

# Queer media in the age of streaming video

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Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies  
2024, Vol. 30(4) 1388–1401  
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DOI: 10.1177/13548565241264155  
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## Abstract

This article contributes to an emerging field of research on the classification and organisation of film and television on streaming video platforms. While scholarship has begun to grapple with the complexities of the streaming video landscape, critical frameworks have yet to be established for examining issues of LGBTIQ+ inclusion in this context. This article explores questions about what queer media is in the streaming video era and how is this shaped by the information practices of streaming video services. Classification and organisation of titles is a significant factor in the discoverability of content on streaming video platforms. In the context of queer media, classification practices also impact the visibility of marginalised LGBTIQ+ identities, communities, and cultures. Beyond this, the categorisation practices of streaming video providers play a significant role in shaping and communicating cultural values about queer media. From an Australian vantage point, this article maps the contours of queer media in the streaming video environment, focusing on Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) and Broadcast Video on Demand (BVOD) services. By investigating the categories that streaming video providers use to organise and highlight LGBTIQ+ film and television, this article identifies how queer media is defined as a cultural category through use of labels such as ‘pride’, the categories and subcategories that approach queer media as a constellation of niche interests, and an underlying emphasis on ‘good’ characters and positive LGBTIQ+ narratives.

## Keywords

Subscription video on demand, subscription video on demand, broadcast video on demand, broadcast video on demand, categorisation, platforms, LGBTQ, queer media, pride

## Introduction

What is queer media in age of streaming video? Definitional questions such as this have often animated queer media studies. Several years ago, Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt posed a

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similar question in the introduction to their book *Queer Cinema in the World*, asking ‘How do we know queer cinema when we see it? Will we always recognise queer films as queer?’ (Schoonover and Galt, 2016: 8). While the term ‘queer’ has always been a difficult category to pin down (Jagose, 1996), the streaming era introduces new questions for queer theory and media studies, questions about accessing, knowing, understanding, and recognising queer media. The proliferation of Broadcast Video on Demand (BVOD) and Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) services has had profound impact on the screen landscape, the experiences of audiences, and broader screen cultures. Lotz (2022) highlights that the streaming environment consists of operators with varying business models, industrial practices and emphases with regard to programming, curation, and categorisation. However, broadly, BVOD services are advertiser-driven with libraries consisting of content originally distributed elsewhere. SVOD services are subscriber-driven, offering users access to a library of on-demand content. While BVOD and SVOD differ, they collectively make up the experience of streaming video today and have similarities in their categorisation of queer media.

For queer screen and media scholars, accessibility of LGBTIQ+ titles and the processes of categorisation adopted by BVOD and SVOD services are novel areas for critical analysis (Bradbury-Rance, 2023; Monaghan, 2023; Shacklock, 2023). While research is beginning to map the contours of streaming video’s relation to contemporary queer screen cultures, I argue that it is necessary to take a step back and interrogate what queer<sup>1</sup> media is in today’s streaming media era. I take inspiration from David L. Eng and Jasbir Puar, who argue that the power of queer studies arises from ‘the continuing interrogation of its exclusionary operations’ (2020: 5). Highlighting the ways that power (political, cultural, and institutional) coalesces within queer studies, they advocate for consideration who or what is included/excluded from queer studies, queer theory, and the broader category of ‘queer’. Motivated by their argument, I use this article to extend definitional questions about queer as a cultural category within the streaming era, mapping how the contours and edges of ‘queer’ are being actively shaped and constrained by the information practices of streaming video on demand. I am interested both in the categorisation of titles and the questions that these categorisation practices raise for queer studies, screen studies, and media studies.

Though SVOD and BVOD services such as Netflix are most frequently analysed through the lens of television studies (Lobato, 2019; Lotz, 2022), Burgess and Stevens (2021) highlight that they also pose a significant disruption to the logics of the film industry and its associated cultures. In this article, I bring film and television studies perspectives together to ask: how are streaming video platforms shaping contemporary queer screen cultures? To answer this, I tease out multiple threads related to queer digital and screen cultures, cinema studies, queer theory, and platform politics. Putting queer theory into conversation with platform studies, Zoe Shacklock (2023) engages with Sedgwick’s (1990/2008) notion of the ‘epistemology of the closet’ to analyse US and UK streaming services. She argues ‘streaming creates an *epistemology of the category*, in which queer life is understood through its categorisation’ (2023: 318), and where LGBTIQ+ identity is ‘obviously visible...and can therefore be understood as predictable and equivalent to a series of consumption choices’ (2023: 319). Building on these insights, I explore how SVOD and BVOD curation and categorisation processes contribute to our ability to access, know, and understand not only distinct LGBTIQ+ identities, but also the broader category of ‘queer’ as it relates to cinema and television. That is, rather than focusing on how these categories produce recognisable, knowable, and consumable identities, I consider how the information practices of streaming services function to tame the messy edges of queerness itself.

Queer media scholars and commentators have long been interested in questions of definition. Foundational queer scholars have defined queer media, film and television through identitarian approaches to representation (Tropiano, 2002), authorship and inclusion behind the scenes (Doty,

1993b), audience readings and queer engagements media texts (Doty, 1993a), and queer politics and practice rendered in cinematic or televisual sensibility, form or narrative (Rich, 1992). For others, the term queer provides a more expansive definitional frame that recognises and challenges the limits of 'gay and lesbian'. For instance, in the introduction to their edited collection *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin write:

That label is confusing – does it refer only to films made by gay and lesbian people? Or does it mean films that have garnered large numbers of gay and lesbian fans? Perhaps it refers to films that depict gay and lesbian characters, even when they are made by avowed heterosexuals? And who decides if a character is gay or lesbian? (2004: 1)

Distancing the language 'gay and lesbian' from the deconstructive project of queer theory, Benshoff and Griffin argue that the term queer is often used within academic spaces to push screen and media studies beyond those simple identitarian approaches to describe 'an authorial voice, a character, a mode of textual production, and/or various types of reception practice. Filmmakers, forms, and audiences – not necessarily identified as gay or lesbian – can rather be understood as queer' (2004: 2). Adding further complexity to these definitional questions, Bryan Wuest (2018) highlights that the queer meaning of a text is often 'not produced only by creators' choices, by LGBT content in a text, or by viewers' personal interactions with the representations onscreen; meaning also results from the industrial work of packaging, promoting, framing, and naming a text' (2018: 40). That is, by the industrial practices and extratextual materials that frame certain texts as queer, which can include trailers, advertising, and categorisation in retail spaces and digital platforms. In this article, I extend these arguments to consider how these questions of defining and knowing queer media are increasingly shaped and transformed by streaming video services, including major international players such as Netflix, Prime Video, and Disney+.

I write this article from an Australian vantage point, with this nation's complex history of queer media and representation at the forefront of my mind. However, as I engage with international streaming services, many of my insights are applicable globally. As such, I straddle the national and international within this article. Within the Australian screen industry, there is a prevailing assumption of historical and contemporary 'invisibility (or under-representation) of gender and sexual diversity on Australian screens' (Cover, 2022: 7) with industry reports highlighting the extent of this in recent times (Screen Australia, 2016, 2023). Challenging this, queer media scholars have highlighted Australia's long history of queer representation in film and television (Beirne, 2009; Cover, 2022; Jennings and Lomine, 2004; McIntyre, 2017; McWilliam, 2017; Monaghan, 2020; Richards, 2019). Queerness, in this context, seems to be both visible and invisible. Of course, this is also true of film and television in other national contexts, which have their own histories of queer representation. In her book, *Ethereal Queer*, Amy Villarejo highlights 'a provocative claim' underpinning many queer histories of televisual representation in the US. That is, that media 'has always been queer... [but] it has only recently been or become recognizably gay' (Villarejo, 2014: 3). A similar provocation can be applied to the Australian media landscape which seems to have always been queer, and at times has been more (and less) recognisably gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and non-binary. Beyond the local industry though, queer media in Australia also consists of international cinemas, television, and streaming media via BVOD, local SVOD and international SVOD services. Writing academically from this context provides a rich opportunity to reflect on the intersections of screen cultures and platform politics that are shaping queer media as a cultural category. However, while researching this from an Australian perspective, I do not mean to

suggest the insights generated by this article are specific to Australian media. The global nature of the streaming video landscape means that they can be applied to many other national contexts.

## Methods for uncovering LGBTQ media on streaming video

To understand what queer media looks like on streaming services in 2024, I audited the designated LGBTQ/queer categories within several major streaming platforms available to me in Australia: two public service BVOD services (ABC iView and SBS On Demand), three commercial BVOD services (9 Now, 10 Play, 7 Plus), two local SVOD services (Binge and Stan), and three international SVOD services (Netflix, Disney+ and Prime Video). While I have not examined all available services, those chosen reflect a cross-section of the streaming media environment that accounts for the varying remits of a range of operators in the market: BVODs focused on public service and commercial goals, as well as local and international SVODs. I explored this particular range of services to consider how queer media is shaped as category within and across sites that encompass different audiences, business models and aims.

My methodology combined elements of catalogue analysis (Lobato and Scarlata, 2019) and interface analysis (Hesmondhalgh and Lotz, 2020), which have been used in screen, media, and cultural studies research to raise questions about content and power in the streaming era. I have previously adopted this method to engage with debates on the discoverability of LGBTQ media on BVOD and SVOD services (Monaghan, 2023). Extending my earlier research to grapple with definitional questions of queer media in the streaming era, I undertook a manual inspection of each service, guided by the following questions: Does the service have an LGBTQ category available through a menu or recommender system that is available on the interface's home page? If so, what terminology is used and how is the category described? Does the service group all LGBTQ media together or are smaller subcategories used to differentiate certain kinds of content? Broadly, what kinds of content are featured within the service's LGBTQ category and its subcategories? And finally, what factors are mobilised to define queer media on each service? To answer the latter two questions, I examined individual titles: reading film synopses, series synopses and/or episode descriptions within the service, cross checking this information on [IMDB.com](https://www.imdb.com), and where necessary watching films and episodes.

This method provides insight into the shape of queer as a category within the streaming media environment today, as viewed from my specific vantage point in Australia. Yet, it is not without limitations. I acknowledge that the streaming media environment is highly dynamic and personalised to each user, which means the categories or images I encountered may be entirely different to other users. Though my method does not enable a full catalogue or interface analysis, what this approach affords is a series of opportunities to interrogate the politics of platforms and bring qualitative cultural studies, screen, media and queer theory questions to the algorithmic and information-led practices of VOD (Video On Demand). As such, the discussion that follows is organised by my experiences of a range of issues related to the categorisation of queer media. My intention is to open up avenues for discussion as I illuminate the dynamics of queer media in the age of streaming video.

Though I have been researching these categories on major streaming services for several years, my in-depth investigation for this article took place in early February 2024, a time that was between two of Australia's biggest queer festivals: Midsumma in Melbourne, which takes place in January, and the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, which takes place in late February-early March. These two festivals bookend February as an unofficial pride month in Australia and there are corresponding film events such as Mardi Gras Film Festival and increased television coverage of queer

content corresponding with this. As such, the period between these festivals offers a unique position to view LGBTQ categories at a time when services are seeking to promote their queer media. However, it must be acknowledged that this approach may impact the way services promote queer media and afford LGBTQ categories with more visibility than at other times in the year (Monaghan, 2023).

## **LGBTQ as a category: From brick-and-mortar to digital distribution**

Though queerness has been ever present through screen and media history, it has not always been recognised as a distinct genre or media category. Bryan Wuest emphasises this in his analysis of LGBT distribution in the US, highlighting that ‘there have not always been media-industry infrastructures predicated on the centralization of LGBT content as a text’s definitive core’ (Wuest, 2018: 29). Exploring the emergence of LGBT special interest sections in brick-and-mortar video stores in the 1990s, Wuest notes the key role played by distributors in establishing a media category focused on LGBT content. Wuest traces the work of distributor Wolfe Video who collaborated with mainstream video stores to establish ‘gay and lesbian’ sections in their stores, shaping this as a recognised industry category. This strategy continued into the streaming era with distributors such as Wolfe taking a major role in shaping queer media as a discoverable category within streaming video interfaces. In 2012, Wolfe Video CEO Kathy Wolfe described the inclusion of ‘gay and lesbian’ on SVOD Hulu and ‘LGBT’ on YouTube Movies as the result of lengthy work ‘behind the scenes on an initiative to secure an “LGBT” category heading as part of all digital distribution platforms’ (Wolfe, 2012). In the announcement of this, Wolfe describes collaborating with the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) to drive similar initiatives at other platforms such as Amazon and Netflix (Wolfe, 2012). Reflecting on these developments, Wuest argues that LGBT became codified as a category or genre as part of a strategic industrial practice, not through ‘recognition, finally, of the true nature of a body of texts and the consequent correct identification of them. Rather, it was one particular way to name and organise texts that had become increasingly tenable and strategic’ (Wuest, 2018: 29).

With this in mind, we can return to Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt’s question, ‘How do we know queer cinema when we see it?’ (2016: 8) with the answer that we come to know queer films as queer in the streaming era through their categorisation as ‘LGBTQ Film’. On streaming services, the LGBTQ category is not a genre in the traditional sense but it ‘seems to function within shared cultural understandings of product differentiation, frequently a label for communication to distributors, exhibitors, and audiences’ (Bradbury-Rance, 2023: 142–143). That is, LGBT, LGBTQ or Queer has come to exist as a functional and recognisable media genre through industry infrastructures that group certain texts together according to shared characteristics. Categories such as this are powerful mechanisms for discovery (Hesmondhalgh and Lotz, 2020; Khoo, 2022; McKelvey and Hunt, 2019). They are designed to make content available and accessible within the expansive libraries of streaming video services (Johnson, 2020). As Wolfe writes, they have an impact: ‘this kind of accessibility to diverse and affirming images can have an enormous impact...For anyone who has ever felt isolated or alone in their gay identity, access to films that reflect and celebrate our lives can truly be a lifesaving experience’ (Wolfe, 2012).

Writing from an Australian perspective, I similarly recognise the significance of access to queer media through the affordances of streaming services. This access is especially powerful given the ongoing under-representation of LGBTIQ+ characters in Australian media (see: Screen Australia, 2016, 2023). However, I also recognise the immense power wielded by streaming services in their categorisation of queer media. These categories shape meanings around texts by associating certain

films or television series with LGBTQ categories or tags. At the same time, they establish exclusionary boundaries by not associating certain films or television series with these same categories or tags (Monaghan, 2023). As Bradbury-Rance suggests, we must question, ‘the conditions of legibility for such a tag’ (2023: 143). In the sections below, I tease out some of these conditions through examination of labelling practices, categories and subcategories, and defining characteristics of queer media in the streaming video landscape. I highlight how queer media is being actively shaped as a category through neoliberal practices of categorisation that constrain LGBTIQ+ identities and communities, queer experience, desires, aesthetics and politics.

## Labelling queer media: LGBTIQ+ vs pride

Despite scholarly attention to the question of *queer* streaming (Bradbury-Rance, 2023; Monaghan, 2023; Shacklock, 2023), and indeed the motivation behind this article, media is primarily not often labelled as ‘queer’ on streaming video services. Instead, films and television series are visible as LGBTQ media, rainbow media, or the media of pride. In their analysis of LGBTQ and Pride playlists on streaming music service Spotify, Frederik Dhaenens and Jean Burgess argue categories such as these reflect certain cultural logics related to LGBTQ cultures, tastes, pleasures, and politics that are ‘embedded [in] and shaped by digital media’s platform logics’ (Dhaenens and Burgess, 2019: 1193).

While two of Australia’s commercial BVOD services, 10 Play and 7 Plus, have no category or label for such content (though importantly, this does not mean that they have no queer titles in their libraries (see: Monaghan, 2023)), other services categorise and promote queer media through labels that group films and television series under umbrella terms (LGBTQ, LGBTQIA+) or through a broader politics of pride. For example, users of Netflix can locate ‘LGBTQ’ as a genre within its ‘TV shows’ and ‘Movies’ menus, users of Stan may come across ‘LGBTQ+’ as a recommended category when they scroll through the homepage of the service, and users of BVOD service ABC iView will discover ‘LGBTQIA+’ as a category within the main ‘Channels & Categories’ menu. While this makes queer media visible and accessible within each service, the broad LGBTQIA+ tag rarely reflects the diversity of queer identity or experience. Gay, lesbian, and transgender characters dominate these LGBTQIA+ categories, with limited inclusion of bisexual and non-binary characters, and a relative absence of asexual or intersex characters.

On other services, media is explicitly associated with Pride, anchoring media texts to the modern Pride movement through promotional copy that emphasises certain aesthetics (rainbows, colour, sparkles, and glitter), positive affect and emotions such as joy, laughter and celebration, and a politics of acceptance and equality. For example, Disney+ groups its LGBT media together in a broad ‘Pride Collection’ of films and television titles. The service first included a temporary ‘Celebrate Pride Month’ category to correspond with Pride Month in the US in June 2021 and later launched the full ‘Pride Collection’ in June 2022. Similarly, Australian BVOD service SBS On Demand features a category of films titled ‘Rainbow Pride’, promoting these titles with a tagline: ‘Love is love. And a great story is a great story. Enjoy a selection of movies that celebrate LGBTQIA+ experiences’. Similarly, on BVOD service 9 Now, a selection of queer film and television series are promoted through a curated ‘Pride’ collection, which has the tagline ‘Unleash the rainbow! Nine’s Pride collection: love, laughter, and a fabulous celebration of LGBTQIA+ joy. Tune in for colourful stories that sparkle from within’. On Prime Video, titles are ‘United with Pride’ and users are encouraged to ‘celebrate with LGBTQIA+ movies and series’ while the pride category on Binge promises a selection of content that is ‘Here, Queer and Fabulous’. Binge also promotes these titles through a tagline: ‘Be it doco, film or series, we’ve got a whole lot of LGBTQIA+ stories

to share. Strap yourselves in and join us for a complex, exciting, vibrant, heartbreaking, gaw-geous (p)ride'. As I browse through each of these services, encountering variations of taglines emphasising celebration, rainbows, and fabulousness, I am struck by the absence of any explicit mentions of politics, gender, sexuality, sex, or desire. Halperin and Traub highlight that the pride movement has 'generated considerable dissatisfactions' (2009: 3) for its alignment with a mainstream neo-liberal politics of normalisation and respectability, which in many ways is commercial, depoliticised and desexualised. By connecting queer media to this movement, SVOD and BVOD services mobilise similar logics, promoting certain films and television series through the affective registers of happiness and joy. These categories highlight what constitutes 'good' queer media in the contemporary moment, emphasising themes of empowerment and celebration, while eliding reference to any of the messier qualities of queerness: sex, sexuality, desire, nuances of identity, rejections of authenticity, negative affect, shame, failure, marginalised queer cultures, questions, challenges, subversions, activism and politics.

### **Microgenres and subcategories: Queer media as a constellation of niche interests**

Though some streaming video services use the LGBTQ or pride category to cohere queer media into a tidy label or genre,<sup>2</sup> most services approach queer media as a constellation of niche interests. For example, Disney+ breaks the broad category of its 'Pride Collection' into smaller groups, highlighting queer titles not just through character and narrative, but other factors including talent, creators, and critical acclaim. The service's subcategories include 'LGBTQ+ Stories', 'LGBTQ+ Talent', 'Pride Episodes', 'GLAAD Media Award Winners and Nominees', 'From LGBTQ+ Creators', 'Black & LGBTQ+', 'Amplifying Transgender Stories' and 'Movies and Shorts'. Shacklock argues LGBTQ categories on streaming services tend to reflect only 'the most visible and dominantly accepted forms of queerness' (2023: 323). While bisexual, asexual, non-binary, and intersex people remain relatively invisible at this level of categorisation, Disney+ highlights some diversity within the LGBTIQ+ community and queer media, platforming Black LGBTQ+ and transgender stories through the service's subcategory feature. This approach emphasises the unique narratives of marginalised identities and communities that are often overshadowed within the broader queer/LGBTQ categorisations.

ABC iView also brings a constellation of subcategories into use through smaller groupings of films and television series such as 'Celebrate Pride! Drama & Comedy' and 'Celebrate Pride! Documentaries'. iView's subcategories are relatively static, ranging from broad generic groupings through to more specific niche categories such as titles 'Featuring Miriam Margoyles'. Notable within the iView approach is the collection of segments from other series. For example, relevant clips from the series *You Can't Ask That* are promoted in a subcategory titled 'You Can't Ask That: LGBTIQ+ Australians' and short segments from documentary series *Queerstralia* are promoted in a subcategory titled 'Queerstralia: LGBTIQ+ History'. In this way, the subcategory enables users to seek out brief moments or visible traces of queerness within other television series on the platform. This emphasises some of the queer pleasures that might be found within the service's library, whether that is in particular episodes or short clips that are easily accessed and consumed. This approach is a powerful tool of discovery. When LGBTQ media is approached in this way, as a constellation of smaller niche interests (modes, genres, themes, relevant episodes, short clips) rather than a cohesive genre or broad category, users are more readily able to navigate the diversity of queer film and television titles on each service.

Taking a different approach, Prime Video uses subcategories to look outward. When accessing the LGBTQA + featured collection on Prime Video, users will first engage with a list of films and series available on the Prime Video platform, which are grouped together under a broad category 'LGBTQIA+ TV and movies'. Scroll below this and Prime Video's subcategories advertise the content in external libraries through additional SVOD subscriptions: 'Hayu: LGBTQIA+ TV' and a variety of other platforms such as 'OUTtv: most popular', 'Shudder: LGBTQIA+ TV and Movies', 'Paramount+: LGBTQIA+ TV and Movies', 'AMC+: LGBTQIA+ TV and Movies' and 'DocPlay: LGBTQIA+ TV and Movies'. Prime Video's subscription-within-subscription approach was established in 2015 with the 'Streaming Partners Program' which later became known as 'Prime Video Channels' through which users can add additional subscriptions to their library (Wayne, 2017). Through this, the Prime Video platform becomes the access point for those additional SVOD services. For example, rather than directly subscribing to Hayu (a niche reality television SVOD) to watch UK's bisexual dating series *The Bi Life*, subscribers can create a Hayu channel within the Prime Video interface, bundling their subscription fees and creating an easy access point for Hayu's queer media. While the LGBTQ category on Prime Video works to showcase relevant content in the Prime Video library, it primarily encourages users to subscribe to other services. This positions Prime Video as a central hub to access a diverse range of queer titles, even when those titles are not within the Prime Video library.

On Netflix, the understanding of queer media as a constellation of smaller subcategories is emphasised further through the personalisation of these categories. Netflix is well-known for its use of microgenres (Goodwin, 2020; Sim, 2023) and recommendation system that tailors the experience of its library for each user (Gomez-Uribe and Hunt, 2015). Netflix microgenres are determined based on trending topics and user data, including viewing behaviours and preferences (Pajkovic, 2022). While many scholarly accounts of Netflix reflect on the experience of scrolling through recommended categories, queer media is also available through direct navigation to Netflix's LGBTQ Movies and LGBTQ TV Shows genre categories. A few quick clicks from the home page, LGBTQ becomes the centre of the vast Netflix library. When users seek out queer media on Netflix in this way, they are likely to encounter a range of personalised LGBTQ-specific microgenres such as 'LGBTQ + Biographical Movies' or 'Dramatic LGBTQ + television'. However, Netflix also uses categorisation practices to encourage users to view traditional genres queerly. When scrolling through the LGBTQ Movies genre category, the user will likely find more traditional generic groupings such as 'comedies', 'dramas' and 'directed by women' within the suggested categories. However, unlike the homepage version of these genres, they contain only LGBTQ films and television series, anchoring more traditional genres of 'comedy' and 'drama' in queerness. Positioning LGBTQ as the centre of gravity in its microgenres, Netflix offers users something of a queer version of these traditional generic categories, enabling its extensive library to be viewed through rainbow-tinted glasses.

## Defining queerness through good queer characters

Across these variations of labelling and categorisation, I am interested in the question of how services determine the content to be included in the queer media category. By this I do not mean the technical processes of tagging and classification, but the factors that are mobilised to define queer media and the constellations of its subcategories on each service. Shacklock's assessment of LGBTQ television on streaming platforms considers that 'queer television has been defined by the presence of queer characters, whether in leading or supporting roles' (2023: 323). From my Australian vantage point, I similarly recognise the presence of visible LGBTQIA+ characters in



many of the queer categories and subcategories on streaming services. This was the case for most content on SBS On Demand, 9 Now, Stan, Binge, Netflix, Prime Video, ABC iView, and Disney+.

In contrast to academic approaches to queer media that understand ‘sexualities as complex, multiple, overlapping and historically nuanced, rather than immutably fixed’ (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004: 2), streaming services dominantly define queer media through the presence of characters that are easily understood as queer. As Shacklock highlights in her analysis of US and UK streaming services, ‘there is no room in the category for queer coded characters or characters whose sexuality may not be clearly defined’ (2023: 323), which means that the LGBTQ category ‘reveals simply the presence of prominently queer characters or people within a programme’ (2023: 323). Building on Shacklock’s assessment, I understand this as a consequence of the information practices of streaming services that seek to make content taggable, searchable, and categorisable. While they make some LGBTIQ+ identities visible within each service’s library, they also have a reductive effect, constraining queerness to the realms of identity and representation.

Viewed through the categorisation practices of streaming video services, queer media is shaped as a cultural category based on the inclusion of certain characters, but not necessarily any aesthetic or political challenge to normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. While Shacklock notes that LGBTQ categories are premised on the presence of queer characters within film and television texts, I argue that it is not just the presence of visible LGBTIQ+ characters that is significant. Beneath this is the emphasis on acceptable LGBTIQ+ characters, identities, and stories that coalesce around so-called ‘positive’ representation. A recent controversy reflecting this occurred in late 2022 when Netflix removed the crime series *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022) from its LGBTQ tag after significant public backlash. As *Variety*’s Zack Sharf explains, ‘The tag is normally used to spotlight shows such as “Heartstopper” and “Sex Education,” both of which include LGBTQ characters and subject matter in a positive light’ (Sharf, 2022). While *Dahmer* tells the story of a gay serial killer and his gay victims, and was created by gay showrunners Ryan Murphy and Ian Brennan, the series was described on TikTok as ‘not the representation we’re looking for’ (Sharf, 2022) and subsequently removed from the LGBTQ category. Critiquing the decision, Murphy stated he did not believe ‘that all gay stories have to be happy stories’ (Wang, 2022).

Queer media studies has long challenged the positive/negative dichotomy, acknowledging that so-called ‘positive’ representations are often focused on assimilation into the mainstream (see Duggan, 2002). Reflecting on this in the context of gay men’s representation, Michael Lovelock argues that happiness ‘has become an overwhelming imperative’ in popular narratives about gay men, producing a ‘normative conception of what constitutes a “good” gay life in the contemporary, neoliberal moment’ (2019: 562). Similarly, trans theorist Cael Keegan considers that ‘good trans media objects are considered ‘good’ when they fold transness into the visual economy of existing normative media’ (Keegan, 2022: 27). Though Keegan primarily works in the field of trans studies, which has different theoretical investments to queer studies, his work aptly describes how the pressure to counter negative stereotypes of the past with ‘positive’ contemporary images produces highly marketable “good” trans objects designed largely for middle-class, white, normatively gendered consumers’ (2022: 28). Keegan advocates for embracing ‘bad trans objects’ that might ‘point to a broader vision for trans politics than provisional inclusion into gender-normative worlds’ (2022: 29). Streaming video services have little scope for such nuance or critique in their categorisation and curation of queer titles, which as I have earlier noted, tend to be emphasised as narratives of ‘love, laughter, and...fabulous celebration’ (9 Now). But what about titles like *Dahmer* that are not aligned with the politics of affirmation, pride, and positive representation? Must LGBTQ categories be populated with ‘good’ characters, heroes, and happy endings? While the inclusion of

*Dahmer* in Netflix's LGBTQ category was critiqued by some community members and online commentators, should the queer dynamics and production context of the series be ignored in the categorisation process? To me, *Dahmer* usefully highlights a particular politics at work around both queer representation and the categorisation of queer titles on streaming services, where film and television is flattened into a positive/negative binary. This case highlights the ideological power underpinning the categorisation of titles on streaming services, where decisions to include or exclude certain titles from the category have significant impact. *Dahmer* suggests that media can only become knowable and possible as 'queer media' if it aligns with the normative politics 'good' queer characters and their happy narratives of empowerment.

## On the queer identity of a text

The labelling and categorisation strategies that I have begun to tease out here create an illusion that media texts can and do have a cohesive 'queer' identity. However, screen and media scholarship challenges such simple definitions. After all, who decides on the identity of a film or television text? As Wuest highlights, the LGBT 'label does not correlate to a neat, well-defined category into which films clearly do or do not fit' (2018: 40). This is because 'a text's identity is highly contingent, able to be marshalled around a particular "centre of gravity," and different venues (e.g. festivals, video stores, or streaming platforms) and practitioners (e.g. distributors) can choose to centralise LGBT content/appeal or not' (Wuest, 2018: 40). For example, Tom Ford's *A Single Man* (2009) depicts a day in the life of a middle-aged gay man after the death of his partner. However, the film's poster and promotional images emphasised the film's stars, Colin Firth and Julianne Moore, enabling it to be read as a straightforwardly heterosexual romance. Though the film's original trailer highlighted the queer elements of the story, these were restrained in later promotional materials produced by the Weinstein Company (Richards, 2016). As Stuart Richards argues, 'this approach is indicative of many LGBT films in that there is a distinct downplay of queer content to favour the "quality" characteristics of the films' (2019: 19). Conversely, Wuest highlights the promotion of Joe Casey's *Hit Parade* (2010) as 'a film with minimal LGBT content but with paratexts and promotional infrastructure that emphasised and played off this aspect of the film' (2018: 39). Both *A Single Man* and *Hit Parade* are available to rent through Prime Video,<sup>3</sup> but they are not tagged as LGBTQIA+ films or included in Prime Video's 'United with Pride' category. On the service, *Hit Parade* has one genre tag (Action) and *A Single Man* three (Suspense, Romance, and Drama) and the description of both films elide any mention of queer characters or narratives. As these examples demonstrate, a text's LGBT identity is dependent upon many factors, including the choices of producers, distributors, exhibitors, and streaming services that place content within LGBT categories.

Though there are often strategic industrial choices to align texts with or against the LGBT categories as shaped by distributors, my analysis in this article shows that content appears to be included in LGBT categories on streaming platforms because it features LGBTQIA+ characters and/or focuses on aspects of LGBTQIA+ community, relationships, or everyday life. Using characters and story as an anchor for queer media as a category seems straightforward, but the examples of *A Single Man* and *Hit Parade* highlight more questions that should be asked about this. Who decides the sexuality or gender identity of characters? If a character's sexuality is hinted at, or a character seems to challenge gender norms, does that count? Moreover, do the LGBTQIA+ characters need to be the central characters in a film or television series?

Complicating these questions further, Schoonover and Galt implore that we consider 'who is excluded when...[certain] logics are imposed as the prerequisite for defining queer cinema?' (Schoonover and Galt, 2016: 8). They argue that the 'common-sense approaches' of categorising

media according to inclusion of LGBTIQ+ characters involves ‘privileging of Western or other dominant practices of cinema’ (Schoonover and Galt, 2016: 8) or else a ‘Western optical regime’ (Schoonover and Galt, 2016: 13) that privileges visibility and publicness. That is, a version of queerness that is recognisable through Western lenses of visibility and identity through which queerness coheres into specific recognisable identities, sexual desires, and acts, and is celebrated through a politics of liberation and empowerment. Interrogating this, Schoonover and Galt write that ‘Non-Western or nontraditional sexualities may not always fare well when viewed through a Western lens of visibility’ (Schoonover and Galt, 2016: 12). Analysing queer television on streaming services between 2019 and 2021, Shacklock raises similar concerns, arguing that ‘queer streaming television operates as a discursive formation, which teaches us what queer lives should look like and how queer stories should be told – one that is overwhelmingly based on visible categories of desire, rather than a more fluid understanding of queer experience (2023: 319).

Questions around the inclusion and exclusion of content in a queer category might also be posed toward historical and contemporary representations, bringing the contingency of identity terms, language, and signification practices into focus. Indeed, ‘though it is easy and often helpful to imagine a text having some form of LGBT “identity,”’ (Wuest, 2018: 40), queer theory highlights that all identity categories are historically, culturally, and contextually contingent. As Benshoff and Griffin highlight:

while today’s films can be relatively forthright about sexuality, films made before the 1960s could only hint at it in various ways. Thus, there are great cultural and historical differences made by gay and lesbian directors in 1930s Hollywood and today’s independent gay and lesbian filmmakers (2004: 1)

Reading this quote two decades after its publication, I am struck by the question of how we look back at queer screen history in the contemporary moment. What do those cultural and historical differences look like through the streaming video services of today? Of course, each streaming video service places different emphasis on the percentage of original, new release, newer titles, and back-catalogue content in their library. However, their queer categories tend to emphasise films and television series that were released in the last two decades. If historical queer media texts exist in the streaming library, how are algorithmic and curatorial practices – recommender systems, tags, curated categories – packaging them for contemporary audiences? More research into the remediation and preservation of queer screen history is vitally necessary to answer this question.

## **Ongoing questions for queer media studies**

I began this article with questions about accessing, knowing, understanding, and recognising queer media in the age of streaming video. To locate answers to these questions, I have explored how streaming video on demand services use strategic labels that associate queer media with the politics of pride, produce queer media as a constellation of niche subcategories and microgenres, and define queerness through the inclusion of recognisable characters and positive representations. Considered alone, each of these processes seem relatively straightforward and common sense. Queerness is labelled and categorised in particular ways that enable queer media to be accessed by users of each service. Classification and organisation of titles is a significant factor in the discoverability of content on streaming video platforms, so film and television must be labelled and categorised to be discovered. From my vantage point in Australia, these processes are incredibly valuable as they point to places where (some) LGBTIQ+ identities, communities, and experiences can be found on screen.

However, the categorisation practices of streaming video providers also play a significant role in shaping and communicating cultural values about queer media. When the processes I have mapped out here are considered together, they are reflective of the power of streaming video services to shape and constrain queer media as a cultural category – one that is knowable and cohesive, that can easily be retrieved by searching key terms or discovered by browsing each service’s interface. By investigating the categories that streaming video providers use to organise and highlight queer film and television, I have identified how queer media is being defined as a cultural category through the shortcuts afforded through labels, categories, and definitions. Examining the LGBTQ categories of BVOD and SVOD services, I encountered several tensions: practices that make some LGBTIQ+ identities visible but simultaneously constrain queerness to specific visible identity categories, emphasising representation of characters over aesthetics, production context, or critical discursive framing. Beyond this, I encountered instances where LGBTQ categories focused only on positive affect and pride, powerfully aligning queer media with a normative politics of ‘good’ characters and happy endings. I argue that these practices have a reductive effect, constraining queerness and taming its radical edges.

The information practices of video on demand also raise ongoing questions for queer media studies. How do we reconcile queer theory with this increasing solidification and codification of queer media? How do we account for queer styles and aesthetics, forms and narratives, authorship, and politics that do not easily fit into the categories established by streaming video services? How do the information practices examined in this article and the many other unexamined practices of discoverability influence how we access and understand more challenging queer titles, historical media, or sexualities and gender identities that do not align with Western lenses of visibility and pride? Questions of defining and *knowing* queer cinema and queer television remain incredibly complex. Can we hold onto this complexity even if we accept the convenient shortcuts (labels, categories, and definitions) offered to us by video on demand? Or do our queerest pleasures and the associated possibilities for queer film and television remain beyond the information practices of digital platforms? In bringing these questions to a conclusion, my aim is not to argue what is queer (or not) about the streaming video era, but to forge pathways for ongoing critical investigation into the queer politics of the streaming era. As the vast libraries of streaming video services continue to grow, we must continue to develop new lines of interrogation to question how digital platform politics influence how queer media is discovered, accessed, known, and understood.

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## Notes

1. In this article, I follow the lead of scholars who use the terms queer, LGBT, LGBTQ and LGBTIQ+ / LGBTQIA+ interchangeably as umbrella terms to refer to films and television series that represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, queer, intersex, and asexual identities and communities. When referencing academic and industry sources, I use the terminology used by each source. Additionally, the term queer is evoked throughout this article as a theoretical concept drawing on the work of queer theory.
2. SBS On Demand’s ‘Rainbow Pride’ is a list of films, 9 Now’s ‘Pride’ is a list of television series and films, and Stan’s ‘LGBTQ+’ is a list of films and television series.
3. Hit Parade is available on Prime Video in the United States but not on the Australian version of the service.

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