

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In the United States, the LGBT phenomenon is no longer considered taboo. The Defense of Marriage Act, passed by the United States Congress in 1996, established marriage as a union between men and women. Massachusetts became the first state in the United States to legalize same-sex marriage eight years later. According to Pew Research reports (“Changing Attitudes on Gay Marriage”), by 2011, more Americans endorsed same-sex marriage than opposed it. The Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalized same-sex marriage around the country in 2015 (Cook 2018, 4). The LGBT individuals in America have made substantial strides toward acceptance over the last two decades, with the highest score of 72 percent in 2019 compared to just 49 percent in 2007. (pewresearchcenter.org, 2020). Many people have tried to figure out why LGBT rights were embraced so quickly in comparison to other civil rights movements, and others have credited the media.

For years, media (e.g. television, newspaper, film, radio) has created representation influencing our reality. One of the media platforms that contribute to such representation is film. According to Hornby (2005), the film is a series of audiovisual that brings and tells the story, which is usually shown in cinema.

According to Lado (1974), video movies or motion pictures are the most important visual aids in principle since they combine the picture with action, color, and sound. Film or movie has been used for human entertainment as well as medium that convey messages (p 201). The film also contains perspective and social construction from the people who work behind it.

LGBT community has become a part of a film for years. However, the representation of LGBT has developed in each period. In October 1961, the Production Code Administration (PCA) that prohibited the depiction of “sexual perversion” in films was converted, leading to the legalization of homosexual content, although with warning and discretion (Noriega, 1990). In result, the movie such as; *The Children’s Hour* (1961), *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), and *The Boys in the Band* (1970) explicitly represented LGBT characters with a regular theme of the negative result of being LGBT. In 1970, the representation of LGBT began to shift along with the Stonewall riots, Black Cat riots, and gay pride movements. Because of this political context, LGBT starts to embrace ‘queer cinema’ in the 1990s where LGBT people acted in independent films with shameless representation (Dean, 2007). The evolution of queer actors still occurs until this time in mainstream media where many people’s perspectives toward LGBT have changed and begin to consider them as a regular part of society (Sadika 2018, 2).

According to Bramford (2016), LGBT representation in the film seems vulnerable to be depicted as misrepresented. In the past, mainstream films with gay

themes, such as *Philadelphia* and *Brokeback Mountain*, lacked authenticity in their portrayals, becoming "watered down" or "heterosexualized" to appeal to a wider audience. These two movies seemed to comfort those audiences because, although sympathetically told, both movies always end with the death of one gay romantic partner, subtly implying a homophobic message. Other movies such as *Cucumber and London Spy* strategically take a different approach by presenting a world with an "exotic otherness," portraying gay men entrancing in their divergences. However, these representations are potentially just as inauthentic (p 1).

Before the 1990s, teen homosexuality (and bisexuality) in American cinema was generally dealt with in vague, if not metaphorical terms, and when it was, the individuals in issue were nearly always unhappy and seeking to hide their non-heterosexual inclinations for fear of humiliation, persecution, or even death. Movies like; *Forty Deuce* (1982), *Abuse* (1982), *The Boys Next Door* (1986), *Torch Song Trilogy* (1988), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2* and *Vision Quest* (both 1985) are some examples (Shary 2002, 238).

One could argue that youth do not openly question their sexuality until they are in their college or post-teen years and that the very idea remains a threat to the existing heterosexual majority, especially for youth whose impressionability is a major issue for strict parents. Another possible issue with depicting adolescent homosexuality is the widely held belief that teenagers are oversexed, allowing being gay or lesbian at such a young age to look more sexually irresponsible, a fear that

may have been especially prevalent during the AIDS epidemic. This unfairly shifts the focus of same-sex relationships from sexual to romantic, but most queer youth representations in the 1990s tended to deal with conflicts around both sexual interaction and romantic desire, or, to put it another way, the same conflicts that heterosexual teens are shown dealing with in other movies. Ironically, as public awareness of AIDS and gay rights legislation grew in the 1990s, the number of gay characters in American films, both kids and adults, grew, occasionally in stereotypically bad positions, but mostly in a more favorable light (Shary 2002, 239).

Teenage homosexuality has grown considerably more acceptable, and its typically sensitive, non-extreme depiction gives an image of gay youth as increasingly accepted, looking for identity like all young people, on their terms, due to gay youth parts in 1990s films. However, for this representation to be fully realized, Hollywood will need to produce more films that feature gay and bisexual teenagers in otherwise ordinary roles, something that the industry appears to be a long way from accomplishing, even after the Oscar-winning *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) brought attention to non-straight sexuality issues for teenagers. Stereotypical depictions may undoubtedly negate the progress gained in portraying LGBT adolescents in diverse and realistic ways, at least until mainstream American culture is prepared to accept LGBT individuals (Shary 2002, 246).

Coming out is an aspect of queer identity that is often shown in a movie, which is when LGBT characters are exposed or reveal their sexual orientation to

others. People who described their queer characters to find their sexual identity will view the statement as a significant step to claim their queer identity (Cover 2000, 80).

Love, Simon is a 2018 American LGBT coming-of-age romantic-comedy film directed by Greg Berlanti, written by Elizabeth Berger and Isaac Aptaker, and based on Becky Abertalli's novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. It tells about Simon Spier, a high school closeted kid who arranges to balance his family, his best friends, and Martin, the threatener that threatened him for his gay secret to the entire school. Meanwhile, an anonymous internet user called Blue has made Simon fall in love while simultaneously discovering his identity.

Love, Simon (2018) is considered a game-changer of queer cinema due of the central character is gay. Since the director, Greg Berlanti is also gay, this movie is considered empowering. This movie gets many positive reviews and supports from many LGBT people especially with the same case in dealing with their sexuality. It can be the first time for LGBT youth seeing central character is represented as empowering and positive representation in a mainstream movie. Apart from enthusiasm and positive support towards the movie, Simon can be a role model or a hero for gay teens that are still afraid of *coming out* (Ursell 2018).

Love, Simon (2018) positions homosexual romantic relationships in a conventional romantic comedy that is traditionally oriented toward heterosexual couples. Despite the progress of the 21st C regarding the representation of LGBT

youth, “the majority of queer teen films remain sidelined in the independent market“(Shary 2002). *Love, Simon* (2018) was financed with a \$17 million budget and attractive casts, represents the mainstream of LGBTQ cinematic representation driven by a major Hollywood studio (Gustines 2018). A few years back, the enjoyment of watching gay individuals, brought together by the multitude of on-screen heterosexual narratives, drew upon the use of “heterosexual societies and conveyed an appropriate message for their viewing purposes”(Hart 2013, 31). This tendency causes gay fan culture to theorize and speculates about heterosexual men in mainstream films – a form of “non-heterocentric parsing” of the film. Uniquely, Simon’s approach deconstructs this dynamic. Whereas previous gay characters had to find their queer identity in the mainstream heterosexual film, *Love, Simon* (2018) did introduce a gay main character whose sexuality is open to the audience and then integrate the narrative into coming-of-age mainstream films.

Despite its popularity, *Love, Simon* is not free from controversy, specifically the depiction of gay characters themselves. The depiction of Simon as a normal/hetero-look boy makes the depiction empowering. On the contrary, “the normal-ness” of being gay fundamentally problematic because it creates a new understanding that being gay is an abnormality. This message is not what queer youth need (Phanord 2018). The controversy of *Love, Simon* (2018) broadens frequently around the depiction of black-effeminate gay, Ethan. As Tobia, gender-nonconforming states, “For over a decade, the unspoken rule of gay television and

cinema has been that masculine gay man can be a sexy protagonist, while effeminate or non-conforming gender gay positioned as desexualized comedic relief” (Tobia 2018). Consequently, this film is being accused of privileging “the right-type” of gay over effeminate and non-conforming gay (Reynolds 2018).

Such problematic representation in empowering narrative of gay movies may happen due to the influence of homonormativity. Duggan (2002) described homonormativity as a norm or concept where privileged mainstream (white, urban, middle-class, cisgender, monogamous) gay males and lesbians are treated as normal citizens just like their heterosexual friends, except for the same-sex attraction and relationship. However, rather than change or challenge heteronormativity, homonormativity maintains heteronormative values while promising the gay community as demobilized and privatized (p 179). Homonormativity allows sexual minorities to search for their rights through marriage, monogamy, domesticity, reproduction, healthcare, and consumption practices (Robinson 2016, 1). These strategies restrict the rights of sexual minorities since they are still trapped in a particular heteronormative institution. Therefore, some sexual minorities can function into heteronormative structures achieving more rights and privileges than some others who cannot assimilate. Consequently, transgender and non-conforming gender community are often marginalized for not conforming their gender into a heteronormative traditional gender role. According to Stryker (2008),

“homonormativity was an effort to promote a double sense of marginalization and displacement undergone within transgender political and cultural activism” (p 145).

Homonormativity behind this movie influence how these gay characters are being represented. As a game-changer in queer cinema, the character of Simon is empowering as a white teenager gay man. The representation can be seen through the narrative elements of the movie as well as its non-narrative. The homonormativity ideology behind this movie takes a role in how gay characters are represented differently based on their color and gender. Since the director, Greg Berlanti is white-masculine gay, homonormativity influences how the director creates the gap between gay characters in a *coming-out* movie.

A recent study regarding the homonormativity issue in the film has not been conducted so far. However, the writer found a journal regarding the depiction of heteronormativity on TV series instead. The journal entitled *Mise-en-Scène Analysis on Heteronormativity in Queer Narrative "San Junipero" from Black Mirror* by Wulandhani and Wijaya (2019). This journal investigates heteronormativity through a representation of the queer characters Kelly and Yorkie. This journal finds that there are gendered stereotypes, victimization, and melancholy relationship of lesbians which support their thesis on ‘heaven for queer?’ emphasizing the notion of heteronormativity. On the other hand, this study will focus on homonormativity as an issue as well as analyzing the representation of gay characters in *Love, Simon (2018)*. Hopefully, this study can fill the previous research regarding representation in queer

cinema as well as be critically aware of heteronormative and/or homonormative values within the movie.

Based on the elaboration above, Homonormativity takes a role in affecting the representation of 3 gay characters, Simon, Bram, Ethan, in *Love, Simon* (2018) because all of them are portrayed unequal based on their color and gender. Therefore, homo/hetero audiences need to be critically aware of gay representation in mainstream LGBT movies. To conduct this study, the writer borrows the concept of the new homonormativity by Lisa Duggan as mention in her essay on *The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism* (2002), and her book *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2003). The writer's approach is qualitative, which concerns a deep interpretation of text and image data to gain social thinking and ideological perspectives (Creswell 2014). Further, the analysis process will be conducted based on its narrative (plot) and non-narrative, *mise-en-scène* elements, as suggested by Ida (2016).

1.2 Statement of the Problems

Based on the background above, this study analyzes Simon, Bram, and Ethan characters in the *Love, Simon* (2018). Accordingly, this study tries to answer the following question:

1. How does homonormativity affect different representations of 3 gay characters (Simon, Bram, Ethan) in *Love, Simon* (2018)?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This research aims at analyzing the representation of gay characters in *Love, Simon* (2018) movie. Three gay characters are portrayed differently. The movie gives different treatment regarding their identity as gay. As the movie promotes LGBT ideas, the writer expects the audiences to be critically aware of the representation of LGBT characters, whether the representation is stereotypical, discriminative, or not.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The representation of LGBT characters in my study is represented differently, including stereotypical or non-stereotypical. The representation is analyzed deeper with the treatment of the filmmaker in portraying the gay characters. This study aims to reveal how they are being represented. This will be significant for hetero/homo audiences to be critically aware of how they are being represented. Homonormativity as a concept that still maintains heteronormative values can be a new insight that homonormativity in the queer film is not always empowering and ideal for queer individuals as a whole. Hopefully, this study can contribute to broadening understanding that other social identities affect discrimination to some queer individuals in homonormative society.

1.5 Definitions of Key Terms

1. Gay: “*a common and acceptable word for male homosexuals, but used for both genders*” (Miller, 2016).

2. Homonormativity: “*a paradigm where privileged mainstream (white, urban, middle-class, cisgender, monogamous) gay men and lesbians are positioned as ‘ordinary, normal citizens’ just like their heterosexual friends, except for the same-sex attraction and relationship, rather than change or challenge heteronormativity, homonormativity maintains heteronormative values while promising gay community as demobilized and privatized*” (Duggan, 2002).

3. Heteronormativity: “*a norm that preferences heterosexuality in social relation, thus, marginalizing sexual minority into lower status*” (Warner, 1993).