

# **STILL COMING-OF-AGE: THE STORIES WE NEED(ED)**

**A COHORT-BASED STUDY OF QUEER VIEWERSHIP AND  
ENGAGEMENT WITH COMING-OF-AGE SERIES**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### **To my parents and family**

This thesis is the result of a year of academic work and years of personal exploration, but it is also, perhaps unexpectedly, a small act of visibility.

There is something paradoxical about the concept of "coming out", as if one must announce something that has likely been obvious for a very long time. I never felt shame, and I never feared your reactions. In truth, I always found the idea of coming out slightly absurd, if not outdated. And yet, there's something about this moment, this space between the personal and the political, that makes it feel worth doing. Not because you probably didn't know. But because sometimes, saying it still matters.

So here it is: I am gay.

I say this with the same clarity and calm as I might say I'm right-handed or that I have blue eyes. And I say it with a quiet kind of pride, one that's rooted not in spectacle, but in the comfort of being fully myself.

This thesis, focused on the importance of queer coming-of-age series, is not only academic. It's deeply personal. In writing it, I've spoken with others about the role that media plays in how we understand who we are as queer people. I've explored new series, characters and pioneers that played a huge role in the queer representation across the years. And I've come to understand, more than ever, why these stories matter, not just for young people, but for all of us navigating a world that still, in so many ways, makes queerness feel optional, strange, or conditional.

I also write this in a time where political winds seem to be shifting. The dismantling of DEI policies, the resurgence of anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric, and the normalization of hate under the guise of policy make it impossible to pretend that visibility is no longer necessary. I am lucky. I have education, support, and safety. But not everyone does. And so, for the queer kid who won't read this thesis but who might someday benefit from the ripple effects of representation, I write this for them too.

I'm not angry. I'm not making a statement out of defiance. I simply want to take up space. Fully. Authentically. With love. With curiosity. With all the tenderness I wish this world extended to everyone like me.

Thank you for reading. And thank you, always, for supporting me.

## ABSTRACT

This study explores how queer coming-of-age (QCOA) series are consumed and interpreted by queer male viewers across three cohorts in Flanders. Although QCOA narratives are often assumed to be primarily relevant to youth audiences, this study reveals their broader emotional resonance across different ages. Drawing on queer theory, television studies, and life course research, fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with queer men aged 18 to 67, grouped into three cohorts: the Pre-Mainstream Cohort (PMC), the Early Queer Normalization Cohort (EQNC), and the Queer Media Explosion Cohort (QMEC). Participants reflected on their engagement with a selection of QCOA series, including *Heartstopper*, *wtFOCK*, *SKAM*, *Young Royals*, and *Love, Victor*. Using constructivist grounded theory, the study analyzed how participants related to these narratives, focusing on sexual identity development, the distinction between recognition and identification, and the concept of QCOA content as an emotional proxy. Findings show that while some participants encountered more accessible and affirming queer media, this visibility did not always translate into emotional resonance. In contrast, others often used QCOA narratives retrospectively, to reimagine or process an adolescence lacking in affirmation. Across all cohorts, participants did not passively absorb representation but actively negotiated its meaning, often projecting their own memories, desires, or unresolved feelings as an emotional proxy. Rather than offering universal mirrors, QCOA series functioned as emotionally flexible cultural texts, enabling queer viewers to navigate identity, reflect on past experiences, and imagine alternative or reparative trajectories across different points in their lives.

## ABSTRACT NL

Deze studie onderzoekt hoe queer coming-of-age (QCOA) series worden geconsumeerd en geïnterpreteerd door queer mannelijke kijkers uit drie cohorten in Vlaanderen. Hoewel QCOA verhalen vaak als relevant voor jongeren worden beschouwd, toont dit onderzoek aan dat ze emotioneel betekenisvol zijn voor verschillende leeftijden. Vanuit een theoretisch kader gebaseerd op queer theory, televisiestudies en life course onderzoek, werden veertien diepte-interviews afgenomen met queer mannen tussen 18 en 67 jaar. De deelnemers werden ingedeeld in drie cohorten: de Pre-Mainstream Cohort (PMC), de Early Queer Normalization Cohort (EQNC) en de Queer Media Explosion Cohort (QMEC). Ze reflecteerden op hun ervaringen met een selectie van QCOA series, waaronder *Heartstopper*, *wtFOCK*, *SKAM*, *Young Royals* en *Love, Victor*. Aan de hand van constructivistische grounded theory werd geanalyseerd hoe zij zich verhouden tot deze series, met bijzondere aandacht voor seksuele identiteitsontwikkeling, het onderscheid tussen herkenning en identificatie, en het gebruik van QCOA series als een emotionele proxy. De bevindingen tonen aan dat hoewel sommige deelnemers toegang hadden tot meer toegankelijke queer media, deze zichtbaarheid niet altijd leidde tot emotionele resonantie. Anderen gebruikten QCOA series eerder retrospectief, om hun adolescentie te herdenken of te verwerken. Over de cohorten heen absorbeerden deelnemers representatie niet passief, maar gaven er actief betekenis aan, waarbij ze eigen herinneringen, verlangens of onverwerkte gevoelens projecteerden. QCOA series functioneren zo niet als universele spiegels, maar als emotioneel flexibele culturele teksten die queer kijkers in staat stellen hun identiteit te verkennen, op het verleden te reflecteren en alternatieve trajecten te verbeelden.

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## INTRODUCTION

Bert (63y, PMC): “I hope society remains open to queer representation, but I’m worried about the impact of the right-wing and authoritarian regimes. Sadly, it feels like we’re entering another period of less or wrong representation, and we’ll all need to think carefully about how to respond.”

Globally, progressive media representation remains closely linked to political developments. This became especially clear in early 2025 when U.S. President Donald Trump proposed dismantling all federal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, including dismissing staff involved in such programs, a move that sparked international concern (Bouma & Bouma, 2025; Demeulemeester, 2025). In Belgium, political and business leaders reaffirmed their commitment to diversity in response (DPG Media Privacy Gate, 2025a; DPG Media Privacy Gate, 2025b). Yet, the fact that a global leader openly opposed diversity frameworks highlights the precariousness of progress toward minority inclusion. Such policy shifts carry cultural weight, as the withdrawal of institutional support for inclusion can shape how queer identities are perceived in society and limit the diverse representation (DPG Media Privacy Gate, 2025c).

For queer<sup>1</sup> youth, traditional media remains a critical source for identity formation, particularly for those who lack access to real-life role models or comprehensive information (Dhoest & Van Ouytsel, 2022; McInroy & Craig, 2016; Pym & Cover, 2023). Media serves as a tool for sexual socialization, playing a significant role in shaping how queer youth understand and navigate their own sexuality (Thomson, 2021). This is evident in both traditional platforms, such as television and film, and newer forms like social media, which collectively shape perceptions and self-conceptions of queer identities (Dhoest & Van

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, *queer* is used as an umbrella term to refer primarily to non-heterosexual identities, that is, sexual identities that fall outside of heteronormative frameworks. The term also acknowledges fluidity and the socially constructed nature of sexual identity, while resisting fixed categorization (Greteman & Stiegler, 2018; Thomson, 2021). This study focuses specifically on queer men. Although the representation of queer men in mainstream coming-of-age television has long been limited and shaped by stereotypes, it has been comparatively more visible than that of other queer identities, such as lesbian, transgender, or nonbinary individuals. In recent years, however, this representation of queer men has become more frequent and multifaceted, reflecting broader shifts toward inclusivity in media. This relative visibility provides a coherent lens for comparison across different cohorts (Dhoest & Van Ouytsel, 2022; Dhaenens & De Smet, 2024; Monaghan, 2017).

Ouytsel, 2022; Fisher et al., 2007; Hernández-Pérez & Sánchez-Soriano, 2023; McInroy & Craig, 2016). Teen television has emerged as a pivotal medium for identity exploration, particularly for emerging adults aged 18–25 who are navigating their own identity development (Dhaenens et al., 2022; Dhaenens & De Smet, 2024; Meyer & Wood, 2013; Van Damme & Van Bauwel, 2012). Television series such as *Glee*, *Dawson's Creek*, and more recent productions like the *SKAM* franchise provide discursive resources for identity formation, frequently portraying same-sex relationships as supportive and functional, thereby countering historically pathologizing or deviant representations (Dhaenens, 2012; Dhaenens et al., 2022; Meyer & Wood, 2013). Television also plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural environment in which teenagers form their identities. American television shows, in particular, provide teenagers with interpretive tools to navigate their realities, for instance by offering frameworks for handling friendships, romance, or coming out (Meyer & Wood, 2013; Monaghan, 2017; Van Damme & Van Bauwel, 2012). However, young audiences do not absorb these narratives passively; they actively negotiate media messages in relation to insights from peers, parents, and school, drawing selectively on what feels meaningful or applicable to their own lives (Cavalcante et al., 2017; Monaghan, 2020; Pym & Cover, 2023; Van Damme & Van Bauwel, 2012).

Representations of queer men in media have undergone significant shifts over the past several decades, particularly in relation to visibility, narrative framing, and modes of distribution. In earlier decades, particularly prior to the rise of digital platforms, queer visibility was largely confined to scripted fiction on television and in film, where portrayals were often shaped by stereotyping, marginalization, or narrative tragedy (Monaghan, 2017; Dhaenens & De Smet, 2024). During this period, audiences relied almost entirely on mediated, fictional representations for any form of queer visibility, even if those representations were limited. In contrast, the contemporary media landscape offers a much broader spectrum of representation, not only through more nuanced fictional portrayals but also through non-fictional, user-generated content. The rise of social media platforms has enabled queer individuals to share their personal stories directly, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and offering more diverse, authentic, and intersectional narratives. Consumers have, in many ways, become producers, reclaiming representational space by documenting and circulating their own experiences (Cavalcante et al., 2017; Cover & Milne,

2023; Siebler, 2016). While a more detailed analysis of these representational developments is provided in the section on *queer representation*, it is important to note here that the coming-of-age genre<sup>2</sup>, both in traditional and digital formats, has become a key site for exploring the intersection of identity, sexuality, and adolescence (Monaghan, 2017; Dhaenens & De Smet, 2024).

The coming-of-age narrative<sup>3</sup>, rooted in the literary tradition of the Bildungsroman, typically follows a protagonist's journey from childhood to adulthood, marked by personal growth and positioning of the self within a social context (Monaghan, 2017; Wasserbauer, 2021). For young queer individuals, this process is often intertwined with coming to terms with their sexual and gender identities, navigating both the positive and negative aspects of these experiences, and articulating them for the first time with friends and/or family (Wasserbauer, 2021). However, it is essential to distinguish coming out and coming-of-age. While coming out addresses the negotiation of social boundaries around sexuality, coming-of-age is broader, focusing on maturity and the transition to adulthood. Not all characters who come out undergo a coming-of-age journey, and vice versa (Monaghan, 2017).

In examining how viewers consume coming-of-age television shows, it is important to note that these stories not only resonate with younger audiences but also generate significant engagement among older generations<sup>4</sup>. This contrasts with the trend in literature, where younger audiences are a popular target group and older communities are mostly overlooked (Boxer, 1997; Tester, 2017). This is particularly relevant in the case of queer coming-of-age (QCOA) series, which often depict universal themes of identity, self-discovery, and acceptance. For example, series like *Heartstopper* have gained global popularity not only among teenagers but also among adults, including those who may have

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<sup>2</sup> The term *coming-of-age genre* refers to a broader category of media works that explore themes of identity formation, emotional growth, and the transition from youth to adulthood (Monaghan, 2017; Wasserbauer, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> The *coming-of-age narrative* describes a specific story arc within a text that follows a character's personal development, which may occur within or outside of the genre itself.

<sup>4</sup> While this study opts for a cohort-based approach, much of the existing literature relies on the concept of *generations*. Although this terminology is conceptually limited due to its often rigid and deterministic framing, the findings from such studies can still offer valuable insights. Where applicable, this study draws on those results while reinterpreting them through a more flexible and context-sensitive cohort framework.

never experienced such stories during their own youth (Wasserbauer, 2021). Despite the common assumption that these queer coming of age (QCOA)<sup>5</sup> series are primarily for queer youth, they are increasingly being embraced by queer viewers of all ages, reflecting the complex ways in which media consumption practices are evolving (Petersen & Sundet, 2019). This highlights a critical argument about generational differences in the consumption of such media: the idea that coming-of-age stories are solely for younger audiences is increasingly challenged. A study by Petersen and Sundet (2019) shows that many adults not only actively consume this type of media but also engage deeply with the playful digital practices that emerge around it. Older fans frequently participate in fan communities, produce fan content, and engage in online discussions, demonstrating that coming-of-age narratives hold relevance well beyond their presumed target demographic. This participation among adult viewers suggests that COA series, especially those exploring queer themes, are seen not only as entertainment but also as a form of identity reinforcement or rediscovery. It is important to note, however, that older queer men remain significantly underrepresented in mainstream media, which may explain in part why some turn to youth-oriented narratives that offer emotional resonance or opportunities for reflection on identity and community that are otherwise lacking (Boxer, 1997; Dhoest & Van Ouytsel, 2022; Humberstone, 2010).

In line with this, research on media consumption among different age groups has shown that adult viewers often approach these narratives with different expectations and emotional connections. While teenagers may view these stories as aspirational or reflective of their current experiences, adults might see them as a means of revisiting their own pasts, feeling nostalgic or engaging in a process of personal reflection (Petersen & Sundet, 2019; Wasserbauer, 2021). Although studies such as those by Dhoest and Simons (2011) and Dhoest and Van Ouytsel (2022) have examined queer media use across age groups, there remains limited empirical insight into how queer individuals from different cohorts emotionally engage with contemporary QCOA series, particularly in relation to their lived experiences and identity development. Therefore, this study aims to explore how QCOA

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this study, the abbreviation QCOA (queer coming-of-age) will be used to refer to queer coming-of-age series and narratives.

series resonate with viewers across different cohorts, with a focus on the varying motivations behind their consumption and the distinct roles these stories play in their life course.

This study is grounded in queer theory, television studies, youth studies, and cultural studies, which together inform our analysis of media representation. We will conduct in-depth interviews with 14 queer participants, recruited through snowball sampling and on-site outreach. The study focuses exclusively on coming-of-age series, such as *SKAM*, *wtFOCK*, *Heartstopper*, *Young Royals*, and *Love, Victor*, which center male queer protagonists and appeal across diverse cohorts. The selection includes both European and American productions. Films were excluded from the selection, as television series provide more narrative space to explore the complexities of growing up queer.

*Table 1: Participant Overview*

| NAME     | AGE | COHORT | CODE                |
|----------|-----|--------|---------------------|
| Kobe     | 18  | QMEC   | Kobe (18y, QMEC)    |
| Jules    | 21  | QMEC   | Jules (21y, QMEC)   |
| Senne    | 22  | EQNC   | Senne (22y, EQNC)   |
| Maxim    | 23  | QMEC   | Maxim (23y, QMEC)   |
| Viktor   | 24  | EQNC   | Viktor (24y, EQNC)  |
| Lucas    | 25  | EQNC   | Lucas (25y, EQNC)   |
| Pieter   | 25  | QMEC   | Pieter (25y, QMEC)  |
| Olivier  | 31  | EQNC   | Olivier (31y, EQNC) |
| Robin    | 31  | EQNC   | Robin (32y, EQNC)   |
| Stan     | 32  | EQNC   | Stan (32y, EQNC)    |
| Thomas   | 40  | PMC    | Thomas (40y, PMC)   |
| Frederik | 50  | PMC    | Frederik (50y, PMC) |
| Bert     | 63  | PMC    | Bert (63y, PMC)     |
| Gerard   | 67  | PMC    | Gerard (67y, PMC)   |

For the purpose of this study, we focus on three distinct cohorts: the Pre-Mainstream Cohort (PMC), the Early Queer Normalization Cohort (EQNC), and the Queer Media Explosion Cohort (QMEC). The decision to divide this study into three cohorts is somewhat arbitrary<sup>6</sup>, as the boundaries between cohorts are not strictly defined, and significant variation exists within each cohort. Nevertheless, this framework provides a useful analytical tool for identifying patterns in media consumption and identity research. These cohorts are based on shared socio-cultural contexts, such as the rise of streaming, which are pertinent for interpreting the results of this study.

## COHORTS AND MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

As previously noted, this study adopts a cohort-based approach<sup>7</sup>, rather than generational labels defined by birth years, to more accurately capture how media consumption and identity formation develop over time. Cohorts refer to groups of individuals who experience key historical events during the same life stage, resulting in shared, though not identical, social and cultural trajectories (Dhoest, 2022b; Rosenfeld & Ramirez-Valles, 2024). In contrast to generational models, this approach foregrounds the influence of specific socio-political, technological, and cultural shifts in shaping media engagement and identity processes (Tester, 2017; Bishop et al., 2020; Kertzner, 2001).

Research on queer identity development frequently highlights the role of generational effects in shaping life trajectories and media engagement. While much of this literature uses the term generations, this study reinterprets such findings through a cohort-based lens. For example, studies have shown that younger generations tend to reach milestones in their sexual identity development earlier, supported by increased queer visibility, legal protections, and digital media. In contrast, older generations often navigated their identities under more restrictive conditions (Bishop et al., 2020; Dhoest, 2022b; Hall et al., 2021; Herdt et al., 1997; Morgan, 2013). These distinctions align closely with cohort effects,

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<sup>6</sup> While the division into cohorts is somewhat arbitrary, given that cohort boundaries are fluid and socially constructed, it remains a useful analytical tool. By grouping participants according to shared socio-cultural contexts and media environments, this approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how different cohorts emotionally engage with QCOA series (Dhoest & Van Ouytsel, 2022). These distinctions emerged inductively from the data and serve to structure the analysis without imposing rigid generalizations.

<sup>7</sup> A more detailed account of the cohort framework and its operationalization is provided in the methodology section.

particularly in how different groups engage with coming-of-age series: younger viewers relate to more diverse and affirming media representations, while other cohorts grew up with limited or stigmatized portrayals of queer identities (Dhoest, 2022b; Petersen & Sundet, 2019; Pym & Cover, 2023).

The notion of coming-of-age is central to understanding identity formation, particularly in the context of media engagement. As previously mentioned, coming-of-age series focus on the transition from adolescence to adulthood, often emphasizing personal growth, self-discovery and self-identification, and the navigation of social and cultural norms (Pym & Cover, 2023). Furthermore, the coming-of-age genre interacts dynamically with cohort-based experiences. Younger viewers now engage with a broader and more nuanced range of QCOA stories across platforms such as Netflix and TikTok. These narratives tend to center on the everyday realities of peers, making them feel immediate and personally relatable. As De Ridder and Dhaenens (2019) observe, platforms like YouTube have become crucial venues through which queer youth not only access mediated coming out narratives but also actively contribute their own stories. These digital spaces facilitate both visibility and community formation, allowing queer youth to “come out of invisibility” and participate in shaping popular representations of queerness. In contrast, older generations often had to search for hidden or coded queer characters in media during their adolescence, as explicit queer representation was rare or even censored (Pym & Cover, 2023; Dhoest, 2022a). This disparity highlights the evolving role of media in shaping identity across time and underscores why coming-of-age narratives remain a crucial site of queer cultural production and personal meaning-making.

To fully understand these generational disparities and how queer media engagement unfolds over time, it is necessary to complement cohort-based analysis with a life course perspective. This approach helps illuminate not only when viewers encounter QCOA series, but also how these narratives take on different meanings at different stages of life.

## LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

The life course perspective builds on cohort analyses by highlighting how identity formation and media engagement develop across different stages of life, shaped by broader historical and social contexts (Bishop et al., 2020; Dhoest, 2022a; Hunt et al., 2019; Rosenfeld &

Ramirez-Valles, 2024; Tester, 2017). In contrast to static generational frameworks, the life course approach examines how significant life events, structural conditions, and individual agency interact over time to shape media consumption and identity development (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Tester, 2017).

A central principle of life course theory is historical time and place, how societal changes shape identity trajectories. Shifts in policy, public discourse, and media representation, central themes in queer studies, have tangible effects on how individuals experience and express their identities (Hammack et al., 2017; Rosenfeld & Ramirez-Valles, 2024). For example, the legalization of same-sex marriage altered the social expectations of queer individuals in the 21st century, leading to shifts in family formation, community visibility, and community engagement (Bishop et al., 2020; Cardinal, n.d.; Hammack et al., 2017; Hernández-Pérez & Sánchez-Soriano, 2023). Similarly, individuals who came of age during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic experienced profound disruptions in their identity development, with many emphasizing activism and community resilience in their narratives (Kertzner, 2001; Rosenfeld & Ramirez-Valles, 2024; Tester, 2017).

Life course research also examines how milestone events, such as coming out, first relationships, and community integration, occur at different ages depending on historical context and personal circumstances (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Bishop et al., 2020). Studies indicate that queer youth today come out at earlier ages than previous generations, benefiting from increased visibility and legal protections. However, intersectional factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic status create variations in these experiences and need to be studied in further research (Bishop et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2022; Herdt et al., 1997; Rosenfeld & Ramirez-Valles, 2024). These nuances are especially relevant to this study, which seeks to understand how different cohorts of queer viewers emotionally engage with coming-of-age series in light of their own lived timelines and sexual identity development.

## QUEER REPRESENTATION

To understand how viewers relate to QCOA series, it's crucial to examine the historical context in which queer characters have been represented on screen. The earliest portrayals of queer identities on television were dominated by invisibility and negative

stereotypes. Before the 1990s, openly queer characters were rare, and when they did appear, they were often linked to tragedy, deviance, or comic relief (Becker, 1998; Cover & Milne, 2023; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Hart, 2000; Monaghan, 2017). As Cover and Milne (2023) points out, early depictions in film and television positioned queer identity as an inherent source of suffering, reinforcing the *tragic gay trope*<sup>8</sup>, where queer characters often faced isolation, rejection, or death. This aligns with Hart (2000), who notes that mainstream television often constructed queer characters as doomed figures, a representation that served to warn against non-normative sexualities. This was seen in *An Early Frost* (1985), one of the first TV movies to address AIDS, which framed its protagonist's queerness primarily through tragedy (Hart, 2000).

A pivotal shift occurred post-Stonewall when the Gay Liberation Movement increased visibility and demands for positive representation (Becker, 1998; Bower et al., 2019; Connolly, 2018; Dhoest & Simons, 2011; Rosenfeld & Ramirez-Valles, 2024). However, this often took the form of the *coming-out narrative*, which, while offering visibility, reduced queer lives to a single defining moment (Dhoest & Simons, 2011; McInroy & Craig, 2016; Monaghan, 2017). This trend, while an improvement from previous erasures, still limited the scope of queer experiences on screen.

During the 1990s, network television began to feature more queer characters, primarily in supporting roles. This era saw the rise of the *sidelined sidekick trope*<sup>9</sup>, which offered limited visibility while keeping queer characters on the sidelines (Becker, 1998; Hart, 2000). Shows such as *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk* expanded visibility, though they often centered white, cisgender, middle-class gay men and leaned into stereotypes of flamboyance (Dhaenens, 2012; Dhoest & Simons, 2011; Fisher et al., 2007; Hart, 2000; Monaghan, 2020). At the same time, this period marked a shift in audience reception studies, as scholars began examining how queer and heterosexual viewers engaged with these

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<sup>8</sup> This term is not a fixed concept in existing scholarship but is coined in this study based on recurring patterns identified across multiple sources (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Hernández-Pérez & Sánchez-Soriano, 2023; W. Monaghan, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> The sidelined sidekick trope refers to queer characters, often gay men, who support straight leads while rarely occupying the narrative center. When their stories are told, they often revolve around coming out or facing discrimination, rather than exploring a fuller range of experiences. An example is Carol Willick from *Friends*, whose lesbian identity is mostly used to serve Ross's storyline.

portrayals. While visibility increased, researchers like Dhaenens (2012) and Dhoest & Simons (2011) noted that many queer audiences still struggled to find complex and relatable representations. The dominance of gay white men in these narratives, at the expense of lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals, reinforced homonormativity, where queerness was accepted only when it closely resembled heterosexual lifestyles (Dhaenens, 2012; Dhaenens et al., 2022; Meyer & Wood, 2013).

By the early 2000s, more nuanced and complex queer characters appeared in mainstream shows like *Six Feet Under*, *The L Word*, and *Brothers & Sisters* (Dhaenens, 2012; Dhoest & Simons, 2011; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Monaghan, 2020). Still, Van Damme & Van Bauwel (2012) point out that many depictions were heavily gendered, with queer men depicted through traditionally masculine or feminized tropes. While some shows moved beyond the coming-out narrative, portraying queer characters in romantic and sexual relationships without centering their identity, gay intimacy often remained limited (Van Damme & Van Bauwel, 2012; Dhoest & Simons, 2011). Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, these depictions were frequently restrained, sanitized, or commodified (Van Damme & Van Bauwel, 2012; Becker, 1998).

Another major shift emerged in the 2010s with shows like *Glee*, *SKAM*, *Young Royals*, and *Heartstopper*, which centered queer youth and their identity formation (Dhaenens et al., 2022; Dhaenens & De Smet, 2024; Meyer & Wood, 2013). These series portrayed queer characters as more complex and multidimensional, and they embedded queerness into broader coming-of-age themes. *Glee*, for instance, featured a range of gay male characters like Kurt, Blaine, and Karofsky showing different masculinities and struggles. Yet, even as *Glee* expanded representation, queer characters were often contrasted with normative masculinity, and gay intimacy was rarely shown as openly as heterosexual intimacy (Meyer & Wood, 2013; McInroy & Craig, 2016).

One trend in recent queer teen dramas is the *cute gay boy trope*, which portrays young queer men as soft, gentle, and emotionally vulnerable (Dhaenens et al., 2022; Dhaenens & De Smet, 2024). This aesthetic is especially visible in *Heartstopper*, where animated butterflies, soft lighting, and cozy costumes like oversized sweaters accentuate the characters' boyish innocence and emotional openness. Similar techniques appear in

*Young Royals*, *wtFOCK*, and *Love, Victor*, where boyish protagonists are framed through care, intimacy, and emotional vulnerability, with an emphasis on romance over sexuality. These shared aesthetics help to reinforce the image of queer male teens as sympathetic and endearing, yet potentially limit the diversity of queer masculinities portrayed on screen (Dhaenens & De Smet, 2024).

Contemporary queer television has seen an increasing push for intersectional representation, acknowledging race, class, and gender identity alongside sexuality (Becker, 1998; Bishop et al., 2020; Hagai et al., 2020; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Yet, critiques remain: *Heartstopper* and *Young Royals*, despite offering affirming love stories, often center cisgender, white characters, leaving trans, non-binary, and queer people of color at the margins (Dhaenens, 2012; Hagai et al., 2020; McInroy & Craig, 2016; Vanlee et al., 2018; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Moreover, queer narratives now fluctuate between utopian optimism and realism. *Heartstopper*, for example, presents a world with little homophobia, while *SKAM* and *Young Royals* continue to explore the real struggles of navigating systemic heteronormativity and social exclusion (Dhaenens et al., 2022; Monaghan, 2020; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

## METHOD

This study examines how queer coming-of-age (QCOA) series are experienced and interpreted by queer men across three cohorts. While previous research has explored the role of media in adolescence, fewer studies address how queer representations continue to resonate into adulthood (Dhoest & Simons, 2011; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; McInroy & Craig, 2016). This research aims to fill that gap by analyzing engagement with QCOA series across different ages. Participants were selected based on prior viewing and personal engagement with one or more of the following series: *Heartstopper*, *Young Royals*, *SKAM* season 3, *wtFOCK* season 3, and *Love, Victor*. Recognizing that queer media is experienced through different personal and cultural lenses, the study centers lived experience, the meanings attributed to media, and the role these narratives played in participants' identity formation.

Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with male participants aged 18 to 67. While most identified as gay, the umbrella term "queer" is used throughout to include more fluid identifications such as bisexual and non-binary (Greteman & Stiegler, 2018; Thomson, 2021). Participants were recruited via LGBTQ+ organizations, personal networks (excluding direct friends), and flyers in a gay bar in Antwerp. After the initial participants were interviewed, the snowball sampling method was employed, allowing participants to refer others who might be interested. In selecting participants, efforts were made to include individuals from various cities in Flanders, resulting in a sample where slightly more than half lived in or around Ghent, while others came from Aalst, Brussels, and Antwerp. This strategy of participant recruitment aligns with good practices in qualitative research, ensuring a diverse range of voices (Fossey et al., 2002).

All participants received informed consent forms outlining the study's purpose, data handling, and their rights. Interviews were recorded only after consent was obtained, and full anonymity was guaranteed (Mortelmans, 2020). Most interviews were conducted in participants' homes or, when preferred, at the researcher's residence or via video call.

A semi-structured interview guide (see appendix) was used, allowing flexibility for participants' narratives to guide the conversation. Key themes included sexual identity

development, experiences with queer representation, and responses to QCOA series. This approach aligns with constructionist in-depth interviewing, where meaning is co-constructed between researcher and participant (Mortelmans, 2020; Ritchie et al., 2013). Interviews, conducted in Dutch between April 1st and May 1st, lasted between 40 and 95 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim. Quotes were translated into English after the analysis phase. Data analysis followed the principles of constructivist grounded theory, using MAXQDA for coding (Charmaz, 2016). Open and focused coding were applied iteratively to move from descriptive codes to abstract themes (Fossey et al., 2002).

As a gay researcher, having a similar background to participants likely contributed to a sense of ease during the interviews, while reflexivity was maintained to consider how personal perspective may have shaped the interpretation of the interviews.

Based on patterns in the interviews, participants were assigned to one of three cohorts. The first cohort, the Pre-Mainstream Cohort<sup>10</sup> (PMC) consists of participants who grew up with little or no representation of queer lives, often citing *Queer as Folk* as one of their first encounters with queer series. Representation for this group was described as extremely valuable due to the absence of relatable frameworks during adolescence. Secondly, the Early Queer Normalization Cohort<sup>11</sup> (EQNC) includes participants who witnessed the initial, often problematic emergence of queer characters, typically portrayed through tragedy, comedy or marginal roles, and who reported that these representations came too late to meaningfully shape their early identity development. For many, meaningful representation only emerged around their twenties, with the arrival of streaming like Netflix. The third cohort, the Queer Media Explosion Cohort (QMEC)<sup>12</sup>, comprises younger participants who grew up with more queer media representations compared to the other cohorts. Many

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<sup>10</sup> The term *Pre-Mainstream Cohort* is used in this study to denote participants who came of age before the broader cultural normalization of queer narratives, this does not imply a complete absence of queer media and representation. Rather, such content was often limited in visibility, circulated in subcultural spaces, or coded, requiring viewers to actively seek it out or interpret queerness between the lines.

<sup>11</sup> The *Early Queer Normalization Cohort* reflects a period when queer stories became more present and accepted, even though representation was still uneven and often shaped by mainstream norms.

<sup>12</sup> The term *Queer Media Explosion Cohort (QMEC)* refers to participants who came of age during a period marked by an unprecedented availability of queer coming-of-age content, particularly through streaming platforms and digital media. However, this “explosion” requires nuance: while access to queer narratives has indeed expanded, much of this content remains relatively niche, features secondary rather than central queer characters, and is still not fully integrated into the mainstream media landscape

indicated that they initially took this visibility for granted, until personal identity questions began to surface.

These cohort distinctions, while interpretive, helped trace shifts in emotional engagement and media impact across life stages. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how queer media shapes identity over time, emphasizing the emotional and cultural significance of QCOA narratives.

## RESULTS

### SEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Participants in the Queer Media Explosion Cohort (QMEC) described their sexual identity development as complex and non-linear, shaped by emotional experiences that often preceded language or self-recognition. Rather than following a clear path, sexual identity emerged through subtle negotiations between feelings and the cultural tools available to interpret them. As Morgan (2013) argues, sexual identity is not just about attraction, but about how that attraction is understood socially. Even within a more accepting cultural context like contemporary Flanders, young queer men still faced intricate journeys toward self-awareness. For example, Jules (21y, QMEC) recalled being drawn to male actors in porn as a teen, though he didn't yet grasp what that meant.

“Around age 11, I searched for porn and realized I was more focused on the male actors than the women. At that time, I knew what homosexuality was, but didn't see it as something that applied to me, until I saw a video with two men, and that's when it clicked”

The struggle wasn't due to ignorance of homosexuality, but rather an inability to see it as a real option for oneself. As Hall et al. (2021) and Tester (2017) note, identity needs social and cultural recognition, not just internal feelings. For many, that recognition was lacking or skewed by heteronormative norms (Cardinal, n.d.; Hall et al., 2021; Hammack et al., 2017). Some, like Kobe (18y, QMEC), initially engaged in heterosexual relationships simply because it seemed like the expected thing to do:

“Yeah, in primary school there was this girl I liked, and I thought ‘Okay, no need to question my sexuality further’. I just assumed I must be into girls and didn't think much more about it, just naïvely went along with that idea because it was what was expected of me.”

Heteronormativity, where heterosexuality is assumed by default, made it difficult for participants to explore queer identities without fear of stigma (Bower et al., 2019; Cardinal, n.d.; Dhaenens et al., 2022; Marshall, 2021). Many, like Maxim (23y, QMEC), delayed coming out after witnessing the exclusion of openly gay peers at high school, showing that even in progressive settings like Flanders, social penalties for visible queerness remain. Compared to other cohorts, QMEC participants had broader access to both fictional and real-life queer media, which offered early representations (Dhoest & Van Ouytsel, 2022;

Vittadini et al., n.d.). However, the process of self-identification was still ongoing and nuanced. Language played a crucial role in identity formation: some, like Kobe (18y, QMEC), embraced more traditional labels such as “gay,” while others, like Pieter (25y, QMEC), adopted fluid and intersectional identities, reflecting patterns noted in existing literature (Dhoest, 2022b; Dhoest & Van Ouytsel, 2022; Russell & Bohan, 2005; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Still, not everyone found this fluidity liberating, highlighting that more inclusive vocabularies don’t necessarily ease the emotional complexities of identity formation.

Place played a crucial role in the identity development of all cohorts, moving away from traditional hometowns often gave participants the freedom to explore and express themselves more openly. As Jules (21, QMEC) reflected on his move to Ghent:

“Yeah, once I got in Ghent... people are just a lot more open. So, I wasn’t afraid of sharing my sexuality anymore. If someone asked, I’d just say yes, it was no big deal. It just felt easy.”

This move wasn’t just physical, but symbolic, highlighting how social environments shape what identities feel possible (Dhoest, 2022b; Pym & Cover, 2023). Still, many participants struggled with internalized doubt. Maxim (23y, QMEC) shared that even after coming out, “I don’t think I’ve fully accepted it”, citing past trauma. Pieter (25y, QMEC) questioned whether he was “queer enough” due to a lack of community connection, though he eventually grew more confident. These reflections suggest that identity formation extends beyond coming out, with lingering heteronormativity and self-doubt persisting, even in accepting contexts, challenging and critiquing stage models that frame disclosure as a final step (Bishop et al., 2020; Cardinal, n.d.; Dhaenens et al., 2022; Morgan, 2013). While milestones like coming out happened earlier for the QMEC, emotional acceptance remains uneven. Their stories do not reflect a seamless progress, but a gradual and often difficult growth process.

In contrast, participants in the Early Queer Normalization Cohort (EQNC) came of age in a cultural context that was more accepting than that of the PMC, yet still shaped by persistent normative expectations and limited opportunities for affirming identification (Boxer, 1997; Dhoest & Van Ouytsel, 2022; Hammack et al., 2017). As Pym and Cover (2023) argue,

their experiences reflect a “transitional phase”, between the limited representation of the PMC and the broader representation available to the QMEC. Although legal protections and media representation were present during their youth, feelings of being “different” and the absence of clear models for identification persisted. Many, like Viktor (24y, EQNC), described early attractions as subtle and unnamed, marking a slow journey toward self-understanding:

“I think my first experience of attraction was during *Danny Phantom*. I really admired him, but at the time I didn’t realize that what I felt was attraction.”

This early, pre-verbal recognition of difference reflects what many queer individuals describe as a moment of realization that initiates the interpretive work of turning attraction into identity (Morgan, 2013; Hall et al., 2021). Unlike younger participants, the EQNC members like Viktor lacked strong media or peer support to help make sense of these feelings. As a result, identity development often happened through indirect or fragmented means (Marshall et al., 2019; Siebler, 2016). For example, Stan (32y, EQNC) found early comfort and recognition in anonymous online chats, which offered a discreet space to explore his feelings:

“So I went on this chat site, and started talking to people anonymously, just to see if what I was experiencing was something others recognized too.”

Though still marginal at the time, digital spaces offered EQNC participants early opportunities for identity exploration and community while allowing them to remain anonymous, resources largely absent during the PMC’s adolescence (Russell & Bohan, 2005; Siebler, 2016).

Some EQNC respondents described an experimental phase in their identity development. Stan (32y, EQNC), for instance, recalled going to a monthly queer party in Ghent, the only place to meet other queer men, where he explored more feminine-coded self-expression. Looking back, he framed this as part of a personal “identity crisis” between ages 18 and 21, a period where limited references led him to test boundaries before arriving at a clearer self-understanding.

Compared to some QMEC participants, who often embraced fluid or non-binary identities, EQNC respondents tended to adopt more cautious and adaptive strategies. Lucas (25y, EQNC), for example, described identifying as bisexual for about a year to make coming out feel “less bad”. This reflects what Guittar (2013) terms “the queer apologetic”, a form of identity compromise in which individuals adopt a bisexual label that aligns with same-sex attraction while still meeting heteronormative expectations. Rather than asserting queerness outright, this approach reveals how identity was shaped through negotiation between personal experience and perceived social acceptability. Nevertheless, several participants described a gradual progression toward a more stable and affirming sense of self. As Stan (32y, EQNC) reflected:

“Between the ages of 21 and 28, it gradually settled... now I feel at ease with who I am.”

This slower, cumulative journey aligns with theories of identity as shaped by social context and available language. Compared to the PMC, who often came to a clearer understanding of their identities later in life, the EQNC were able to explore during adolescence, but unlike the QMEC, their exploration remained cautious and carried social risks.

For participants in the Pre-Mainstream Cohort (PMC), sexual identity development was often delayed, fragmented, and solitary (Balon, 2023; Dhoest, 2022a; Kertzner, 2001; Tester, 2017). Their experiences were shaped not only by a lack of visibility but also by the absence of language, community, and cultural scripts. As Hall et al. (2021) and Kertzner (2001) emphasize, identity formation requires more than inner awareness, it depends on social recognition and cultural legitimacy. For the PMC, growing up in a heteronormative and silent environment meant that recognition was often deferred well into adulthood. Frederik (50y, PMC) described how, during his teenage years, he struggled to make sense of his feelings:

“At the end of secondary school, I fell for a boy without realizing it. Between 15 and 19, I had experiences I couldn’t yet connect to the word ‘gay’ or apply to myself.”

Other PMC participants echoed Frederik’s experience, showing some parallels with Jules’ earlier quote, though unlike Jules (21, QMEC), they were unable to explore or act on their feelings. As Thomas (40y, PMC) explained, when asked about earlier attractions with boys:

“Yes, I was attracted to others... but they weren’t gay, so I stayed silent. I didn’t say anything, and I didn’t do anything about it.”

This kind of silence, internal and external, was common with this cohort. Even when queer feelings were present, they had no outlet, no language, no framework. Unlike the QMEC, who experimented with labels and digital media, PMC participants often encountered a void that could only be filled later. For many, meaningful identity development began only after adolescence. Even in hindsight, moments of desire were often remembered as isolated flashes, with no way to name or pursue them at the time. Thomas (40y, PMC) recalled:

“There just wasn’t any space for it... I didn’t know anyone who was gay, and it was never talked about. So I thought, maybe it would just go away.”

This belief, that queerness might simply fade, was reinforced by the total absence of visible role models. As Dhoest (2022a) and Dupont (2019) note, queer representation in Flemish media was often hidden or pathologized, leaving little to identify with.

## EMOTIONAL PROXY

A common theme across interviews is that QCOA does not generally act as a straightforward mirror for identification but serves as an emotional proxy<sup>13</sup>, a narrative space where participants project fantasies and unresolved feelings from different periods in their lives. Importantly, the emotional meaning of this proxy differs strongly between cohorts. In the Pre-Mainstream Cohort (PMC), QCOA media is most often associated with emotional release, retrospection, and mourning of an unlived youth, as elaborated in the following section. In contrast, participants in the Queer Media Explosion Cohort (QMEC) often describe QCOA series as emotionally relatable, but with less personal impact, or as narratives they now approach with more critical distance. This reflects a shift from seeking representation to evaluating it based on how personally relevant or complex it feels.

Participants in the PMC, in unpacking themes of emotional release, retrospection, and the mourning of an unlived youth, described growing up in environments where queer characters were either absent or misrepresented. Within this cohort, the absence was not

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<sup>13</sup> *Emotional proxy* is a concept developed inductively through the analysis of interview data in this study.

only one of representation, visible queer characters or narratives, but also of recognition: the sense of being seen, understood, or validated within those narratives. As Susan Driver notes, “growing up and coming out queer is not merely a personal process of identity, but involves a cultural process of reassessing, embracing, refusing, and combining media representations ‘for better or for worse’” (as cited in Marshall, 2021, p. 266). For these respondents, however, there were no representations to reassess, embrace, refuse or combine. The process of coming out and coming-of-age happened largely in private, without the support or guidance of media representation. Frederik (50y, PMC) supports this reflection, stating:

"As a teenager, I had no way to understand what was happening, the only framework available was a negative one about anything that wasn't heterosexual."

When QCOA stories eventually entered their lives, often decades later, they were not encountered as reflections of current identity, but as keys to understanding a past that had gone unprocessed or emotionally unresolved. This sense of retrospection is shared with Gerard (67y, PMC), as he described watching *Heartstopper* and *Young Royals* with emotional investment:

"I watch those scenes and ask myself, 'what would my life have been like if I experienced the same things as they did?' Or perhaps more accurately, it reflects something I missed, something I now recognize in these series."

Gerard's quote captures a common emotional pattern among participants in the PMC cohort: the scene onscreen becomes not a representation of life as it is or was, but as it could have been. This experience aligns with Halberstam's (2005) notion of the “logic of delayed adulthood”, where queer subjects experience delayed or disjointed timelines of recognition, expression, and acceptance. In this sense, QCOA media for PMC respondents does not simply trigger nostalgia; it helps them make sense of a version of themselves that couldn't fully exist in the past. This also aligns with Padva's (2014) framing of queer nostalgia as a reparative engagement with history, one that empowers queer communities to reimagine their pasts not as fixed losses, but as emotionally rich and symbolic terrains. Through nostalgic reflection, participants construct a kind of queer heritage, drawing on private and collective memories to explore what they were denied, what they desired, and

what continues to shape who they are. Here, nostalgia becomes not merely a longing for what was missing, but a therapeutic and imaginative space of healing, self-recognition, and belonging (Padva, 2014).

Bert (63y, PMC) corroborates this statement while talking about *Paris 05:59: Théo et Hugo*, a gay love story about two boys that get to know each other in a sex club:

"If it had been possible to experiment like that during my student years in Leuven, maybe I would have seen my childhood friend there, maybe we would have had sex, maybe we would have had a relationship. ... But I never experienced it that way."

This retrospective experience often involved a mixture of joy and grief. Frederik (50y, PMC) described his affection for *Heartstopper* not because it reflected his own teenage years, but because it showed a world that felt radically different:

"Growing up, I had a tough coming-of-age in a hostile environment, so it hits something traumatic. I'm sure it's romanticized, but your experience probably looks more like *Heartstopper* than mine ever did."

This duality was common with a lot of participants across different cohorts. Watching these series allows participants to feel or experience what they never could at that age, even if only by emotional proxy. This was apparent with Lucas (25y, EQNC), who described how watching *Love, Victor* opened a space for an emotional proxy:

"It was nice to fantasize about how things could have been. Because I related to the storyline, how he first came out as bi, and how his mother reacted badly at first because of her religion, even though she still loved him."

This bittersweet fantasy serves as an emotional resource, one that, while fictional, provides real feelings of being seen and finding closure. As Petersen and Sundet (2019) argue, this form of affective engagement functions within a "devoted play mood", in which the fan-object, in this case the series, becomes a site of emotional release, personal interpretation, and even ritual. Notably, older fans in their study also used this mood to revisit lost or missed youth experiences, echoing what is observed in this study's PMC respondents.

Bert (63y, PMC), who spent most of his adult life in heterosexual marriages, described queer media as something he originally engaged with pedagogically, in his role as a

teacher trying to better support different students. However, once he began exploring his own sexuality, the QCOA content shifted in significance:

"I've always tried to be open toward anyone who is different from me. That's something my parents instilled in me during my upbringing. ... So that I could create a safe space for non-heterosexual students at school ... But when I started to experience my own sexual identity, I found it incredibly powerful and important to have those kinds of role models myself."

This emotional shift, from "teacher" to "me", from professional distance to intimate resonance, shows how queer media can feel personal and change over time for this cohort, and maybe for other cohorts in the future. The same content becomes re-signified depending on the viewer's life phase and degree of self-acceptance. As Dhoest and Van Ouytsel (2022) argue in their study on queer media generations, representation operates differently across generational contexts, not just because the media landscape changes, but because people relate to media based on the cultural narratives that were or were not available during key developmental windows.

In contrast, participants in the QMEC often described queer representation as being always available but without the same emotional weight. While participants from the PMC and EQNC often emphasized how transformative it would have been to encounter such narratives in their youth, frequently stating that these stories would have helped them make sense of their feelings, younger participants expressed a more ambivalent relationship to this visibility. For many, queer characters and storylines were part of the media landscape for years before they became meaningful. Several participants explained that they simply weren't "interested in" or "occupied with" those representations until they began actively questioning or exploring their sexual identity. This reveals a visibility engagement paradox<sup>14</sup>: greater access to queer media does not automatically lead to earlier engagement or identification. Rather, the emotional impact of representation still depends on where individuals are in their developmental journey. For older participants, the lack of visibility delayed key identity milestones and left emotional gaps that later encounters with queer media helped them revisit, process, or reimagine. For younger participants,

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<sup>14</sup> The *Visibility Engagement Paradox* is a term introduced in this study to capture a pattern observed across cohorts in this study.

representation may be ambient or backgrounded until personal experience catches up, at which point it can still function as a source of self-recognition.

## IDENTIFICATION VS RECOGNITION

A recurring distinction in the interviews is between identification and recognition. While these terms are often used interchangeably in both popular discourse and media studies, participants across all cohorts revealed more differentiated relationships to QCOA series. For some, seeing a character that directly mirrored their own experiences or identity provided a profound sense of identification. For others, the connection was less about sameness and more about recognition; seeing an experience similar to theirs, or observing a reality they found meaningful or moving, without necessarily seeing themselves represented. This distinction proved especially relevant for the Early Queer Normalization Cohort (EQNC) and the Queer Media Explosion Cohort (QMEC), both of whom have had at least partial access to queer representation throughout adolescence or early adulthood.

Scholars like Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) emphasize the importance of identification with media characters as a facilitator of sexual identity development, suggesting that direct parallels between viewer and character help normalize queer feelings. However, these findings suggest a more layered picture. Many participants described feeling alienated from early or stereotypical representations, and only later found value in media when they encountered characters whose emotional complexity or life circumstances, even if not identical to their own, allowed for recognition of shared vulnerability, struggle, or longing for romance.

Olivier (31y, EQNC), for instance, discussed his frustration with Steve from *W817*, who was, for him personally, one of the first visible gay characters on Flemish television.

"You don't fully recognize yourself in that, it's just the stereotype. The overly feminine gay guy: flashy clothes, a certain way of talking, doing caring tasks at home. It was all an exaggeration."

His rejection of Steve did not just stem from a lack of similarity, but from an active resistance against what that character symbolized: an essentialized, feminized gay identity that left little room for variation. This reaction echoes Dhaenens' (2012) critique of early queer

media that often relied on limited, stereotypical portrayals of gay identity, which could alienate viewers who did not conform to these portrayals. This resistance also reflects internalized norms and a preference for traditional masculinity shaped by hegemonic ideals. These internalized heteronormative ideals can shape how certain media representations are received. As Van Meer and Pollmann (2021) note, the persistent association of gay men with femininity in media can lead to discomfort or disidentification, especially among those who do not wish to be seen through that lens.

Interestingly, younger participants viewed Steve from *W817* differently. Although some were too young to remember the show clearly, a few, like Pieter (25y, QMEC), still considered Steve a positive example of queer representation. Pieter didn't see Steve's domestic role as tied to his sexuality, but rather to his position in the group.

"I know they won awards for how they portrayed Steve as gay, because he was more than just 'the gay one'. Back then, being gay was often the whole character. But Steve felt more layered. Yes indeed, he did the household tasks, but I always saw him as older, like a father figure to the group. Maybe that's why he did more."

For Robin (32y, EQNC), as for Olivier (31y, EQNC), identification with queer media was initially hindered by the limited and stereotypical range of characters available. However, when he later encountered QCOA series like *Heartstopper*, the significance did not lie in direct self-identification, but rather in the way the narrative made room for nuance and internal diversity within queer experiences.

"*Heartstopper* shows so many identities, trans, feminine gay, bi, more 'normal' gay, and the mix between them. What I found beautiful was how their differences and similarities were shown as part of the same story. Love is love, without making it feel like a special case."

This affective relationship is characterized by a term I coin *reflective witnessing*, as opposed to direct mirroring, in which viewers are moved by the emotional truth of a scene without necessarily inserting themselves into it. Lucas (25y, EQNC) took this even further. While he admitted to never feeling particularly seen in queer media growing up, he now appreciates the genre not for what it offers him personally, but for what it offers others.

"I don't necessarily feel the need for that anymore. Personally, I think it's more important when you're younger, you need to see those characters more, to help shape yourself and better understand the world. Whereas now, I feel like I already have a sense of how everything fits together. I know who I am."

Lucas' reflection aligns with the shift described by Monaghan (2020), where queer media no longer serves primarily as a mirror for identity affirmation but portrays diverse experiences within mainstream narratives. While Lucas (25y, EQNC), whose Moroccan and Belgian background made direct representation less accessible, once needed characters to help shape his understanding of himself and the world, he now approaches QCOA series with a more formed sense of self. His, and others' in the EQNC, understanding of his sexual identity was largely formed through other experiences, such as attending gay parties and socializing with other queer individuals, because there was no different framework available. Although he can now appreciate queer narratives without needing direct identification, he nonetheless expresses regret over the continued lack of representation of queer people of color.

Among younger viewers, particularly in the QMEC, the distinction between recognition and identification was often reversed. Here, identification was more available; characters were closer in age, lived in similar social contexts, and expressed similar emotions or conflicts that paralleled their own. However, identification in the deeper sense was often absent. Jules (21y, QMEC) initially needed to be reminded of the queer representation that existed during his teenage years. Upon reflection, he agreed that while queer characters were present in the media, they often felt like templates or aesthetic ideals rather than meaningful figures.

"I think it's cute. Just cute. But it wasn't realistic. The story was... well, it was all sunshine and rainbows about two gay guys falling in love. And that's fine, it was sweet, but I didn't see myself in it."

Jules' description shows similarities with how most respondents viewed *Heartstopper*, often describing it as "romantic", "cute" and "all sunshine and rainbows" and therefore also as unrealistic. This echoes concerns raised by Monaghan (2017) and Dhaenens & De Smet (2024), who argue that the current wave of teen queer dramas often rely on a "soft

aesthetic” of sweetness, cuteness, and acceptability. Although most of these characters offer positive and affirming representations, they can also narrow the portrayal of queer experiences by promoting a new normativity, one in which queerness is expected to be gentle, appealing, and easily accepted by mainstream society. For Jules (21y, QMEC), identification was technically available, but the emotional connection was absent because the content lacked the messiness or struggles of gay love and sexual identity development that would make it feel real.

Viktor (24y, EQNC) expresses a similar sentiment and adds that, although the “love-dovey” and emotionally tender relationship between Charlie and Nick in *Heartstopper* initially drew him in, it ultimately contributed to his disengagement from later seasons.

"I think I watched up to the first two seasons, but by the third I started to drop off, because I think the 'love-dovey' aspect initially attracted me, not consciously perhaps, but in the end it just felt a bit too much for me. It didn't really feel relatable anymore ... It felt too idealistic."

While this newer wave of queer representation moves beyond the *tragic gay trope* and the *sidelined sidekick trope*, it is important to note that overly romanticized and simplified portrayals can feel unrealistic. Although they attract viewers, they may<sup>15</sup> also lead to fatigue or disconnection, as reflected in Viktor's experience.

Interestingly, Kobe (18y, QMEC) offered a contrasting perspective. His engagement with *wtFOCK* triggered a moment of self-recognition so profound that it disrupted his self-concept.

"I wasn't specifically looking for gay stories. I just started watching *wtFOCK* without thinking much about it. And then there was this one scene where the two boys kiss. And in that moment, I felt something shift inside me, like, 'oh, maybe that's what I want too'."

For Kobe (18y, QMEC), the power of that moment was not just in recognizing himself, but in realizing that media could activate parts of himself he had not yet put into words. This generative potential of QCOA series aligns with Driver's and Lipton's argument that media

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<sup>15</sup> While some participants expressed disconnection due to the unrealistic or overly idealized nature of queer representation, others indicated that this didn't matter to them. They watched such series precisely because they offered a feel-good experience, even if they didn't reflect their reality.

does not merely reflect queer identities, but can actively shape them by helping individuals articulate aspects of themselves that had previously remained unspoken (as cited in Dhoest & Simons, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that queer coming-of-age (QCOA) series do not merely reflect identity but actively shapes it, albeit in diverse ways. The value of QCOA series lies not in their universality, but in their ability to reflect a wide range of queer experiences: they operate across time, across emotional needs, and across distinct socio-cultural conditions. Rather than viewing engagement with QCOA series as generational based, this study shows that different cohorts interact with these texts in interpretive and often reflective ways, consuming them to process emotional needs that may have gone unrecognized or unspoken during adolescence. This flexibility in interpretation highlights a key insight from this study: the connection queer viewers have with media isn't fixed but constantly changing. It's not based on shared demographics, but on emotional impact.

Throughout the interviews, participants described their media engagement in ways that challenge traditional identification models. The value of representation was not always located in characters who mirrored their own biographies. Instead, many respondents emphasized how certain narratives, regardless of how directly identifiable they were, allowed them to recognize emotional patterns, suppressed memories, or longings. For many participants, the value of QCOA series lay not in direct identification, but in a deeper sense of recognition, an emotional connection to experiences that felt personally meaningful, even without direct resemblance. As previous research suggests, media role models can be vital in affirming identity (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). But this study expands that notion, revealing how QCOA narratives often act less as mirrors and more as affective frameworks through which viewers interpret themselves, sometimes long after identity milestones have passed.

What emerges from this analysis is the concept of *emotional proxy*, a narrative space through which viewers explore, reframe, or mourn their own developmental experiences. Participants frequently articulated how QCOA stories helped them process past emotions, reimagine lost possibilities, or make sense of non-linear identity trajectories. These narratives became sites of introspection and sometimes of grief, especially for those whose formative years lacked affirming representations. In such cases, QCOA series did not simply reflect what was; they gestured toward what could have been, helping viewers make

sense of experiences that once felt confusing or incomplete. These engagements were not passive but reflective, involving an active negotiation between the self, the series' narrative, and cultural memory.

For many, the act of watching QCOA content was a layered experience, interweaving enjoyment with critique and comfort with skepticism. Participants often viewed shows like *Heartstopper* or *Young Royals* with both admiration and frustration, appreciating their emotional depth and depiction of healthy gay relationships, while simultaneously questioning their polished aesthetic or sanitized conflicts. These responses point to a significant shift in queer spectatorship: mere representation is no longer enough. Today's queer viewers often approach media with a critical eye, shaped by their own lived experiences. This echoes Monaghan's (2020) analysis of post-gay television, in which representation is increasingly negotiated rather than celebrated. Indeed, many interviewees challenged the assumption that the growing number of queer characters in media signifies a complete or unproblematic cultural breakthrough. As several participants put it, "we're still not there". They pointed out that QCOA content still frequently defaults to normative, romanticized, and emotionally restrained portrayals, leaving little room for complexity or messiness<sup>16</sup>.

And yet, it would be reductive to interpret these critiques as cynical or detached. Rather, they reflect a deeply invested mode of engagement, one that combines emotional connection with critical reflection. While some participants, like Viktor (24y, EQNC), did disengage from content they found insufficient, most continued to engage, often using these stories as springboards for reflection, imagination, and connection. Whether through rewatching, social media, or informal conversations with friends, QCOA narratives became a shared vocabulary for articulating queer feelings and desires that often lacked language elsewhere.

A key strength of the QCOA genre lies in its narrative elasticity. These stories hold space for viewers at multiple points in their life course, not just those currently experiencing

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<sup>16</sup> While participants critiqued these portrayals for lacking the emotional and relational messiness of real-life experiences, they also acknowledged them as a step forward, more layered and emotionally nuanced than representations from a decade ago or earlier.

adolescence. Participants, like Pieter (25y, QMEC), described returning to *SKAM* with new insights and different emotional perspectives. A show that initially provoked a deep emotional response may, when revisited years later, still hold personal value, yet reveal new layers of meaning that were not fully understood at the time of first viewing. These recursive readings illustrate how media texts gain new meanings through reencounter. This supports Dhoest and Van Ouytsel's (2022) findings on queer media generations, while also extending them: the series significance is shaped not only by the historical moment in which it is first encountered, but also by its capacity to gain new personal meaning when revisited later in life.

Taken together, these findings suggest that QCOA media holds lasting value across all cohorts, not by resolving identity, but by provoking feeling, reflection, and contradiction. For queer viewers navigating a world where visibility has increased but belonging remains uneven, these stories offer not only narratives but tools: for understanding, for healing, for imagining otherwise.

While this study offers insight into how QCOA series are experienced by queer men across a range of ages, it remains limited in scope. Nearly all participants were white and cisgender, with only one respondent identifying otherwise. As such, the findings do not capture the full diversity of queer subjectivities, particularly those shaped by racial, gendered, or transnational experience. Future research would benefit from engaging more deeply with these perspectives to better understand how intersecting identities inform queer media engagement.

Ultimately, the relationship between queer media and queer identity remains a site of negotiation, transformation, and worldmaking. Queer coming-of-age series matter, not because they tell definitive stories, but because they invite queer viewers to tell their own.

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## APPENDICES

### 1. RECRUITMENT MESSAGE

Beste,

Mijn naam is Yari Landuyt, ik ben momenteel bezig met mijn thesis over hoe verschillende cohorten coming-of-age-series (zoals Heartstopper, WTFOCK seizoen 3, SKAM seizoen 3, Young Royals en Love, Victor) ervaren. Daarom ben ik op zoek naar homoseksuele mannen tussen 18-60 jaar die één of meerdere van deze series hebben gezien en hierover willen praten in een interview.

Het interview is volledig anoniem: je naam of andere identificeerbare gegevens worden niet gedeeld. Het doel is om beter te begrijpen hoe verschillende personen deze verhalen beleven.

Lijkt het je interessant om deel te nemen? Laat het me gerust weten via e-mail: [yari.landuyt@ugent.be](mailto:yari.landuyt@ugent.be) of via mijn nummer: 0471 86 44 39!

Alvast bedankt!

Yari Landuyt  
[yari.landuyt@ugent.be](mailto:yari.landuyt@ugent.be)  
0471 86 44 39

## 2. FLYER

# FAN VAN



HEARTSTOPPER, WTFOCK,  
SKAM, YOUNG ROYALS OF  
LOVE, VICTOR?

IK DOE ONDERZOEK NAAR HOE VERSCHILLENDE  
GENERATIES DEZE COMING-OF-AGE-SERIES ERVAREN EN  
IK BEN OP ZOEK NAAR MENSEN DIE HIEROVER WILLEN  
PRATEN IN EEN KORT INTERVIEW.

 **WIE?** HOMOSEKSUELE MANNEN TUSSEN 18 EN 60  
JAAR

 **WAT?** EEN INFORMEEL GESPREK OVER JOUW  
KIEKERVARINGEN

 **WAAR?** ONLINE OF IN PERSOON, WAT VOOR JOU HET  
BESTE PAST

 **HOE LANG?** MAX. 1 UUR  **100% ANONIEM!**

HEB JE ÉÉN OF MEERDERE VAN DEZE SERIES GEZIEN EN WIL  
JE ME HELPEN?

STUUR ME EEN MAILTJE! 

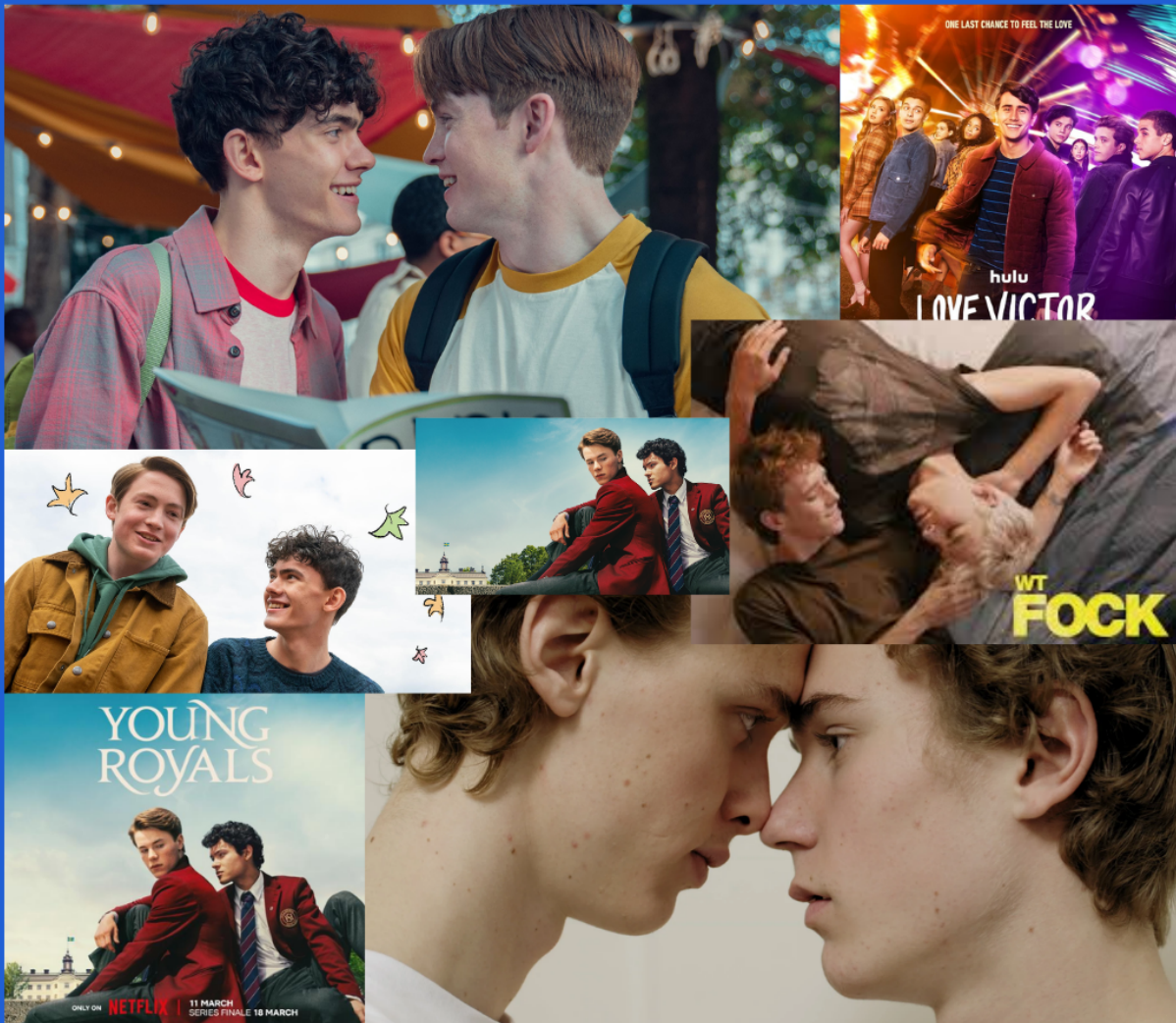
 [YARI.LANDUYT@UGENT.BE](mailto:YARI.LANDUYT@UGENT.BE)  
ALVAST EEN DIKKE MERCI!

### 3. SOCIAL MEDIA POST



UNIVERSITEIT  
GENT

## FAN VAN HEARTSTOPPER, WTFOCK, SKAM, YOUNG ROYALS OF LOVE, VICTOR?



#### 4. SOCIAL MEDIA TEXT

 Ben jij fan van Heartstopper, WTFOCK, SKAM, Young Royals of Love, Victor? 

Ik doe onderzoek naar hoe verschillende mensen deze coming-of-age series ervaren en ik ben op zoek naar mensen die hierover willen praten in een kort interview.

 Wat? Een gesprek over jouw kijkervaringen

 Waar? Online of in persoon, wat voor jou het beste past

 Hoe lang? Max. 1 uur

 100% anoniem!

Heb je één of meerdere van deze series gezien en wil je me helpen? Stuur me een mailtje!   [yari.landuyt@ugent.be](mailto:yari.landuyt@ugent.be) Alvast een dikke merci!  

## 5. DROP-OFF

- In welk jaar ben je geboren?
- Hoeveel jaar ben je?
- In welke periode van je leven (kindertijd, tienerjaren, vroege volwassenheid) ben je bewust in aanraking gekomen met queer representatie in media?
- Kan je je herinneren welke LGBTQ+ personages of verhalen je als een van de eerste hebt gezien?
- Toen je opgroeide, had je het gevoel dat er veel queer personages in de media waren, of waren ze eerder zeldzaam?
- Was LGBTQ+ representatie in de films/series die je keek eerder positief, negatief of stereotyperend?
- Welke series of films met queer personages hadden de grootste impact op jou toen je jonger was?
- Herinner je je een tijd waarin queer personages amper zichtbaar waren op tv en in films?
- Was er een moment in je jeugd waarin het opeens normaler werd om LGBTQ+ personages in mainstream media te zien?
- Heb je het gevoel gehad dat er altijd al veel queer coming-of-age verhalen beschikbaar waren, met diverse en herkenbare personages?

## 6. INTERVIEW GUIDE

- Kan je in je eigen woorden beschrijven hoe jouw seksuele identiteit zich heeft ontwikkeld? Denk aan eerst moment van aantrekking, een eerste ervaring, hoe je jezelf bent begonnen te identificeren, wanneer je dit bent beginnen delen met anderen.
- Wat trekt jou het meest aan in coming-of-age-verhalen zoals: Heartstopper, WTFOCK, SKAM, Young Royals, Love, Victor?
- In hoeverre herken je jezelf in de personages en situaties van deze series?
- Hoe belangrijk is het voor jou dat coming-of-age-verhalen LGBTQ+-verhalen bevatten?
- Hoe verschillen de representatie in verschillende series die je hebt gezien met elkaar? (Heartstopper gebruikt veel "cute aesthetics" en animatie-elementen, terwijl SKAM een rauwere, realistische stijl heeft)
- In welke mate beïnvloeden deze series hoe je naar liefde, vriendschap en jouw eigen seksuele identiteit kijkt?
- Welke coming-of-age series speelden een belangrijke rol tijdens jouw adolescentie?
- Hoe verschilt de representatie van queer karakters in coming-age-series van vroeger?
- Denk je dat coming-of-age series van nu realistischer zijn dan vroeger? Waarom wel/niet?

## 7. INFORMED CONSENT

**Beste,**

In het kader van mijn thesis voer ik onderzoek uit naar cohorten verschillen en gelijkenissen tonen in het kijken naar coming-of-age-series (zoals *Heartstopper*, *wtFOCK*, *SKAM*, *Young Royals*, *Love*, *Victor*).

Gedurende de periode van \_\_\_\_\_ tot \_\_\_\_\_ neem ik interviews af bij verschillende respondenten.

Wij zouden u graag willen vragen of u wilt deelnemen aan een interview.

Een interview duurt tussen de 45-60 minuten en wordt digitaal opgenomen (geluid) voor analysedoeleinden. Deze geluidsopnames zijn uitsluitend toegankelijk voor de onderzoeker en zijn promotor en worden enkel gebruikt voor onderzoeksdoeleinden. Daarnaast wordt een softwareprogramma gebruikt om de data uit de interviews te analyseren.

### **Uw rechten en privacy**

Deelname aan dit onderzoek is volledig vrijwillig. U heeft het recht om op elk moment, zonder opgave van reden, uw deelname stop te zetten. Alle verzamelde gegevens worden volledig geanonimiseerd, wat betekent dat uw identiteit niet kan worden herleid. Pseudoniemen worden gebruikt in de presentatie en rapportage van de resultaten.

### **Ik verbind mezelf ertoe om:**

1. Op het einde van het academiejaar de verzamelde data te vernietigen. De professor zal een beveiligde kopie bewaren aan de universiteit indien nodig voor wetenschappelijke verantwoording.
2. De bestanden volledig te anonimiseren, waarbij geen namen of identificeerbare gegevens worden gebruikt.
3. De verzamelde data enkel te delen met mijn promotor en uitsluitend te gebruiken voor onderzoeksdoeleinden.
4. Enkel een interview af te nemen als zowel de interviewer als de respondent deze brief hebben ondertekend en elk een exemplaar krijgen van de ondertekende versie.

Indien u vragen heeft over dit onderzoek of uw rechten als deelnemer, kunt u contact opnemen met de onderzoeker via onderstaande contactgegevens.

Met vriendelijke groeten,

[datum, naam en handtekening interviewer]

[Contactgegevens interviewer (mailadres, telefoonnummer)]

### **Toestemmingsverklaring**

Ik, ..... (naam van deelnemer),  
bevestig dat ik ben geïnformeerd over de aard en het doel van dit onderzoek en dat ik  
vrijwillig WEL/NIET (schrapping wat niet past) wil deelnemen aan een interview in het  
kader van het onderzoek naar intergenerationele verschillen en gelijkenissen in het  
kijken naar coming-of-age-verhalen.

Ik begrijp dat mijn deelname vrijwillig is en dat ik op elk moment mijn toestemming  
kan intrekken zonder negatieve gevolgen.

Datum: \_\_\_\_\_ Naam, voornaam: \_\_\_\_\_

Handtekening:

## 8. CODE SYSTEM

| ALL COHORTS                      |                                      |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Hoofdcategorie                   | Subcodes                             |
| Seksuele identiteitsontwikkeling | Eerste bewuste aanraking queer media |
|                                  | Zelf-identificatie                   |
|                                  | Feelings                             |
|                                  | Keerpunt / Aanvaarding               |
|                                  | (No) framework / hulpmiddelen        |
|                                  | Development Sex ID                   |
| Media als katalysator            | Eerste queer voorbeeld               |
|                                  | Streaming                            |
|                                  | Invloed Vlaamse media                |
|                                  | Vershil vroeger/nu                   |
|                                  | Meer representatie?                  |
|                                  | Toekomstbeeld                        |
| QCOA-ervaringen                  | Eerste QCOA                          |
|                                  | Aantrekking QCOA                     |
|                                  | Belang van QCOA                      |
|                                  | Feel good / Plezier / Cuteness       |
|                                  | Reflectie / Emotionele verwerking    |
|                                  | Emotionele proxy                     |
|                                  | Identification                       |
| Seriespecifiek                   | Recognition                          |
|                                  | Heartstopper                         |
|                                  | Young Royals                         |
|                                  | Love, Victor                         |
|                                  | SKAM / wtFOCK                        |
|                                  | Andere voorbeelden                   |
|                                  | Realistisch?                         |
| Representatie                    | Representatie van zichzelf           |
|                                  | Representatie oudere gays            |
|                                  | Representatie in Vlaamse media       |
|                                  | Intersectionaliteit                  |

| PMC                              |                                      |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Hoofdcategorie                   | Subcodes                             |
| Seksuele identiteitsontwikkeling | Ontwikkeling van seksuele identiteit |
|                                  | Zelf-identificatie                   |
|                                  | Feelings                             |
|                                  | Label                                |
|                                  | Framework                            |
|                                  | Eerste bewustwording of aantrekking  |
| Representatie                    | Eerste queer voorbeeld in media      |

|                            |                                           |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
|                            | Late confrontatie met queer representatie |
|                            | Belang representatie                      |
|                            | Keerpunt representatie                    |
|                            | Representatie oudere gays                 |
|                            | Representatie Vlaamse media               |
| QCOA                       | Soaps (Thuis, Familie)                    |
|                            | Queer As Folk                             |
|                            | Heartstopper                              |
|                            | Love, Victor                              |
|                            | Other                                     |
|                            | Aantrekking                               |
|                            | Feel good aspect                          |
| Streaming & Media-omgeving | Recognition                               |
|                            | Emotionele stand-in                       |
|                            | Invloed van streaming (Netflix)           |
|                            | Verschil vroeger en nu                    |
|                            | IVM oudere representatie/series           |
|                            | Toekomstbeeld                             |

| EQNC                             |                                               |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Hoofdcategorie                   | Subcodes                                      |
| Seksuele identiteitsontwikkeling | Ontwikkeling seksuele ID                      |
|                                  | Zelf-identificatie                            |
|                                  | Ontkenning / bi                               |
|                                  | Feelings                                      |
|                                  | Obstakels                                     |
|                                  | Apps / chats                                  |
| Representatie                    | Eerste queer voorbeeld in media               |
|                                  | Wanneer confrontatie met eerste representatie |
|                                  | Representatie Vlaamse media                   |
|                                  | Representatie van cohort                      |
|                                  | Representatie oudere gays                     |
|                                  | Intersectionaliteit                           |
|                                  | Toekomstbeeld                                 |
| QCOA-ervaringen                  | Eerste QCOA serie                             |
|                                  | Belang van QCOA                               |
|                                  | Feel good                                     |
|                                  | Genieten                                      |
|                                  | Educatie                                      |
|                                  | Emotionele stand-in                           |
|                                  | Identification                                |
|                                  | Recognition                                   |
|                                  | Reflectie / Emotionele verwerking             |
|                                  | Romantiseren                                  |

|                                       |                              |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Streaming &amp; Media-omgeving</b> | Streaming (Netflix)          |
|                                       | Meer representatie?          |
|                                       | Vershil met vroeger en nu    |
|                                       | IVM oudere voorbeelden       |
|                                       | Andere queer films of series |

| QMEC                             |                                                            |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hoofdcategorie                   | Subcodes                                                   |
| Seksuele identiteitsontwikkeling | Eerste bewuste aanraking queer media                       |
|                                  | Zelf-identificatie                                         |
|                                  | Verwarring                                                 |
|                                  | Heteronormatieve sociale leeromgeving                      |
|                                  | Kader voor seksuele ID                                     |
|                                  | Obstakels                                                  |
|                                  | Keerpunt                                                   |
|                                  | Aanvaarding seksuele ID                                    |
|                                  |                                                            |
| Representatie                    | Eerste queer voorbeeld in media                            |
|                                  | Wanneer confrontatie met eerste representatie              |
|                                  | Realistische weerspiegeling?                               |
|                                  | Representatie Vlaamse media                                |
|                                  | Meer representatie?                                        |
|                                  | Toekomstbeeld                                              |
|                                  | Intersectionaliteit                                        |
| QCOA                             | Eerste QCOA series                                         |
|                                  | Belang van QCOA                                            |
|                                  | Feel good / plezier / cuteness                             |
|                                  | Romance / rozengeur en maneschijn                          |
|                                  | Sense of belonging / zelfzekerheid                         |
|                                  | Education / Introductie queer zijn                         |
|                                  | Emotionele stand-in                                        |
|                                  | Identification                                             |
|                                  | Recognition                                                |
|                                  | Gevoel tijdens kijken                                      |
| Streaming & Media-omgeving       | Invloed van streaming (Netflix)                            |
|                                  | Vershil vroeger en nu                                      |
|                                  | IVM oudere series                                          |
|                                  | Andere queer movies / series                               |
|                                  | Heartstopper / Young Royals / SKAM / wtFOCK / Love, Victor |
|                                  |                                                            |