuality during a "huge identity crisis" and "cycling through all of the identities" during her youth. A number of participants noted that they had struggled with the pressure of having to label their sexuality and finding the label that felt fitting. This appears indicative of what a study by Bates et al. uncovered: "[A] common dissatisfaction that labels, even many found already within the LGBTQ+ community, do not fit preexisting selves" and that labels were "both loved and loathed" (Bates et al., 2020, pp. 64-65). This links back to the idea that labels can serve as liberation through validation, or they can feel restrictive.

Interviewee 8, who occasionally uses the term lesbian, described their sexuality as pansexual and homoromantic, noting the difference between sexual and romantic attraction experienced by some plurisexual individuals. They expressed dissatisfaction with the label bisexual: "When I called myself bisexual, it felt so reduced to sexuality and I felt like I was immediately talking about something private" (Interviewee 8). Interviewee 5 also described feeling like it was "inappropriate" to disclose her sexuality and that it at times felt "overbearing". This was particularly striking on the linguistic level: Commonly used terms for monosexual identities in everyday language – gay, lesbian, and straight – do not feature the suffix *-sexual*. Terminology such as homosexual and heterosexual appears more limited to scientific and official contexts, whereas in their day-to-day lives, individuals tend to refer to themselves as gay, lesbian, or straight. This indicates a split between sexuality as behaviour and sexuality as an identity, with the terms ending in and focusing on *-sexuality* being used less

than those culturally attached to identities. Bisexuality is the outlier in this case, and this sheds light on the social perception of bisexuality as perhaps inherently more sexual than identities such as straight, gay or lesbian. Moreover, this also connects to the growing popularity of the term *queer* as an identity label for bisexual individuals. Also lacking the suffix *-sexual*, it may alleviate some of the discomfort stemming from the linguistic emphasis on sexuality and sexual behaviour. Interviewee 12 frequently referred to himself as gay in addition to bisexual, similar to how Interviewee 8 described their sporadic use of the term lesbian. Furthermore, another interviewee remarked:

> I personally don't use the term bisexual with myself often, I prefer the more general term queer, but I think [bisexual representation] is good even for people like me [...] to know that you can use this label and it doesn't have to be a negative thing. (Interviewee 2)

The connotation between the label bisexual and negative stereotypes was also expressed by Interviewee 8: "I do think that maybe if the label bisexual comes up more explicitly in queer media, that can make it easier for people to use it in a positive way and not to have that internalised biphobia." Internalised biphobia was linked by several interviewees to negative media portrayals of bisexuality that they had encountered: "Stereotypes make it harder for you to develop your own kind of queerness" (Interviewee 4). In this context,

> [n]arratives like *Heartstopper* that depict bisexuality in such a positive way have the ability to serve as the cornerstone for young adults accepting who they are and creating and understanding of their bisexuality that is neither reliant on nor reflective of binegativity and damaging stereotypes. (Allen, 2023, p. 221)

This once again highlights how under- and misrepresentation impact this audience and the importance of validating portrayals of bisexuality. In addition, it underlines the interplay between language as a representational system and media representations in the self-perception of this audience. It further emphasises the plurality of experiences within the LGBTQ+ community and why treating queerness – even bisexuality – as a monolith falls short of the complexities of sexuality and identity.

Not Queer Enough: Community and Belonging

"You are queer enough, it's enough to be bisexual." (Interviewee 4)

The participants of this study grew up in and continue to move through a heteronormative society. Heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality impact queer individuals in their identity formation and validation:

> So because dating men was always an option and like the default in society, I dated men and I wasn't really questioning it. And then when I started to realise [that I was bisexual] I was also questioning the validity of those feelings. [...] And I felt this struggle of not being sure how to label it. (Interviewee 5)

Not only does compulsory heterosexuality enable bisexual invisibility and erasure by positioning heterosexuality as the norm, compulsory monosexuality also plays a part in invalidating bisexuality. Moreover, when depictions of bisexuality are not portrayed as valid in media, "bisexual or bi-questioning consumers receive the same message [that bisexuality is invalid] about their own experience" which prevents "them from fully understanding their own sexual identity" (Allen, 2023, p. 200). As queer individuals, (re-)negotiating our identity upon discovering our queerness is inherently difficult. If the portrayals of bisexuality perpetuate the notion that this identity is less valid than those of gay or lesbian individuals, it adds an additional layer to that process of identity negotiation. Interviewee 2 remarked that "[b]isexuality gets discredited a lot" and Interviewee 6 stated that the mere existence of bisexuality is often denied. In societal discourse, the notion that bisexuality is not an identity at all coexists with the idea that it somehow permeates everyone's sexual attraction:

> To identify as bisexual is to be obliged to defend, paradoxically, both bisexuality's essence and existence – 'everyone is bisexual' and 'there is no such thing as bisexuality' persist side by side in common wisdom. (San Filippo, 2013, p. 26)

Both notions erase bisexuality as a valid sexuality and identity. The impact of compulsory monosexuality was felt by several interviewees, for instance, Interviewee 8 mentioned: "I think it is still, by many, perceived as not so much a stable identity, but dependent on who you're with, you'd be perceived differently." This absorption into either heterosexuality or homosexuality as previously discussed in the context of *Heartstopper* led to feelings of insecurity: "The person I'm dating and I pass as a straight couple and then I sometimes feel insecure about it" (Interviewee 5). Interviewee 1 indicated: "I'm a guy and because I've dated guys most of my life, it's like 'no, you're not bisexual, you're just gay." As a result of heteronormativity and homophobia, queer individuals often face discrimination. What is

noteworthy in the experience of the bisexual community is the facing of *double discrimination* (San Filippo, 2013) from both straight and queer spaces.

All twelve interviewees had experienced feeling not queer enough. They pointed to a hierarchisation within the LGBTQ+ community that privileges monosexual queer identities over bisexuality. This led to a sense of isolation even in queer spaces, a feeling of insufficiency and inadequacy: "I have two colleagues who are queer as well, a gay man and a lesbian woman. And I do sometimes feel like they would see themselves as more queer in a way than I am because I'm in a relationship with a man" (Interviewee 6, bisexual woman). Notably, bisexual individuals are much less likely to be open about their sexuality at work: In the United Kingdom, 55% of bisexual people have not disclosed their identity at work, compared with 6 to 8% of gay men and lesbian women (Goldberg, 2016). A general sense of not belonging in the queer community was evident from this interviewee's experience: "I didn't feel like I belonged for quite a while when I wasn't really sure about my sexuality and if, I don't know, if I was queer enough" (Interviewee 6). Interviewee 2 supported this by stating that she feels "a bit on the periphery" and like she has "less of a place" in queer contexts. One explanation for the exclusion of bisexual individuals in community spaces was, according to Interviewee 4, the perception of bisexuality as a stepping-stone identity:

> In my friend group, the experience was that people were more comfortable labelling themselves as bisexual before coming out as lesbian or gay or whatever. So that's kind of interesting, I think, but it also kind of invalidates bisexuality as an option of its own.

This connects to the view of homosexuality and heterosexuality as "extremes", making bisexuality the middle ground, or in this case, a predecessor or stepping stone. It also supports the notion of a hierarchy within the LGBTQ+ community, placing monosexual identities like gay and lesbian on a higher rung than bisexuality (Corey, 2017). Interviewee 12 described this as: "I'm bi, so I'm less of a gay but still less of a straight." Moreover, he recounted an instance in which he almost disclosed his bisexuality to his mother after watching a queer film. She had declared that she understood same-sex attraction as not being a choice. She then, however, proceeded to state that she did not understand bisexuality, as bisexual individuals have a choice – by being in heteronormative or straight-passing relationships and not acting on their attraction to the same gender. Interviewee 12 expressed his frustration: "Should I now come out to my mum not as bisexual but as gay? What is this choice I'm given?" The connection to media representation was striking. Not only did the collective engagement with queer media trigger

the conversation around LGBTQ+ identities between mother and son, it also prompted his mother to reflect on her perception of them.

Interviewee 4 felt similarly: "I found it easier to ask my dad if he would still love me if I was a gay man than saying that I also like girls." These examples highlight the pervasiveness of monosexism and compulsory monosexuality for the bisexual community, to the extent that coming out as homosexual is perceived as less daunting than disclosing their bisexual identity. The under- and misrepresentation of bisexuality in the media further push plurisexual identities to the margins of the queer community, potentially emphasising this feeling of it being "worse" to come out as bisexual. Interestingly, the opposite sentiment has been previously discussed in the context of Nick's coming out in *Heartstopper*, when one interviewee hypothesised that it may have been easier for him to come out as bisexual than as gay. These seemingly contradicting views highlight the difficult situation of bisexuality within queer discourses, both in the media and in society as a whole.

In the context of media representation, Interviewee 8 further remarked: "There was a moment in my life when I was kind of discovering various representations of bisexuality and instances of biphobia in particular that helped me realise I could be as queer as I want to be." This again hints at a hierarchy within the community or "degrees of queerness", as one interviewee called it. However, it also stresses an individual's agency in the expression of their queerness, which arose as particularly important for the participants. Almost all interviewees connected their experiences with binegativity and biphobia to stereotypes in the media, particularly the aforementioned not being "safe to date" (Interviewee 12) due to the assumption that bisexual people are more prone to infidelity. These stereotypes had not only affected and limited them in their self-perception, but they had contributed to their hesitancy of coming out in fear of negative repercussions from a monosexist society: "It isn't really accepted. You either are straight or you are a lesbian or gay, but you're not bisexual" (Interviewee 4). This shows how bisexual erasure and misrepresentation in the media also contribute to societal attitudes towards bisexuality.

Despite the pervasiveness of intra-community issues alongside discrimination from straight communities, all interviewees shared a generally positive view of the LGBTQ+ community. They characterised it as a safe and welcome space, where, in spite of differences, queer people could enjoy a sense of shared experiences. Through, for instance, "insisting" that they are a

part of the LGBTQ+ community, most interviewees felt like they belonged, at least to an extent. Interviewee 6 described her experience as follows:

> But I'm very vocal about how I do think I belong in the community. And I also know many like gay or lesbian people who don't really consider themselves to be a part of the community, who don't really take part in activities or they don't really, they just wanna live their like normal lives, which is good. I mean, it's, it's possible to, to not be a part of that community, but I do, I do want to be a part of it. And so I insist that I am.

This depoliticisation of queerness and the notion of "living a normal life" can be connected to the previously defined concept of *homonormativity* (San Filippo, 2013), the insertion of queer individuals in a framework that mirrors heteronormativity and therefore makes queerness more palatable. In the context of bisexuality also destabilising homonormativity, this interviewee's insistence on articulating a politically queer and bisexual identity was striking.

Immersing themselves through connecting over positive media representations was one way of increasing their feeling of belonging. Other studies have shown that collective media interpretation and creating communities based on shared interest in queer media can have a positive impact (Craig et al., 2015). Moreover, in the case of a lack of support in their lives, media can fill the gap that real-life connections may not be able to fill: […] the social support that LGBTQ youth receive from their network of important others may not satisfy their needs, increasing the potential salience of media personae to the social networks of LGBTQ young people" (ibid., p. 296). Narratives like *Heartstopper*, characters like Nick Nelson, and public figures such as Kit Connor can play an important role in the validation of bisexual identities, as this research has shown.

4.3.3 Normalisation: The Purpose of Representation

The previous chapters have identified visibility and validation as the key roles of representation for this audience. What emerged from their responses was a strong emphasis on normalising queerness, particularly within the genre that *Heartstopper* inhabits. Due to being a teen drama and its lack of oversexualisation, several participants described it as particularly suitable for young people: "It's so important that they framed it in a way that is kids friendly because that is the time when I suffered most" (Interviewee 12). Calzo and Ward (2009) have identified the tendency of LGBTQ+ relationships to be oversexualised in the media, a trope that, according to the interviewees, *Heartstopper* subverts. Interviewee 12 continued: "And that is the time that I want the next generation to start their – not to start their healing journey, but to never

have to have that healing journey." Interviewee 2 expressed a similar sentiment: "What I wouldn't have given as a child to see these kinds of representations out there." There was a clear emphasis on the value of younger viewers being exposed to the nuanced and positive portrayal that the interviewees perceived *Heartstopper* to be. Bond notes that "[m]edia may serve as influential sexual socialization agents, providing vital information [...] that can influence the attitudes and values of LGB individuals as they formulate their sexual identities" (Bond, 2014, p. 99).

The interviewees, however, did not limit the purpose of representation to identity validation for bisexual individuals: "It's really helpful for young people to see themselves represented in a way, but also for straight teenagers to see that as normality" (Interviewee 6). Normalising the existence and experience of bisexual individuals through media portrayals constituted an important factor in getting "the message across to the general public" (Interviewee 2). This is crucial, as

> [f]or many people, bisexuality is not visible in everyday life, so television and film may be their only exposure to it. If the only bi characters they see are meant to symbolize the most negative aspects of human nature, and their entire view of bisexuality is based on that depiction, they are far more likely to have a negative response [...]. (Johnson, 2016, p. 383)

Moreover, Calzo and Ward conclude that sustained engagement with LGBTQ+ media may impact the audience's beliefs and attitudes towards the community, causing them to approximate or even align with how queer identities are represented (2009). This is particularly important "if negative stereotypes dominate [...], regular exposure could make people less accepting" (Calzo & Ward, 2009, p. 283). On the contrary, this also means that positive media depictions could contribute to more acceptance in society. In the words of Interviewee 12:

> We have a lot of problems and I don't think [media portrayals] even as good as *Heartstopper* can totally heal them. But I'm pretty sure that [media] like *Heartstopper* contribute to the resolution of this big problem we live through. (Interviewee 12)

This once again highlights the importance of media representation in the wider cultural and societal discourse. In summary, the participants attributed a great amount of power to the media in contributing to their own perceptions and those of others. In the case of bisexuality, these "others" consist of both heterosexual and homosexual audiences. Media representations can therefore either perpetuate the stigma around bisexuality or contribute to alleviating double discrimination. The interviewees identified media representations as both a risk to societal attitudes towards bisexuality when it came to misrepresentations and negative portrayals, and

as an opportunity to empower bisexual individuals and normalise bisexuality as a valid identity through positive but most importantly nuanced depictions. Media was by no means seen as the only way to enact positive change for bisexual individuals but as a complimentary tool in shaping the future of the majority of the LGBTQ+ community who have been marginalised for too long.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to critically examine bisexual representation on two levels: in academia, by mapping out the absence of bisexuality within queer theory and the lack of research on bisexual audiences in media studies, and in media itself, by analysing a bisexual audience's engagement with and evaluation of *Heartstopper* as one representation of their identity. Through this, I have contributed to the small body of research concerned with bisexuality and media representation, and shed light on the far-reaching impact of bisexual erasure in academia, media, and society. Specifically, the aim was to uncover the complex interplay between media representation and identity (in)validation as well as the audience's sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community.

By situating bisexuality within queer theory and contextualising it against concepts such as monosexism and compulsory monosexuality, I have argued that queer theory still relies on two oppositional poles of sexuality, therefore failing to recognise sexuality as a spectrum with bisexuality as a category of its own. Instead, it has absorbed bisexuality into homosexuality, contributing to the wide-spread phenomenon of compulsory monosexuality. Despite its attempt to break with hegemonic orderings of gender and sexuality, queer theory has largely underrecognised and therefore further marginalised bisexuality, contributing to the socially prevalent invalidation of plurisexual attraction. This has historically left a knowledge gap due to the absorption of bisexuality into either heteronormativity or homonormativity. From a media studies perspective, this thesis has shown that the interplay between identity and representation through a constructionist lens warrants more academic attention on the lack of bisexual representation in the media. By discussing the representational gap that continues to grow between monosexual queer identities and bisexual identities on screen as well as the persistent misrepresentations of bisexuality, I have highlighted the importance of examining bisexual audiences.

Through qualitative interviews, I have researched the engagement of twelve bisexual individuals with the series *Heartstopper* and their perceptions of other representations of queerness and bisexuality. What stood out in their engagement was the strong emphasis on representation as a motivating force, as the interviewees sought out queer content through streaming platforms, recommendations from other members of the LGBTQ+ community, and queer news outlets. This finding highlighted the importance of queer curation and community-building practices through media engagement. Furthermore, the sustained affective engagement of this audience was striking. The participants had developed a strong emotional

connection to the series and its characters, describing *Heartstopper* as a source of comfort and hope in troubling times. This further underlined the importance of representation for a marginalised audience facing biphobia and binegativity amongst other external stressors not directly related to their sexuality. Representation perceived as positive, such as *Heartstopper*, provided relief and support, also or especially if that support was not present in their day-to-day lives. Despite the intensity of their engagement, rewatching the series multiple times and engaging with online discourse around it, the participants' showed a reluctance to call themselves fans due to the fandom's treatment of bisexual actor Kit Connor. This was indicative of a significant identification with members of the bisexual community, such as Connor beyond his portrayal of Nick.

This thesis has explored bisexual representation through the audience's perception of the character Nick Nelson, concluding that *Heartstopper* provided a relatable, realistic and nuanced portrayal of a young bisexual man. The audience's identification with Nick constituted a crucial element in both their engagement with the series as well as their evaluation of *Heartstopper's* depiction of bisexuality. This finding emphasised the intersections between identity and media representation, namely the importance of role models. Particularly Nick's reiteration of "I'm bi, actually" when faced with monosexist assumptions resonated with several participants and underlined the need to make bisexuality visible through continuously *articulating* a bisexual identity. This stood in clear contrast to other, especially previous representations of bisexuality in the media which were overwhelmingly characterised as relying on stereotypes and tropes, using bisexuality as a plot device and ignoring the complexities of attraction to multiple genders – if they existed at all. Through centring *Heartstopper* as a well-received example, this research has therefore also highlighted the long history of bisexual erasure and misrepresentation in entertainment media. The need for nuanced and therefore meaningful representation, such as *Heartstopper*, became evident through this audience's dissatisfaction with stereotypical media depictions of bisexuality and the connections they drew to their self-perception and identity validation. In their view, "good" representation entailed the visibility of a plethora of bisexual experiences through multi-faceted characters whose personalities and storylines went beyond their sexual identity and dealt more with universal themes than endless coming-out narratives. This related closely to the concept of identity as characterised by plurality. It further connected to the importance of counteracting the notion of queerness and even bisexuality as a monolithic experience.

The importance of visibility in the context of bisexual erasure was also crucial beyond the screen: The blurring of the lines between fiction and reality was noteworthy in the participant's perception of Kit Connor's disclosure of his bisexuality. In the eyes of this audience, Connor falling victim to monosexist assumptions regarding his sexuality emphasised the prevalence of bisexual erasure even among the fan community of *Heartstopper*, who had seen Connor portraying a bisexual character. To them, this instance further highlighted the problematic practice of accusing public figures of queerbaiting, and by using media terminology, overstepping the boundary between fictional representations and the real world.

Discussing their personal experiences with media representation, the participants of this study believed that negative portrayals of bisexuality had impacted them in their self-perception and had led to internalised binegativity and biphobia as well as a hesitation to disclose their bisexual identity. Especially the connotations of the label bisexual as a less stable, heavily sexualised and overall much-contested identity were noted as constraints in coming to terms with their own identity. The intricacies of labelling or not labelling their sexuality stood out as another key factor in the context of stigmatised representations of bisexuality. Having agency over the words used for their sexuality emerged as a crucial component in developing a queer identity independent of the connotations of bisexuality. Contrarily, representations that they perceived as positive, like *Heartstopper*, had empowered them and provided a sense of validation that many had wished for when they were younger. These findings underlined the importance of representation – both on the linguistic and the medial level – as central to self-perception, meaning-making practices and the ideological power of the media. Moreover, the interviewees pointed to tensions within the queer community and not feeling "queer enough" due to their bisexual identity, which emerged into a common theme of hierarchisation within the LGBTQ+ community that reflected many of the issues identified in the realm of queer theory, namely monosexism and compulsory monosexuality. Several participants felt like they were "less queer" than lesbian and gay members of the community and were therefore relegated and confined to the margins. Biphobia and negativity from other (queer) people hence played a significant role in their sentiment of not fully belonging.

These experiences were connected to societal attitudes about bisexuality as disruptive and destabilising, which relates back to the normative idea of sexuality as dichotomous and binary, heterosexual/homosexual, and closely linked with gender. This notion that bisexuality breaks with these taken-for-granted categories underlines the interest from both heterosexual and homosexual communities in erasing bisexuality in order to legitimise their sexualities by

defining them as mutually exclusive opposites. Not only does bisexuality threaten the idea that homosexuality is heterosexuality's "other", in many ways does it constitute an "other" for *both*, perpetuating bisexuality's marginalisation in and alienation from both straight and queer spaces. The lack of nuanced portrayals of bisexuality stood out as complicit in these societal attitudes, as the interviewees believed negative depictions perpetuated harmful notions of bisexuality. If media representations reinforce and perpetuate negative attitudes towards bisexuality, bisexual individuals will continue to find themselves in biphobic contexts and internalise biphobia and binegativity.

Overall, this thesis constituted media representations as a driving force in the self-perceptions of bisexual individuals and identified normalisation as a key role of the media in order to combat biphobic attitudes. The media was characterised as being able to uphold or challenge power structures. Hence, not only did this audience see potential in media representations of bisexuality as validating for plurisexual individuals but also in counteracting stigma amongst hetero- and homosexual audiences. While they were reflective of the complexity of discrimination and marginalisation, they attributed some power to media portrayals in either further perpetuating or counteracting existing hegemonies in society. This finding was contextualised within a social constructionist view on the media and further underlined the paramount importance of studying media representations of marginalised audiences and their engagement.

Although my own bisexual identity was a key strength in this project as it may have positively influenced the level of trust I was granted by the interviewees, it also required me to invest my own identity in a way that I have seldom done in a research project. I have had to remain reflective of my in-group knowledge and terminology throughout the writing process, and my inability to fully separate myself from the participants in this study – as I, too, am a bisexual audience member and fan of *Heartstopper* – could easily have been a limitation. Nevertheless, the value of the perspective I have been able to weave into this study outweighs the risks related to being a member of the community myself. I have remained reflective of the intricacies of this position.

Limitations and Further Research

This thesis had several limitations beyond length and time constraints. For instance, by studying the engagement of an audience with a British series, it limited the sampling to participants who were either natively or bilingually anglophone. It also may have shaped the cultural context as being predominantly European and white, with the majority of participants being of European origin or ancestry. As a series produced and distributed by Netflix, access to *Heartstopper* further constrained the sampling process. A greater number of bisexual men would have been desired in the context of Nick Nelson as a bisexual character and Kit Connor as a bisexual actor and may have shed even more light on the intersections between queerness, gender and masculinity, which could only marginally be explored in this thesis. As this research was undertaken as qualitative study, the findings are by no means representative of the bisexual community in its entirety. Rather than arguing for a monolithic bisexual experience, the aim of this thesis was to closely examine and amplify voices from a marginalised subgroup of the LGBTQ+ community to the extent that was possible. Nevertheless, commonalities emerged that were contextualised within the broader historical and societal perceptions of bisexuality.

If this thesis has shown and taught me anything as a researcher, it is the importance of lending my voice to the marginalised. The gratitude I was met with from the participants encouraged me in this endeavour and has once again proven the need for representation – also in academia. Therefore, there is not only ample opportunity to take the study of bisexual audiences further, there is a distinct *need*. I have uncovered some of the ways in which this community believes to have been impacted by media representation through a case that deeply resonated with them, but there is tremendous value in researching those portrayals of bisexuality that this audience perceived as harmful. Some of the themes that this thesis could not explore in detail but that warrant more academic attention are the connections between gender roles, masculinity and bisexuality, performativity within the queer community, and intersecting identities such as age, ethnicity, cultural background, and religion. Particularly the role that media representation may play for queer individuals who lack support in their communities deserves more academic attention. Just like some of the interviewees in this study expressed their *right* to meaningful representation in the media, I argue that this right also extends into academia. The need for visibility and identification is neither pacified nor satisfied by the absorption and simultaneous neglect of bisexuality within queer theory.

References

Abercrombie, N. & Longhurst, B. (1998). Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination, London: Sage

Allen, M. (2023). In a Romantic Way, Not Just a Friend Way: Exploring the developmental implications of positive depictions of bisexuality in Alice Oseman's Heartstopper, *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 23, no.2, pp. 197-228, https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2022.2153191

Angelides, S. (2006). Historicizing (Bi)Sexuality: A Rejoinder for Gay/Lesbian Studies, Feminisim, and Queer Theory, *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 52, no. 1-2, pp. 125-158, https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2022.2153191

Bates, G. (2021). Fake Inclusion and Tokenism in the Media Industry, *Injection*, Available online: https://www.injectionmag.com/post/tokenism-in-the-media-industry

Bates, A., Hobman T. & Bell, B. T. (2020). Let Me Do What I Please With It... Don't Decide My Identity For Me: LGBTQ+ Youth Experiences of Social Media in Narrative Identity Development, *Journal of Adolescent Research*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 51-83, https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558419884700

Billard, T. J. & Gross, L. (2020). LGBTQ Politics in Media and Culture, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1263

Bitran, T. (2022). How the Heartstopper Team Found Their Truly Diverse Cast, Available online: https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/heartstopper-casting-video [Accessed 15 April 2024]

Bond, B. J. (2014). Sex and Sexuality in Entertainment Media Popular with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents, *Mass Communication and Society*, vol. 17, pp. 98-120, DOI: 10.1080/15205436.2013.816739

Bond, B.J., Miller, B. & Stevens Aubrey, J. (2018). Sexual References and Consequences for Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Characters on Television: A Comparison Content Analysis, Mass Communication and Society, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 72-95, https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2018.1489058

Bond, B. J. (2023). PS and Identity Among LGBTQ Media Users. In: Tukachinsky Forster, R. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Parasocial Experiences*, Oxford University Press, pp.291-306, https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/46261/chapter-abstract/405482728?redirectedFrom=fulltext

Butler, J. (1990). Gender Trouble, New York: Routledge

Butler, J. (1993). Bodies That Matter, New York: Routledge

Bradbury-Rance, C. (2023). 'Unique Joy': Netflix, Pleasure and the Shaping of Queer Taste, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 133-157, https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2023.2193521

Bridges, E. (2018). A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and 'The 100 Mess', *Journal of Fandom Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 115-132, DOI: 10.1386/jfs.6.2.115_1

Bromberger, B. (2022). Heartstopper: Netflix Gay Teen Romance's Winning Formula, *Bay Area Reporter*, vol. 52, no. 19, pp. 15-16, Available through: https://eds-p-ebscohost-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=82b06531-e01f-429c-bf38-33757504ee36%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZlJnNjb3BlPXNpdGU%3d#AN=156954191&db=qth

Browne, K. & Nash, C. J. (2016). Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research, New York: Routledge

Byrne, B. (2005). Qualitative Interviewing. In: Seale, C. (ed.), *Researching Society and Culture*, London: Sage, pp. 206-226

Calzo, J. P. & Ward, L. M. (2009). Media Exposure and Viewers' Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: Evidence for Mainstreaming or Resonance?, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 53, no. 2, pp. 280-299, DOI: 10.1080/08838150902908049

Couldry, N. & Hepp, A. (2017). The Mediated Construction of Reality, Cambridge: Polity.

Corey, S. (2017). All Bi Myself: Analyzing Television's Presentation of Female Bisexuality, *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 190-205, Available through: https://eds-p-ebscohost-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/eds/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=975ee2f1-dfbe-4280-af91-af9ca87e2bd4%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZlJnNjb3BlPXNpdGU%3d#AN=edselc.2-52.0-85017447284&db=edselc

Craig, S. L., McInroy, L., McCready, L. T. & Alaggia, R. (2015). Media: A Catalyst for Resilience in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth, *Journal of LGBT Youth*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 254-275, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2015.1040193

Dahlgren, P. & Hill, A. (2020). Parameters of Media Engagement, *Media Theory*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 1- 32, Available through: https://eds-p-ebscohost-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/eds/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=70e9925b-ab5b-4a70-9449-d339f9825205%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZlJnNjb3BlPXNpdGU%3d#AN=edsswe.oai.lup.lub.lu.se.8a93724c.ab00.4240.8d15.b2754511e894&db=edsswe

Dias, J. (2020). Tokenism and Representation: A Fine Line in Popular Media, *Medium*, Available online: https://medium.com/the-volume-collective/tokenism-and-representation-a-fine-line-in-popular-media-6fa803dc939b [Accessed 1 May 2024]

Drenten, J., Harrison, R. L. & Pendarvis N. J. (2023). More Gamer, Less Girl: Gendered Boundaries, Tokenism, and the Cultural Persistence of Masculine Dominance, *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 2-24, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucac046

Eisner, S. (2013). Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution. Berkeley: Seal

Erickson-Schroth, L. & Mitchell, J. (2009). Queering Queer Theory, Or Why Bisexuality Matters, *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 9, pp. 297-315, DOI: 10.1080/15299710903316596

Esper, D. & Bowen-Jones, Z. (2023). Queer Content Is More Popular Than Ever – And Non-Queer People Are Fans Too, *Gay Times*, Available online: https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/originals/queer-content-more-popular-than-ever/ [Accessed 15 April 2024]

Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Gammon M.A. & Isgro, K. L. (2006). Troubling the Canon: Bisexuality and Queer Theory, Journal of Homosexuality, vol. 52, no. 1, pp. 159-184, Available online: http://jh.haworthpress.com

GLAAD Media Institute. (2016). Reporting on the Bisexual Community: A Resource for Journalists and Media Professionals, Available online: https://glaad.org/publications/focus-reporting-bisexual-community [Accessed 15 April 2024]

GLAAD Media Institute. (2023). Where We Are on TV: 2022-2023, Available online: https://glaad.org/wherewareontv22/ [Accessed 15 April 2024]

Goldberg, A. E. (ed.) (2016). The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies, Available through: https://sk-sagepub-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-lgbtq-studies

Gomillion, S. C. & Giuliano, T. A. (2011). The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity, *Journal of Homosexuality*, vo. 58, no. 3, pp. 330-354, https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2011.546729

Gurevich M., Bailey H. & Bower, J. (2009). Querying Theory and Politics: The Epistempic (Dis)Location of Bisexuality within Queer Theory, *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 9, pp. 235-257, DOI: 10.1080/15299710903316539

Hall, S. (1996). Who Needs Identity? In: P. Du Gay & S. Hall (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity,* London: Sage, pp. 1-18

Hall, S. (ed.) (1997). Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, London: Sage

Hall, S., Hobson, D., Lowe, A. & Willis, P. (2005). Culture, Media, Language, New York: Taylor & Francis e-Library

Harding, S. (2008). Sciences From Below: Feminisms, Poscolonialities, and Modernities, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Johnson, H. J. (2016). Bisexuality, Mental Health, and Media Representation, *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 16, no, 3, pp. 378-396, Available through: https://eds-p-ebscohost-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/eds/detail/detail?vid=7&sid=975ee2f1-dfbe-4280-af91-af9ca87e2bd4%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZlJnNjb3BlPXNpdGU%3d#AN=118246787&db=qth [Accessed 15 April 2024]

Kneen, B. (2015). Neither Very Bi Nor Particularly Sexual: The Essence of the Bisexual in Young Adult Literature, *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 359-377, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-014-9237-8

Kuckartz, U. (2014). Qualitative Text Analysis: A Guide to Methods, Practice and Using Software. Los Angeles: Sage

McInroy, L. & Craig, S. L. (2017). Perspectives of LGBTQ Emerging Adults on the Depiction and Impact of LGBTQ Media Representation, *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 32- 46, Available through: https://eds-p-ebscohost-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/eds/detail/detail?vid=10&sid=975ee2f1-dfbe-4280-af91-af9ca87e2bd4%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZlJnNjb3BlPXNpdGU%3d#AN=120040456&db=sih [Accessed 15 April 2024]

Ng, E. (2013). A Post-Gay Era? Media Gaystreaming, Homonormativity, and the Politics of LGBT Integration, *Communication, Culture & Critique*, vol. 6, pp. 258-283, DOI:10.1111/cccr.12013

Ochs, R. (2009). What is Bisexuality? In R. Ochs & S. E. Rowley (eds), *Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals Around the World*, Bisexual Resource Center, pp. 7-9

Rivas, C. (2005). Coding and Analysing Qualitative Data. In: C. Seale (ed.), *Researching Society and Culture*, London: Sage, pp. 366-392

San Filippo, M. (2013). The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television, Indiana: Indiana University Press

Saunders, Emma. (2022). Heartstopper's Kit Connor Says He Was 'Forced' to Come Out as Bisexual, *BBC News*, Available online: https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-63469444 [Accessed 15 April 2024]

Scarcelli, C. M., Krijnen, T. & Nixon, P. (2021). Sexuality, Gender, Media: Identity Articulations in the Contemporary Media Landscape, *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 24, no. 8, pp. 1063-1072, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1804603

Shaw, J. (2023). Bi: The hidden culture, history and science of bisexuality, Edinburgh: Canongate

Tuchman, G. (1978). The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media. In G. Tuchman, A., R. Daniels & J. Benet (eds.), *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in Mass Media*, Oxford University Press, pp. 150-174

Watkins, M., Simmons, A. & Umphress, E. (2019). It's Not Black and White: Toward a contingency perspective on the consequences of being a token, *Academy of Management Perspectives*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 334-365, https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2015.0154

Woodward, K. (ed.) (1997). Identity and Difference, London: Sage

6. Appendix

6.1 Question Guide

Topic	Question	Connection to theory
Introduction/Parameters of engagement	**Tell me a little bit about yourself.**	-
	What kind of films and TV series do you like?	-
	How did you first find out about Heartstopper?	Contexts/Motivations
	Why did you decide to watch it?	Motivations
	What made you stick with it?	Modalities
	Talk me through your experience of watching the series.	Contexts/Intensities/Modalities
	Have you ever rewatched it?	Intensities
	What do you look for when you are deciding what to watch next?	Motivations/Contexts
	Did you engage with any other related content during/after watching Heartstopper? Tell me about it.	Consequences/Intensities
Opinion on Heartstopper	**What did you think about the series?**	Modalities
	What do you think about the Heartstopper fandom? Would you consider yourself a part of it?	Fandom Identity
	Can you tell me about something that was important to you in the series? A particular character, scene, etc.	Modalities
	Do you have a favourite character in the series?	
	What is it about them that stands out to you?	
	Do you relate to them? Why?	Identity
	What did you think about the character Nick Nelson?	Modalities
	Did you relate to him?/What could you relate to, what couldn't you relate to?	Identity
Media representation of bisexuality	**What did you think about how the series dealt with the topic of bisexuality?**	Representation
	What stood out to you in the depiction of bisexuality?	Representation
	What did you think about Nick repeatedly saying "I'm bi, actually"?	Representation

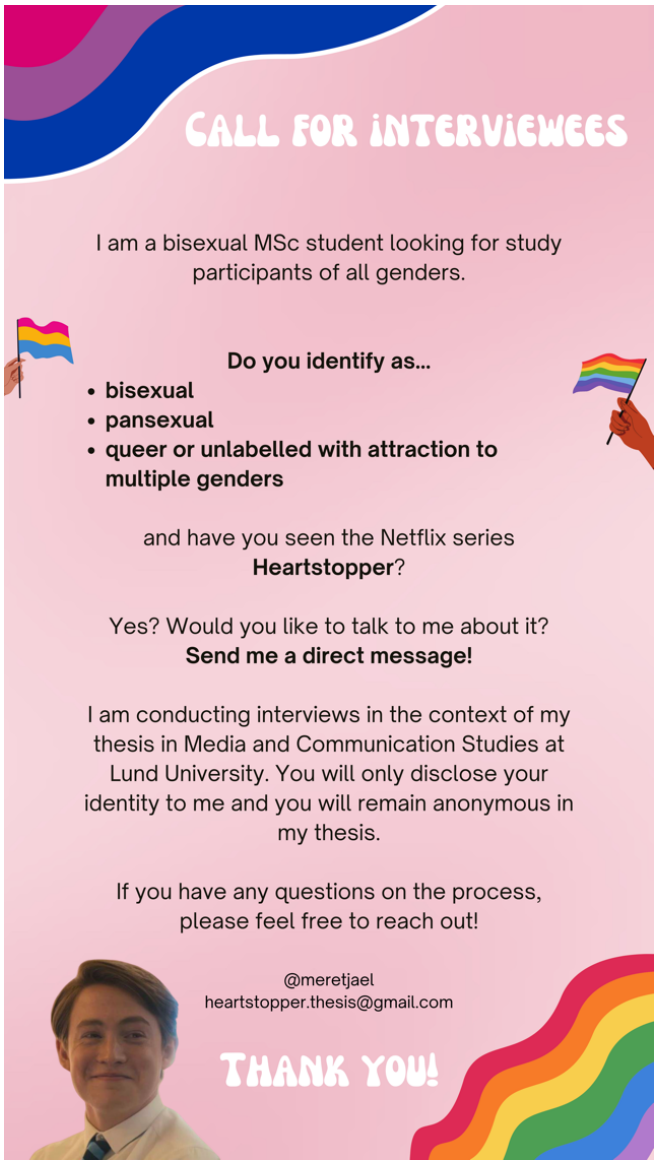
	How do you feel about the use of the label bisexual in the series?	Representation Identity
	Do you generally look for yourself to be represented in the media you engage with?	Motivations Representation Identity
	How do you feel about other representations of bisexuality or queerness?	Representation
	Do you think there is good representation? What would you say makes representation good?	Representation
	How would you evaluate the representation of bisexuality in Heartstopper?	Representation
	Can you think of any stereotypes associated with bisexuality or queerness in the media?	Representation
	What did you think about Heartstopper in terms of queer stereotypes?	Representation
Media representations and impact on identity, community and belonging	**Do you know about Kit Connor's coming out on Twitter? How did that make you feel?**	Social constructivism Contexts
	What do you think about that in the context of Heartstopper?	Social constructivism
	What do you think about the involvement of queer people in the production of a series like Heartstopper?	Contexts Representation
	How do you feel about media representations in connection to how you identify?	Representation Identity Social constructivism
	How do you feel about bisexual representation and your own identity?	Representation Identity Social constructivism
	Do you think media representations have had an impact on how you feel about your identity? If yes, how so?	Representation Identity Social constructivism

	How do you feel about the LGBTQ+ community?	Identity Community/belonging
	What has had an impact on how you feel about the queer community?/What has influenced your view on the community?	Community/belonging Social constructivism
	Is there anything else that you would like to tell me? Something we haven't touched on yet perhaps?	

6.2 Study Participants

Interviewee number	**Gender identity**	**Age**	**Country of residence**	**Country of origin**
1	male	25	Portugal	Portugal
2	female	22	Canada	Canada
3	female	23	Germany	Germany
4	non-binary	30	Germany	Germany
5	female	27	Germany	Germany
6	female	28	Germany	Germany
7	female	20	Germany	Germany
8	genderweird (non-binary/female)	33	UK, England	Germany
9	female	21	Canada	Canada
10	female	27	Germany	Germany
11	female	28	UK, Northern Ireland	UK, England
12	male	23	Sweden	Ukraine

6.3 Call for Interviewees



6.4 Consent Form

Meret Jael Koch
she/her
Media and Communication Studies
Lund University, Sweden
heartstopper.thesis@gmail.com

Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this project. The research centres around bisexual* people's engagement with the Netflix series *Heartstopper*. I am conducting this study for my Master thesis in the MSc programme Media and Communication Studies at Lund University. I would like to ask you about your engagement with *Heartstopper* and your opinion about media representation as a self-identifying bisexual person.

The interview will take approximately 30 to 60 minutes on Zoom. You are welcome to say as much or as little as you want, you may also choose to not answer any of the questions or to stop the interview at any time.

I ask for your consent to record the interview and to use the interview findings in my thesis.

If you permit, the audio of the interview will be recorded, the recording from the interview will be handled confidentially and will not be shared with any third party. When all analysis of the interview data is completed, the files will be deleted, and all data will be anonymised. The thesis will summarise input from the interviews, as well as from other data sources. References or quotes from the interviews will be anonymised and will not include information that will identify individual interviewees.

Please give your written consent. If you have any questions regarding the interview setup or the confidentiality of your data, please do not hesitate to reach out.

_____

Date Signature

*In this project, the umbrella term bisexual is used to include other labels and identities that refer to attraction to more than one gender.

6.5 Code Book

Theory	Category	Sub-category	Sub-subcategory	Codes
Parameters of media engagement	Contexts	Availability	Streaming platforms	Netflix; Disney+; Amazon Prime
		Time		war in Ukraine; my life was so miserable; short; quick; age; specific times that we were in the mood to watch it; semester abroad; right point in time for me
		Genres		British TV; romance; teenagers; queer; love story; series; family friendly; comedy; drama; teen drama; romcom; feel-good
		Place		country where I live; British; English; city vs countryside
		Production	Involvement of queer people	build a safe space; sensitive themes; very important; share experiences and feelings; include people that are affected; appreciate it; absolutely necessary; to not misrepresent; to avoid stereotyping
	Motivations	Searching		I don't want to watch straight romance movies; Google best gay trope series or movies; search for LGBT; balance it out; social media
		Recommendations		other content posted about it; someone is talking about it; friend sent me a picture; queer friends; friends working on the series; friend told me about it; reviews; many people were watching it; group text with friends
			Platforms/ algorithms	through streaming platforms; advertised on Netflix; algorithms; similar series/films; Amazon Prime; watch trailer; percentage match; ad on Instagram
		Possible reception		picky; valuable; speaks to me; prejudgment; puts me in a good mood
		Representation		representation factor; see myself; important that the gay or bisexual trope would be there; always liked all things queer; realised I am queer and that's why I like all of this; always looking for good queer content; really important to me to find that representation; I could see myself as some of these people; not used to a queer love story in a positive light; always try to read queer literature; more representation but not necessarily well done;

				actively look for it; I watch anything queer; felt starved for representation; see facets of myself; subconsciously holds me longer; I always look for a little bit of identification; same interests; same world view; partly look for myself to be represented; pick what to watch and it is important to be represented; appreciate when it's there but don't look for it; big fan of queer culture; at least a little bit queer; more subconscious; maybe subconsciously;
	Modalities	Cognitive engagement		dealt with many topics; really good at addressing problems; not overly censored; important to bring up heavier themes; show solutions how to tackle it; thinking about teaching it; learn about identities; progressing journey; see other people's experiences; wasn't sure what to expect
		Affective engagement		liked the music; like the visual things to recreate the graphic novel; made me very happy; chemistry between the protagonists; sweet; hopeful; really excited; fun; lighthearted; vibes; fluffy; really cute; positive, escapism; really enjoyed it; enjoy mix of tones; positive feeling; sensitive storytelling; unique; personal; beautiful to watch; cheesy; over the top; too much; cinematography; colours; soft; calming; nice; friendly; so much love behind the series; everyone cares about it so much; excited
		Emotional engagement		I felt so guilty; I felt so good; first beam of light for me; helped keep me sane; preserved that part of my identity; identify with characters; heartwarming; go back to my teenage self; uncomfortable with heavier themes; comfort show; I just felt very connected; made me feel less alone; it touched me; warming my inner child; a cure for my inner child; felt very connected; connecting with my inner teenager; how it could have been; felt in my heart; I could relate; crying; emotional; had to cry

	Intensities			lowkey obsessed; always watching something; urge; binged it; prolong the experience; I wanted it to be longer; hooked; watch party with friend; spent the entire day watching the whole series; watched it like three times; obsessed; 10 or 11 times; comfort show; I wanted more; hungry for more; rewatched three times; binge-watcher; could watch it hundreds of times and not get sick of it
		Related content		graphic novel; followed actors on Instagram; read novel; web comics; deep dive; searching for everything I can find on it; actors; Alice Oseman; news related to it; read the whole comic; fan fiction; fan art; reading up on it; algorithms; colouring book; interview
		Fandom	Distance from fan community	I don't even consider them fans; not that kind of fan; not active; critical of the fan community; how crazy fans can get; wouldn't consider myself part of it; younger than me; I don't relate; secondhand fandom; I'm over those kinds of people; wouldn't buy books or research
	Consequences			couldn't discuss it with many people; significantly influenced my life; talked through it with my friend who is also queer; heavier themes depressing; had to stop and put it away; talked to my gay friend about it; connect over queer media; talking to other people about it; recommended it to all of my friends;
Identity	Bisexuality/ queerness	Labels	Sexuality	bisexual; not comfortable with the label; pansexual; queer; umbrella term; omnisexual; not strictly; fluid; prefer more general term queer; controversy around pansexual; niche categories of LGBTQ+; cycling through identities; controversy surrounding labels; shy away from specific labels; lying to myself if I picked a label; comfort in bigger labels; more flexibility; micro labels; doesn't hurt anyone to have a specific label; confusing; occasionally call myself a lesbian; gay as umbrella; close enough; a word someone likes to use for themselves; homo romantic; interchangeable; reduced to sexuality (bi vs queer/lesbian/gay); bisexual as a two gender thing;

				called myself bisexual for years; queer relationship; not heterosexual; maybe bi is easier as a label; don't know if I'm bi or a lesbian; appease people with labels; bisexual more approachable than other plurisexual labels; depends who I'm talking to; polysexual; huge identity crisis; easier to digest; put into a box; defined me
			Gender	questioning gender identity; gender binary; non-binary; pronouns; gender roles; you're a boy or you're a girl; it's part of my identity
		Coming/being out		I was not out to many people; they're not interested in the full complexity; find own labels; disclosure of being bi; being able to put that feeling into words; stages of coming out (friends, family, etc.); specifying labels for other people; appease people with labels; own identity has consequences; realised I was bisexual in my early twenties; inappropriate telling people my sexuality; overbearing; I feel insecure about saying it; not sure how to label it; pressure to label sexuality; afraid to tell me parents and they'd treat me differently; important for people to recognise your identity
		Agency		the part that has not been stolen from me; label yourself with what you feel comfortable with; very individual for each person; important distinction between own choice of labels and other people's; it can mean different things to different people; important for people to recognise your identity; different stages of acceptance
		Fluidity		maybe I will have to reconsider that; I still have time; lying to myself if I picked a label; more flexibility; identify differently in different contexts; attraction can change over time; can still change things; not being defined; not assuming things; I was neither and also both; don't know what will happen in the future; gender blindness; so many different experiences; afraid of being put into a specific category

		Community/ belonging	Positive	doesn't really matter what kind of queer; shared experience; there are people who feel the way I do; feel free to express myself; can be a perfect place; for younger people to belong; becoming a part of it more; immersing yourself through books and social media; activism; I insist that I am a part of the community; very vocal; good community; we find each other; talk to my friends and they understand; feel embraced; can be my authentic self; support; really want to belong; validation; signalling safety through queer items; immersion; in the middle of the community; not as possessive anymore; easier to become a part of it; openness; freedom; great; very welcoming; Pride; meeting people; bubble; openness; same values; pretty good; very supportive; accepting; belong most of the time; welcome despite questioning; political cause; basically everyone in my circle is queer; positive place to be; liberal; progressive; acknowledge the history of the community; positive outlook for the future; I belong just because I'm not straight; validating; important to my experience; feels like home; similar experiences
			Intra-community problems	focus on sexuality and partying; a lot of subcategories; not good communication; racism; trans exclusivity; more in male gay community; generational; internet drama; important distinction between own choice of labels and other people's; divisions within community; biphobia; division between cis and trans, monosexual and plurisexual; ageism; did not feel welcome; didn't feel like I belonged in the past; we are judge sometimes; focus on bodies; not as tolerant; bisexual discrimination; gatekeeping; do not belong; intersectionality; exclusion of some communities/labels; need to insert myself/adapt; validity of some labels; important to talk about; animosity towards bisexual women
		Bisexuality as disruptive/ deconstructive		people find it a bit scary; less orderly; less controlled; bisexuality as progression from monosexuality; disrupting boundaries; not stable;

				spectrum; too much to accept; threat; combination of gay and straight; queerness as ideology; people want to put us in boxes; I love fucking the system; I was neither and also both; ability to shape shift
		Invisibility/ invalidation		never visible at first sight; identity questioned by people you don't know; straight passing privilege; I didn't know any queer people when I was young; partner might make it look like they are heterosexual; always assuming I'm gay; overlooked; people forget that I also like girls; hard for people to know; do I need to date a girl for them to know who I am?; I had to date a woman to make it real
			Bisexual erasure	deny the existence of bisexuality; discredited; phase; only been with one gender; not entirely bisexual; pretending to be something you're not; dependent on who you are dating; not valid; didn't exist; would never erase my bi or pansexual experience; my dad is convinced I will marry a guy
		Heteronormativity/ compulsory heterosexuality/queerphobia		prayed to be straight; scared to hold hands in public; trauma; straight as standard; had to be straight; I was going to get married and have kids; heteronormative world; heterosexual values; am I gay or am I not?; default in society; dating men was always an option; I wasn't questioning it; questioning the validity of my feelings; turned you straight; I assumed I was straight; I'm not gay I still like girls; my dad is convinced I will marry a guy; dress straight passing in case people have prejudices
		Binegativity/biphobia	Double discrimination	negative preconceptions; internalised biphobia; did not feel welcome in queer community; not allowed in queer spaces and hyper sexualised in straight spaces; stepping stone identity; framed in a really negative way; choice; reluctance to date bisexuals; have to get checked to get into the community; belong 3/4 in queer community; do not belong; animosity towards bisexual women; don't feel as embedded

		Hierarchies within LGBTQ+ community	Quantifying queerness	not queer enough; wasn't sure about my sexuality; gay and lesbian see themselves as more queer; have to prove that you belong; experiences with same gender; degrees of queerness; privileging of bigger labels; am I queer enough?; hetero-presenting relationship; who gets attention at Pride; more acceptance for visibly queer relationships; fake queer; did not feel welcome in queer community; not allowed in queer spaces; I've become much gayer; less of a gay but still less of a straight; not gay enough; belong 3/4; do not fit in; homosexuality as the extreme; is the community my place; on the periphery; don't feel as embedded
			Monosexism	you could talk about being gay; easier to come out as gay; I remember people being gay; easier for people to understand; revert to being attracted to men
			Compulsory monosexuality	pick a side; show that no one has to be just straight or just gay; you are just straight; you're just gay; later come out as gay; first labelling as bisexual before coming out as lesbian or gay; stepping stone identity; treating me as gay; choice; wish I was a lesbian; you're gay or butch; two identities; actually straight; am I gay or am I not?; I assumed I was straight because I liked guys; revert to being attracted to men
		Performance/ performativity		walking too queer; dressing in a certain way; is this too gay for me; signal that I'm gay; rainbow items; looking straight; you have to look a certain way; masculinity; lean into queerness; femininity; read as queer; recognition; signifiers; can be threatening; less of a man; hand movements; language; slang; butch/femme; people assume we are boys; alternative; effeminate; outspoken; not very visibly queer; traditionally feminine; straight passing
	Other identity aspects			I'm losing myself; I was not speaking my language; not get my identity shattered completely; queer versus gay is a generational thing; my generation of queers; religion; not my entire identity; Christian

				household; very strict household; Indian; African; Ukrainian; German; Brown; not my defining feature
Representation	Misrepresentation	Tropes		must be painful; two women kissing to show they are fun and adventurous but no deeper meaning; their sexuality isn't explored; plot device; all about the queer experience; coming out; end up miserable or sad; token gay character; sidelines; trauma porn; male gaze; manic pixie dream girl; cool girl; closeted bully; tokenism
		Stereotypes		promiscuity; hypersexual; not good at sports; femininity/masculinity; sleeps around a lot; sleeps with anyone; very sexual; indecisive; confused; gay best friend; playing with everyone; blue-haired bisexual girls that want to be non-binary; queer men more at ease with women; cheaters; less safe to date; finds everyone attractive; butch/femme; switching the gender of partners
	Lack of representation			you don't often see that; I don't know that many bisexual representations; mainly gay male representation; bisexuality doesn't have a big place; a lot of gay or lesbian characters; bisexual or pansexual not a lot of representation; didn't see much; mostly gay boys; can't think of any; bisexuality as progression from monosexuality; the bar was really low; not a lot of representation; I've grown up without representation; least represented; not a lot of bisexual main characters; don't want to tell queer storylines; made own representation through fan fiction; can't recall a case; don't know if gay or bi; underrepresentation; I don't know any; wasn't represented at all when I was younger; didn't exist; queerness was not on the table; I don't really feel represented; growing up there was no representation; less common than straight, gay or lesbian representation
		Gendered differences		especially a male character; men not taken seriously; men secretly gay; women actually straight; she just wants to be cool; virtually no representation of bisexual men;

				more two women in a relationship; not nearly as mainstream; not used to seeing bisexual men; more accepted for women; male gaze; queer men not allowed to be soft; bi women more often represented than men; experimentation; more taboo for men
	"Good" representation	Casual representation		not done for the sake of representation; right to be represented; see that I am naturally there; not articificial/forced representation; not a gay movie but a romance movie; not obvious that they wanted to represent people; just a normal story; casual representation; not diversity quotas; happened to be gay/bisexual/whatever
		Nuanced representation		not a full utopia; there are still issues; realistic but still very hopeful; more of it; different relationships; healthy relationships; healthy identities; healthy conversations; very beautiful; truthful; human; right to happy portrayal; more inclusive representation; move away from stereotypes; not only about coming out; we are on the way to good representation; feels genuine to the community; queer people deserve love stories; characters that are allowed to be diverse; allowed to struggle; subversion of tropes; complexity; radical move; revolution; less about the queer experience; no perfect person; not black and white; hint of grey; there is definitely bad representation; more realistic; honest
		Visibility		bi visibility could be a lot better; it definitely helps to use bisexual there; centres around queer characters; would love to see someone who doesn't feel comfortable with specific labels; more explicit use of the label bisexual; overrepresenting to achieve visibility; nice to see yourself and your experience; exploration of pansexuality; more pansexual characters; addressing bisexuality

		Plurality/multi-facetted identity		adds to complexity; not only distinguishing characteristic; not only personality trait; less about the queer experience; I would like to see more; parts of identity; no perfect person; not build it off stereotypes; not flat; doesn't have to capture the whole struggle; doesn't only talk about the struggles but good things too; diversity; intersectionality; not all straight white people; well thought out; has a backstory; personality; mental health; nothing is just black or white
	Heartstopper	Nick as a character	Identification	struggle with his sexuality I relate with; confusion; very relatable; taking am I gay quizzes; saw myself represented; identification; pressure; figuring himself out; is this okay; I felt seen; could identify with the feelings being transported; I liked that it represented how I perceived it myself; process of coming to terms with being bisexual; googling am I bisexual, am I gay?; that was me; I'm not alone; normal process; felt drawn to him; I also play rugby
			Characterisation	breaks the mould; has own biases; comes to terms with his sexuality; doesn't give into pressure; softer; not bro-y; not overly feminine; rugby; has all the girls falling for him; really sweet character; love Nick; very gentle; development; felt confident to share his sexuality; torn; struggling how to label his feelings; good kid; a lot of depth; less like a caricature; like a real person; growth journey
			I'm bi, actually	being with Charlie doesn't erase his sexuality; very relatable; maybe a bit too much at times; worth pointing out; important for him; bisexual part not really represented (lack of "opposite" sex love interest); I have felt that a lot; I have said that a lot; very valid; can seem weird or unnecessary; hard relate; I liked that he particularly says he's bisexual; very real; people were complaining that he said it so often
		General		fairytale; otherworldly; subversion of tropes; healthy; meet cute; complexity of queerness; plurality of identities; shift in representation; good representation; positive representation; depicted nicely in

				the series; a lot younger than me; just a normal story; identification; play with stereotypes; wove it into the story; express diversity on many levels; felt a bit like tokenism; doesn't feel very stereotypical; didn't like the description on Netflix; second season over the top; cliché; not realistic; felt real; better than other representations; how I wish it would have been; would have liked more exploration of pansexuality
		Audience		what I wouldn't have given as a child; important for younger people; didn't know it could apply to me when I was young; I wish I would have been able to see something like Heartstopper; I didn't have a lot of these shows growing up; speaks to different audiences; mature people that grew up queer; younger audiences discovering themselves; speaks to everyone; for kids to see this is how it can be; it wasn't represented at all when I was younger; would have had an impact when I was younger; aimed towards teenagers; teenage me would love it; for someone who isn't queer; for someone who hasn't processed it yet
Social constructivism	Real-life consequences	Personal		huge impact; personality forming; change the way I think; questioning gender identity because of lack of representation; media played a huge role because I only met other queer people at uni; get the message across to the general public; when I was younger it had a lot more impact; questioning everything; cycling through identities; portrayal of LGBTQ+ community could really impact those who are questioning; large impact; even subconsciously; felt more confident about myself; more in touch with myself; more authentic; someone like me on TV; stereotypes impact young queer people; portrayals of biphobia; other stories have caused harm; has definitely helped me create a story of myself that didn't make me feel bad about myself; didn't know who I was; didn't know bi existed; thought of it more as a sexual thing; couldn't see what it could be; misconception that it will turn kids gay; Heartstopper can tell

				you it's worth it; any kind of representation would have helped a lot; would have had an impact when I was younger; needed more time to figure out how I identify; loaded yes; media was accessible; exploration of my identity; control the media; positive and damaging media; Heartstopper opened my eyes and helped me realise; representation got me thinking about my sexuality; I looked for other outlets; contributed to me thinking about my sexuality and coming out; I found my identity early and before there was representation (counter argument); really valuable
			Normalisation/validation	makes it mainstream; helpful for young queer people to see themselves represented; straight teenagers to see it as normality; confirmation that I am valid too; supported me in accepting; people have at least heard of it; get people thinking about it; it's not a huge deal; nothing to feel guilty about; normal people; normal stuff; counteract political backlash; might help some people; love stories normalise being queer more than stories about oppression and hardships; counteract internalised biphobia; I could be as queer as I want to be; opened up queer community; bring us together; making it a norm; set a standard; movies are not the only thing that can heal us but they can contribute; normalise it being there; feel more secure; depicting a normal life; seeing it as normal; helped me realise it's okay; there is not only one way to be
		Kit Connor	Perceptions	stupid; (quite; really) sad; horrible; don't dig into very young people's private lives; should always be the person's decision in their own time; disturbs me emotionally; felt it in my gut; similar experiences; missed the point of the series; ironic; very internet thing to do; core experience of being bisexual; understand the impulse; not acceptable; disgusting; very important thing to happen; stunned; really angry; nobody should be pressured; everyone has their own pace; people assuming things; terrible; no one's business;

				horrible; understand that people want to know; takes away the chance from queer actors; it's private; shitty; what is wrong with people?; awful
			Queerbaiting accusation	shouldn't confuse queer baiting with actors playing a role; should be called out; separate him from his character; actor; his job is not to talk about his personal life; being queer vs acting queer; transposition to the real world; difficult word to use for real people; Kit Connor is not a storyline; Kit Connor is real; privatisation of characters and actors; questioned if he was fit for the role; acting; don't assume; his private life should have nothing to do with his role; takes away the chance from queer actors; real people can't queer bait

6.6 Full Transcript

Question:
Then, although we know each other a little bit, why don't we start with you telling me a bit bit about yourself?

Answer:
My name is [redacted]. I don't know, I'm 23 to be this week. And yeah, I dunno. That's kind of briefly about, I'm bisexual as well, so that is why... where my interest in the topic you're working on comes.

Q:
And what kind of films and TV series do you like?

A:
Oh, I am low key obsessed and I think I'm always watching something. It's very rare that I'm like... not watching something. I wouldn't say that I'm like consuming media, but I like to admire it. But generally I would say that I like arthouse movies a lot. I like thrillers, detectives... I have never been like, particularly into romantic movies or anything of that kind.
Very occasionally if I have a mood, but if I had like a regular evening, I would... I would never land on that option. But recently, this February, I don't know why, but I was having the urge of like, just watching romance movies, but I was like, I don't wanna watch straight romance movies. So I just went on Google and I started like, you know, googling, picking up all the best kind of gay trope series or movies.

So I made like a list of like 15 and I started watching one by one. And I found it so interesting because, I don't know, I have… it's pretty recently that I started picking movies or series that I'm watching based on like the representation factor. Like, so now in my life, I don't have too much time because of the thesis and everything. So that is why I cannot watch, even though I'm saying that I'm watching something all the time, I cannot watch it like all the time. I mean all the time. I mean, in a sense, like every day I can watch like 40 minutes of something, but not more. So I am really picky with what I'm, you know, dedicating my time to. So I don't want it to be like some background noise. I want it to be some nice piece of, you know, art, I could say.
And that is why I also feel like if I'm dedicating these 40 minutes and they're like valuable for me per day, I want to see something, that I can see myself, you know, like what, what, you know, speaks to me and stuff. So that's why it's kind of important for me that the gay trope would be there. I mean, it could be a lesbian, it could be gay, bisexual. Of course I would prefer a gay or a bisexual trope because, well it, it speaks to me more than a lesbian, but it's still fine.

Q:
Yeah. Then how did you find out about *Heartstopper*?

A:
Oh, it's really, I don't know, for me it has become very important, the series, for many different reasons. So I think the first time I watched it was like April 2022 or May 2022. It was the first season, I can't really remember when was it exactly released – [I: around that time.] Yeah. But it was like, the weirdest time in my life in that time because, so because I come from Ukraine, that was exactly around the time when the war started on the 24th of February.
That was when I moved to Poland. And like my life had totally crashed. I didn't know the language, I didn't know the people. I lived in a house of a very sweet couple, but still, you know, the room where I lived in, I'm eternally grateful to them for everything they did to me. But still the room where, where I lived it, it was, well, it was their life, you know, it was like the pictures of their families, the, their decorations. And even though, well it was the, the best I could get. Of course I totally do not complain, but I was feeling like, you know, like a stranger in that place. Like, you know, the room is kind of important for a person and because it, for me it is important. It should reflect me as a person. It, you know, representation is important and I think that in the room it's where it starts. Yeah, it should be showing me as a personality, but here it was someone else's life and I was kind of, I planted myself there. It was feeling really weird and I was feeling like, because it was because of war, I was reconsidering my like national identity and other parts of my identity a lot. I was feeling like I'm losing it all because I was speaking not my language all the time.
And it was for the first time for me, like such kind of experience, I was feeling like I'm losing myself and I don't know what am I turning into. And then, because all my media sphere has become war and death and all this horror, you know, I was feeling like my life was so miserable. But then I occasionally opened Netflix and I saw that there is like a new series called *Heartstopper*. I did not know anything about it before, but I just watched the trailer and I saw that there is like some gay trope.
And at first I was feeling like so, so wrong, like so guilty. I was like, how can I watch that and feel happy, how can you feel happy in these circumstances? But then I was like, I started watching it just, I don't know, I just

pressed the button and I felt so good because I felt like that was the part that has not been stolen from me. Like that part of my identity, I was, I was watching that and it was kind of bringing me back to, you know, to the time when it was still peaceful, to the time when like, well at the time I was not out to many people. I was out to like several of my close friends, but still I was in peace with my identity even though I was not out. I knew who I am and I was okay with that. And I feel like *Heartstopper* was the first kind of beam of light for me in this whole shit that was, I'm sorry, in this whole situation that was happening, it kind of brought me back to who I am and also helped me like stick to to to, yeah, to, to help me not get my identity shattered completely.
Even though I couldn't like, discuss it with a lot of people because while at that time my surrounding was not that gay, let's say and I mostly lost most of my friends back home, or they went around the world, it was kind of difficult. And while *Heartstopper* was not something they were up to discuss because there was many things happening, but still, again, coming back to the point, I feel like it has significantly influenced my life. At that time, helped me keep my brain kind of a little bit sane and well yeah, preserved that part of my identity, which I think I developed later on when I moved to Sweden.
In a sense that I, I thought I was like accepting myself, but I feel like now is when I accept myself actually, maybe I will have to reconsider that in some time again. Who knows?

Q:
Yeah. Can you talk me through your experience of watching it?

A:
Yeah. I binged it actually, well, I binged some part of it, but when I realised how different it is from most of like gay trope series, I was like, okay, there is just like, I don't remember how many episodes. Is there like 10 or [I: I think it's eight.] Eight, yeah. I was like, oh my God, it's just eight episodes. Like please don't, you know, in German there is this word for it: "fressen". So like when you don't really eat, but when you get it all in at the same time.
So I was like, don't "fressen" it, you know. So I think I binged like four, the first four episodes. And then I was like, no, no, no, stop, stop. I was like, no, one episode per day because let's prolong the experience.
Yeah. But I feel like it was still too short. I wanted it to be longer and I felt like it was so different in a sense that always, like, I feel like gay series and movies, they kind of contribute, they're important. I'm not taking it away from them, but I feel like they contribute to the feeling to victimisation of gay people themselves. You know, when I watch gay movies, I even though they are kind of created to, for me to relate with the pain of that that we experience, but at the same time, I feel like it is also institutionalising that pain, like in a sense that it is making, the experience of being gay, it makes it, it's like it must be painful. And I feel like *Heartstopper* is showing the other side of it, the way it can be differently because, well, I'm not gonna say that it was not painful for the main characters, I will not say that they were not living through some, you know, they didn't have their identities figured out, especially Nick. But still compared to most of the gay content like movie wise, I think it was less violent and I think it was the way I wish I had it. Yeah.

Q:
Did you engage with any other related content while you were watching it or after you watched it?

A:

Yeah, so I, as soon as I started watching it, I then went to the internet and started reading up on it and I figured that it was actually books first and then it was a series. I had no idea, but I was like, okay, that is cool because as it was just eight episodes, I felt like I wanted more and there was more in the sense of books. But then I was really scared to start reading the books because I didn't want, I knew that it's not the end of the story and I didn't want it spoiled.

And I also felt like, because my first experience and first encounter was in the series, I wanted to proceed with that first encounter in season two, you know. So I didn't want to kind of read the book on season two and then watch the movie because my first experience and perception was from the series and I found the series really well done, it's not like, mm, yeah, I felt like the book probably is better because I read the book on the first season, I wouldn't say I found it better than the series, it was really precise, you know, what they recreated in the Netflix show, it's almost sometimes line by line matching with what is in the, in the book.

Or in the comic, you know, you'd rather say. Yeah, but it's really nice to have that piece of text, you know, like paper-wise. Yeah, it's really nice. I also was hesitant on should I order it or should I not, I decided not to order it. So I have it like digital because I, again, I was not completely out, so I knew that book would like raise questions. But on my phone, you know, it's mine.

Q:

What do you think about the *Heartstopper* fandom and would you consider yourself a part of it?

A:

I would say that I do consider myself a part of it, but I'm not an active participant or something like that. Because, well, I think to like to be a fan, you don't really need to participate in the fandom I guess. But at the same time, so I think that most of the times when I'm like getting invested into some story, I had that as well with Harry Potter, with the Lord of the Rings, et cetera. I don't, I like to stick to the main plotline chosen by the creator, Alice Osman in this case.

And even though I know that the stories that the fans create as in, well, you know, some other tropes, possible continuations, they are really nice because I looked into some of them, but I kind of consciously choose not to because I really love to admire the main line at least until it is over. Because I still, I'm not proceeding with reading the books on what has not yet been released by Netflix because I want it to be like a new experience. I don't want to get some other kind of, how do you put it? I want to know the core line and maybe after that I would read some fan fiction on on the story. Because I feel like, you know, I feel like Nick and Charlie deserve their own story to be developed by the person who in the first place is their like mother, you know, who created them. And after that I would consider other plot lines possible.

Q:

Can you tell me about something that was particularly important to you in the series? A character or a scene?

A:

Yeah, I think this, the scene where Nick is talking to his mum because again, well, Charlie is gay, I'm bi and Nick is bi as well. So of course I could relate to him a little bit more. And also his mum is somehow similar to mine in a sense, like even visually. So that scene, it was like, so because I was watching it and I was expecting like a scandal to start or like tears and you know, he will run out of the house and none of that happened.

It, it happened like in the blink of an eye. It was, the scene is kind of short, but it just, you know, it happened and then they move on like next scene. I'm like, what? Like I couldn't under-, I had to pause because I couldn't comprehend like how did, like they not, did they not, I couldn't understand how did they not follow the main kind of, how it always develops, you know, the scandal and acceptance stage and then maybe she, the mother, would accept him and they would have a reunion and a talk and a tea, here none of that happened. It was like a, I think it was kind of regular, you know, like a, well it was not like any conversation, it was special of course with a particular emotionality happening, but still it was nothing groundbreaking, you know? Yeah. I feel like that is how I would like my mum to react.

Q:

Do you have a favourite character in the series?

A:

I think I like all of them. Well, I heard a lot of complaints from like people, you know, about that the series is too gay because almost every character is in some way queer, let's say. I, well, you know, I can understand if it was every series that was like that. Okay, maybe the criticism would make sense, but like, I'm sorry, like we, the queer representation in movies is, well, it has failed. I think because, well, again, coming back to the way the representation is working, it's one and the same trope being recreated all the time while there is another one, a gay person is a clown or like a funny, usually a guy with like very feminine and you know, it's a very straight way to see a gay person and like a token, you know, ally kind of thing. So I don’t know, I wouldn't buy that. So give us this series and, well, coming back to your question, they were so different and I feel like that is what I appreciate about them. And I also like that the queer lines for each of them are different based on the different experience they live through. And still, I mean, again, because I relate to Nick the most, I would say that he is my kind of favourite character. Maybe also because that is the way I kind of romanticise my possible partner as him. I wouldn't say that I can relate a lot with Charlie in the sense that I see myself because well, as personalities we are kind of different. But yeah, I, I think Nick would be the one.

Q:

What did you think about how the series dealt with the topic of bisexuality?

A:

To be honest, like even though, yes, again, I liked seeing myself represented as Nick, still, I feel like the bisexual part of him was not really represented to be honest because I mean, it's not, it is not a must for a bisexual person to have relations with a, for, let's say based on Nick, yeah, bisexual man to have relations with a woman. I never had relations with a woman. I'm still bisexual. Not like I had like romantic but not sexual. But still I feel like, you

know, if he never said he was bisexual you would have never known he was bisexual. And it's like a tricky part for me. Like I cannot, I cannot say concretely what would I like to see there because I think it is wrong to say what would I like to see there in that sense probably, because being bisexual does not require you to have experience with both men and women or other genders. You know, if you take it broad, broader, but at the same time, I don't know, I think maybe in that way I'm just thinking out loud. Yeah, maybe in that way he was represented well because the question is then if we speak about representation of a gay person, should we see a gay person kissing another gay person or can they just be a gay person, you know?

So I don't know, it's kind of a difficult question because I think, yeah, being represented as gay person does not necessarily mean that all your intimate moments must be put on screen. Probably because if we look at straight people and how they are represented, you know, we see that the person is straight, but we don't necessarily see every straight person in that movie having sex or like, any sex scene or even a kissing scene. We just know they're straight. So why do they, yeah, that's what I think, why can they have it and we cannot. So yeah, that's my, that's what I think. Yeah, so I think it was represented fine then. Okay. But it's a very nice question. I have not been thinking about it in that sense.

Q:

What do you think about Nick in the second season repeatedly saying "I'm bi, actually"?

A:

Well that is something I really related with because, again, as I said, I had like some friends back in Ukraine who know that I'm bi, but then again they are straight men. somehow for me it was like really non-standard, you know, gay male experience because stereotypically, you know, gay men are usually hanging out with girls, women. For me it was not always the case. And because both of my friends are like straight men, yes they were accepting me, but because I never had an experience, sexual, with a woman, while they were kind of jokingly but still kind of meaning it, they were treating me as gay and I always, every time they were making the joke, I had to say like, no, I'm actually bi. 'Actually, I'm bi' like literally word to word as Nick was saying. And they were like, yeah, yeah, but you have never had sex with a woman.

And I was like, hmm. Sometimes I was even thinking that, I had this thought, okay, maybe I have to like, hook up with a woman just to like tick a box, you know? And next time they say it I'm like, no, actually I had sex with a woman, you know? So now I can consider myself bi, you know? Yes, I do understand that sexuality is a spectrum. It's much more difficult to explain it to people who do not understand that. And even more interestingly, like out of those two friends of mine, well I'm not trying to like out anyone, you know, or tag anyone as gay, bi or whatever, but I kind of, because we are so close, you know, we spent like days, months, we lived together. I know that one of them has some, you know, queerness to him probably, but that's just what I suppose. And as I came out to him, he was like particularly curious and interested and blah blah blah. But every time I was supposing and telling him that maybe he like should give it a shot or like, mentally, I don't mean like sleeping with a man, but I mean mentally give yourself a chance of that opportunity to think 'what if I am'? He was like very, no, no, no, no, no. You know, like no, you know, kind of like Nick maybe in the first season when he was like trying to get away from that. It didn't last long though. But yeah. And I feel like the same reason why my straight friend was saying

no, no, you know, when I was supposing that he might be somewhere in the queer spectrum for the same reason I was saying ‘no I'm bi, I'm not gay’, you know, because maybe I was also scared to be gay inside.
I think until now I'm kind of thinking that yeah, maybe I'm gay because I didn't have that experience with a woman then, you know, since I moved to Sweden and I have never heard like, no, you're gay. I feel like no, I'm bi, you know, I still find women attractive. I still find, I still think I could have some relations with a woman even though sometimes I feel like because, well, I'm 23 to be, you know, and I feel like because I have so much more sexual experience and relationship experience with men than with women, I feel like maybe I will never have relations with a woman even if I wanted to because I was thinking even like in sexual life, I don't have that experience and I have that internal fear that it might be too late, you know? I mean, because I know like I have a lot of straight men, male friends here as well and well, you know, we discuss our sexual life and stuff. I tell them about mine, they tell me about theirs and I just listen about theirs and I'm just thinking like, would I, would I be able to, you know, satisfy the woman if I ever was with her because I just don't have that experience, you know? So sometimes I'm feeling like the lack of my experience and the fact that I'm more into men, you know, I'm being honest with myself, is also working as kind of an invisible wall for me to even try having anything with a woman. Because sometimes, yeah, there happened to be women who I really find interesting, you know, and I would love to you know, try dating with them or something. But then I'm like, no, I also want her to be happy. I want her to be satisfied in her sexual life and, well, I don't want to be a failure in that sense. Maybe she should rather find a straight man who has more experience and who knows how to do it for her. So yeah, I feel like sometimes I have more respect to women than men because I'm gay or what, I dunno. Yeah.

Q:
How do you feel about the use of the label bisexual specifically in the series?

A:
Hmm. Yeah. Well I feel like Nick is one of those people who fall, who, again I speculate, but who falls under the bisexual as in male and female or like men and women, less of a pansexual, more of a two gender thing. Because when he was having that dialogue with his mom, he kinda tried to, you know, give her some hope saying that, I can't remember how he exactly he said it, but it was like I can still have a girlfriend or like I can still like girls or something. So yeah, he didn't say anything about like non-binary people, et cetera. Maybe it also because he didn't want to load his mom with a lot of, you know, it's a dangerous situation. Like he's already being vulnerable and she's already kind of accepting him. I, I had the conversation with my mom once. I'm sorry that I'm like going away from that. [I:No, all good.] And well I was working for years trying to get their mind ready, you know, and at some point my mom said, well you know what, I think because we were watching some movie and there was like a gay trope, was like gay trope, male, gay trope. And she was like, you know, I think I can sympathise with gay people, because the gay men, they have to go through so much and they're not being accepted and they cannot make themselves love women.
And I'm like, oh my god, are we there? Like, this is the chance. And then she's like, but you know these bisexuals, it's like literally, they are literally showing off, like what is this? Like trying to experiment or like, I can understand when you have genetically something in your brain that doesn't allow you to, I don’t know, I'm sorry, but to have an erection like with a woman, okay, you can’t do anything about it, you know, it's a curse, as she said, but then

she's like, but bisexuals, you're a man and you can't be with a woman so why do you choose to be with a man? And I was like, so should now I come out to my mom not as bisexual but as gay, like what is this kind of choice I'm given? So I feel like maybe that is why he could have said 'I can also date girls' because if he told her more, like, non-binary people or gender fluid or anything else, it could be too much for her to kinda accept but maybe he just is into men and women. So I feel like, yeah, I think there are also pansexual characters. I don't remember who that is or not...

Q:
I don't know off the top of my head either.

A:
Yeah. But yeah, I didn't find it very problematic. Again, he, he is who he is, so yeah. But again, it's just a speculation on, I don't know who he really is into, well, clearly men because of Charlie but also he said girls. So yeah.

Q:
How do you feel about other representations of bisexuality in the media?

A:
You know, I'm trying to recall at least one case and I can't, well I feel like, many men, bisexual men, I can't recall any but bisexual women, yes, there's plenty of bisexual women, that's not bad, but it's also kind of a result of a male gaze because a bisexual woman is a double pleasure because you like get a straight trope, like a she with a guy and then you also get like a lesbian, you know? Well and men like seeing both, a woman sleeping with a man and a woman sleeping with a woman. So maybe that is why bisexual women are more often represented than bisexual men. On the other hand, gay men are also much, much more represented than lesbian women I feel like. But again, it is just like my subjective standpoint, I never made any kind of measurements. And also I feel like I'm noticing because I'm a man, I'm noticing more the men's queer tropes than women's.
Yeah, yeah. So I feel like the bisexuality is more represented for women. But again, I think it is not represented as bisexuality, it is just represented as she is like experimenting or like if you take any American like high school drama or university drama, there is always gonna be this fraternity and girls will be kissing girls and stuff. Not because maybe they're bisexual but, well because this movie was made by a straight American man who likes seeing women kissing and likes other guys seeing this like cheap kind of piece of movie where there is nothing new in terms of cinema, you know?
And it is just stuff for a guy to watch after, I don't know, work with a bottle of beer and some chips. That's, that's it. So I feel like that's not bisexual representation, the fact that a woman is kissing another woman, but still, you know, following these like uni jocks, it is not necessarily a bisexual representation but could be some weird porn fantasy of the director for other weird men watching that, I'm sorry for like saying that, but yeah.

Q:
How do you feel about the fact that you can't think of any male bisexual characters?

A:

Yeah, it's kind of sad every time. Like I think about bisexual characters, it's *Heartstopper*, that's a standard for, oh no, wait, wait *Young Royals*, no they're, I don't know if they're gay or bi.

[I: Simon is gay, Wille is unlabelled. He doesn't label his sexuality.] Yeah, that's what I think. So yeah, we don't know who is Wille, I think he doesn't know himself probably or didn't know until the current point in time in the timeline that we have just seen.

Yeah, I don't know, it is kind of weird because if we think that if, as I said I usually notice like men queer tropes and I didn't notice men bisexual tropes, maybe there is underrepresentation of them. I don't know. Yeah, because it's interesting because, again, in the popular kinda media it is that gay men are overrepresented, but I don't know, maybe it's because they, I think like, you know, for a straight man there is, that's also what one of my friends told me once that he likes that I'm gay because it's less competition for him like for the girls. And I was like, 'well I'm bi' and he was like, yeah, but you know what I mean, you know, so maybe depiction of gay people, a gay man, if it was something unacceptable back in the times it became acceptable. But again, in particular constraints to depict him as a feminine, you know, guy hanging out with other men under the umbrella of like, yeah, well, he exists, we can laugh about him because he's like a school clown always. Or like someone very feminine or like, you know, straight men love drag queens let's say. Yeah, for, well I don't want to like overgeneralise, but well straight men who I know love drag queens, yeah, they know it's often a man. Most often it's a man dressed as a woman and not just dressed as a woman but also kind of overemphasising some parts of a woman, you know? Yeah. Like extreme makeup, which a woman usually probably wouldn't wear in the street, you know? So a gay man is kind of fine because it's less of a threat for a straight man. Maybe that is why they are represented more than bisexual men because bisexual men can still take your woman. I don't know, maybe it's that, I have no idea why, why that is happening, but I suppose that could be the reason as well.

Q:

Can you think of any other stereotypes associated with bisexuality? You mentioned kind of like how women are represented as like just experimenting maybe. Is there anything else that you can think of?

A:

Yeah, like I heard often that like, we are cheaters and I was like damn, I have never cheated in my life. I mean it is just so... well and I, when I said that I did never cheat and they, I heard only that, well you were only dating men. And I was like, no, but still I never cheated. So basically they, they for some reason and women as well, like both men and women, they both think that you would, and that's another fear of mine, but okay, they both think that you would cheat and then I asked them like, why do you think that the probability of me cheating is higher than the probability of a straight man, let's say cheating because I can cheat with like literally any person in the world and you can cheat only with like 4 billion people. Is that the reason that I'm less safe to date than you are? And of course I know that this kind of trope of a bi guy cheating, it is popular, not in movies, haven't seen that in movies. Oh no wait, no, there is this *Grace and Frankie* series on Netflix about two women whose husbands when they're kind of elderly and the husbands get together and they kind of try to proceed with their life. So that is also, I don't know if I haven't, I have not really gotten deep into it, so I don't remember if these men are gay or they're

bi, but taking into consideration that they have like lived with these women through their whole life, maybe even if they identify as gay now probably they could be considered bi, I don't know.
But still in much of, in a lot on the internet, you know, there are like on Reddit, et cetera, there is plenty of these kind of stories of a man leaving a woman for another man. And also while I hadn't been on Grindr ever, and I registered there like two months ago and I knew that in Ukraine there used to be very many like men who have families and who have kids, but they still, you know, secretly kind of discreetly they find other men to sleep with. And I was always thinking that, well, that's because Ukraine is a conservative country. They cannot establish the family and, with a man you know or like, any kind of family they wish to establish because they don't have, they have one choice. And I thought that in Sweden it's not the case, but I came to Sweden and I'm scrolling through Grindr and there is a whole category called discreet, which is basically men who never post their face and who are searching for a sexual experience with other men and oftentimes they have families, et cetera.
So that is something I still am trying to understand in a sense. I'm not like judging them or whatever I, well I feel like it's wrong that, unless they're in open relationship in or in open marriage, I feel like it's wrong to lie to your partner. But I thought that in Sweden as a much more inclusive and equal country, this wouldn't be such a case. But I mean the category of these guys is so big. I recently saw, because there are often people who don't really want these discreet guys to text them. So I thought that, I saw like a bio of one guy saying, please no discreet guys, if you think you are discreet, please don't. It's your mom who is discreet about you not being gay. Like it's your mom who, who pretends that you're, she doesn't know you're gay.
So yeah, I mean maybe that's the case that like bi men can actually be in one relationship and then move to another one. But I mean anybody does that, like straight people also can change their partners. Yeah, straight people can also cheat. It's nothing bad. But I have often heard, I never proposed to these girls to date with them because they were just in my friend circle back home. But we were like, you know, drinking, playing some games and asking some questions like truth or dare, et cetera. So when they were asked like if they would date a bisexual guy, they were most often saying no. And when I asked them why, so I mean they don't have to, but I was just curious, they were saying that, well first he might cheat, second with a man, but still cheating with a man is better than with a woman because then it would, if he cheated with a woman, it would be like there is something in the woman that she doesn't have, while if he cheats with a man, it's kind of better because you know, it's not to compare her, a woman to him, a man, he has something she cannot offer, you know, but it's like a competition. Like what are you talking about people, are you in love or are you at the Olympics? Like really, I mean if he loves you, he will not cheat. If you love him, you will not cheat. You know, if everything with you is fine, no one is gonna cheat, you're gonna be happy. Yeah, I mean I'm not trying to say that if you have problems it's okay to cheat. It's not, but, but still we are people, we have our struggles and experiences. And the second thing they said was, so first he can cheat, second he's less of a man kind of because a straight man is like a, you know, strong like, because oftentimes like conservative societies see heteronormative relations as well, you know, heteronormative, where a man is a provider and a woman is like, you know, not a provider but like a caretaker of the family and yeah, and they want him to be kind of strong, but because they think he's bi, so he's like one of the feminine guys and he will not be able to protect her da da da. But you know, protect from what, like you get often attacked or like it's... why do we need, I don't know, it's so odd for me and maybe because I'm the only bi friend of theirs and I, you know, I don't look like a uni jock, I'm not bucked up or anything. Maybe that is why they were also thinking that, well, a gay

guy, you know, a stereotypical with nails, makeup and everything, even though they were actually thinking that I'm not wearing makeup and nails because I'm bi so I'm like less of a gay, but still less of a straight.
So I have like, the hands movement, you know, the kind of language tone I use like know this kind of gay slang and stuff. So it's still somehow gay but also somehow straight, like a combination of the two. So theoretically they would never consider dating a gay man. Theoretically they could consider dating a bi guy, but not because they wanted to, but because he could trick them into believing that he's straight. And even here in Sweden I was having, we were watching a movie called *God's Own Country*, which is also a gay movie about, boy I forgot, was it an Irish man or a British man, but a British man falling in love with a migrant from Romania while they're working on a farm. And we were talking about something and my friends here said that it is not okay if a bisexual guy doesn't tell his girlfriend that he's bisexual.
And I got like really, you know, I got thinking like, okay, on the one hand you have to be transparent in the relationship and you, it's not okay if you don't tell some things because, well you, you are trying to be one, kind of, because that's how I see relationship. I know that there is multiple kind of different kinds, but for me, I wouldn't like us to be like completely different individuals, you know, sharing a common space. I, I understand that well, I would love my partner to have of course their own sovereignty and stuff. But still I would love us as a couple to be like one and act as a one, as one because that's how I see relationship and I don't, I think that it's important to be transparent and honest and feel free to say whatever you feel in the first place. But then I don't know if a bisexual man should be blamed for not telling until some point of time that he's bi. And also women who were in the same circle when we were discussing this, they agreed with the first opinion that it's wrong that he did not say it.. Oh no wait, it was so it was not *God's Own Country*, it was, we were watching *Love Is Blind*. Oh, first American season and there was a bisexual guy. Oh yeah, that's the representation moment, there was a bisexual guy and he didn't tell her that he's bisexual, but even when he told her that, that he's bisexual, she was kind of trying to, she was super calm, she was trying to be accepting and everything, but he was super aggressive and he started like screaming at her, you know, it was kind of insecurity in him speaking while they immediately broke up.
I'm sorry for this spoiler, but like they didn't really make it until after like fourth episode or something. So yeah, there is a lot of challenges in being gay, bisexual, especially. I feel like, well especially because I experienced that and yeah. So again, summing up, first being cheater is the first kind of prejudice and the second is not disclosing that you're bi, which is not okay turns out for some people, maybe .

Q:
Talking about disclosing sexuality, do you know about Kit Connor who plays Nick coming out on Twitter?

A:
Well, I wouldn't say it was really a coming out, he was like kind of pulled out of the closet, you know? [I:Yes.]. So it was, it was really disgusting, like what the fans did to him.. But I think it is very important. I mean it, I'm very sorry for him, but I feel like he has done a significant, like what happened is a very important thing to happen. Even though I don't wish it for him or didn't wish it for him, you know, I wished he was bi in my head, I would never pull him, I would never do what these fans did, you know, and that is why I, I was saying that I'm also critical of the fan community as a whole.

Yeah, because I feel like the creator, like the characters the author is making, they're like her children, you know, or not like children, but it's like, well I'm currently writing my thesis and I have a special feeling towards this thesis because I understand that this is my craft, this is something that I'm creating, you know, and I have a special feeling towards it. And I think when fans, they are watching something, they tend to privatise these characters, and feel like they belong to them. And I also feel that because I want these characters to be part of my life somehow, sometimes I feel like I would love some of them to be my real-life friends, you know, and stuff. But I feel like it's kind of a problem because people who act in the movies are real people. And if characters created by Alice Oseman will not really suffer from getting outed by the fan community if they create some fan fiction, the characters in real life will. And I feel like it's a huge problem. And that's why I'm really sceptical about like fan culture in general in the modern world because I see how it can harm artists not only as actors but also as singers, et cetera, because people get so passionate that they try to own not just the character but the actor. And that is not because it's this particular actor, but because they see this actor only as this character. And I understand that for some character, for some actors it's because like Daniel Radcliffe, it's because, well he was raised with Harry Potter, you know, and I think he did a very great and hard job to kind of separate himself as Daniel Radcliffe from Harry Potter. And I think for many people he still didn't succeed. But for me he did, because I see a lot of other movies that he did nowadays. Like, I forgot the English name of the movie, but like the *Swiss Knife Man* or something.

But because for Kit Connor, this, I don't know if it was, I don't, it was not his first experience in the, in the movies because he was, I think, starring in movies since he was like a little kid. But it's his first major, his first big and it's horrible because he's just 18 years old. And you know, the saddest part is that finally Netflix made a proper age representation in the series because like look at *Élite*, I stopped watching *Élite* because like, what the hell is that? Like these are 27, 30-year-old people playing teenagers. Like, I don't look like that. I'm 23 now. I still look kind of 18, you know, or like 19. But how am I supposed to identify with someone in *Élite*? I'm not that rich, I don't like live that kind of lavish life. I don't have these, all kinds of gossip happening around. And then I can, I see that they're like teenagers who look like 30 year olds. And here they finally make it kind of proper representation. And the person being so young is getting outed and not just outed, but outed in front of the whole world. And the whole fan base and the fan base is huge. It's, it's a huge success for now, this series. So it was horrible. But I feel like while we as society, we progress through conflicts, through different mistakes, like you cannot make a progress until you see where there is a problem to fix.

So I just hope he's, he can feel good after this and I hope he realised that even though this happened to him, and I'm really sorry for him, but I hope he will realise that, that this happened to him has made an even bigger contribution to the gay community. And not only, but at least also to the ally community, than even the whole series itself. Because if the series was something imagined for us, you know, we kind of know that these are characters at the same time. The Kit Connor guy is real. Yeah. And it's not him playing a bisexual man. He is a bisexual man. So we've had real-life consequences on his life. So I feel like that little moment for us as fans, is a huge moment for him in his life and an even bigger moment for the whole, you know, industry because that is something you can refer to in the future when fans are getting crazy again. So yeah, I hope he's just feeling like nice now or like not that bad, but I saw that and I was like, that's what I'm talking about when, when I'm talking about how, how crazy fans can get. Yeah, yeah. And that's the point. They didn't get the point of the series. It

means those who were doing that, they didn't really get it. They have seen him as a piece to, you know, as property to privatise, as entertainment. They didn't see it as a lesson. So I hope they see it now.

Q:
Speaking of real-life consequences, how do you feel about media representation and your own identity?

A:
As a whole identity? Like all of the aspects of it?

Q:
Yeah, or bisexuality specifically. Whatever you want to share.

A:
I feel like I referred to the movie *God's Own Country*. I feel like it was very important for me because that was one of the movies which really hit the spot with like several of my major kind of identities, parts. I, again, I don't think that like my particular identity and the combination of my, you know, little identity parts should be, must be represented in every piece of media because that would be, I told that one of my favourite genres is art house. And I love it because it's the genre, not so much for representation, but for the art itself. So I feel like movies should stay being, should stick to being art. And I feel like sometimes what Netflix, and not only Netflix, but also Disney is trying to do is this kind of, you know, artificial representation where they, you know, or like… okay coming a little bit away from the sexuality because now Disney is reshooting a lot of movies, and turning *like The Little Mermaid* into Black Little Mermaid or there was this movie about Cleopatra, you know, which were really controversial. I have a feeling that it is a wrong approach to representation because not only it creates a lot of negativity around the topic and also makes those people who were already racist even more racist. So it's very counterproductive and I feel like the stories of actual people of colour and there is plenty of these stories to be told, they're not being told. So what's happening, basically Western media and Western stories are being kind of remade as if they're Western.
Well, they still stay Western stories just with Black people in them. But you know, we still don't know any authentic stories of Black people. Okay. I will not say any because there is a big chunk of, well Black stories being told in the US and I appreciate that and I watch these like movies and series to support them. But I feel like I, I will never watch something that was done for the sake of representation. And that is what I also think about the representation. It's just difficult to operate the terms because on the one hand, what I want media to be is also kind of representation, but I don't want it to be done as a representation. So I would like them to represent bisexual people, pansexual people, straight gay, lesbian people, trans people, but not with intention to represent them. Because most straight people are never placed in these movies to be represented. They're just there because they, they have the right to be there. I have the right to be there only when they intentionally want to put me there. I'm seen as a plot line. I'm not a plot line, you know, my life is not less of a, is not less worthy than straight people's lives.
And also like, oh, I, I recently read this comment basically saying, it was not a comment, it was a speech. I don't remember the name of whose speech it was, but some director was getting an award and he was, he said that I

was asked why did I make a movie? Like why did I make a gay movie? And it was a love story. And he was like, he was asking why did, why? People ask me why did I make a gay movie? And he's like ‘it’s not a gay movie, it's a love movie. Like it's a romance movie.’ That is what I want. I don't want a movie to be a gay movie. And I feel like I also get it internalised because again, I, as I started our conversation, I was searching for movies with gay representation. Why do I need to search movies with gay representation? Why can't I just see the movie and see that I'm naturally there, you know, I, yeah, that's, I belong there. Not because someone placed me there intentionally, but because I just happen to be real, you know?

Q:
Do you think that media representations have had an impact on how you feel about your identity as bisexual?

A:
Yeah, I think so. And again, coming back to what we just discussed, I feel like to change some idea, which has been very kind of internalised and institutionalised because straightness on screen has been a standard. So I feel like this kind of a revolution, you know, or this kind of a very radical move to representation or even this kind of like what we now discuss as a fake representation should have happened too, because you could kind of try to change the standard slowly, but I don't think it would work. Or you can do it very radically. You know, you can take white, you can change it to black and then start decreasing, decreasing to get to the grey, let's say. I mean it's just, I couldn't come find a better comparison, but I feel like we needed this kind of radical representation that Netflix did.
I'm now criticising Netflix, but I also would love to say that I acknowledge that they did a significant work because by maybe over-representing sometimes they make these people who they overrepresent visible, you know, they're like, no, we are here. You know, it's a statement more than a piece of art, as I said. But I feel like at some point for it to stop being a statement, I don't want to be a statement. It is important to start going to making it a norm, you know? So that's, could you repeat your question?

Q:
Yeah. Do you think that media representations have had an impact on how you feel about your identity?

A:
Yeah, so that is why I feel, so I remember when I, I didn't know who I am and I, again, because I was growing up in a relatively conservative environment, I didn't know that bisexual people exist. I got to know that gay people exist from porn, which was a sad experience because also I was raised in a pretty religious family. Not like dramatically religious, but well, you know, going to church every Sunday as a child, et cetera.
So I thought, I was sure that I can be gay. I didn't know that bi existed. I knew that you can love a woman and love a man and I didn't really think about it in sense of love, but because I discovered it from porn, I didn't think about it as a romantic thing, but more like a sexual thing. And I remember going from school when I was like in grade six or seven, so I was like 15 or yeah, going home and just like, no, I was maybe even 14, I was going home and because I was, you know, raised in a religious family, I was very religious, until the point in my life I was praying every day going home for God to like make me like normal, like straight not gay. And I was hating myself.

And that is also because I didn't see that kind of representation because I couldn't see what can it be. It was just like, you know, sex. And I was like, how, like how can it be like, you know, I could see love stories on the screen, but it was like Titanic, you know, straight. It was all straight stories. And then I saw like gay porn being the other option. I understood that, well this is something I like, but I didn't know that there is the romantic dimension to it. And I think that it's very important that the movies have introduced this kind of romantic dimension to it, especially movies like *Heartstopper* because that is a healthy kind of relationship. Healthy, not in a sense that they don't have conflicts. They do and they have pretty serious conflicts with problems. Yeah, especially like with Charlie having the, I don't yet understand how to like describe it because they haven't yet named it, but it's some kind of an eating disorder or a, yeah, it's pretty serious. But it's not like they, it's not like they have problems because they're gay and they cannot find a way to their romantic relations. Their romantic relations seem to be fine, but they have challenges just like other people could have.

And I'm really, I would be really happy if the general cinema industries would move in the direction where I hope that *Heartstopper* will set a standard to depict this kind of relationship. Because I really would love my kids if I ever have some, or even if I don't, generally any kids, to see that yes, this is how it can be. You can love and be loved. Also, what I like that for two seasons, they haven't showed even one sex scene, they can, we know that they kind of had it in France, maybe, like they were in bed, but again we did not see anything happening. So I love that for two seasons they haven't show even one sex scene, just kisses and everything. And that is why that is like the answer I always give to people who say that like kids are not supposed to see gays in the movies because it'll turn them gay. Like what? Okay, show them the straight movie afterwards, make them straight again. Like this is, this is hilariously ridiculous. And I think *Heartstopper* is good because it can also be shown to kids not because it has kind of right gaze. No gaze as in gaze. Yeah. Yeah. But because it's kids-appropriate, you know, it doesn't have violence, it doesn't have sex, intercourse, sexual intercourse, et cetera, it has love in it. So why not show kids love, you know?

Q:
How do you feel about the LGBTQ+ community?

A:
In general? It's great.. Yeah. I feel like it has a lot of problems, especially the gay part of it. I feel like we are also like, somehow people tend to create groups and like tribalised or you know, get the typification of something. I feel like it is also natural for us, but I feel like sometimes it is really unnecessary or sometimes it's getting too much as in like, oh you're gay so da da da, you know it, so, so you will do that, that that and that again, like gay is just part of my personality. It's not my whole being, I'm so much more than being bisexual, you know, it definitely influences my, the choices I make, my life views even my political views. But again, it influences my political views because my identity is threatened. Not because being gay is political. Being gay is not an ideology. LGBT is not an ideology. You know, like this is the stupidest argument I have heard in my life. How can it be ideology? It's not, I mean it's not a particular political order we are trying to set. It's a fucking life we're trying to live. That's all like, so, okay. Straightness is then also ideology? Like no. And within the LGBTQ+ community, I feel like we have a lot of problems with discrimination as well.

And I feel like I am happy to experience life in the Swedish LGBTQ community, because in Ukraine I have never had a healthy relationship. And while I also played a part in why it was not healthy. So I'm not just like blaming my partners, but because you cannot feel free and at peace with yourself, you cannot feel free and at peace in your relationship, you people like those gay people I used to date in Ukraine, they and me as well, we are very traumatised in a sense. I remember my first boyfriend, I couldn't walk in the city, like we were walking in the city centre as as weird kind of friends because me and my best friends, we can be walking in the city centre and I'm not scared to like, you know, hug them or like touch them even or anything. But with my first boyfriend, we were walking like strangers who just happened to walk nearby. I couldn't hold his hand until we went into like the forest in the city centre, like a huge park, to hold hands because I was scared that we will be seen. And I come from like a really liberal town. So now if I was walking hands holding, maybe nothing serious would happen. Maybe it also could have happened. But in my head, the idea that something will happen was enough for me to not do that. And I feel like that fear, it is not something that allows you to establish these kind of healthy relationships as they show in *Heartstopper*. And I think *Heartstopper* is something that allows you to regain agency over your own body, being, choices you make otherwise where would, how would I know that I actually can do that? Because my society tells me no, but *Heartstopper* can tell you yes, yes you can get beaten, you know, yes you can face other problems, but I think it's kind of worth it. Like why would I refuse? And then within the LGBTQ community, the problem is again, coming back, many people, we are all different, many people are going through different stages of acceptance of their identity and, and yeah, well in gay community, the biggest problem and the reason why I have registered for the dating apps only this summer, literally half a year ago, just, oh no, nine months ago. And for Grindr I registered just two months ago, because I have always seen, I remember in Ukraine I, I found a telegram chat because, well again, because everything is so closed, people often use telegram where they have like secret channels. I went on there and there was like the community of the Lviv gays. So the town where I come from, gays and basically the messages they were sending, there was like a list of five numbers with slash in between. And I was like, what? Like what are these numbers? What is it like geo location or what? Only then I figured that the numbers was your weight, your dick size, your waist size, you are like, I don’t know how muscular you are and the number is signifying how muscular you are. I was feeling like I don't want to be gay anymore. I was feeling like I want to be straight, not because I'm being bullied as a gay, but because the gays are really scary. I was feeling like it's a meat market. Like especially in the gay community. Gay as in, yeah, gay, gay. I don't want to be seen as five numbers separated by a slash. And this is not something that, you know, straight movies have given us. It's something we have developed ourselves, and now see as a norm. Why do we see as a norm to, I never encountered that, but I know that these situations happened to some of my friends when they went on a date and they were rejected as soon as they took their clothes off. I mean, you don't have to have sex in this situation. Of course you, you always choose, but you don't have to be like, so the guy just left. So my friend got undressed and the guy who he was like about to hook up with just without saying anything, he just left closing the door. Like how do you think that person would feel? Yeah, like you have been bullied your whole life. You have been feeling misrepresented, you have been feeling marginalised your whole life. And now you act like that to a person who has been going through the same experience. This kind of level of inconsideration and ignorance and egoism is just horrifying me. And that is why I'm really critical of the gay community. I have not heard about similar things in the lesbian community because while some of my lesbian friends kind of keep me updated how it's happening there, well there is this stereotype that, you know, lesbians, they can immediately fall in love. You know, it takes

for them just like two words and now they can get in committed relationship, for gays it's the opposite. Like I have the, I had the fear that I will never be able to get married because there is literally, well so little, I will say gay men who want to have a family. And then when you have a family, you see like, I know a gay couple of a Ukrainian man and a Polish man living here, my friends who live together and I see them both on dating apps. So they're kind of in an open relationship. And again, I don't judge that, but it's not what I want for myself. So I want to see the representation in real life as well. Not only in the movies and I feel like our own community does not kind of create some boundaries, and institutionalises this kind of hookup culture, which is fine. I also enjoy it. But you know, I have this feeling after every hookup, I have this feeling that, you know, he leaves and I'm like, oh.
It's like, okay, so now we move on with our life, you know,. And sometimes you talk to that person and they're so interesting, you know, they're such a nice human and they're smart, they're funny, you know, I have the feeling that, okay, I would love to give it a shot as in a relationship. They just don't look for that. Totally valid. But you know, the question is, are they not looking for that because they really don't want it or are they not looking for that just because there is this hookup culture and, and then you grow into an old man and then you are, also, well I feel like we are so intolerant.
Mm. Like also if you are literally on Grindr, people write like, no like grandpas or like no old men, blah blah blah, I understand these are your sexual preferences, blah blah blah.
But still, you know, we argue that we need equality, but yeah, when it comes to our own community, we are so not tolerant and so kind of, all kinds of things. And also there is bisexual discrimination in the gay community because you know, you're bi like how do I know that you'll not cheat? This is crazy. Like maybe this is not a problem with sexual orientation. Maybe that's just being a human, maybe being a human means being problematic. Maybe being a human means having all these problems. But then I'm also a human. Why do I, why do I see this as a problematic, why do I see this as discrimination?
Yeah. So that's the main problems I think, the fact that in the gay community we see each other as piece of meat to also, my god, no, there is more, being a bottom is a shame. Being a top is like I, I was having a hookup with a guy. I will not be specifying like, hmm. And well he said clearly he's a top. I was like, okay, I'm verse. Like I could do both, it's fine. But he was like this kind of top that like he didn't want me to see his ass. Like not even, I'm not saying, you know, do more but even see. So I was like later after when I was going home in the train, I was like just wondering where does it come from? Like wait, where does it stem from? You know, because okay, I understand that the penetration part might be something you don't want. Okay, maybe even touch. But seeing, like this is some internalised fear that if a man sees your, you know, it's so complicated. And I feel like we are so traumatised and I feel like movies is not the only thing that can heal us. I think it's a lot of work each of us has to has to work on themselves. And also on that community because every time I encounter something like that I'm trying to, you know, I wouldn't say educate people, but to pinpoint it to them that you know, this is human and that is human and that is human and you don't necessarily need to want to sleep with them or want to build a life with them. But you have to, maybe not even have to respect them, but you cannot disrespect them. Yeah. So yeah, being a bottom is not something very respected in the gay community. Or also I feel like things like dating apps, Grindr, et cetera, they release these statistics every year on how many tops are in which country, how many bottoms are in each country. Yeah. And I feel like, and then there is like a whole, if you read the comment section under that post of Grindr where they publish their kind of statistics of the year, people are literally like, it's a power play happening there. So the countries with most tops are like the superior countries. Countries with most bottoms

are the inferior countries. And then countries with most bottoms very often are Asian countries. So also some racism comes into play and, or I remember I registered on Grindr and the first guy whose post I opened and I read his bio, it was in Swedish and it was written like, I only want young Asians. I read that and I was like, damn, wow. If that's a preference and not like some internalised racism, I don't know, I don't know stuff about this world anymore. So we have a lot of problems and I don't think movies even as good as Heartstopper can totally heal them. But I'm pretty sure that movies like *Heartstopper* contribute to this, to resolution of the this big, big, big problem we live through. Which can be a great experience, but you have to work even harder to make it a great experience.

Q:
Do you feel like you belong in the queer community?

A:
Sometimes yes. Sometimes no. When I talk to my friends who are queer whom I have a lot of, I do feel like I belong. I feel like I am so free with them that I have never been so free even in the way I can speak. So I'm not yet out to my parents, they know, but like they kind of try to get it out of me. But I got so used to them not knowing that I just don't want to make that step and have this like weeks or maybe a month of weirdness because, even though underneath they know when you put it on the table, they still have the like hope that it's not what they suppose it is. You know, I mean it's kind of natural. I understand where it comes from from their environment they live in and stuff. So I don't blame them for that. I know that they love me unconditionally. And my mom multiple times told me that [name redacted], you know that I love you and if you want to talk to me about anything you can tell me, don't tell your dad, tell me and da da da. And I'm like, yeah. And then she calls me and she tells, like we talk with her about everything. Like we are like pals, we are friends, you know, we have very similar interests. Generally we are like two drops of the water. But she once called me and she was like, hmm, do you, you know, [name redacted], like I was cooking and she was like, you know, we would, me and you, we are like so close and open, we talk about everything but the only thing we never talk about is like your romantic life and relationship. And I was like… And she asked me like, so you know, can we like talk about that? And I'm like, yeah, we can be talking about that more. You know, I just didn't know, know what to answer. But I know that she knows, I know that she tries to get it from me, but I know that it's difficult.
Yeah. But sorry, I again went away from your question.

Q:
It’s okay. The question was, do you feel like you belong in the queer community?

A:
Yeah, so with my parents still, I try to filter the language I use, so I got used so much to speaking here in a particular way. And yeah, in some places I still have to limit that. Or like now my childhood friend came to visit, she's a a daughter of my mom's best friend. Even though I know she's super liberal, super leftwing and she's very accepting, she might come visit me. We have met like yesterday and she came for like several days with her

boyfriend. But I know that she might come visit me so I have to take off my gay flag in my room so that she didn't see that. And the act of taking that flag feels so weird. It's like my, again, I started from the room, it's very important for me because it's like, it's me on the walls basically. And me taking that flag and hiding it in the bag is like who you lie to, her or do you lie to yourself? Like why do you want to be seen that way? Why are you scared that she will even though I know if I ask her, do not tell your mom because she'll tell my mom immediately. I know that she wouldn't tell because, well, she understands the problematic of the topic and what is on stakes. I don't know, but I don't want to take chances, you know? Yeah. And it feels so bad. It feels so bad.
Yeah. And sorry, again, about queer community. I feel like I belong because of that sometimes because I can be more open. But then again when we come back to the dating part, especially sometimes I wish I was a woman. Sometimes I wish I was a lesbian woman, again, don't think that I'm devaluing any challenges lesbian women are going through. But I feel like I just want, you know, to, to be loved. I don't want to just like have sex, you know? I know that there are like lesbian women have their own challenges, not trying to devalue. But I feel just because I experienced so much of like dating men, sometimes like, give me a break. You know? I, yeah you, sometimes you want what you don't have. It does not necessarily make it better your situation. But yeah, I feel like the problem of being gay is not limited to toxic straight people existing in the world, but also toxic gay people existing. We have to deal with them. Don't know how. Yeah. Well with straight people we know how to deal with. But with gay people. Complicated.

Q:
Is there anything else that you want to share on the topic?

A:
I just, I just want to emphasise the point I made before that series, like *Heartstopper* are so important because of the particular stance they take on being queer. Not only bisexual, even though Charlie is gay and Charlie is gay and Nick is bisexual and they're kind of main characters. But still, I feel like it tries to cover most of the spectrum. And I feel like it's so important that they made, that they framed it in the way that it is kids friendly because that is the time when I suffered most. And that is the time I feel that I want the next generations to start their, to not start the healing journey, but to never have that healing journey. So I want their journey to just be, to have, they will have their own problems, they will have their own challenges and that's totally fine. It's great to have challenges because it makes you grow as a person. But I don't want them to grow into the meat market we have in the gay community. I want them to grow into something happy and bright.