

“Lesbians? Where?": Queer and cis
heterosexual audiences' interpretations of
queer coding in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and
Thelma & Louise

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated queer and cis heterosexual viewers' interpretations of queer coding in the 1991 films *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* using a theoretical framework incorporating tenets from semiotics, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding communication model, and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity. Queer coding is a process through which fictional characters are subtextually portrayed as queer. Some audiences might interpret these characters as LGBTQ+, while others may view them as cis heterosexual. This study aimed to determine and compare how queer and cis heterosexual audiences interpret the queer coding in the selected movies. To the researcher's knowledge, no existing studies have investigated different viewers' interpretations of *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* using the above-described framework. All three lenses comprising the study's theoretical framework hold that meaning creation is subjective *and* culturally restricted. These optics also consider the influence that an individual's sociocultural circumstances and subjectivity have on their creation and interpretation of meaning. This study used qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gather data from eight queer-identifying and eight cis heterosexual-identifying participants, which was then interpreted via a thematic analysis. This analysis yielded rich insights regarding the similarities and differences between the various participants' understandings of and desires for queerness in the two films, the personal and contextual considerations that influenced their interpretations, and the filmic signs the participants used to construct their understandings. Future studies could replicate this research using a larger, more demographically diverse sample to explore how different audiences with varying influences interpret queer-coded movies.

Keywords: *Fried green tomatoes*, Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity, queer coding, semiotics, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding model, *Thelma & Louise*

OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie het queer en cis heteroseksuele kykers se interpretasies van queer-kodering in die 1991 films *Fried green tomatoes* en *Thelma & Louise* ondersoek deur gebruik te maak van 'n teoretiese raamwerk wat beginsels van semiotiek, Stuart Hall (1973) se enkodering-dekoderingskommunikasiemodel, en Judith Butler (1988) se teorie van gender-*performativity* inkorporeer. Queer-kodering is 'n proses waardeur fiktiewe karakters subtekstueel as queer uitgebeeld word. Sommige gehore kan hierdie karakters as LGBTQ+ interpreteer, terwyl ander hulle dalk as cis heteroseksueel verstaan. Hierdie studie het ten doel gehad om te bepaal en te vergelyk hoe queer en cis heteroseksuele gehore die queer-kodering in die geselekteerde films interpreteer. Sover die navorser bewus is, het geen bestaande studies al verskillende kykers se interpretasies van queer-kodering in *Fried green tomatoes* en *Thelma & Louise* ondersoek deur middel van die bogenoemde teoretiese raamwerk nie. Al drie lense wat die studie se teoretiese raamwerk vorm huldig die siening dat betekenisgeving subjektief en kultureel beperk is. Hierdie lense oorweeg ook die invloed wat 'n individu se sosiokulturele omstandighede en subjektiwiteit op hul skepping en interpretasie van betekenis het. Die studie het kwalitatiewe semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude en fokusgroepe gebruik om data van agt queer-identifiserende en agt cis heteroseksueel-identifiserende deelnemers in te samel, wat deur middel van 'n tematiese analise geïnterpreteer is. Hierdie analise het ryk insigte opgelewer oor die ooreenkomste en verskille tussen die verskeie deelnemers se begrip van en begeertes rakende queerheid in die twee flieks, die persoonlike en kontekstuele faktore wat hul interpretasies beïnvloed het, en die fliek-tekens wat die deelnemers gebruik het om hul interpretasies te konstrueer. Toekomstige studies kan hierdie navorsing herhaal deur 'n groter, meer demografies-diverse steekproef te gebruik om te ondersoek hoe verskillende gehore met verskeie invloede queer-gekodeerde films interpreteer.

Sleutelwoorde: *Fried green tomatoes*, Judith Butler (1988) se teorie van gender-*performativity*, queer-kodering, semiotiek, Stuart Hall (1973) se enkodering-dekoderingskommunikasiemodel, *Thelma & Louise*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- APA: American Psychiatric Association
- BaSSREC: Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
- CARA: Classification and Rating Administration
- DSM-I: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
- IRIMS: Integrated Research Integrity Management Systems
- LGBTQ+: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and other sexual and gender identifications
- MPA: Motion Picture Association
- MPAA: Motion Picture Association of America
- MPC: Model Penal Code
- MPPDA: Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association
- NWU: North-West University
- PCA: Production Code Administration
- POV: camera point of view
- RDGC: Research Data Gatekeeper Committee
- USA: United States of America

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

We're not just frying tomatoes here ...

Ninny: "Does the name Idgie Threadgoode ring a bell?"

Evelyn: "Um, no ma'am. I don't think so."

Ninny: "You'd remember her."

- excerpt of dialogue from *Fried green tomatoes* (Avnet, 1991)

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study investigated queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. The dissertation's introductory chapter provides an overview of queer coding in the film industry to orientate the reader in terms of the study's focus. In section 1.2, the theoretical framework is outlined. These optics are a semiotic understanding of media representation, reception theory, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding communication model, queer theory, and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity. Principles from the three lenses were used to develop a synthesised framework that allowed an exploration of how different audiences interpret queer-coded movies. Section 1.3 explains and motivates the study's problem statement. Thereafter, the study's research questions and aims are presented. Section 1.6 describes and motivates the qualitative research approach employed, while section 1.7 delineates the study's research methods. Discussions of the study's ethical considerations and significance follow. Finally, section 1.10 presents the study's chapter layout and briefly describes each chapter's content and purpose.

1.1.1 Background and context

Historically used as a derogatory reference to homosexuality, the term queer has, from the late 1980s onwards, been reappropriated by many gender and sexual minorities as a positive self-label (Hewitt, 2018; McCann & Monaghan, 2020:2). In this dissertation, the term is used, in conjunction with the term LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and other sexual and gender identifications) as an umbrella term for sexual and gender identifications other than cis heterosexuality. The term cisgender, often shortened to cis, describes an individual whose gender identification aligns with their body and the sex assigned to them at birth (Riggs & Treharne, 2017:115). This dissertation also uses the terms sexually queer/sexual queerness and genderqueer/gender queerness to refer specifically to sexual identifications other than heterosexuality and gender identifications other than

cisgenderism, respectively. The above terms were chosen because they are inclusive of all non-heterosexual sexual and non-cisgendered gender identifications, and acknowledge that these identifications are fluid, multiple, varying, and diverse. Throughout the study, terms such as homosexuality/homosexual, gay, and lesbian are also used, depending on their appropriateness as dictated by the sociohistorical context of their application.

Queer coding is a process through which fictionalised characters are subtextually portrayed as sexually queer or genderqueer. Queer-coded characters' sexual or gender identifications are not stated directly or confirmed. Nonetheless, these individuals appear queer to some degree (Greenhill, 2015:111-112; Kim, 2017:156). Films usually imply queer-coded characters' queerness by employing cultural stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people (Doty, 2000:3; Kim, 2017:156-157). In this dissertation, the terms queer coding and queer-coded refer to subtextual, implicit depictions of sexual and gender identifications other than cis heterosexuality. These depictions include but are not limited to subtextual portrayals of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer characters.

Queer coding can occur in any medium depicting fictional characters. This study focuses exclusively on its use in films. Queer coding occurs between the filmmaker(s) and their movie and between the film and its audiences. A film's creators intentionally or unintentionally depict the characters as subtextually queer. Viewers then interpret the depictions of the characters (Doty, 2000:4; Hartawan *et al.*, 2022:31). Because the characters' queerness is implied rather than explicitly stated or confirmed, various viewers may understand the characters' identifications differently. Some may interpret the characters as queer whereas others could understand them as cis heterosexual (Greenhill, 2015:111-112; McLeod, 2016:2, 13).

Queer coding is particularly complex in filmmaking, as many different artists with varying degrees of influence over the outcome of the final product are involved in the production of a movie. These artists include writers, directors, actors, costume designers, and editors. Any of these role players, or any combination, could be involved in intentionally or unintentionally encoding the film's characters as queer (Doty, 2000:4; Greenhill, 2015:112). Queer coding itself is neither inherently positive nor negative (Kim, 2017:162; Matte-Kaci, 2019:32; McLeod, 2016:2). Depending on its use by filmmakers and reception by viewers, queer coding can influence audiences' viewings varyingly. Audiences may or may not recognise and appreciate the queer representation provided by these movies. Viewers may also perceive this representation as conditional due to its implied, subtextual nature. These audiences might wish the queer-coded characters were depicted as explicitly LGBTQ+ rather than merely coded as such. Other viewers might enjoy the ambiguity of the queer-coded characters' identifications. Some audiences may identify yet dislike a film's subtextual queerness and

might wish it were excluded from the movie (see section 2.2.1 for elaborations on queer coding as a communication phenomenon).

Throughout much of American mainstream filmmaking¹, queer communities have been underrepresented onscreen. This is due in part to the Motion Picture Production Code, more commonly known as the Hays Code. The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA)² enforced a set of rules that governed American filmmaking between 1930 and 1968. This code stipulated what could be depicted in films and banned portrayals of sexualities perceived as perverse (Asimow, 2000:224, 235; Nurik, 2018:533). At the time, most Western societies viewed homosexuality in this way (Kim, 2017:158; McLeod, 2016:18). Filmmakers wishing to represent homosexual characters could do so merely subtextually through a process known today as queer coding. Many Hays Code-era audiences, particularly queer viewers, learned to subconsciously or consciously 'read between the lines' to recognise the subtly communicated queerness of queer-coded characters (Bernsmeier, 2013:32; Linder, 2012:280; Longo, 2021:26). Following the discontinuation of the Production Code, many LGBTQ+ audiences continued to and today still employ queer readings of mainstream movies to create queer interpretations of characters not explicitly depicted as such (Bernsmeier, 2013:16-17; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017:1011-1012; Walker, 2019:23).

In those rare instances that movies such as *Dracula's daughter* (Hillyer, 1936), *Rebecca* (Hitchcock, 1940), *Rope* (Hitchcock, 1948) and *Rebel without a cause* (Ray, 1955) hinted at queerness, the portrayals of homosexual characters were largely negative (Crewe, 2015:53, Epstein & Friedman, 1995). Even after the Production Code was lifted and homosexuality could be represented more overtly, for the most part these portrayals remained negative. Examples of post-Hays Code movies that depict their homosexual characters negatively include *The detective* (Douglas, 1968), *Vanishing point* (Sarafian, 1971), *Freebie and the bean* (Rush, 1974), *Next stop, Greenwich Village* (Mazursky, 1976), *Cruising* (Friedkin, 1980), *Night shift* (Howard, 1982), and *Revenge of the nerds* (Kanew, 1984). Through harmful stereotypes, gay and lesbian characters during *and* after the Hays Code period were often depicted as

¹ This study focuses on Western films, specifically mainstream American movies, because they are usually disseminated and consumed internationally, and have global reach and impact. For instance, the researcher watched and came to appreciate *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* while growing up in a small South African town in the 1990's and early 2000's. Scholars such as Doty (2000), Bernsmeier (2013), Eaklor (1994), Gilbert (2021), Rockler (2010), Symmonds (2018), and Vickers (1994) have explored the queer potential of these two films. However, it seems that no studies have explored interpretations of these movies' implied queerness by audiences situated within the Global South. This study using South African participants addresses this research gap.

² This trade association was established in 1922 as the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). Its name was changed to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) in 1945. In 2019, the association's title was further amended to the Motion Picture Association (MPA), as it continues to be known today (MPA, 2022b; Ng, 2018; Peck, 2015:5-6).

either dangerous villains or piteous victims. In other cases, they served as a source of humour and ridicule (Dhoest & Simons, 2012:263; Liu, 2012:5; Smelik, 1998:135).

In 1968, the Hays Code was replaced by the MPA's current age rating system. Following this system, an offshoot of the MPA known as the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA) board assigns movies age ratings before distribution (Nurik, 2018:534-535). Media scholars argue that this rating system encourages the production of socially conservative material appealing to hegemonic social expectations (Bernsmeier, 2013:64-65; Drushel, 2020:175; Nurik, 2018:536). This study holds that films depicting or concerning queerness are more likely to receive high age ratings than movies portraying exclusively cis heterosexual characters. The higher a film's rating, the smaller its potential audience and profit (Friedman, 2011; Lubbers, 2018:167). Many contemporary mainstream filmmakers either eschew depictions of LGBTQ+ characters entirely or 'safely' imply queerness using queer coding. Queer coding's historical and contemporary use in filmmaking is discussed further in section 2.2.2.

Contemporary mainstream films depict LGBTQ+ characters varyingly. On the one hand, movies such as *Freeheld* (Sollett, 2015), *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016), *Booksmart* (Wilde, 2019), and *Rocketman* (Fletcher, 2019) depict queerness authentically and position the LGBTQ+ characters as integral to the narratives. On the other hand, many recent filmic depictions of queerness still reinforce LGBTQ+ stereotypes and lack diversity in terms of race, age, class, gender, and ability (Crewe, 2015:53; Kane *et al.*, 2013:6; Townsend *et al.*, 2022:4, 6, 10-11). The queer characters' storylines also tend to be peripheral to or serve the heteronormative main plots. These characters either support or act as foils for cis heterosexual protagonists and their storylines (Kane *et al.*, 2013:6; Townsend *et al.*, 2022:6, 12). *Dirty grandpa* (Mazer, 2016), *Buddy games* (Duhamel, 2019), *The gentlemen* (Ritchie, 2019), and *West side story* (Spielberg, 2021) exemplify the above shortcomings of contemporary films portraying queerness.

The circumstances and considerations outlined in this section illustrate the historical and continuing lack of adequate queer visibility in mainstream media. This study holds that many queer audiences continue to depend on queer-coded characters to satisfy their need for queer representation in mainstream movies. Queer coding continues to be an important, albeit fraught facet of queer media representation (see section 6.6.1). Despite its significance, this communication phenomenon has not been sufficiently explored from a media studies' perspective. This study falls within communication and particularly the field of media studies. It investigated how the implied queerness of certain film characters is subtly communicated to and received by different audiences. This examination can help to improve understanding of queer coding as an exemplification of several aspects of communication. These aspects

include the polysemy of communication signs (i.e. filmic signs) and the influence of individuals' subjectivities, positionings, and sociohistorical circumstances in meaning creation (i.e. their interpretations of queer-coded movies).

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The three lenses comprising the study's theoretical framework are thoroughly examined in Chapter 3. In this section, the tenets of semiotics, reception theory, the encoding-decoding model, queer theory, and the theory of gender performativity relevant to this study are outlined briefly to orient the reader.

Semiotics is one of seven metatheoretical communication traditions, as classified by Robert Craig (Craig & Xiong, 2022:4; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008:7). Through semiotics, media content can be understood to represent certain kinds of reality. These media representations organise signs into systems known as codes to convey messages that receivers must interpret (Chandler, 2017:63; Fiske, 2011b:84; Jeong, 2011:75). These signs and codes have denotative and connotative meanings. The denotative meaning refers to a sign's literal meaning and is broadly agreed upon by members of the same society or culture (Danesi, 2018:28; Fourie, 2007:346; Gravells, 2017:64). It is interpreted by most receivers in a society in the way the communicator intends. Connotative meanings are context-dependent and the polysemic nature of signs is more apparent on the level of connotation. Each receiver's connotative meaning is deduced differently, and their interpretation is influenced by countless personal and sociocultural factors (Danesi, 2018:28-31; Fourie, 2007:346; Gravells, 2017:64). Signs then do not have fixed meanings and can represent different things to different receivers.

Notwithstanding, the codes into which signs are organised restrict the range of possible meanings they can convey. These codes consist of sets of practices or conventions within a specific culture at a certain point in history and provide a framework for the interpretation of signs and creation of meanings that would make cultural sense (Fiske, 2011b:4; Gravells, 2017:52; Moriarty, 2016:20-21). Simply put, meaning creation is both individualised and culturally delimited.

Semioticians also hold that signs and codes communicate sociohistorical discourses, myths, and ideologies (Chandler, 2017:191; Gravells, 2017:63; Nöth, 2004:13-14). Individuals continuously encounter different discourses, myths, and ideologies with varying degrees of societal dominance. They encounter these ideologies in numerous ways, including through media engagement (Fiske, 2011a:32; Gray, 2013:94, 96-97). The socially dominant and marginalised ideologies to which individuals are exposed influence people's relationships with

their fellow society members, their surroundings, and even themselves. According to semioticians, the countless discourses individuals encounter throughout their lives constitute and continuously inform their subjectivities (Fiske, 2011b:15, 66-67; Hassen, 2015:119, 122; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006:41).

In turn, society members' subjectivities influence their construction, communication, and interpretation of meaning (Fiske, 2011b:66-67; Salam, 2020:68; Stoddart, 2007:203). Media encoders' subjectivities play a role in how they produce queer-coded films, whereas decoders' subjectivities influence how they interpret these movies' queer coding. Depending on various personal and social considerations, certain film discourses might influence different people variously. This study argued that movies' signs (particularly the signs used in queer-coded films) can be understood so divergently that the same sign can uphold dominant *and* minority ideologies. Films, particularly movies upholding hegemonic ideologies such as cis heteronormativity, often use semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment and intertextuality in their portrayals of reality. The use of these semiotic tools in movies is explored in section 3.3.3.

In communication studies, reception theory focuses on the various ways individuals receive and interpret messages and how these interpretations are influenced by their specific circumstances or subjectivities (Laing, 2017:7; Sandvoss, 2011:240). Particularly relevant to this study was reception theorists' understanding of audiences' horizons of experience and expectations (explored in section 3.4). The countless experiences an individual engages in or encounters throughout their life constitute their horizon of experience. This horizon of experience informs the person's viewpoints, attitudes, perspectives, knowledge, and understandings. It also frames the individual's expectations of subsequent experiences, thereby forming their horizon of expectations (Jauss, 1982:23; Sandvoss, 2011:236; Welsh & Wolf, 2020:6-7). An individual's horizon of expectations shapes their expectations of future experiences and influences *how* they engage with said experiences (Keuris, 2016:46; Sandvoss, 2011:236; Welsh & Wolf, 2020:6-7). In other words, a society member's horizons of experience and expectations perpetually shape each other and intertextually affect how the individual creates meaning, including how they construct interpretations of queer-coded movies.

Another significant tenet of reception theory, echoed by the encoding-decoding model, is the notion of interpretative communities. These communities are made up of audiences with access to the same cultural codes, who subscribe to similar ideological beliefs and values, or who share interpretative strategies for constructing meaning (Chandler, 2017:193, 251; Livingstone & Das, 2013). These strategies precede the receivers' interpretations of particular

texts and influence *how* they understand those texts (Fish, 1980:171; Gray, 2013:101). Society members belong to different interpretative communities depending on their experiences, learned understandings, sociocultural backgrounds, ideological beliefs, and subjectivities (Chan, 2016; Harries, 1997:301; Van Leeuwen, 2005:144-145).

According to Stuart Hall's (1973, 1980:118-119, 2006:164) encoding-decoding model, which falls within reception theory, texts are encoded by their producers and then decoded by active audiences. Hall's (2006:163; Thomson, 2021:2) conception of the mass media communication process consists of four stages, namely production, circulation, use, and reproduction. These four stages of mass communication encompass Hall's (1980:118) three determinate moments of meaning creation: the communicator's encoding of a message or text; the encoded message itself; and active audiences' decoding of the text. During production, the communicator creates the text and imbues it with meaning potential – potential derived from the encoder's personal interpretations of the employed signs' connotative meanings and their understandings of the codes framing said signs (Xie *et al.*, 2022:193). Circulation and use occur when the audiences receive and interpret the text, respectively. Proponents of the encoding-decoding model argue that active audiences have agency and decipher messages using their individual frames of reference, experiences, and knowledge (Thomson, 2021:2; Xie *et al.*, 2022:193). Reproduction refers to the receivers' reactions to the interpreted text. Depending on the audiences' individual circumstances, positionings, subjectivities, and the specific meanings they construct from the text, the message might impact them in numerous ways (Murdock, 2017:1-2; Thomson, 2021:2; Xie *et al.*, 2022:193).

Depending on how closely their social positioning aligns with the (usually dominant) ideological operations underlying a message, an individual at the receiving end could interpret a message in one of three ways. Receivers whose social situation and personal experiences align them comfortably with the likely hegemonic ideology of the text would probably accept the preferred or dominant reading intended by the producer (Campbell, 2017:12; Hall, 1973:16, 1980:125-126). Those whose subjectivity places them in direct opposition with the text's ideology would likely reject the intended meaning entirely by engaging in an oppositional reading (Campbell, 2017:13; Hall, 1973:18, 1980:127). Most receivers are situated in social positions that neither completely conform to nor oppose the dominant ideologies underlying most texts. These receivers would likely construct a negotiated reading by accepting parts of the meaning as intended by the producer while rejecting others (Campbell, 2017:12; Hall, 1973:17).

Queer theory critiques the heteronormative notions of sex, gender, and sexuality upheld by culturally dominant ideologies and the social norms defining and restricting sexuality and gender (Lovelock, 2019:53; McCann & Monaghan, 2020:4; Milani, 2012:62). Judith Butler's

(1988) theory falls within queer theory and examines how sociohistorically situated individuals construct, communicate, and interpret sexual and gender identifications (Lloyd, 2015; Shams, 2020:3; Van der Watt, 2017:3-4). According to Butler (1988:523, 2013:22-23; Prado-Castro, 2017:98), gender is a cultural concept socially constructed through ongoing, repetitive, often involuntary acts. These acts are performed by members of a society and are based on their culturally learned understandings of their society's dominant gender discourses. These discourses, organised through semiotic signs and codes, precede and produce individuals' gender (Lloyd, 2015; Lovelock, 2019:19; Shams, 2020:16). Following this argument, gender is not a naturally occurring state, but rather a sociocultural construct.

Within Butler's (1988) social constructionist model of gender, individuals continuously and likely subconsciously express their gender identifications through the signs and codes used to 'do' or 'undo' gender within their culture (Kirby, 2016:41; Lloyd, 2015; Shams, 2020:3, 18). Conversely, individuals reflexively make sense of others' gender identifications through an interpretation of the same available signs and codes (Butler, 1999:12; Lloyd, 2015; Meyerhoff, 2015). Society members' sociocultural positionings and experiences ensure that they never fully inhabit the ideal gender to which they are compelled to aspire. Like queer theorists, performativity scholars claim that although the practice of enacting gender (i.e. embodying a culture's norms by using its signs and codes associated with gender) is compulsory, it is not fully determining of *how* a person constructs and presents their gender identification (Butler, 1999:12; Lloyd, 2015; Meyerhoff, 2015). An individual's historical context, sociocultural positioning, personal experiences, and learned understandings of gender influence their enacting of gender identifications and their interpretation of others', including queer-coded characters', identifications.

Queer theorists and gender performativity scholars hold that sex, gender, and sexuality are highly entwined within most cultures (Butler, 1999:30-31; McCann & Monaghan, 2020:175; Riggs & Treharne, 2017:110). Gender expressions and identifications that are viewed as transgressive within their sociohistorical contexts are culturally aligned with sexual identifications that are perceived as transgressive, and vice versa. Queer-coded movies often employ this cultural entwinement to imply their characters' queerness. Queer-coded characters are often interpretable as queer because they exhibit socioculturally transgressive gender presentations (Kim, 2017:159; Linder, 2012:280; Liu, 2012:7). In other words, stereotypically effeminate male characters are usually perceived as gay while masculine women are understood as lesbians. These transgressive gender stereotypes and tropes are historically and culturally associated with sexual and gender queerness and communicated as

queer through semiotic signs and codes that are historically, socially, and ideologically aligned with queerness.

The above discussions illustrate the applicability of the study's selected theoretical lenses. By synthesising tenets from semiotics, the encoding-decoding model, and the theory of gender performativity, the study was able to explore subjective and socially restricted interpretations of queer-coded movies.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

To reiterate, this study investigated how queer and cis heterosexual audiences interpret the queer-coded characters in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. The theoretical framework underlying this exploration implemented semioticians' understanding of media representation, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding model, and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity. All three of these lenses hold that meaning creation is both subjective *and* socioculturally delimited. These optics also consider the influence that an individual's sociohistorical circumstances and subjectivities have on their creation, expression, and interpretation of meaning. This theoretical framework enabled an examination of how different participants interpreted the selected films' queer-coded characters, and how the participants' sociocultural positionings, personal experiences, individual cognitions, and learned understandings of gender and queerness influenced their interpretations. Empirical data concerning the above issue were gathered from self-identified queer and cis heterosexual research participants using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The collected data were analysed through thematic analysis.

To the researcher's knowledge, no existing studies have combinedly explored the queer coding, nor self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* using semiotic media representation, the encoding-decoding model, and the theory of gender performativity. Moreover, queer coding itself has not been sufficiently researched from a media studies' perspective as a communication phenomenon that illustrates the polysemy of filmic signs and the role audiences' subjectivities, learned understandings, and circumstances play in their meaning-creation processes.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.4.1 General research question

How do self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences interpret the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*?

1.4.2 Specific research questions

1.4.2.1 How can semiotic media representation, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding communication model, and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity be implemented in an investigation of different audiences' interpretations of queer-coded movies?

1.4.2.2 How do self-identified queer audiences interpret the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*?

1.4.2.3 How do self-identified cis heterosexual audiences interpret the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*?

1.4.2.4 How do self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* compare?

1.5 RESEARCH AIMS

1.5.1 General research aim

To determine how self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences interpret the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*.

1.5.2 Specific research aims

1.5.2.1 To determine, through a literature and theoretical overview, how semiotic media representation, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding communication model, and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity can be implemented in an investigation of different audiences' interpretations of queer-coded movies.

1.5.2.2 To determine, using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and thematic analysis, how self-identified queer audiences interpret the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*.

1.5.2.3 To determine, using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and thematic analysis, how self-identified cis heterosexual audiences interpret the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*.

1.5.2.4 To compare, using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and thematic analysis, self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*.

1.6 RESEARCH APPROACH

This study followed a qualitative research approach, which is explored fully in section 4.2. Qualitative research aims to explore and provide insights into specific individuals or communities' socially situated experiences, perspectives, and meaning-creation processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:41; Merriam & Tisdell, 15). A qualitative approach is interpretivist and usually produces rich, descriptive data (Bryman, 2016:375; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:17). A richly descriptive, interpretivist approach was appropriate for this study exploring how different audiences create meanings from queer-coded films and the numerous, subtle ways their subjective interpretations correspond and differ.

Qualitative research often entails inductive methods of investigation (David & Sutton, 2011:84; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:17). On the one hand, this study's theoretical framework deductively guided and informed the study's empirical data collection and analysis. It informed the identification of sampling requirements, the generation of interview and focus group schedules, the identification of themes of analysis, and the interpretation of data within those thematic categories. On the other hand, the thematic analysis process employed in this study used both inductive and deductive reasoning. Relevant themes, subthemes, and codes were identified inductively as they arose from the participant-obtained data. After all the relevant thematic categories had been determined, the content not yet categorised was deductively charted for analysis.

1.7 RESEARCH METHODS

This section briefly outlines the methods used to conduct the study's literature and theoretical overview and its empirical research. As already indicated, the theoretical framework of this study is explored in Chapter 3. Thereafter, Chapter 4 thoroughly describes and motivates the study's empirical research design and methodology.

1.7.1 Literature and theoretical overview

The literature sources used in this study include books, e-books, academic journals, theses and dissertations, reports, review essays, web-based sources, and films. The databases that were consulted are Google-scholar, EBSCH Ohost, SocINDEX, JSTOR, and NEXUS. Using these databases, the researcher concluded that no other studies have investigated self-

identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* using a semiotic understanding of media representation, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding communication model, and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity.

Notwithstanding, there is sufficient research in the relevant fields on which to base this study's literature and theoretical overview. Many scholars have studied media representation within semiotics (e.g. Aiello, 2020; Chandler, 2017; Danesi, 2018; Fiske, 2011b; Gravells, 2017; Jeong, 2011), reception theory (e.g. Alber, 2018; Gambier, 2018; Holub, 1984; Laing, 2017; Welsh & Wolf, 2020), and Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding communication model (e.g. Aligwe *et al.*, 2018; Campbell, 2017; Murdock, 2017; Shaw, 2017; Thomson, 2021; Xie *et al.*, 2022). Much research has been done on queer theory (e.g. Bernini, 2021; Brintnall, 2021; Hewitt, 2018; Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016; McCann & Monaghan, 2020; Riggs & Treharne, 2017) and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity (e.g. Kirby, 2016; Lloyd, 2015; Meyerhoff, 2015; Shams, 2020). Numerous researchers and theorists have explored explicit queer representation in film and television (e.g. Cook, 2018; Crewe, 2015; Dhoest & Simons, 2012; Smith, 2020). Others have studied queer coding in or queer readings of movies and television series (e.g. Bendel, 2013; Björklund & Lönngren, 2020; Doty 2000; Greenhill, 2015; Kim, 2017). The queer-coded aspects of *Fried green tomatoes* (e.g. Bernsmeier, 2013; Halberstam, 1998; Proehl, 2018; Whatling, 1997) and *Thelma & Louise* (e.g. Doty, 1993; Seidman, 2005; Symmonds, 2018; Tasker, 1993) have also been researched.

1.7.2 Empirical research methods

This section briefly explains the data collection, sampling, and data analysis methods used to conduct this study's empirical research.

1.7.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Data were first collected from the 16 participants (i.e. eight self-identified queer and eight self-identified cis heterosexual individuals) through one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Qualitative semi-structured interviews are conducted by an interviewer using an interview guide consisting of general lines of inquiry, themes, and open-ended questions with varying degrees of specificity (Gray, 2022:411; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:110). This guide may be adjusted continuously depending on the specific data the interviewees provide. On the one hand, semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility necessary to obtain nuanced, elaborate responses regarding the interviewees' individual thoughts and opinions on often complex issues (Adams, 2015:499; Gray, 2022:411; Leavy, 2017:140). On the other hand, this

interviewing method enables a degree of structure and control regarding the discussion themes. It allows the researcher to obtain information relevant to the study's focus (Brinkmann, 2013:21; Tracy, 2020:158). In this study, the semi-structured interview guide was used to gain in-depth insights into the various participants' individual and multifaceted meaning-creation processes, specifically regarding their construction of understandings of the queer-coded *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* characters (see Table 4.2 for the schedule used in this study's individual interviews).

One-on-one interviews are often used in research that touches on sensitive topic areas. The method's flexibility allows the interview to be guided by the degree to which each interviewee feels comfortable discussing specific issues (Adams, 2015:494; Bullock, 2016:330; Prior, 2016:112). This study's focus on audiences' interpretations of queer-coded movies could be considered sensitive. The semi-structured interview schedule allowed participants to raise the subject of queerness voluntarily if they felt comfortable discussing it. Queerness was explored only with participants who introduced the topic. The researcher also refrained from directly referencing queerness until participants brought it up to minimise the risk of informing or distorting the interviewees' interpretations of the characters' potential queerness (see section 4.4.1 for detailed explanations of how semi-structured interviews were used to answer specific research questions 1.4.2.2 to 1.4.2.4).

1.7.2.2 Focus group interviews

The one-on-one interviewees also participated in focus group discussions aimed at deepening the insights gained during the semi-structured interviews. Focus group interviews are conducted by a facilitator who initiates and guides discussions between 4 to 12 participants. Like semi-structured interviews, this data collection method usually obtains richly descriptive information detailing the participants' specific attitudes and views (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2019:317; Pickard, 2017:244-245; Prior, 2018:235). Because focus groups ideally enable dynamic interactions between various participants, these sessions often obtain data on a wider range of thoughts and perspectives than individual interviews, which is a method that collects information concerning one subject's views at a time (Bryman, 2016:501-502; Gray, 2022:499-500; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:114).

This study conducted two focus group sessions; the first (i.e. Focus group 1) comprised the cis heterosexual participants, and the second (i.e. Focus group 2) the queer participants. Dividing the participants in this way ensured a degree of homogeneity in the groups' composition, which increased the likelihood that participants would feel comfortable interacting authentically with one another (Gray, 2022:502). Organising the focus groups based on the

participants' gender and sexual identifications decreased the risk of them feeling pressure to withhold their specific understandings of the movies' queer-coded characters or to conform to the group's majority view. Like the one-on-one interviews, the researcher facilitated discussions between the participants regarding their interpretations of the movies' queer-coded characters without directly referencing queerness (see Table 4.3 for the focus group guides used in these sessions). Section 4.4.2 thoroughly describes this study's use of focus groups to obtain the data needed to answer specific research questions 1.4.2.2 to 1.4.2.4.

Both the individual and focus group interviews were conducted using Zoom, a user-friendly video and audio-conferencing platform (Archibald *et al.*, 2019:3-4). The participants consented to the recording of the Zoom sessions' audio and video.

1.7.2.3 Sampling

This study employed non-probability purposive and snowball sampling to recruit its research participants. Unlike probability sampling, non-probability sampling techniques do not allow each member of a research population the opportunity to participate (Bryman, 2016:693; Leavy, 2017:265; Pickard, 2017:61). This study's population consisted of all *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* viewers and using probability sampling methods would have been impossible. Such a strategy would require giving every *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* viewer throughout the world the chance to participate. Non-probability sampling is widely used in social research such as this study that aims to explore detailed descriptions to improve understandings of social phenomena (Petty *et al.*, 2017:63).

Purposive sampling is usually used when researchers do not wish to generalise their results to an entire population but rather to explore specific socially situated individuals' perspectives and meaning-making processes (Bryman, 2016:408). With purposive sampling, participants are chosen based on the study's purpose (Bryman, 2016:408; David & Sutton, 2011:232). As this study investigated self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of queer coding in movies, the participants were selected based on their self-identified sexual and gender identifications. Participants also had to be willing to view the two movies before participating, had to have access to a DVD player or a DVD-compatible device, such as a personal computer or laptop, to watch the films, and needed a Zoom-capable device to participate in the Zoom interviews and focus group sessions.

Snowball sampling involves asking participants identified through other sampling methods to recruit additional individuals (Gray, 2022:238; Leavy, 2017:80). In this study, the people selected through purposive sampling were asked to recommend the study to others who might

be interested in participating. The researcher, supervisor, and co-supervisor requested friends, relatives, and acquaintances to share the recruitment material with others whom the researcher and supervisors do not know personally. Section 4.5 provides a detailed discussion and motivation of this study's use of purposive and snowball sampling to recruit its participants.

1.7.2.4 Thematic analysis

The recordings from the above-discussed data collection techniques were transcribed, and the transcriptions used to thematically analyse the participants' data. The unit of analysis used was verbal communication (i.e. words, sentences, and phrases). Thematic analysis entails identifying key themes and patterns within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Nowell *et al.*, 2017:2). It focuses on the data's implicit, subtextual meanings rather than its explicit, superficial, or direct meanings (Gray, 2022:759; Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016:35-36). It was an appropriate data analysis method for this study exploring participants' subtle, multifaceted understandings of queer coding, a nuanced and complex social phenomenon.

Thematic analysis can be conducted using inductive *and* deductive reasoning (Ibrahim, 2012:41; Kiger & Varpio, 2020:5). This study's thematic analysis was approached inductively and deductively. The study's theoretical framework deductively guided the identification of relevant codes and themes and the interpretation of the data with those thematic categories. Inductive reasoning was used to identify initial codes, subthemes, and themes within the collected data. Thereafter, the remaining data (i.e. data not yet classified) were categorised deductively for analysis (see Table 4.5 for the categories used during the thematic analysis process). Section 4.7 provides a thorough description and explanation of this study's use of thematic analysis to generate the results required to answer specific research questions 1.4.2.2 to 1.4.2.4.

1.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher received scientific and ethical approval to conduct empirical research from the North-West University's (NWU) Scientific Committee of the Focus Area Social Transformation and the NWU Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC), respectively. The study's ethics number, as provided by BaSSREC, is NWU-01000-22-A7. The NWU's Research Data Gatekeeper Committee (RDGC) also gave permission to recruit NWU-affiliated participants (see Annexures A1-A3).

The researcher, study supervisor, and co-supervisor completed various NWU-recommended ethics training programmes and workshops. These sessions gave them the skills necessary to conduct and oversee research exploring the sensitive subject of queerness. Moreover, the

supervisor and co-supervisor had prior experience with the research methods used in this study and guided the primary researcher's data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. All potential participants were given informed consent forms clearly explaining the voluntary nature of participation. The informed consent form thoroughly outlined what participation in the study would entail. The form also stressed that participants could decline to discuss any issues they did not feel comfortable discussing (see section 4.10 for an elaboration of the informed consent form's content and purpose). As mentioned, the participants were unaware of the study's focus on queer coding to ensure the findings' scientific integrity. Nonetheless, they were informed of the research's concentration on sexual and gender representation. Any questions the participants had about the study's purpose were answered truthfully. These explanations were phrased in terms of the study's broader focus on sexuality and gender representation in movies. The researcher gave honest clarifications about the study while ensuring the findings' integrity and validity.

The participants' privacy was protected by ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym used throughout the data collection, analysis, and presentation processes. No information that could be used to identify the participants was or will be disclosed. Access to the raw data was and remains restricted to the study's researcher, supervisor, and co-supervisor (see section 4.10 for detailed discussions of how the participants' confidentiality and anonymity were ensured). Lastly, the participants were given legally obtained DVD copies of *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. Providing these DVDs ensured that there were no copyright concerns regarding the participants' viewings of the films.

1.9 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Queer coding is a significant facet of queer media representation. This study provides valuable insights into how different audiences with varying positionings, subjectivities, and circumstances interpret queer-coded films and how their understandings differ and align. The study's results can help to improve understanding of the polysemic nature of film signs, the role an individual's personal and contextual influences play in their meaning creation, and the relationship between media engagement and audiences' understandings or perceptions of reality. The study's findings can also contribute insights regarding the relationship between audiences' queer media representation needs and their interpretations of queer-coded characters.

1.10 CHAPTER LAYOUT

The table below presents the dissertation's chapter layout and provides brief descriptions of each chapter's motivation and content.

Table 1.1 Dissertation's chapter layout

Chapter title	Chapter description
Chapter 1: Introduction	Chapter 1 introduced the study's focus, that is self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of queer coding in <i>Fried green tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i> . The chapter outlined the study's contextual background, theoretical framework, problem statement, research questions and aims, research approach and methods, ethical considerations, and significance.
Chapter 2: Context of the study	This chapter provides detailed discussions on what queer coding entails and its use in past and contemporary films. The chapter also briefly outlines <i>Fried green tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i> 's plots and contextualises their use of queer coding.
Chapter 3: Literature and theoretical overview	This literature chapter delineates the tenets of the study's theoretical framework to answer specific research question 1.4.2.1. Chapter 3 explores the concepts of semiotics, reception theory, the encoding-decoding model, queer theory, and the theory of gender performativity relevant to the study's examination of queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of queer-coded movies.
Chapter 4: Research design and methodology	This chapter explains the study's qualitative research approach, research design, and empirical research methods, namely semi-structured one-on-one interviews and focus groups. It also examines the study's sampling techniques, its measuring instrument, and the thematic analysis employed to analyse the gathered data. Thereafter, Chapter 4 outlines the validity and reliability of the results, the study's feasibility, and the ethical considerations related to the empirical research.
Chapter 5: Results chapter	Chapter 5 explores the empirical research results to answer specific research questions 1.4.2.2 to 1.4.2.4.

Chapter 6: Conclusion	The final chapter draws conclusions based on Chapter 3's literature and theoretical overview and Chapter 5's empirical findings. The chapter also outlines the study's limitations and makes recommendations for future research.
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1.11 CONCLUSION

This introductory chapter orientated the reader in terms of the study's topic, that is queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of queer coding in the 1991 movies *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. The chapter provided contextual information regarding queer coding and its use in films. The chapter also explained the study's theoretical framework and described the tenets of semiotics, reception theory, the encoding-decoding model, queer theory, and the theory of gender performativity relevant to the research topic. Furthermore, Chapter 1 presented the study's problem statement, research questions, and research aims. In section 1.6, the study's qualitative research approach was explained and motivated. Thereafter the study's literature and theoretical overview methods and empirical research methods were described. An explanation of the study's ethical considerations and significance followed. Finally, the dissertation's chapter layout was presented. As stated in this layout, Chapter 2 contextualises the selected films' queer coding and outlines their narrative plots.

CHAPTER 2: CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

“Go on you old bee charmer, tell me a good tall tale”

Idgie: “I can’t believe [the reverend] actually swore on a Bible.”

Ruth: “Well, not really. If that judge had looked any closer, he’d have seen it was really a copy of *Moby Dick*.”

- excerpt of dialogue from *Fried green tomatoes* (Avnet 1991)

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter orientated the reader by providing an overview of the study’s investigation of queer and cis heterosexual audiences’ interpretations of queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. The current chapter provides contextual insights regarding queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. Before exploring the study’s theoretical framework (see Chapter 3) and thereafter the empirical research methods (see Chapter 4) and results (see Chapter 5), it is necessary to contextualise the phenomenon of queer coding as it pertains to the study’s selected movies.

The first section expands on the introductory chapter’s description of queer coding and its use in films. Thereafter, section 2.2.2 explores those aspects of historical and contemporary filmmaking contexts relevant to the employment of queer coding in the past and at present, respectively. The following section briefly summarises the plotlines of *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. These synopses provide readers unfamiliar with the films the information necessary to understand subsequent chapters’ discussions of the films and viewers’ interpretations of their queer-coded characters. Section 2.4 briefly outlines film and media studies theorists’ arguments regarding queerness in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. These discussions illustrate how numerous scholars’ understandings of the films’ queer potential support this study’s investigation of queer coding in these specific movies.

2.2 QUEER CODING

As mentioned, this section examines queer coding in movies and the phenomenon’s occurrence in historical as well as contemporary filmmaking landscapes.

2.2.1 What is queer coding?

As discussed in section 1.1, queer coding is a communication process through which fictional characters are subtextually and connotatively portrayed as queer. While these characters’

sexual or gender identifications are not explicitly stated as LGBTQ+, some audiences may interpret them as being sexually queer or genderqueer (Greenhill, 2015:111-112; Kim, 2017:156). In the film industry,³ queer coding occurs between a movie's various creators, the film, and its numerous audiences. The filmmakers intentionally or unintentionally imbue certain characters with suggestions of queerness, that is queerness which is hinted at rather than confirmed. The movie's different audiences then decode said characters. Because the characters' queerness is merely implied, there is no guarantee that viewers will interpret them as LGBTQ+. Some receivers may understand the characters to be queer, and others may not (Greenhill, 2015:111-112; McLeod, 2016:2, 13).

The degree of intentionality behind queer coding is particularly complex in filmmaking. Many different artists with varying degrees of influence over the outcome of the final product are involved in the production of a movie. Any of these role players, or a combination of them, could knowingly or unknowingly encode the film's characters as queer (Doty, 2000:4; Greenhill, 2015:112). For instance, an LGBTQ+ costume designer's queer sensibility may subconsciously influence how they style a film character. The designer may unwittingly clothe the character in attire that connotes queerness to an extent. This attire might contribute to the character's overall implied queerness. Conversely, a director might deliberately insinuate a character's LGBTQ+ status rather than portray it explicitly. Media studies scholars such as Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2012:197) and Scanlon and Lewis (2017:1013) hold that filmmakers often use queer coding deliberately to draw large audiences and maximise profits. This strategy allows film creators and production companies to satisfy queer audiences' needs for media representation without alienating cis heterosexual viewers.

Filmmakers usually imply the queerness of their LGBTQ+ characters via tropes and stereotypes culturally associated with LGBTQ+ people (Doty, 2000:3; Kim, 2017:156-157). These stereotypes frequently relate to the characters' gender expressions. Section 3.6.1 explores the sociocultural entwinement of sexuality, gender identifications, and gender expressions. For this chapter, it is sufficient to state that the stereotypes and tropes associated with queerness usually relate to transgressive gender expressions, that is masculine presentations by women and feminine expressions by men (Kim, 2017:159; Linder, 2012:280; Liu, 2012:7). For instance, the *Fried green tomatoes* encoders portrayed Idgie (i.e. one of the movie's queer-coded protagonists) as a masculine woman via her engagement in

³ Media studies scholars such as Bendel (2013:28) and Bernsmeier (2013:46, 49) posit that audio-visual mediums of fictional narratives are particularly susceptible to the occurrence of queer coding. These scholars hold that films and television allow for more ambiguity in terms of the signs used to communicate certain messages than written forms of entertainment. These messages include meanings regarding characters' sexual or gender identifications. For instance, in a novel, a lustful look between two characters must be described to a certain extent. However, queer-coded movie characters can share a quick, almost imperceptible, sexually charged look. Certain viewers may notice this look and interpret it as communicating queer desire. Other audiences may overlook it completely.

stereotypically male pastimes, her traditionally masculine attire, and body language that is socially considered masculine. Because transgressive gender presentations are culturally associated with queerness, Idgie's perceived masculinity implies her potential queer status (Bernsmeier, 2013:71; Eaklor, 1994:327). Audiences familiar with this sociocultural alignment may consciously or subconsciously equate Idgie's masculine gender presentation with gender-queerness. Even though the character's gender identification is not explicitly confirmed, some viewers may interpret Idgie as transgender or non-binary. Other viewers might associate her masculinity with sexual queerness. They may interpret her as a lesbian or bisexual. Sections 5.3.3.1 and 5.4.3.1 explore queer and cis heterosexual audiences' various understandings of Idgie's gender expression and how it relates to the character's gender and sexual identifications.

This study argues that although queer-coded films often satisfy LGBTQ+ audiences' need for representation, they frequently serve heteronormative and cisgendered interests. As argued by Doty (2000:4) and Proehl (2018:22), the queer visibility provided by these movies is conditional. The queerness communicated in the films is not evident to all viewers. Queer coding is neither inherently positive nor negative. Depending on its utilisation by filmmakers and reception by audiences, queer coding can influence viewers' filmic experiences positively or negatively. Audiences can even view queer coding as simultaneously positive *and* negative (Caza, 2022:14; Kim, 2017:162; Matte-Kaci, 2019:32). For instance, a lesbian *Thelma & Louise* receiver craving queer media visibility might appreciate the queerness hinted at throughout the film. However, she might dislike the subtextual nature of said queerness, wishing that Louise and Thelma, the two queer-coded protagonists, were explicitly depicted as lovers (see sections 5.3.1 and 5.4.1 for different audiences' varying desires for and appreciation of portrayals of explicit and implied queerness).

2.2.2 Queer coding's lasting legacy

Historically, LGBTQ+ communities have been underrepresented in film. From 1934 to 1968, the United States' Motion Picture Production Code forced producers and filmmakers to work under a system of strict censorship.⁴ This code, commonly referred to as the Hays Code or the Production Code, expressly prohibited the portrayal of queer characters in American films (Asimow, 2000:224, 235; Nurik, 2018:533). During this period, the Production Code Administration (PCA) enforced the Hays Code and had the power to approve, censor, or completely reject and prohibit the distribution of Hollywood films. It was impossible to get

⁴ For detailed descriptions of the development of the Hays Code, the media landscapes in which it emerged, declined, and was eventually abandoned, as well as the specific guidelines and rules set out in the code itself, see Asimow (2000), Bernsmeier (2013), Black (1989), Doherty (1999), and Nurik (2018).

financing for a project or to release a film in the United States of America (USA) without PCA approval (Asimow, 2000:228-229; Kozłowska-Matlak, 2016:57). Filmmakers usually engaged in rigid self-censorship to ensure that their projects were realised. They frequently allowed themselves to be governed and restricted by the rules and guidelines in the Hays Code (Asimow, 2000:232; Gilbert, 2013:2).

The Production Code forbade depictions of any forms of sexual activity or identification it considered perverse, which, at the time, included portrayals of homosexuality⁵ (Kim, 2017:158; McLeod, 2016:18). Filmmakers who wanted to represent queer characters could do so only subtextually, employing what is known today as queer coding. In those rare instances that Hays Code era film creators did hint at queerness via queer coding, the depictions of LGBTQ+ characters were usually negative portrayals (Crewe, 2015:53, Epstein & Friedman, 1995; Longo, 2021:27). Employing harmful tropes and stereotypes about queer people, directors often depicted queer-coded characters as villains. These antagonistic figures included murderous, mentally disturbed characters such as Brandon and Phillip in *Rope* (Hitchcock, 1948) and Norman Bates in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), as well as literal monsters such as the monster in *Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935) or the vampiric Countess Marya Zaleska in *Dracula's daughter* (Hillyer, 1936). During the Production Code era, queer-coded characters were also frequently depicted as piteous victims. These characters usually died tragically before the movie's conclusion – the implication being that queerness is an insurmountable impediment and unavoidably leads to a person's physical demise. Examples of such characters include John 'Plato' Crawford in *Rebel without a cause* (Ray, 1955), Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly, last summer* (Mankiewicz, 1959), and Martha Dobie in *The children's hour* (Wyler, 1961).

In 1968, Jack Valenti, the new head of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), replaced the Hays Code with a new regulatory system, the MPA's current age rating system. According to this system, movie producers pay the MPA a fee in exchange for providing their

⁵ The Hays Code was written and implemented at a time when homosexuality was condemned as immoral and medically aberrant by the vast majority of American society. 'Sodomy' was a federal crime in the USA until the Model Penal Code (MPC), drafted by the American Law Institute, was adopted in 1961 (Demeri, 2021; Woods, 2017:696-697). Even so, laws criminalising consensual 'sodomy' were still in effect in some American states as recently as the 1980s and even the 1990s (Avery, 2021; Weinmeyer, 2014: 916-922). In the 1950s, many Western people, especially American medical professionals, adapted their view of homosexuality as a wicked practice indulged in by morally corrupt individuals. Instead, they perceived it as a mental illness (Drescher, 2015:569-570; Glass, 2017:101-103). In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) classified homosexuality as a "sociopathic personality disturbance" in the first edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-I). In the APA's 1968 second edition of the DSM, DSM-II, homosexuality was reclassified as a "sexual deviation". This classification was further modified to "Ego Dystonic Homosexuality" in DSM-III in 1980. It was not until the 1987 revision of the third edition of the DSM, DSM-III-R, that homosexuality was completely depathologised by the APA (Drescher, 2007:109, 2015:569-571; Glass, 2017:102-103).

completed films with ratings before distribution⁶ (Nurik, 2018:534-535). The CARA board, which consists of eight to 13 individuals, assigns these movie ratings.⁷ Appointments to the board are based on parental status.⁸ There are no other known requirements for CARA eligibility. Board members receive no known formal training to enable them to adequately, fairly, and as objectively as possible rate the submitted films (Ng, 2018; Nurik, 2018:535). Using their judgement as parents, the members grade movies subjectively according to the minimum age of audiences they perceive as appropriate to view the content.⁹ It is likely that the higher a movie's rating, the smaller its potential audience pool and, ultimately, profit (Friedman, 2011; Lubbers, 2018:167).

According to media studies scholars Bernsmeier (2013:64-65), Drushel (2020:175), and Nurik (2018:536), CARA members and their rating system encourage the production of culturally conservative content with majority appeal. Drushel (2020:175) further argues that within the USA queer media content is still frequently viewed as controversial and inappropriate for juvenile viewers, and that CARA raters – situated in Los Angeles, USA (Nurik, 2018:535) – are likely biased to an extent against films portraying queer characters. These biases against depictions of queerness could result in higher age ratings for movies portraying queer characters than similar films depicting cis heterosexuals (Drushel, 2020:175).

Filmmakers who are dissatisfied with their films' ratings can appeal the decision or edit their movies and resubmit them for rating. However, these processes can be time-consuming and expensive. Rather than risk the financial ramifications accompanying a high rating, rating decision appeal, or editing and rating resubmission, filmmakers often avoid controversial material (Friedman, 2011; Nurik, 2018:535-536). This study holds that many film creators steer clear of queer themes entirely because queer content is usually perceived as controversial or 'risky'. Others depict LGBTQ+ characters in a 'safe' way by employing queer coding. Then, even though censorship was formally discontinued in 1968, queer content continues to be

⁶ American movies released solely via streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, and Netflix are often not submitted to the MPA for rating (Powell, 2021; Tremblay, 2020:33). However, many American streaming services (e.g. Disney Plus, HBO Max, Netflix, and Hulu) loosely model their movie age rating systems on the MPA system (Casey, 2021; Hulu, 2022; Tremblay, 2020:33).

⁷ Although the MPA has not disclosed the specific methods CARA board members use when assigning ratings to films, the association has revealed the general steps involved in the rating and appeal processes (Barranco *et al.*, 2020:1006; CARA, 2020:1-22; Ng, 2018). For descriptions of these steps and processes, see the "Classification and rating rules" document published by CARA (2020).

⁸ Except for senior members, raters must have a child between the ages of 5 and 15 years at the time of their appointment and must retire from the board by the child's 21st birthday.

⁹ The specific ratings currently available within the MPA rating system are G (suggested for general audiences), PG (parental guidance suggested), PG-13 (parents strongly cautioned), R (restricted), and NC-17 (no one 17 and under admitted) (Drushel, 2020:174-177; MPA, 2022a; Peck, 2015:3-4). For a more detailed explanation of what these various ratings entail and how the ratings have changed since the system's conception, see the MPA's official website (MPA, 2022a), as well as Drushel (2020:174-177), and Peck (2015:3-4).

suppressed to some extent, and certain filmmakers continue to circumvent this suppression via queer-coded characters.

2.3 PLOT SUMMARIES

The 1991 drama *Fried green tomatoes*, directed by Jon Avnet, is based on Fannie Flagg's 1987 novel *Fried green tomatoes at the Whistle Stop cafe* (Avnet, 1991). *Thelma & Louise* was also released in 1991. It is an adventure comedy-drama written by first-time screenwriter Callie Khouri and directed by Ridley Scott (Scott, 1991). Section 2.3 briefly outlines the two movies' plots.

2.3.1 *Fried green tomatoes* plot summary

Fried green tomatoes opens in rural Alabama in the 1980s. Dissatisfied and meek middle-aged housewife Evelyn Couch (Kathy Bates) accompanies her husband Ed (Gailard Sartain) on a visit to his nursing home-bound aunt. There Evelyn meets 82-year-old Ninny Threadgoode (Jessica Tandy). During this and several subsequent visits, Ninny tells Evelyn about the nearby, long-abandoned town of Whistle Stop and its inhabitants. Ninny's tale focuses specifically on her future sister-in-law Ildgie (played firstly by Nancy Moore Atchison and then by Mary Stuart Masterson) and Ildgie's relationship with Ruth (Mary-Louise Parker). Through these visits, Evelyn develops a strong friendship with the older woman. Evelyn gains confidence, becomes more assertive, finds purpose in her life, and is eventually empowered to take charge of her stagnating marriage.

Ninny's tale begins shortly after the end of World War I and centres on Ildgie Threadgoode, a young tomboy who feels misunderstood by everyone in her life apart from her older brother, Buddy (Chris O'Donnell). Ildgie and Buddy are extremely close, and she is completely devastated when he dies after being hit by a train. A few years go by, and even though Ildgie grows up, her grief over Buddy's death does not subside. She is rebellious, engages in masculine hobbies (e.g. fishing and gambling), wears masculine clothing, and often isolates herself from others. When she does socialise, she usually surrounds herself with rough types and social outcasts. Eventually, Ildgie's mother (Lois Smith) asks Buddy's old sweetheart, prim and proper Ruth Jamison, to stay with them for a while. Like Ildgie, Ruth witnessed Buddy's death. Ildgie's mother hopes that by spending time with Ruth, Ildgie might begin to deal with her loss and learn to behave in more socially acceptable ways.

Initially, Ildgie resists Ruth's attempts at befriending her. But after a while, they become very close and get up to all sorts of mischief. They stow away on a train to hand out food to poor people. Ildgie risks getting stung by bees to collect honey for Ruth, whereafter Ruth

affectionately nicknames Ildgie “a bee charmer”. They play poker and baseball, get drunk, and go swimming at night. While swimming, Ruth tells Ildgie that she is engaged to be married and then kisses Ildgie on the cheek. Ildgie does not attend Ruth’s wedding. Instead, she follows the newlyweds to Georgia and watches from afar as the groom, Frank Bennet (Nick Searcy), carries Ruth into their new home.

A few years later, Ildgie decides to visit Ruth and learns that her husband physically abuses her. Ruth forces Ildgie to leave. However, after Ruth’s mother dies, Ruth writes to Ildgie. She indirectly asks Ildgie to save her from her abusive marriage. Ildgie, her brother Julian (Haynes Brooke), and their employee, Big George (Stan Shaw), fetch a pregnant Ruth and bring her back to Alabama – but not before Ildgie threatens to kill Frank if he ever hurts Ruth again. After Ruth gives birth to a boy, Buddy Jr., Ildgie’s father (Danny Nelson) borrows money so that Ildgie and Ruth can start their own business. Together, they run their restaurant, the Whistle Stop Café, and raise Buddy Jr. (Grayson Fricke).

One night, a hooded Ku Klux Klan member shows up at Ildgie and Ruth’s house. He reveals himself to be Ruth’s husband and threatens to kidnap the baby if Ruth does not come back to him. Frank returns a second time and takes the baby by force, hitting Big George’s mother and Threadgoode employee, Sipsey (Cicely Tyson), with a shotgun. As he climbs into his truck, Frank is struck over the head by an unknown assailant. Thereafter, a Georgian sheriff named Curtis Smoote (Raynor Scheine) questions Ildgie and Big George about Frank’s disappearance. Ruth suggests that she and Buddy Jr. move away, but Ildgie reassures her that she does not have to worry about Frank anymore. She asks Ruth to stay with her.

Several years later Frank’s truck is discovered in a river and Ildgie and Big George are accused of murdering him. In court, the Georgian prosecutor (Macon McCalman) questions Ruth’s motives for abandoning her husband in favour of living with Ildgie. Ruth becomes emotional and responds that Ildgie is her best friend and that she loves her. Ruth then convinces Reverend Scroggins (Richard Riehle) to give false testimony providing Ildgie and Big George with alibis for the time of the murder. The judge (Tom Even) dismisses the case and Ildgie and Big George return to their lives in Alabama. Time passes by relatively uneventfully until Ruth is diagnosed with cancer and dies. Ildgie is heartbroken but cares for Buddy Jr. as she promised Ruth she would.

Back in the present, Evelyn invites Ninny to move in with her and Ed. Ninny reveals to Evelyn that it was Sipsey who killed Frank. She also admits that Ildgie and Big George barbecued Frank’s corpse, which they then fed to Sheriff Smoote. At the movie’s end, Ninny points out Ruth’s grave to Evelyn. Evelyn notices a recently placed jar of honey near the headstone. The

attached note is addressed to Ruth and reads, "I'll always love you, the Bee Charmer". Evelyn is shocked to learn that Idgie is still alive. Ninny implies that she is Idgie. Ninny and Evelyn walk off, arm in arm.

2.3.2 *Thelma & Louise* plot summary

Waitress Louise Sawyer (Susan Sarandon) convinces her best friend and housewife Thelma Dickinson (Geena Davis), to accompany her on a relaxing weekend getaway to a mountain cabin. On their way to the cabin, the women stop at a bar for a drink. Thelma dances with a man named Harlan (Timothy Carhart). When Harlan later tries to rape a drunk Thelma in the bar's parking lot, Louise appears and points a gun at him. She threatens to shoot him unless he lets Thelma go. The women start to walk away but when Harlan hurls an insult their way, Louise shoots and kills him. She and Thelma flee the scene.

Thelma suggests that they report the incident to the police. Louise says the authorities would not believe that Harlan assaulted Thelma. Thelma is upset, and Louise tries to reassure her. Louise promises to come up with a plan to keep them both safe. Louise then decides to flee to Mexico and asks Thelma to join her. After taking some time to consider Louise's offer, Thelma agrees to go to Mexico with her. Louise tells Thelma that she refuses to drive through Texas, the state in which she grew up.

The women meet a handsome hitchhiker named JD (Brad Pitt). Thelma is immediately charmed by him. Later, at a motel, Thelma spends the night with him. Before they have sex, JD tells Thelma he is a thief and gives her tips on robbing shops. Elsewhere in the motel, Louise collects cash from her boyfriend, Jimmy (Michael Madsen), who showed up in person to deliver the money Louise asked him to wire to her for the purpose of the women's escape. Jimmy proposes to Louise, but she refuses him. The next morning, JD steals the money that Jimmy brought. The theft leaves Louise completely distraught, and Thelma takes control of their situation. Using the skills she learned from JD, she robs a shop. She and Louise flee yet again.

Meanwhile, the FBI and the Arkansas State Police, led by investigator Hal Slocumb (Harvey Keitel), investigate Harlan's death and begin to suspect that Louise and Thelma are somehow involved. They question various people about the two women, including Thelma's controlling husband, Darryl (Christopher McDonald), Jimmy, and JD. During a phone conversation, Hal tries to convince Louise to surrender, but she refuses.

Thelma then asks Louise if she was sexually assaulted in Texas. Although Louise refuses to talk about it, it is implied that Thelma's suspicion is correct. Shortly thereafter, they get pulled

over by a state trooper (Jason Beghe). Thelma catches him off guard and apologetically holds him at gunpoint. She instructs a shocked Louise to take his gun and shoot the police radio. Thelma then shoots a few air holes into the patrol car's boot and forces the officer to climb into it. After locking him in the boot, she and Louise continue their journey.

Louise talks to Hal a second time and tells him that Harlan's death was an accident. He says that he believes her. He also says that even though he sympathises with her and Thelma's situation, he will have to charge them with murder if they refuse to turn themselves in and share their version of events. After this conversation, Thelma tells Louise that she would understand if Louise wanted to go back to Jimmy, but that she cannot go back to Darryl or her old life. Louise tells Thelma that she is still committed to going to Mexico with her.

Eventually, the authorities track Louise and Thelma down and surround them at the Grand Canyon's edge. Rather than allowing themselves to be captured, Thelma suggests they just keep driving. Louise kisses Thelma, they lock hands and, despite Hal's efforts to stop them, Thelma and Louise drive off the cliff's edge.

2.4 FRIED GREEN TOMATOES AND THELMA & LOUISE CONTEXTUALISED

While the two movies under study differ greatly in terms of setting, tone, and narrative, they share certain ideological and thematic similarities. On an ideological level, both films explore non-conformity in heteronormative, cisgendered, and patriarchal societies. In addition, both movies examine the themes of friendship, love, loyalty, and companionship between women.

Media studies scholars such as Greenhill (2015:129) and Walker (2019:24) hold that queer coding often occurs between female characters who are canonically understood as friends. Within most globalised societies, it is usually culturally acceptable for female friends to be emotionally demonstrative, physically intimate, and verbally affectionate towards one another – much more acceptable than for male friends (Robinson *et al.*, 2018:95-96). Consequently, female characters can often 'get away with' exhibiting certain queer-coded traits and behaviours without audiences automatically interpreting them as queer.¹⁰ Male characters usually cannot exhibit these attributes towards one another without most viewers understanding them as queer (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2012:197; Kim, 2017:162).

Idgie and Ruth's and Louise and Thelma's friendships are prime examples of the above-described queer-coded female relationships. This study argues that if a male movie character

¹⁰ For more detailed discussions of filmic female friendships' susceptibility to queer coding, as well as explorations of the related notions of the "apparitional lesbian" and the doctrine of "lesbian impossibility", see Castle (1993), Mayer (2015), and Ristock (1997).

were to kiss another man, audiences would probably interpret them as romantic partners. Even though Louise kisses Thelma on the lips, most *Thelma & Louise* receivers view them as friends rather than lovers.¹¹ Sections 5.3.1.2 and 5.4.1.2 discuss how most of the study's queer and cis heterosexual participants interpreted Thelma and Louise as platonic friends. If a male film character were to publicly declare his love for another man, most audiences would likely interpret them as queer lovers. In *Fried green tomatoes*, Ruth professes her love for Idgie in a courtroom full of people. Despite this emotional declaration of love, many viewers perceive Idgie and Ruth as platonic friends.¹² Then, as argued by Seidman (2005:53), these protagonists' "lesbianism is denied by interpreting it as a type of intense bonding between women" (see sections 5.3.1.1 and 5.4.1.1 for explorations of the participants' interpretations of Idgie and Ruth's relationship). Section 5.4.2 provides a discussion of one of the cis heterosexual participants' own views on female friends' physically affectionate behaviour and how her understanding thereof might have influenced her interpretation of *Fried green tomatoes*' queer-coded characters.

Media studies theorists Charania and Albertson (2018:141) posit that historically, society members have sometimes perceived lesbians as women who turn to other women for emotional and sexual support after suffering violence at the hands of men. Both Ruth and Thelma's characterisations support this perception. Ruth turns to Idgie for emotional, financial, and arguably romantic support after she decides to flee from her physically abusive husband, Frank. After Louise saves Thelma from Harlan's attempted sexual assault, Thelma relies on Louise for emotional comfort. Thelma also initially depends on Louise to plan and orchestrate their escape from the police. Ruth and Thelma can be interpreted as women who turn to other women or lesbianism to recover from trauma inflicted upon them by men.

As previously explained, many role players are involved in the production of films. Therefore, there is no way to definitively determine the intentions of each artist involved in encoding Ruth and Idgie's or Louise and Thelma's relationships. Whereas some of the encoders may have intended for the characters to be interpreted as queer romantic partners, others may have encoded them differently. In the years directly following *Fried green tomatoes*' release, media studies scholars such as Eaklor (1994:323, 325), Levy (1999:474), and Whatling (1997:88) explored the various ways Idgie and Ruth's relationship could be interpreted. They argued that there is much room for queer readings of the characters' relationship. According to Eaklor (1994:323), most *Fried green tomatoes*' reviewers took the movie's creators to task for its

¹¹ Doty (2000:53) and Greenberg *et al.* (1991:20) argue that most receivers interpret Thelma and Louise as platonic friends.

¹² According to Bernsmeier (2013:69), Eaklor (1994:322), Rockler (2010:90), and Vickers (1994), many *Fried green tomatoes* viewers interpret Ruth and Idgie as cis heterosexual friends.

“delesbiani[s]ation” of the romantic relationship portrayed in the novel. Whatling (1997:88) argued that even though the film “perpetuates rather than challenges dominant [heteronormative] relations of seeing” the film has “lesbian potential”. More recent explorations of the movie hold similar positions. Bernsmeier (2013:69) and Proehl (2018:17, 22) claim that *Fried green tomatoes*’ encoders deliberately suppressed the novel’s lesbian content to make it undetectable to mainstream viewers. Yet, the queerness is noticeable to audiences employing the interpretative strategy of a queer reading.

After *Thelma & Louise*’s original release, many scholars expressed their views on the nature of the titular characters’ relationship. Doty (1993:8), Tasker (1993:29), and Whatling (1997:18) allow for queer interpretations of the women. However, they assert that most socially situated individuals would view such interpretations as secondary to understandings of the characters as cis heterosexual. More recent works on the film align with the above scholars’ claims. Gilbert (2021) and Symmonds (2018) suggest that Louise and Thelma’s relationship could be interpreted platonically or queerly.¹³

2.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter examined how queer coding occurs in filmmaking. Queer coding is an extremely complex communication phenomenon. Numerous artists involved in the production of a film can employ queer coding with varying degrees of intentionality. Different audiences interpret queer-coded characters differently. They may or may not interpret said characters as LGBTQ+. Moreover, some receivers may perceive the queer coding positively, others negatively, and others yet as both positive *and* negative.

Because the Hays Code prohibited the portrayal of explicitly LGBTQ+ characters, filmmakers between 1934 and 1968 had to suggest queerness via queer coding. Despite the 1968 dismantling of the Production Code, filmmakers often continued – and to this day continue – to depict queerness subtextually rather than explicitly. Scholars suggest that the MPA’s CARA board leans towards social conservatism and likely assigns films containing explicitly queer characters higher age ratings than movies depicting only cis heterosexuals. Filmmakers often employ queer coding to simultaneously depict queerness and avoid the financial ramifications of receiving a high age rating.

This chapter also summarised the plots of *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. These summations grant readers who have not seen the films the information necessary to comprehend discussions of the queer coding contained in the movies. Finally, section 2.4

¹³ In this dissertation, the term queerly was used to refer to interpretations of relationships or identifications as LGBTQ+.

outlined several media studies and film theorists' views regarding the queer potential of films such as *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*, illustrating the academic foundations of this study's exploration of queer coding in these two specific films. Chapter 3 concerns the study's theoretical framework. It explores the various theoretical lenses employed in this dissertation and their applicability to an investigation of different audiences' interpretations of queer-coded movies.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

“You might say we had a meeting of the minds”

Thelma: “You awake?”

Louise: “Guess you could call it that. My eyes are open.”

Thelma: “Me, too. I feel *awake* ... Wide awake. I don't remember ever feelin' this awake. You know what I mean? Everything looks different.”

- excerpt of dialogue from *Thelma & Louise* (Scott, 1991)

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter provided essential contextual information regarding queer coding, its use in filmmaking, and specifically, its occurrence in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. This chapter explores the study's theoretical framework to answer specific research question 1.4.2.1: *How can semiotic media representation, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding communication model, and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity be implemented in an investigation of different audiences' interpretations of queer-coded movies?* (see section 1.4.2)

As already indicated, this study employs a theoretical framework incorporating a semiotic understanding of media representation, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding model, and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity. All three theoretical optics consider how society members' circumstances, experiences, learned understandings, individual psyches, and cognitions influence their meaning creation, expression, and interpretation (Chandler, 2017:35; Meyerhoff, 2015; Xie *et al.*, 2022:190, 195). This study's tripartite framework is appropriate for exploring queer coding. Queer coding is a complex communication phenomenon consisting of highly polysemic signs operating through semiotic codes. Audiences' interpretations of queer-coded films are greatly influenced by their circumstances, psyches, subjectivities, experiences, and learned understandings of gender and sexuality (Kim, 2017:157; Matte-Kaci, 2019:10; Nordin, 2015:20).

First, this chapter provides a historical overview of the three theoretical lenses. A critical discussion on semiotic media representation follows. This section focuses on subjective *and* socially negotiated meaning creation, the role of discourses, myths, and ideologies within media engagement, and films' use of specific semiotic tools to depict portrayals of reality. These latter tools include semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment and

intertextuality. Section 3.4 reviews the tenets of reception theory relevant to this study. Thereafter, section 3.5 critically explores the above-mentioned encoding-decoding model by focusing on Hall's conception of the mass media communication process, media content's ideological operations, and receivers' reading positions.

The tenets of queer theory and the theory of gender performativity relevant to this study are discussed thereafter. Section 3.6.1 outlines queer theory and Butler's (1988) critical conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality. The section thereafter concerns the societal dominance of cis heteronormativity. Section 3.6.3 investigates the impossibility of complete adherence to the prescriptions of cisgenderism and heteronormativity. Chapter 3 concludes with a summation and integration of the arguments throughout its sections. This final section also stresses the applicability of the theoretical framework to this study.

3.2 HISTORICAL OVERVIEWS

Semiotics is the study of signs, sign systems, and sociocultural sign usage (Fourie, 2007:327; Moriarty, 2016:20). The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) and the American philosopher Charles Peirce (1960a, 1960b) are generally acknowledged as the two founders of modern semiotics. Their contributions have greatly influenced semiotic study in many disciplines, ranging from philosophy to linguistics, particularly from structuralist and poststructuralist perspectives (Chandler, 2017:4-5, 267, 271).¹⁴ Their work has also been highly influential within media studies, wherein this audience reception study falls (Chandler, 2017:3-4; Lacková, 2023:69, 78). De Saussure was concerned primarily with the formal structures underlying sign systems. Peirce focused on the ways that contextual factors influence individual, subjective sign interpretation and meaning-making (Chandler, 2017:36; Moriarty, 2016:20-21; Van Staden, 2012:99).

The current study primarily used a Peircean understanding of signs and signs systems because it explored how personal and contextual factors influence individuals' meaning creation. Specifically, this study investigated how cis heterosexual and queer audiences interpret *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. The work of semiologist Roland Barthes, who drew on de Saussure's dyadic model of semiotics, is also significant here. Barthes' (1967, 1972, 1974) contributions regarding denotation and connotation, and mythic meanings were particularly relevant to this reception study. Barthes' conception of denotation and connotation contributed to understanding how culturally situated individuals (e.g. the study's participants)

¹⁴ Other important historical movements and/or contributions within the field of semiotics include the advent of Russian formalism, Marxist semiotics, Vladimir Propp's narrative theory, the Prague and Copenhagen linguistic circles' as well as the Tartu-Moscow School's contributions, cognitive semiotics, postmodern semiotics, zoosemiotics, and biosemiotics (Danesi, 2018:18; Lagopoulos & Boklund-Lagopoulou, 2021:9-12, 15, 17).

subjectively create meaning. Barthes' notion of myths applied because mythic meanings play a crucial role in subjectivity construction, which was relevant as subjectivity is integral to meaning creation.

As this study focused on socially negotiated meaning construction, it drew on concepts from social semiotics. This branch of semiotics concerns the sociocultural contexts in which meaning-making occurs as a social process (Halliday, 1978:1-2; Hodge & Kress, 1988:8, 12; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006:266). Concepts from film semiotics were also used. Specifically, the study used a film semiotics perspective that drew on foundational film semiologist Christian Metz's (1974) work. His conceptions are based on semiotic notions of meaning construction and communication that align with this study's understanding of semiotic media representation (Chandler, 2017:213-214; Metz, 2009:67).¹⁵

Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding communication model falls within reception theory, which focuses on how society members interpret texts (Laing, 2017:7; Sandvoss, 2011:240). One of Hall's primary motivations for developing the model was his disagreement with behaviourist approaches to reception studies. According to Hall, these approaches oversimplify the complex, socially situated process of meaning creation into a decontextualised linear process (Aligwe *et al.*, 2018:1020; Hall, 1980:117; Murdock, 2017:3-4). Incorporating arguments from semiotics, reception theory, and Marxist theory, his model posits that receivers' sociocultural contexts, personal frames of reference, knowledge, and experiences influence their interpretations of texts and meaning creation (Aligwe *et al.*, 2018:1020-1021; Hall, 1980:117, 122; Livingstone & Das, 2013). Since its development, the encoding-decoding model has impacted studies regarding audience reception of media texts significantly (Biltereyst & Meers, 2018:34; Livingstone & Das, 2013; McLeod, 2016:23).

Butler's theory of gender performativity, first proposed in 1988, falls within queer theory and critiques essentialist, heteronormative conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality (Lloyd, 2015; Shams, 2020:1). Butler's arguments incorporate concepts from phenomenology, dramaturgy, theatre studies, performance studies, anthropology, and sociolinguistics, specifically, speech act theory (Butler, 1988:520; Lloyd, 2015; Shams, 2020:1). One of the primary motivations driving the theory's development was Butler's critique of the essentialist approaches to gender and sexual identities often taken by feminists. According to Butler, essentialist approaches uphold the heteronormative gender binary and exclude those with transgressive gender identifications or expressions from culturally acceptable categories of classification (Butler, 1999:9; Shams, 2020:2). Butler's theory of performativity has been highly influential in

¹⁵ A detailed exploration of the tenets of film semiotics or Metz's work was beyond the scope of this study. See Fourie (2001:216-223) and Metz (1974; 2009) for detailed discussions on these subjects.

feminism and queer theory (Breen, 2016:3; Lloyd, 2015; Pramaggiore, 2013). Many tenets from Butler's theory and queer theory, some of which overlap with feminist enquiries, were relevant to this study exploring how different audiences interpret the gender and sexual identifications of sociohistorically situated movie characters.

3.3 SEMIOTIC MEDIA REPRESENTATION

As discussed, section 3.3 explores subjective and social meaning creation, the roles discourses, myths, and ideologies play within media engagement, and the use of semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment as well as intertextuality within movies.

3.3.1 Subjective and social meaning creation

Meaning-making is a process initiated by communicators or encoders subjectively creating messages using signs. Receivers or decoders complete the process by subjectively interpreting said signs (Chandler, 2017:260-261; Hall, 2006:166). Encoders usually organise these signs into cultural codes to create messages that make sociocultural sense. Audiences familiar with the codes are more likely to interpret the signs in ways that also make social sense than receivers who are unacquainted with the codes. These codes are sociohistorically situated and restrict the meanings encoders can impart, and receivers can interpret from the signs the codes encompass (Barry & Flitterman-Lewis, 2010:67; Martin, 2019:30). Depending on various contextual and personal factors, different encoders and decoders create and interpret meanings differently (Freeland, 2009:647; Hurley, 2021:6; Livingstone, 1991:288). These factors include cultural circumstances, interpersonal influences, learned understandings, personal experiences, individual positioning, ideological beliefs, subjectivities, psyches, and cognitive factors. Even though meaning creation is culturally restricted, it is also highly individualised.

Several semioticians (Chandler, 2017:63; Fiske, 2011b:84; Jeong, 2011:75) hold that encoders use semiotic signs to create media representations portraying depictions of reality. Peirce (1960b:135) describes a sign as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity". His model of the sign consists of three interrelated parts. The first is the representamen or sign vehicle which refers to the form the sign takes. The interpretant is the interpretation drawn from the sign. The final component is the object or referent to which the sign refers (Chandler, 2017:29; Danesi, 2018:9; Peirce, 1960b:135). The object cannot be known directly and is always hidden (Chandler, 2017:37; Fiske, 2011b:4). Social semioticians, such as Bezemer and Jewitt (2009:1), support Peirce's (1960b:135)

conception of the unknowable object by claiming that society members subjectively experience their surroundings and realities completely via signs. Notwithstanding, each society member's individual understanding of their reality is delimited by the culturally agreed-upon meanings of cultural signs and codes within the person's specific language community (Chandler, 2017:231; Hall, 1973:12).

Peirce's (1960b:135) conception of signs allows for variation in the meanings drawn from them. He states that a sign need only represent something to *someone* – not *everyone*. A sign can mean something specific to one person while representing something entirely different to another. The encoders and decoders of a text may understand a particular representamen similarly, but their various interpretants might differ slightly or considerably. As the sign object cannot be known directly, everyone's interpretation is valid. There is no objectively correct understanding of the sign vehicle. Because media communicators' social circumstances and subjectivities influence their encoding of texts, the kinds of reality communicated by said texts are not neutral, value-free portrayals. As already noted in section 2.2, movies' encoding is particularly complex, as numerous different role players and artists are involved in the production process and influence the outcome of the final product (Doty, 2000:3-4; Greenhill, 2015:111-112; Proehl, 2018:17, 22). Each encoder may understand and intend meaning differently depending on their individual considerations. Similarly, because audiences draw on their own experiences, understandings, and beliefs when interpreting texts, their interpretations of the depicted realities are somewhat subjective. A receiver's understanding of a text might differ from the communicators' intended meaning(s) and the meanings drawn by other audiences.

Signs and the codes through which signs operate have denotative and connotative meanings.¹⁶ According to Barthes (1967:89-90), the denotative meaning of a sign refers to its literal, widely recognised and shared meaning, and is broadly agreed upon by most sociohistorically situated individuals (Danesi, 2018:28; Fourie, 2007:346; Gravells, 2017:64). Connotations are those associative meanings of signs that individuals understand, communicate, and interpret using their frames of reference (Danesi, 2018:28-31; Fourie, 2007:346; Madlela, 2018:59). The polysemic nature of signs is more apparent on the connotative than on the denotative level. For example, the denotative meaning of Idgie's attire is that she often wears denim overalls (see section 2.3.1). Whereas most people (i.e. whether encoders or decoders of the film) would likely agree with the above denotative description of

¹⁶ The distinction between denotation and connotation is made almost entirely for analytical purposes. In actuality, it is very difficult to separate a sign's denotative and connotative meanings (Barthes, 1974:9; Gravells, 2017:64). Scholars such as Hall (1980:122) have argued that purely denotative meanings do not exist as no meanings are absolutely and objectively accurate or universally true. These scholars posit that denotation refers simply to those meanings that garner a wider consensus than connotative meanings.

Idgie's clothing, different individuals may understand the connotative meaning(s) of the overalls differently. For instance, some of the study's research participants interpreted Idgie's overall wearing as an act of rebellion. In contrast, others understood it as an expression of butchness and queerness (see sections 5.3.3.1 and 5.4.3.1).



Figure 3.1: Idgie visits her brother's grave wearing denim overalls (Avnet, 1991)

Connotative meanings are socially and historically restricted and thus not entirely personal or boundless. Society members can draw only a limited number of connotative meanings from signs, as they must make sense within the given temporal context (Barthes, 1967:91; Fourie, 2007:346; Gravells, 2017:64). Semiotic sign systems or codes also limit the range of possible meanings signs can convey, providing a framework for communicating and interpreting signs and creating sensible meanings related to cultural sets of practices or conventions (Fiske, 2011b:4; Gravells, 2017:52; Moriarty, 2016:20-21).

Encoders such as filmmakers convey meaning by organising signs into codes (Chandler, 2017:204; Harries, 1997:296). Audiences then usually interpret these texts' signs using shared cultural codes. Due to globalised sociocultural dress and gender codes, most *Fried green tomatoes* communicators and audiences would likely agree that Idgie's clothing style differs from traditionally feminine attire, especially within the culturally conservative setting of the film – the American South in the early 1900s (Danesi, 2018:168). While the various encoders and decoders may identify numerous reasons underlying the character's choice of attire, most would probably interpret her clothing as somewhat peculiar for an early 20th-century Alabaman woman. The codes framing Idgie's overalls as a sartorial sign simultaneously enable individuals to subjectively create meaning and limit the possible interpretations they can draw.

Individuals usually need to be familiar with a society's codes to understand culturally situated signs (Hodge & Kress, 1988:7; Moriarty, 2016:20-21; Van Rheede van Oudtshoorn, 2015:2). Social semioticians hold that the ability to communicate and interpret signs according to the codes in which they operate is a socially acquired skill (Bezemer & Cowan, 2021:109; Hodge & Kress, 1988:7; Van Leeuwen, 2005:47). People are not born with an inherent understanding of codes or the range of sign meanings available within them. They learn their society's various codes and signs through everyday experience, interaction with other society members, and exposure to culturally and historically situated media texts (Bezemer & Cowan, 2021:109; Fourie, 2007:343-344; Jenkins, 2011:xxix-xxx).

Code learning via media exposure was particularly relevant to this study. For instance, a young girl might (sub)consciously learn sociohistorical dress codes via her *Fried green tomatoes* viewing. She may notice that Idgie is repeatedly criticised for her clothing, which is considered masculine within the context of the film's setting. Depending on how the girl's other socialisation factors (including her previous media exposure or consumption) influence her interpretation of the film, the movie may teach her that many people expect girls to dress in ways that are considered feminine or illustrate that in the past girls were criticised for wearing clothes that are now considered acceptable for young women. Importantly, this study does not argue that media texts *alone* influence society members' understandings of cultural codes. Other significant agents of socialisation include relatives, peers, fellow community members, social institutions, and consumer culture, to mention but a few (Chandler, 2017:171-172; Hosany *et al.*, 2022:236-237).

Chandler's (2017:186) taxonomy for classifying semiotic codes consists of the following categories: social, representational or textual, and interpretive codes.¹⁷ The various kinds of codes and subcodes contained in these categories often overlap, and any semiotic analysis of a sign, message, or text should consider the different codes simultaneously involved and the relationship between them (Fiske, 2011b:4; Gravells, 2017:53). Social codes are those regarding verbal language, the body, behaviour, or commodities (Chandler, 2017:186; Pârlog, 2019:32). Many signs communicating Idgie's arguably masculine character are organised via overlapping social codes. Clothing codes (i.e. commodity codes) and gender codes (i.e. bodily and behavioural codes) delimit interpretations of Idgie's attire, while ritual codes (i.e. behavioural codes) frame understandings of her traditionally masculine hobbies, such as fishing and gambling. Many of this study's participants understood the above signs to be

¹⁷ Chandler's taxonomy is one among many taxonomies for the classification of codes and subcodes. This classification system was selected for the study because it aligns with the investigation's understanding of the functioning of semiotic codes and signs. See Bernstein (2003:58-61), Fiske (2011a:66-73), Solomonick (2015:31-36), and Watson and Hill (2012:43, 89-90) for explorations of alternative taxonomies.

communicating Idgie's masculinity. Some of these participants further interpreted the character's masculinity as an indication of queerness (see sections 5.3.3.1 and 5.4.3.1 for thorough discussions of the participants' interpretations).

Chandler's (2017:186-187) representational codes include scientific, aesthetic, rhetorical, genre, stylistic, and mass media codes. Representational codes adhere to certain conventions delineating texts' structure, style, and content (Chandler, 2017:204). Over time and via repeated exposure to these textual codes and how they frame texts, people gain knowledge that functions intertextually to shape their construction or expectations and interpretations of content employing codes (Chandler, 2017:204). For example, a romantic comedy screenwriter will likely consciously or subconsciously draw on their intertextual knowledge of other romantic comedies when planning their movie's structure, plot, and narrative. *Thelma & Louise* audiences who have viewed many films belonging to the Western genre might have specific expectations of the movie concerning its adherence to or departure from this genre's conventions. These expectations would probably influence the viewers' interpretations of the film.

Codes of mass media include cinematic codes, which were particularly relevant to this study. This study subscribed to a film semiotics perspective that drew specifically on foundational film semiologist Christian Metz's (1974:47-49) work. Here cinematic codes involve those concerning the filmic or televisual form and are therefore also known as codes of form. These include editing codes and codes of camera point of view (POV) (Fourie, 2001:218; Kirsten, 2018:134; Stam *et al.*, 1992:50). Editing codes relate to shot cutting, fading, and sequencing and diegetic and non-diegetic sound¹⁸ codes (Chandler, 2017:214-215, 218-219; Fourie, 2007:342). Codes of camera POV are codes of camera distance and movement (Chandler, 2017:213-214; Nichols, 1981:48). Cinematic codes relate to *how* films depict content. Many film and media scholars hold that filmmakers employ these cinematic codes to convey meaning on both a denotative, textual level and a connotative, subtextual level (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2012:197; Fiske, 2011b:6,8; Fourie, 2007:349-350).

Consider the scene in *Fried green tomatoes* where the prosecutor questions Ruth about her and Idgie's relationship (see section 2.3.1). The cameraperson gradually focuses the viewer's attention on Ruth's face via a zoom shot. The editor accentuates the shot by allowing the prosecutor's voice to fade slowly. On a textual level, the camerawork and editing of this shot denote a woman being questioned by an off-screen man. This study holds that the cinematic

¹⁸ In film, there is a distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound. Diegetic sound refers to any sound that exists within and emanates from the fictional world of the film (Chandler, 2017:218; Tan *et al.*, 2017). Non-diegetic sound does not originate from within the movie's world and is audible only to the film's audiences, not its characters (Chandler, 2017:218).

codes used in this scene connote additional, subtextual meanings about the significance of Ruth and Idgie's relationship within the film's plot. The zoom shot and fading away of the prosecutor's voice stress Ruth's intense feelings about the topic (i.e. her and Idgie's relationship). A few moments later, Ruth proclaims that Idgie is "the best friend I ever had, and I love her" (Avnet, 1991). Whether the viewer interprets this as a declaration of platonic friendship or romantic love, the dramatic zoom shot and fading of sound highlight the importance of this relationship to Ruth and the film's storyline.



Figure 3.2: Ruth testifies on Idgie's behalf during her murder trial (Avnet, 1991)

In their encoding of texts, filmmakers also employ non-cinematic or extra-cinematic codes. Non-cinematic codes (also known as codes of content) comprise the various techniques used to combine components of audio-visual material to communicate meaning (Fourie, 2007:342). Unlike cinematic codes, extra-cinematic codes do not apply exclusively to film and television. Codes of content include narrative, thematic, production, acting, décor, costume, and lighting codes, and codes of mise-en-scène (Chandler, 2017:206-207; Fourie, 2001:218, 2007:342; Nichols, 1981:48). Whereas cinematic codes concern *how* content is communicated via the filmic medium, extra-cinematic codes relate to the content itself. Social codes often influence the non-cinematic codes employed in texts (Chandler, 2017:204; Fiske, 2011b:5, 9; Nichols, 1981:26). For instance, globalised commodity codes influence the décor and costume codes framing *Fried green tomatoes* signs such as the café's booths and Idgie's baseball mitt, respectively. Thus, the social codes employed by the film's fictional characters can also be categorised as codes of content (Fiske, 2011b:5, 9; Nichols, 1981:26).

The final scene of *Thelma & Louise* exemplifies the combined use of cinematic and non-cinematic codes to convey meaning (see section 2.3.2). The last shot portrays Louise and Thelma driving their car off a cliff. The image of their leap freezes mid-air. One interpretation of this editing choice is that the film's final shot conveys Louise and Thelma's escape from the patriarchal and heteronormative systems that failed them. By editing the image to depict their leap but not their likely fatal plummet, director Ridley Scott could be said to convey a message of hopefulness.¹⁹ The codes of content used in the last shot support the above reading. A viewer may interpret how Thelma grabs Louise's hand – both the actress Geena Davis' use of acting codes and the fictional character Thelma Dickinson's employment of behavioural social codes – to convey the women's confidence in and contentment with their choice to escape capture via probable suicide.



Figure 3.3: In *Thelma & Louise*'s final shot before the credit sequence, the protagonists escape police capture by driving their car into the Grand Canyon (Scott, 1991)

Interpretive codes consist of perceptual and ideological codes (Chandler, 2017:186; Gravells, 2017:52; Pârlog, 2019:33). Ideological codes are particularly relevant to this study. These codes pertain to the numerous beliefs and worldviews regulating everyday life. Semioticians hold that *all* semiotic codes are ideological to an extent, as they communicate sociohistorical discourses, myths, and ideologies via signs (Chandler, 2017:191; Gravells, 2017:63; Nöth, 2004:13-14). The ideologies to which an individual subscribes play a significant role in their understanding of signs, the codes framing them, and media texts such as queer-coded

¹⁹ When asked about the film's ending in a 1991 interview, Scott commented that "[i]t just seemed appropriate that they carry on the journey. It's a metaphorical continuation ... [The film's] about choices and freedom" (Taubin, 2005:79).

movies.²⁰ The next section explores ideologies and the discourses and myths via which they are disseminated.

3.3.2 Discourses, myths, and ideologies

Society members are exposed to and their subjectivities influenced by dominant and marginalised discourses, myths, and ideologies throughout their lifetimes. This argument relates to this audience reception study because encoders and decoders' subjectivities play a role in their creation, communication, and interpretation of meaning.

Discourses are systems of representation that have over time come to circulate particular mythic meanings. Discourses naturalise myths into apparent common sense within specific temporal contexts (Barthes, 1972:107; Fiske, 2011b:14; Hassen, 2015:120). According to Barthes (1972:10, 108, 127; 1974:206) and others (Fiske, 2011a:82-83; Gravells, 2017:63; Lacey, 1998:68), myths are cultural ideas, beliefs, and values (i.e. connotations) that are so dominant, pervasive, and taken for granted within a society or subsection of a community that they appear natural (i.e. denotative) rather than culturally constructed. These myths help to naturalise certain (often socially hegemonic) ideologies (Barthes, 1972:10, 127; 1974:206; Chandler, 2017:171, 173-174). Ideologies or worldviews are beliefs and attitudes shared by certain groups of people that frame how they view and interact with their surroundings. Those who subscribe to a particular worldview usually accept its underlying myths as fact, while those who do not adhere to it may view its beliefs as incorrect or false understandings (Eagleton, 1991:29-30; Fiske, 2011a:157; Van Dijk, 2013). French philosopher Louis Althusser built on the well-known historical-materialist conception of ideology by Karl Marx to develop a more nuanced understanding of ideologies.²¹ He held that contrary to Marxist beliefs, ideologies are not views imposed by one class upon another, but rather ubiquitous sets of practices in which all members of society continuously participate, regardless of their social or economic class (Eagleton, 1991:18; Fiske, 2011a:166).

The particular ideologies that discourses circulate may or may not be culturally dominant. Depending on the myths it conveys and the interests it serves, a discourse bears either hegemonic or more marginalised ideologies (Brintnall, 2021; Fiske, 2011b:14; Lovelock, 2019:20-21). Society members are subconsciously acclimated over time and through repeated exposure to specific (generally dominant) discourses and often but not necessarily accept their myths and ideologies as 'objective realities' (Fiske, 2011b:66-67; Harrison & Boyd,

²⁰ See Chandler (2017:185-219) for a more detailed discussion of the taxonomy of codes and subcodes applied in this dissertation.

²¹ See Eagleton (1991), Fiske (2011a:156-181), and Marx and Engels (1932) for detailed discussions of Marxist understandings of ideology.

2018:140; Moosavinia *et al.*, 2019:190, 193-194). Discourses serve the interests of those who subscribe to and subordinate or marginalise those who do not support the discourses' ideological disseminations (Barthes, 1972:147-148; 150; Fiske, 2011b:42). Discourses bolster their subscribers' conscious or subconscious belief that their views of life and values are correct and position others' ideological subscriptions as 'incorrect' (Fiske, 2011a:164-165; Harrison & Boyd, 2018:137-138, 141). For instance, patriarchal gender discourses promote the interests of conforming individuals who adhere to the myths of femininity (e.g. 'feminine' women), masculinity (e.g. 'masculine' men), or traditional gender roles (e.g. 'subservient' women or 'dominating' men). These dominant gender discourses subordinate the interests of those who do not adhere to the above myths (e.g. 'masculine' or 'domineering' women, or 'feminine' or 'submissive' men). Patriarchal gender discourses further bolster the demands of ideologies such as cisgenderism and heteronormativity and undermine the norms or beliefs upheld by ideologies like queerness.

Importantly, discourses and ideologies can shift over time, depending on various contextual factors (Ahn *et al.*, 2014:118-119; Harrison & Boyd, 2018:140). Although heteronormative discourses are still culturally dominant, queer sexual and gender discourses are far less marginalised today than 50 years ago (Bernini, 2021:132; Deerwater *et al.*, 2023:4). Discourses and ideologies can also be dominant *and* marginalised, depending on the particular society or culture in which they circulate (Harrison & Boyd, 2018:140). Capitalism is dominant within the USA yet marginalised within Vietnam, a country with a socialist-oriented market economy, and vice versa (Beckert & Desan, 2018; Fforde, 2019:671).

Semioticians, including social semioticians (Hassen, 2015:119-120; Hodge & Kress, 1988:3, 6; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006:14), hold that like signs and codes, discourses shape every aspect of social life, influencing how people view the world around them, its inhabitants, and even themselves (see discussion on interpellation later in this section). Especially relevant to this study is the role discourses play in creating meaning within texts such as films. Movies do not merely reflect versions of reality; they also to an extent create those realities (Fiske, 2011b:21; Lovelock, 2019:78). Several scholars (Cook; 2018:10; Crewe, 2015:51-52; Smelik, 1998:136) argue that films depicting negative, stereotypical portrayals of LGBTQ+ people encourage viewers (i.e. both cis heterosexual and queer audiences) to adopt negative attitudes towards queer individuals and communities. Conversely, films depicting queer characters as complex, well-rounded people tend to encourage positive attitudes towards and a greater understanding of queer people, and hence prompt audiences to hold more favourable views of queerness (Cook; 2018:9-10; Dhoest & Simons, 2012:270). The study's

results chapter explores how films can influence audiences' understandings of gender, sexuality, and heteronormative conventions (see sections 5.3.2 and 5.4.2).²²

Movies disseminate specific discourses via signs framed by codes and thereby contribute to the naturalisation of particular ideologies (Baig *et al.*, 2020:414-415; Fourie, 2007:346). Films that support and reproduce hegemonic ideologies are more easily and widely distributed within a society than those upholding minority worldviews (Ekdale, 2013:159; Saha, 2013:240). Society members (including filmmakers) who subscribe to hegemonic ideologies usually have more access to the resources necessary to produce films than those with culturally marginalised worldviews (see elaboration later in this section). This disparity in access to filmmaking resources helps most mainstream media texts maintain the dominant ideologies of their creators. However, some mainstream movies communicate marginalised beliefs and values (Grant, 2007:33; Lacey, 1998:98-99, 104; Ortner, 2012:2). The example of Idgie's denim overalls exemplifies the inter-functioning of signs, codes, discourses, myths, and ideologies within movies. The dress and gender codes framing the overalls sign as culturally transgressive convey meanings about the sociohistorical dimensions and implications of Idgie's clothes. The codes enable the circulation of various globalised discourses within the film, including, for instance, patriarchal gender discourses. These discourses disseminate specific cultural myths like masculinity, femininity, and traditional gender roles. The above myths promote hegemonic worldviews such as patriarchalism, heteronormativity, and cisgenderism.

Many movies simultaneously communicate seemingly contradictory discourses (Fiske, 2011b:47; Lacey, 1998:107). Even though other characters' judgmental reactions to Idgie's clothing can be interpreted as promoting hegemonic views, some signs within the film communicate minority discourses. For instance, Idgie teaches Buddy Jr. to play catch, a traditionally masculine pursuit (Baker, 2022:739). This act can be viewed as an indexical sign²³ representing Idgie's paternal role in Buddy Jr.'s life. This sign conveys feminist gender discourses and disseminates marginalised mythic meanings (e.g. non-traditional gender roles, leisure pursuits, and family structures). These myths communicate and naturalise minority ideologies such as feminism, queerness, or non-traditionalism.

²² Although the study did not directly investigate the participants' views on heteronormativity, cis heterosexuality, or sexual or gender queerness, some participants volunteered information regarding their beliefs on these topics (see sections 4.4.1, 5.3.2, and 5.4.2).

²³ This study subscribed to Peirce's (1960b:157, 160, 165) commonly accepted classification of the forms of signs as either iconic, indexical, or symbolic, depending on the sign vehicle's relation to the sign object. The indexical sign vehicle is directly related (either physically or causally) to its referent or object (Chandler, 2017:41). See Chandler (2017:45-56), Fourie (2007:335), and Gravells (2017:204-206) for detailed descriptions of these sign forms. See Chandler (2017:52-54, 158-159, 212) and Fourie (2001:217, 2007:335) for discussions on the indexicality and iconicity of film signs – discussions related to this study but beyond its scope.

Viewers interpret films and their discourses using their specific interpretative strategies (see sections 3.4 and 3.5.3 for elaborations on interpretative strategies and communities). This study holds that many film signs can be interpreted so divergently that the same sign can simultaneously maintain hegemonic and marginalised worldviews. The issue is further complicated when considering queer representations presented subtextually via queer coding. For instance, a *Thelma & Louise* viewer may interpret the film as simultaneously disseminating queer and heteronormative sexual discourses. Their understanding may be that the movie implies that the protagonists are lovers and thus depicts sexual queerness in a favourable light. They may also view the filmmaker(s) failure to explicitly portray the women as queer as reinforcing heteronormative values. A different audience member might be unaware of the queer coding in the movie. They might understand the film to be disseminating exclusively heteronormative sexual discourses. A third viewer may interpret *Thelma and Louise* as indisputably queer. They may believe that the filmmaker(s) intended for the characters to be construed as lovers. This viewer may understand the movie to be disseminating queer sexual discourses and subordinating heteronormativity.

Dominant discourses and their associated codes, signs, and myths are so pervasive within a given culture and learned at such an early age that they typically appear natural and normal (Gravells, 2017:52, 69; Hall, 1980:121; Ricento, 2013:3). The ideologies that these hegemonic discourses disseminate also appear natural, moral, and common-sensical (Gravells, 2017:52, 69; Hall, 1980:121, 2006:167). Ideologies have economic and political dimensions that play a significant role in the distribution of sociocultural power. A society or culture's dominant economic and political systems are organised around, enforced by, and perpetuate culturally hegemonic ideologies. Those society members in positions of power usually draw on dominant ideologies to achieve and maintain their societal influence (Fiske, 2011a:168; Harrison & Boyd, 2018:136). Individuals or groups of people who subscribe to them are more likely to occupy positions of power than those who adhere to more marginalised ideologies. Those in power are better able than their marginalised counterparts to voice their views, attitudes, and ideological beliefs (Barthes, 1972:147-148; 150; Gravells, 2017:70). Hegemonic power structures and the ideological views and values disseminated via them perpetually sustain each other. Dominant ideologies' ubiquity in society grants legitimacy, naturalising them further. Their pervasiveness reinforces the dominance of their mythic beliefs (Althusser, 2006:85; Fiske, 2011b:43; Gravells, 2017:70). These hegemonic discourses, myths, and ideologies function as both invisible and essential, hiding their dominance and the power structures they serve (Kennedy, 2014:120; Lacey, 1998:101; Lovelock, 2019:21).

Althusser (2006:84) argues that individuals are interpellated or hailed as social subjects by the dominant ideologies of their society. Following Althusser, semioticians (including social semioticians) posit that the various discourses people are exposed to throughout their lives shape their subjectivities (Fiske, 2011b:15, 66-67; Hassen, 2015:119, 122; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006:41). Most society members are more frequently exposed to culturally dominant discourses than to marginalised ones (Chandler, 2017:201; Gravells, 2017:70). However, a person does not necessarily adhere to dominant ideologies simply because they are more frequently exposed to them than to minority worldviews. French philosopher and political activist Michel Foucault (1978:95) claims that “[w]here there is power, there is resistance”. Society members are individuals with cognitive abilities and agency. They can resist dominant ideologies’ hegemonic norms and values (De Lauretis, 1984:14; Moosavinia *et al.*, 2019:193-194; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017).

The subjectivities of individuals are unstable and impermanent as they are constantly shaped by multiple discourses. Society members experience different situations and consume media content throughout their lives that are influenced by various ideologies of differing societal dominance. These varied influences continuously affect people’s ability to create, communicate, and understand meaning (Fiske, 2011b:66-67; Hall, 1989:70; Salam, 2020:68; Stoddart, 2007:203). Because their subjectivities are dynamic and ever-changing, individuals may interpret media differently at different times. Research participant Alexa’s²⁴ understanding of *Thelma & Louise* illustrates how viewers may even interpret the *same* text differently at various times (see section 5.4.2).

Audiences’ subjectivities and media consumption influence each other in a continuous, intertextual cycle. Film discourses may influence their viewers’ subjectivities which, in turn, influence how those receivers create meaning from subsequent movies (see section 3.3.3 for a related discussion on intertextuality). Film discourses also affect encoders’ subjectivities. The discourses filmmakers encounter via their own media consumption (acting in those instances as decoders rather than encoders) may influence their subsequent construction and communication of films. It is important to note that individuals often choose to watch movies that reflect or align with their views and values (Castle & Stepp, 2019; Weaver, 2011).

²⁴ All research participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

3.3.3 Films' employment of semiotic tools

Media representations often employ semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment to communicate meaning.²⁵ These tools operate through polysemic signs framed by codes and often serve to hide their texts' ideological underpinnings. Following a semiotic view of binary opposition, opposites within a society are usually so intertwined that the appearance of one item in an oppositional pair automatically calls the other to mind (Danesi, 2018:45; Putri & Sarwoto, 2016:82). Semioticians, particularly social semioticians, hold that individuals depend on the concept of opposition or binaries to categorise and make sense of sociocultural experiences (Chandler, 2017:105-106; Gal & Irvine, 2019:147; Putri & Sarwoto, 2016:82-83). Although oppositions do not occur naturally, they are so widely used within everyday social life that society members usually view them as natural rather than culturally constructed (Chandler, 2017:105; Hall, 2000:18; Valocchi, 2005:752).

Societal oppositions are seldom valued equally. According to semiotics, most pairs of opposites consist of an unmarked and a marked form. The concept of semiotic unmarkedness/markedness was introduced by structuralist linguist Roman Jakobson. He proposed that oppositionality operates at the levels of the sign signifier *and* signified, as conceptualised by De Saussure.²⁶ The unmarked form is usually viewed as more natural, fundamental, and acceptable than its marked counterpart (Chandler, 2017:110-111; Chen & Chen, 2020:730). In binary opposition, the unmarked form is given precedence over the marked form, and the former item cannot operate as hegemonic without a marked counterpart to dominate. Each item's meaning is dependent on the other. The unmarked item is defined by what it is *not* (i.e. its marked counterpart) and vice versa. The hegemonic unmarked form is defined by what it seeks to repress and, through this repression, constitutes its marginalised marked partner (Chandler, 2017:111). Unmarkedness/markedness relates to Peirce's conception of how individuals construct their identities. According to him, society members gain a sense of self and, thereby, subjectivity by placing themselves in opposition to others (Petrilli, 2013:4). Simply put, individuals view themselves as 'me' by othering those around them as 'them'. They can only position themselves as subjects by designating others as objects.

²⁵ The semiotic concepts of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations and the commutation test are related to but beyond the scope of this study's exploration of semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment. See Barthes (1967:40-70), Chandler (2017:98-139), and Fiske (2011a:103-104; 110-127) for explorations of these conceptions.

²⁶ Jakobson subscribed to De Saussure's structuralist sign model which holds that a sign consists of two interrelated parts; the signifier (comparable to Peirce's representamen) and the signified (arguably equivalent to Peirce's interpretant) (Chandler, 2017:13, 32, 110).

The apparent taken-for-granted naturalness of the unmarked form usually maintains its dominance. The unmarked item is transparent and draws no attention to its privileged position over the marked item which is foregrounded by its noticeable irregularity (Chandler, 2017:112; Fiske, 2011b:43; McLeod, 2016:14-15). Hegemonic discourses, myths, and ideologies usually align unmarked items with specific favourable clusters of unmarked attributes while associating their marked counterparts with the undesirable, marked, socially assigned opposites of those qualities (Chandler, 2017:117, 119-120; McLeod, 2016:14-15). This alignment further naturalises and favourably positions ideologically dominant concepts such as cis heterosexuality. It also positions said concepts' culturally assigned opposites (e.g. queerness) as marginal and transgressive (Chandler, 2017:119; McLeod, 2016:14-15; Riggs & Treharne, 2017:111).

The above-described functioning of these semiotic tools aligns with this study's understanding of the operation of sociocultural signs, codes, discourses, myths, and ideologies (see sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2). The meanings communicated by one item in an opposition are usually understandable only in terms of its binarily opposed counterpart. For instance, masculinity is identifiable as 'masculine' by defining it in terms of what it is *not* – femininity. A sign communicating masculinity (e.g. Idgie's overalls) is framed within cultural codes (e.g. dress and gender codes) in such a manner that the decoder (sub)consciously compares it to its cultural binary opposite (e.g. a flowery dress). Idgie's overalls can be interpreted as masculine because they are not a dress – the preferred attire of the film's other female characters. Her clothing is masculine in her sociohistorical context because it is not feminine. Nothing fundamental suggests that the opposite of a pair of overalls is a flowery dress. It is only by considering said overalls within globalised and historically situated dress and gender codes that this opposition seems natural and common-sensical rather than socially constructed.

The above example illustrates how unmarked forms function similarly to *and via* hegemonic discourses, myths, and ideologies. An unmarked item such as gender conformity achieves and maintains societal dominance over its culturally assigned opposite (i.e. gender non-conformity) through socially dominant gender discourses. These discourses further the culturally constructed illusions that gender conformity is gender non-conformity's natural opposite and that the former is inherently superior to the latter. Culturally dominant discourses and myths align the unmarked form in a binary opposition with specific favourable attributes while associating the marked item with the unfavourable socially assigned opposites of those qualities. For instance, the myth of traditional gender roles aligns gender non-conformity (communicated via Idgie's overalls) with abnormality and gender conformity (e.g. a flowery

dress) with desirability. Simply put, hegemonic cultural discourses and socially unmarked items perpetually sustain each other's sociocultural dominance.

Media texts often depict portrayals of reality that promote and further naturalise already normalised hegemonic worldviews. These representations frequently employ aligned oppositions to influence their audiences' perceptions of their surroundings, fellow society members, and themselves. Depictions of LGBTQ+ characters, whether explicitly queer or queer-coded, usually rely on stereotypes and tropes semiotically aligned with queer people. Stereotypes about queer people frequently relate specifically to their gender expressions (Brown, 2021; Crewe, 2015:52; Kim, 2017:159-160). Films often depict queer men as effeminate and queer women as masculine. Queer theorist Christopher Pullen (2012:20) refers to stereotypes as "discursive myths". Tropes and stereotypes operate through signs with specific connotations. These connotative meanings are so socially pervasive that the myths they convey via discourses are culturally naturalised and appear to reflect an objectively true reality (Bernsmeier, 2013:20; Chandler, 2017:164; Smelik, 1998:136-137). Films often use stereotypes that position queer characters in opposition to cis heterosexual characters by foregrounding gender or sexual queerness as visibly different from the expected norm and therefore marked and noticeable as 'other' (Bernsmeier, 2013:17; Cook, 2018:38).

Movie characters whose sexual and gender identifications are not explicitly stated are usually depicted and understood as cis heterosexual (Hewitt, 2018; Lovelock, 2019:67). Filmmakers and audiences assume these characters are cis heterosexual because cisgenderism and heterosexuality are ideologically dominant within heteronormative societies, and therefore pervasive and viewed as natural and common-sensical. Cisgenderism and heterosexuality are an unmarked sociocultural given (see section 3.6.2). Most movies depict cis heterosexual characters simply as 'people' with 'normal' attributes or characteristics and vice versa – 'ordinary' (i.e. unmarked) people are 'correctly' interpretable as cis heterosexual. Films portraying LGBTQ+ characters frequently align their queer characters with marked, culturally unfavourable attributes. This alignment depicts the queer characters as 'different' from the above 'normal' characters and vice versa – marked characters who deviate from sociocultural norms can often be assumed to be queer (Kim, 2017:163; McLeod, 2016:13; Slagle, 2014:135). Cis heterosexual characters' gender and sexual identities rarely play an integral role in their depictions or narrative arcs, whereas the opposite is true for LGBTQ+ characters. Queer movie characters' portrayals often centre predominantly around their sexualities or gender identities (Green, 2013:33; Knegt, 2018; Thomson, 2021:6).

LGBTQ+ film characters are often interpretable as queer via their cultural 'queerness' rather than their sexual or gender-queerness. This marked social strangeness is usually unrelated

to sexual and gender identification. Often it has culturally been aligned with – and has, through this alignment, become a signifier of – sexual or gender-queerness. For instance, athleticism has no causal relationship to queerness. However, many people perceive lesbians as ‘unusually’ athletic. Filmmakers often depict lesbians as such (Linder, 2012:280-281; Seif, 2017:18). Lesbians’ heightened athleticism is a stereotype that has become so socially pervasive, naturalised, and dominant that many society members believe it to be an objective truth rather than a widely held socially situated and subjective belief. In section 3.6.2.2, ‘movies’, particularly ‘queer-coded movies’, use of semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment is explored further.

Intertextuality also influences media content’s construction, communication, and interpretation and can influence how individuals interpret and navigate their realities.²⁷ Intertextuality refers to the relationship of texts with other texts that inform and influence their creation and interpretation (Danesi, 2018:206; Gravells, 2017:56; Nolte & Jordaan, 2011). All authors or media producers, such as filmmakers, are influenced by their previous exposure to and engagement with media texts and consciously or subconsciously borrow from them (Kot *et al.*, 2021:4; Trifonas, 2017:181). Similarly, receivers create meaning from media content by drawing on their understandings gained from other texts (Gray, 2013:93; Michael, 2016:117). Foundational feminist film theorist Janet Staiger (2000:1) posits that “contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have watching films” and that “[t]hese contexts involve intertextual knowledges”. Sections 5.3.2 and 5.4.2 explore several intertextual influences affecting the participants’ interpretations of the selected films.

Audiences’ interpretations of films are often influenced indirectly by other texts. For example, during the Hays Code era, queer audiences did not have access to explicit queer representation in film. These viewers often learned to ‘read between the lines’ and satisfied their need for LGBTQ+ visibility by interpreting certain characters as queer, even though they were not explicitly depicted as such (Bernsmeier, 2013:84; Linder, 2012:279-280). Consequently, a queer viewer who grew up during this period might, through exposure to numerous queer-coded Hays Code era films, have learned to interpret particular characters as LGBTQ+. They might then knowingly or unknowingly draw on this skill when watching *Fried green tomatoes* or *Thelma & Louise* and interpret the main characters in these films as queer.

Intertextuality sometimes involves specific, direct allusions or overt references to other texts (Gravells, 2017:57; Michael, 2016:117; Ndlangamandla, 2017:57). For instance, as explicitly

²⁷ The semiotic notions of anchorage and bricolage are related to the exploration of intertextuality within semiotic media representation. However, investigating these concepts exceeded the focus of this study. See Chandler (2017:255-256, 258-259, 283), Fiske (2010:118-119), and Penn (2000:229-230) for explorations of anchorage and bricolage.

stated in the opening credit scene, the 1991 film *Fried green tomatoes* is based directly on the novel *Fried green tomatoes at the Whistle Stop café* by Fannie Flagg (Avnet, 1991). The movie's director directly employed Flagg's novel to encode the film. The book implies much more strongly than the film that Idgie and Ruth are romantically involved (Eaklor, 1994:323; Proehl, 2018:17, 22). Movie viewers who have read the novel might draw on the knowledge gained from this reading and interpret the film versions of Idgie and Ruth as queer, even though they are not explicitly depicted as lovers in the film.

Media scholar and cultural theorist John Fiske (2011b:85) holds that the meanings created from primary texts (e.g. movies) are influenced by the intertextual evocation and impact of other texts of a different type that refer directly to the primary text. These other texts may be secondary texts (e.g. promotional articles and events, interviews, and reviews) or tertiary texts created by audience members, such as social media commentary or gossip. An example of a secondary text relevant to this study is Kate Aurthur's (2018) BuzzFeed article entitled "Why *Fried Green Tomatoes* is a Lesbian Classic – Yes, Lesbian!". Aurthur's article explores a queer interpretation of Idgie and Ruth's relationship in the film version of *Fried green tomatoes*. A viewer who has read this article might be more inclined to interpret the movie versions of these characters as queer than a viewer who has not read the article. If this receiver were to discuss Aurthur's text and its influence on their reading of the film with a friend, said conversation would constitute a tertiary text. This tertiary text could influence the second individual's interpretation of the movie were they to watch it then.

Drawing on the work of foundational queer and feminist film theorists,²⁸ scholars such as Lee (2023:5), Matte-Kaci (2019:37), and Nowell (2012:70) hold that some audiences use their knowledge of extra-filmic material to support their queer readings of queer-coded movie characters. Said material includes extended director's cuts of films, celebrity gossip, star associations, and actors or directors' repertoires of previous works. The above scholars posit that queer readings subvert the hegemonic ideology of heteronormativity promoted by most mainstream movies. A *Thelma & Louise* viewer who has seen *The hunger* (Scott, 1983), in which Susan Sarandon's character is involved in an explicitly queer relationship, might associate Sarandon with queerness. They might then interpret her portrayal of Louise as queer. The subversive use of extra-filmic material illustrates that society members can oppose the dominance of hegemonic discourses through resistive interpretations of texts (see section 3.5.3 for discussions on resistive understandings of media texts). The above argument is also reflected by certain tenets of reception theory.

²⁸ These foundational theorists include Richard Dyer (1998:192), Andrea Weiss (1991:287, 290, 1992:30, 32), and Clare Whatling (1997:119).

3.4 RELEVANT TENETS OF RECEPTION THEORY

Reception theory in communication studies focuses on how individuals receive and interpret messages and how these interpretations are influenced by their specific circumstances, frames of reference, and subjectivities (Laing, 2017:7; Sandvoss, 2011:240).²⁹ Reception theorists' understanding of meaning creation as a subjective and social process supports the tenets of semiotics thoroughly discussed in the previous section.³⁰

Reception theorists (Alber, 2018:37; Gambier, 2018:47-48; Holub, 1984:84-85) and social semioticians (Harries, 1997:305; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006:115) use Umberto Eco's 'model reader'³¹ and Wolfgang Iser's 'implied reader' to differentiate between implied or ideal readers and actual readers. The former is an abstraction, ensuring that the ideal reader's understanding aligns with the encoder's intended meaning (Chandler, 2017:251; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006:115). It is doubtful that any actual or empirical receiver will interpret a text entirely in the encoder's intended manner. Actual readers interpret texts according to their specific frames of reference (Harries, 1997:305; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006:115; Livingstone & Das, 2013). The lack of 'fit' between communicators and actual receivers' interpretations can usually be ascribed to the differences in their various social circumstances, knowledge, experiences, psyches, and subjectivities. These differences, in turn, lead to variations in the encoders and decoders' specific reading positions (see section 3.5.3). The differentiation between implied and actual readers stresses meaning creation's interactive, procedural, and negotiated nature. Encoders imbue their texts with meaning potential. By actively interpreting these texts, actual readers realise said potential into empirical meanings that likely differ to a greater or lesser degree from the communicators' intended understandings.

Like semioticians, reception theorists hold that individuals' subjectivities, perceptions of reality, and interpretations of media content are influenced by their intertextual knowledge of other texts and previous experiences, positionings, understandings, and interpretations. Related to the notion of intertextuality is foundational reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss' (1982:19, 23)

²⁹ While discussion of Barthes' 1967 (translated in 1977) proclamation of "[t]he death of the author" was beyond the scope of this study, it is relevant to the exploration of audience reception within communication studies. In the above-mentioned essay, Barthes (1977:146-147) argues for an understanding of texts as reader-oriented and containing multiple meanings that get reinscribed with each new receiver rather than possessing a single, limited, and objectively correct meaning as intended by the author. Barthes draws on literary theorist William K. Wimsatt and philosopher Monroe Beardsley's (1946:468-470) conception of "[t]he intentional fallacy". In this essay, Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946:468-470) posit that an author's intention is nearly irrelevant when interpreting their text. Michel Foucault's 1969 (translated in 1998) conception of the author function is also applicable to reception theory within communication studies yet exceeded the focus of this investigation. Reception theory scholars (Gray, 2013:91) often view Foucault's (1998) author function as a challenge to Barthes' liberation of the reader from the author's domination. Rather than dismissing the author completely, Foucault (1998:211) redefines the author's role as a function of discourse.

³⁰ For detailed explorations of the tenets of reception theory, see Holub (1984) and Livingstone and Das (2013).

³¹ In this context the term reader is synonymous with receiver or audience member.

conceptions of horizons of experience and horizons of expectations. A person's horizon of experience, continuously shaped by the numerous experiences the individual encounters throughout their life, provides said individual with particular perspectives, viewpoints, and knowledge – it frames the person's expectations of future experiences (Jauss, 1982:23; Sandvoss, 2011:236; Welsh & Wolf, 2020:6-7). Reception theorists argue that an individual's expectations of an encounter (i.e. horizon of expectations) impact *how* they experience and understand an event or interaction. These intertextual horizons intertwine and influence meaning creation, as seen in the interpretation of films by both filmmakers and movie viewers. As discussed in section 3.3.2, an individual's reading position is shaped by their understanding of the world around them.

According to literary theorist Stanley Fish (1980:171) and reception theorists drawing on his work (Gray, 2013:101; Livingstone & Das, 2013), receivers create meaning within various interpretive communities. These communities consist of individuals with access to the same semiotic codes, who subscribe to similar ideological norms, or who share interpretative strategies for creating meaning from texts (Chandler, 2017:193, 251; Livingstone & Das, 2013). These strategies exist before the receivers' interpretation of specific texts and influence or delineate the meanings drawn from said texts (Fish, 1980:171; Gray, 2013:101). Reception theorists and social semioticians hold that individuals belong to different interpretive communities depending on their cultural backgrounds, experiences, learned understandings, ideological beliefs, values, attitudes, and continuously shifting subjectivities (Chan, 2016; Harries, 1997:301; Van Leeuwen, 2005:144-145). Consider, for instance, how certain audiences use their knowledge of extra-filmic material to support their queer readings of films (see section 3.3.3). Reading ostensibly cis heterosexual films queerly is an interpretive strategy often employed by queer audiences seeking to fulfil a need for LGBTQ+ media representation (Linder, 2012:279; Scanlon & Lewis, 2017). The interpretive strategy of queer readings is explored further in section 3.5.3. The next section explores the encoding-decoding model which forms part of reception theory and semiotics.

3.5 STUART HALL'S (1973) ENCODING-DECODING MODEL

Section 3.5 investigates the encoding-decoding communication model by examining Hall's understanding of the mass media communication process, the worldviews underlying media texts, and the reading positions receivers can occupy.

3.5.1 The mass media communication process

Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding model claims that mass media communicators such as filmmakers encode texts that active audiences decode (Hall, 1980:118-119, 2006:164). The

encoding-decoding model proposes that mass communication consists of the following four stages: production, circulation, use, and reproduction (Hall, 2006:163; Thomson, 2021:2). During production, the communicator encodes the message or text and imbues it with meaning potential. This intended meaning is based on the connotations the text's signs hold for the communicator and the encoder's understanding of the sociocultural codes via which these signs are organised (Xie *et al.*, 2022:193). Apart from the encoder's internal considerations (e.g. their subjectivity, circumstances, and knowledge), the systems of broadcasting and production also play an important role during this initial stage (Hall, 1973:2-3; Xie *et al.*, 2022:193). As discussed in section 3.3.2, socially dominant broadcasting institutions and structures usually function through and maintain hegemonic ideologies, and frame the communicator's message within a preferred, hegemonic code (Hall, 1973:2-3).

Circulation and use entail the audiences' reception and active interpretation of the text, respectively (Thomson, 2021:2; Xie *et al.*, 2022:193). Even though the text is encoded within a preferred code, the audiences interpret it in ways that make sense within their frames of reference. These interpretations may differ from the encoder's preferred meaning (see section 3.5.3). Reproduction refers to the receivers' reactions to the interpreted message. Depending on each receiver's positioning and the specific meaning(s) they create from the message, the text might impact them variously (Murdock, 2017:1-2; Thomson, 2021:2; Xie *et al.*, 2022:193).

These four stages of mass communication are independent *and* interconnected, with the meaning of a message not contained wholly within the sign or the text itself (see sections 3.3 and 3.4). Hall (1980:118) defines meaning creation within mass communication as determinate moments consisting of the communicator's encoding of a text, the encoded text itself, and active audiences' decoding of the content. According to semiotics, reception theory, and the encoding-decoding model, meaning creation is not a passive, one-sided act. It is an active, interactive, and negotiated process requiring the communicator's encoded text as well as a receiver. This receiver has agency and is positioned within a specific interpretative context on which they draw when reading the text (Aligwe *et al.*, 2018:1020; Campbell, 2017:12-13; Shaw, 2017:593-594). This study's previously discussed semiotic understanding of subjectivity and its role in meaning creation supports the encoding-decoding model's conception of the communication process. During the moment of reception, the (usually dominant) discourses that the communicator has encoded in the text collide with the various discourses the receiver brings to bear on the content. Receivers employ the discourses, myths, and ideologies that constitute their subjectivities to interpret the text's signs (Fiske, 2011b:66-67, 83; Hall, 1980:117-118, 2006:165). Meaning is completed only once the receiver

has interpreted a text. The audience is simultaneously the receiver of the message and the source of its meaning (Fiske, 2011a:70; Hall, 1973:3).

Like semioticians, Hall posits that media texts convey both denotative and connotative meanings, with the former generally agreed upon by encoders *and* decoders within a particular cultural context (Hall, 1980:122-123, 2006:169). According to Hall (2006:168), connotative meanings are context-dependent and interpretable only via culturally situated, ideologically implicated codes. Hall's position supports this study's assertion that sociocultural codes disseminating distinct ideological meanings simultaneously enable the creation of socially sensible meanings and limit the range of those meanings (see sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2).

Communicators and receivers use their subjective connotations framed within particular codes when encoding and decoding a text, respectively (Hall, 1980:119-120, 122; Xie *et al.*, 2022:190). Connotative associations vary from encoders to decoders, as well as from one receiver to the next. When more than one communicator is involved in the construction of a text (as is usually the case in filmmaking), connotations may also vary from one encoder to the next (Greenhill, 2015:112; Hall, 1980:119-120; Xie *et al.*, 2022:190). Individuals acquire connotative associations through various experiences, ranging from socially situated learning and media engagement to exposure to specific sociocultural circumstances, events, and interactions (Barthes, 1967:91; Fourie, 2007:346; Gravells, 2017:64). These experiences operate intertextually to influence subsequent encounters and the creation of future connotative associations (see section 3.4).

Connotative associations are subject to cultural and historical changes (Adamsen, 2016:99; Fourie, 2007:346). For example, at the time of *Thelma & Louise*'s 1991 release, explicit queerness was less pervasive in public life and media representations than today (Bernsmeier, 2013:126; Knegt, 2018; Miles, 2018:2). Audiences viewing the film upon its original release might have had less queer exposure than current viewers. These receivers may have been less likely to interpret Louise and Thelma as queer than some of today's audiences.

3.5.2 Ideological operations underlying texts

Hall's (1980:123) approach aligns with the semiotic notion that most media representations implicitly attempt to maintain certain ideological operations – either marginal or, more likely, dominant (see section 3.3.2). Semioticians (Chandler, 2017:204, 247), reception theorists (Jauss & Benzinger, 1970:12), and proponents of the encoding-decoding model (Aligwe *et al.*, 2018:1020; Hall, 1973:13) maintain that the structure of texts, the codes, signs, and discourses

employed in their construction and their intertextual relationships to other texts encourage receivers to create specific understandings over others.

For instance, *Thelma & Louise*'s structure, plot, and style draw on many generic conventions of classic and contemporary Westerns (Greenberg *et al.*, 1991:20; Symmonds, 2018). Most movies within this genre depict cis heterosexual protagonists and promote socially hegemonic heteronormativity, cisgenderism, and patriarchalism (Green, 2013:33; Symmonds, 2018). It could be argued that through its encoding, *Thelma & Louise*'s creators attempted to position the film's audiences so that they would interpret the characters as cis heterosexual. The communicators might have employed their intertextual knowledge of the Western genre to encourage this preferred reading, anticipating that receivers would use similar intertextual understandings in their interpretations of the film.

Moreover, queer-coded movies such as *Thelma & Louise* communicate their characters' queerness subtextually via indirect, implicit connotations. Queer-coded characters *may* be interpreted as LGBTQ+, but they do not *have* to be (and often are not) interpreted as such. Doty (2000:4) argues that within cis heteronormative, patriarchal societies, certain society members sometimes accuse those who interpret queer-coded characters as LGBTQ+ of 'reading into things' or of imagining queerness where there is none. The reverse seldom occurs. Because cis heterosexuality is socially naturalised and a cultural given, a character is usually assumed to be cis heterosexual without definitive 'proof' of cis heterosexuality (Doty, 2000:2-3; Eaklor, 1994:326). The hegemonic ideological operations underlying many queer-coded films encourage audiences to interpret the queer-coded characters as cis heterosexual.

Because media representations that support and reproduce socially hegemonic ideologies are more easily and widely distributed within a society or culture than those upholding minority worldviews, most mainstream media texts maintain dominant ideologies (Ekdale, 2013:159; Saha, 2013:240). This cultural ubiquity of hegemonic ideologies could explain why Hall (1973:13, 1980:123-124) focuses primarily on texts that maintain or attempt to uphold dominant worldviews in his conception of the encoding-decoding model. Critics of the model (Ross, 2011:4; Turner, 2006:164-165), argue that it is concerned almost exclusively with texts that promote culturally dominant ideologies. As semioticians and critics (Murdock, 2017:9; Ross, 2011:6-7) argue, some media content opposes hegemonic worldviews. Such texts promote marginalised ideologies. This study holds that although the above criticisms of Hall's model are justified, the model also allows for disseminating and promoting marginalised worldviews. While it focuses on the communication and operation of hegemonic ideologies, the model asserts that "it is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event within more than one 'mapping'" (Hall, 1973:13).

3.5.3 Preferred, oppositional, and negotiated reading positions

The encoding-decoding model states that receivers of media content can engage in preferred or dominant, oppositional, or negotiated readings of texts. Audiences' reading positions depend on how closely their frames of reference and subjectivities align with those of the encoder and the ideological functions underlying the text (Hall, 1973:16-18, 1980:119, 125-127). Mainstream movies such as *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* are usually produced within culturally hegemonic production and broadcasting structures – institutions that frame the texts within preferred codes (Campbell, 2017:11-12; Hall, 1973:2-3).

Depending on the above alignments, receivers could interpret a message in three ways. Receivers whose sociocultural circumstances and experiences align them comfortably with the text's underlying (likely hegemonic) ideological operations would probably accept the preferred or dominant reading intended by the producer (Campbell, 2017:12; Hall, 1973:16, 1980:125-126). For example, audiences who subscribe to heteronormativity and cisgenderism would likely interpret Louise and Thelma as cis heterosexual friends.³²

Regardless of whether they accept it or not, most media receivers will likely identify or recognise a message's preferred reading (sometimes called denotative). This recognition is due to the decoders' understanding of sociocultural codes, discourses, myths, ideologies, and other personal and contextual factors. Fiske (2011b:195) argues that society members with hegemonic values often do not feel the need (as minorities frequently do) to seek out discourses disseminating their ideological views. They are not motivated to pursue specific, less accessible discourses because their ideological subscriptions are socially dominant. Thus, society members with hegemonic worldviews often have a "more limited discursive repertoire" than marginalised individuals (Fiske, 2011b:195).³³ Receivers who subscribe to the hegemonic ideologies underlying most texts would probably accept these texts' dominant readings as 'obvious', natural, and interpretations based on common sense (Chandler, 2017:191; Murdock, 2017:4).

While receivers with more marginalised ideological beliefs are unlikely to accept a text's preferred reading without question, they would probably still recognise the dominant reading and the communicator's intended meaning(s). These individuals can identify the dominant reading because they have been so thoroughly exposed to dominant discourses throughout their lives that they have learned to engage with those as well as their own, more marginalised

³² It should be understood that this study does not assume that *all* cis heterosexual individuals subscribe to cisgenderism and heteronormativity, nor that *only* cis heterosexual people adhere to these ideologies.

³³ See Baxter (2011:235-236), Brown (1987:3), and Fiske (2011b:194-195) for discussions on the related semiotic notions of double text and double-voiced discourse.

discourses (Fiske, 2011b:194-195; Greenhill, 2015:112; Yep, 2003:21-22, 24). Even though these receivers recognise the text's dominant reading, they would probably engage in connotative readings, either oppositional or negotiated.

Although the preferred meanings of most media texts are pervasive and culturally dominant, they are by no means universally unchallenged or undisputed (Hall, 1973:13, 1980:123-124; Murdock, 2017:4). Media representations promote their preferred meanings by using signs that are highly polysemic on the connotative level. There is no guarantee that actual receivers will accept the preferred readings intended by communicators (Aligwe *et al.*, 2018:1021; Hall, 1973:13; Murdock, 2017:4). Additionally, semiotic codes provide frameworks that both accommodate variation in the meanings of polysemic signs and restrict the range of possibilities of those meanings (see section 3.3.1).

Individuals whose subjectivities place them in direct opposition to their society's hegemonic ideologies would likely reject the culturally dominant meanings intended by most communicators altogether. These receivers engage in oppositional readings (Campbell, 2017:13; Hall, 1973:18, 1980:127). While they understand the intended, preferred meanings on a textual level, they also recognise that the media content's (likely dominant) ideologies differ fundamentally from their own (Campbell, 2017:13; Chandler, 2017:192; Murdock, 2017:3). They create meaning from texts using their alternative (usually more marginalised) subjectivities and sociocultural positionings (Chandler, 2017:192; Hall, 1973:18; Murdock, 2017:3). For instance, a viewer who believes that women are cruel and unable to be friends, lovers, or companions of any kind, might interpret *Thelma & Louise* vastly differently than its filmmaker(s) probably intended. Whereas the communicators and most viewers would probably agree that the movie's protagonists care for and support each other, this viewer might interpret Thelma and Louise as deceitful criminals, manipulating each other to get themselves out of a difficult situation.

Most people are situated in social positions that neither completely conform to nor oppose the dominant ideology underlying most texts. These receivers would likely employ negotiated readings, accepting parts of the meaning as intended by the producer while rejecting others (Campbell, 2017:12; Hall, 1973:17). They would probably reject or question particular understandings within the text and construct different meanings to make the text more applicable to their lived experiences, positionings, and understandings. Depending on the degree of fit between these audiences' subjectivities and the text's underlying ideologies, the receivers may accept or reject the text's ideological meanings (Campbell, 2017:12; Chandler, 2017:192; Hall, 1973:17). Most audiences would probably accept *Thelma & Louise*'s message that love drives the protagonists to support each other. However, different viewers would

negotiate different readings of the nature of this love, depending on their individual psyches, experiences, sociocultural positionings, and understandings of friendship and queerness. Whereas some receivers might view the characters' affection as platonic, others could perceive it as romantic or sexual.

Negotiated readings contain many contradictions. The polysemic nature of the signs making up texts enables and encourages these inconsistencies (Fiske, 2010:125, 2011b:65; Hall, 1980:127, 2006:173). The signs of certain texts are more open to interpretation and contradiction than others.³⁴ According to Fiske (2010:83-84, 2011b:66, 96)³⁵ and Whatling (1997:17), these representations tend to be more popular among receivers than those messages that are more resistant to diverse interpretations. Texts containing highly polysemic signs are popular because they allow diverse individuals to negotiate meanings in ways that result in various pleasurable or rewarding readings (Fiske, 2011b:66; Jenkins, 2011:xxx). For instance, movies depicting queer-coded characters (e.g. *Thelma & Louise*) are often favoured because they allow different audiences to interpret the queer-coded characters in various satisfying ways (see sections 5.3.1 and 5.4.1).

A reading strategy particularly relevant to this study is the phenomenon of queer readings (also referred to as against-the-grain readings).³⁶ Audiences who employ this interpretative strategy intentionally interpret texts in ways opposing the encoders' preferred meanings. Specifically, they interpret characters who are not explicitly portrayed as queer, queerly (Fiorenza, 2017:51; Lawes, 2019:262; Shaw & Persaud, 2020). Depending on the specific content the receiver opposes and the extent to which they oppose it, queer readings can be either negotiated or oppositional (Dhoest & Simons, 2012:262; McLeod, 2016:24).

Queer readings of content encouraging heteronormative interpretations resist the texts' preferred understandings and the essentialist notion that heteronormative readings are the only valid, correct, or 'obvious' understandings of the texts' meanings. According to queer theorist Alexander Doty (2000:2), "any text is always already potentially queer". The practice of reading heteronormative texts queerly is a resistive strategy that opposes the hierarchical organisation of heteronormative understandings of content as primary, fundamental, or correct

³⁴ Barthes' 1973 (translated in 1974) distinction between readerly and writerly texts would be relevant to an in-depth exploration of the degree to which various texts are open to interpretation. For Barthes (1974:5, 156), readerly texts are relatively closed, accessible, and popular, while writerly texts are usually intellectual, difficult to interpret, and challenge readers to participate in the creation of meaning.

³⁵ Fiske (2010:83), drawing on Barthes' notions of readerly and writerly texts, proposes the concept of producerly texts, which he describes as a "popular writerly text" – a text possessing the "accessibility of a readerly one" as well as "the openness of the writerly".

³⁶ While beyond the purview of this study, the semiotic notion of excorporation is relevant to an in-depth investigation of against-the-grain reading practices. Fiske (2010:13) defines excorporation as "the process by which the subordinate make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system".

and queer interpretations as secondary, alternative, or incorrect (Björklund & Lönngren, 2020:196).³⁷ Queer readings challenge or destabilise essentialist, heteronormative, and socially constructed notions of naturalness/unnaturalness, normality/abnormality, and correctness/incorrectness. Semiotic alignment within the cis heterosexuality/queerness binary is explored further in the next section (specifically, see section 3.6.2).

3.6 QUEER THEORY AND JUDITH BUTLER'S (1988) THEORY OF GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

As already mentioned, this section investigates queer theorists and Judith Butler's (1988) critical conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality. It also examines the sociocultural hegemony of heteronormativity and cisgenderism. Lastly, section 3.6.3 explores the impossibility of absolute adherence to cis heteronormative prescriptions.

3.6.1 Sex, gender, and sexuality

Queer theory critiques the essentialist, heteronormative models of sex, gender, and sexuality privileged by most societies' dominant ideologies and the social norms that define and limit gender and sexuality (Lovelock, 2019:53; McCann & Monaghan, 2020:4; Milani, 2012:62). Like semioticians, queer theorists hold that all supposedly objective assertions or 'truths' about reality are culturally constructed, subjective, and ideologically implicated (see sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2). Queer theorists posit that all categories used to order and make sense of social experiences are subjective, ideologically loaded social constructions and not, as is commonly believed within most cultures, innate states of being. These categories include the binary categories related to sexuality, sex, and gender (Jagose, 1996:3, 130; McCormick, 2013:130; Riggs & Treharne, 2017:102).

Queer theorists (McCann & Monaghan, 2020:175; Riggs & Treharne, 2017:110) and Butler (1999:30-31) hold that within most cultural contexts, sex, gender, and sexuality are highly entwined. A detailed discussion of Butler's engagement with the earlier feminist distinction between sex and gender was beyond the scope of this study.³⁸ It is sufficient to explain that Butler takes the distinction between biological sex and cultural gender a step further. They³⁹ claim that even the division between males and females is cultural rather than a natural given (Bernini, 2021:127; Butler, 1988:524; Hall, 2000:27). Although they do not deny the material

³⁷ Related to queer reading practices are the strategies of subverting and appropriating heteronormative texts through ironic and camp readings. However, comprehensive explorations of these strategies exceeded the scope of this study. See Matte-Kaci (2019:70-74), Miller (2014), and Sender (2012:221-222) for discussions of camp and ironic readings of texts.

³⁸ For a more detailed exploration of Butler's position on the distinction between sex and gender, see Butler (1990; 1993a; 2004).

³⁹ Butler uses they/them pronouns (Fisher, 2020).

facticity of biological difference, they posit that every body is from the moment of its birth and throughout the rest of its life always already imbued with and contaminated by cultural signification – the biological body continually bears cultural meanings. It is nearly impossible to separate the body from its sociohistorically situated meanings (Butler, 1988:521; Hall, 2000:27; Kirby, 2016:41). The above view supports this study's conception of socially negotiated meaning creation (see section 3.3.1). Within heteronormative ideology, it may seem that physiological sex is a foundational, natural given that precedes and causes gender and sexual desire. However, Butler (1988:521, 1999:30-31) posits that sex is as much a cultural construct as gender and desire, and that sex, gender, and desire continuously and simultaneously reproduce and maintain one another.

Butler (1999:30) further posits that the heteronormative conception of gender “presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender, and that gender reflects or expresses desire”. Heteronormativity prescribes an inverse relationship between individuals' gender and the objects of their sexual desires. Men are compelled to be attracted to ‘biological’ women (i.e. society members whose culturally assigned sex is female) and vice versa (Butler, 1999:30-31; Riggs & Treharne, 2017:102). Thus, within heteronormative, cisgendered societies, individuals' socially assigned sexes and genders dictate their sexual identifications. Conversely, distinctions between men and women are also drawn based on heteronormative sexual desire (Bernini, 2021:127; Butler, 1999:30-31). ‘Biological’ males (i.e. individuals whose socially assigned sex is male) who are sexually attracted to women are categorised and perceived as men. Females who express sexual desire for men are defined as women. Heterosexuality and cisgenderism then continually reproduce and maintain each other in a perpetual cycle of heteronormativity.

The anti-essentialist, social constructionist theory of gender explores how individuals within particular societies or cultures subconsciously construct, communicate, and interpret sexual and gender identifications (Lloyd, 2015; Shams, 2020:3; Van der Watt, 2017:3-4). Butler (1990:25) asserts that gender is performative. They hold that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990:25). Within socially dominant worldviews, a subject's gender presentation is usually believed to result from their innate or inborn gender identity. Butler (1988:523) argues that contrary to this belief, gender identities follow from gender expressions, not vice versa.

Butler's (1988:523, 2013:22-23; Prado-Castro, 2017:98) theory holds that gender is a cultural concept that is socially constructed through ongoing, repetitive, often involuntary acts. Society members perform these acts. The form or appearance of these performances is based largely

on the individuals' culturally learned understandings of their society's various gender discourses. Gender discourses precede and produce individuals' gender (Lloyd, 2015; Lovelock, 2019:19; Shams, 2020:16). These discourses are often organised through semiotic signs and codes and convey mythic meanings regarding gender. For Butler (1999:183, 185), "identity is asserted through a process of signification", which is "a regulated process of repetition". Individuals continuously and usually subconsciously express their gender identifications through the semiotic signs used to communicate and 'do' or 'undo' gender within their specific society (Kirby, 2016:41; Lloyd, 2015; Shams, 2020:3, 18).

Consider, for example, a boy who expresses his masculinity by playing rugby. Whenever the boy plays rugby, he (sub)consciously constructs and communicates his masculine gender identity. Sports such as rugby have become aligned with masculinity in certain societies over time (Furse, 2021:3; Scott, 2020:358-359). Although people often perceive rugby participation as a natural indicator of masculinity, this association is an ideologically implicated social construction rather than a fundamental truth. The boy who expresses his masculinity by playing rugby does so because of this established sociocultural alignment of sports with masculinity. He may anticipate certain social rewards (e.g. praise or popularity) for playing rugby in a culture wherein the sport is celebrated as a manly pursuit appropriate for boys and men. The boy draws on his knowledge of his culture's hegemonic gender discourses, its dominant gender and ritual codes, and the social signs used to communicate masculinity within those codes. This knowledge is gained in numerous ways, such as media exposure and sociocultural socialisation. These codes and signs' communication of masculinity precedes the boy's conscious or subconscious use thereof to convey his masculinity.

Some of Butler's critics argue that the theory of gender performativity is overly deterministic and does not allow individuals enough agency in their subjectivity construction (Lloyd, 2015; Probyn, 1995:79; Shams, 2020:48). In works following their 1988 conception and 1990 exploration of gender performativity, Butler clarifies that their theory is neither deterministic nor voluntaristic. They explain that even though individuals' gender expressions are restricted by their culture's specific codes, society members can still choose how to communicate their gender identities within those codes (Butler, 1993a:15, 1999:187; Shams, 2020:48). A woman might express her femininity by habitually wearing flowery dresses, dainty jewellery, and delicate makeup. However, not *all* women aiming to express femininity would communicate it using these signs. Some may wear skirts or even trousers. Trousers are sociohistorically considered to be masculine attire (Danesi, 2018:167). However, depending on factors such as the specific design of the trousers, the other clothing items with which they are paired, and the wearer's accompanying accessories, trousers may also convey femininity or even subvert

conventional notions of femininity. In all the above examples (i.e. femininity communicated through a dress, a skirt, or trousers) the signs used to convey femininity are framed within sociohistorical dress and gender codes. Notwithstanding, the women in these examples were able to choose a clothing sign most suited to their personal gender identifications and expressions.

Importantly, the different women's specific understandings of femininity also play a role in how they express it. Thus far, this study's explorations of individual, subjective meaning creation have focused mainly on the production and interpretation of media texts. This study posits that society members (sub)consciously use sociocultural signs framed by particular codes to construct their subjectivities, similarly to how encoders create media texts. These subjectivities include individuals' sexual and gender identifications. It should be noted that media communicators' encoding of texts is likely more conscious, strategic, and consistent than most society members' encoding of their subjectivities. Section 3.6.3 explores Butler's (1988) and queer theorists' views on the role an individual's context, personal experiences, and learned understandings play in their expression of gender identification.

Because gender is constituted through ongoing, repetitive acts and shaped by the various discourses to which gendered subjects are exposed and through which they are interpellated, gender identifications are by no means stable or permanent. As individuals continually experience and are influenced by different circumstances and ideologies, they construct and communicate their gender identifications differently throughout their lifetimes (Butler, 1988:519, 1999:179; Kern, 2012:243). This tenet of Butler's (1988) theory aligns with the study's understanding of society members' impermanent subjectivities (see section 3.3.2). For instance, at different times in her life, a woman might express her femininity variously – wearing dresses as a girl, jeans and t-shirts during her teenage years, jumpsuits as a young adult, and women's suits when middle-aged.

Individuals also make sense of others' gender identifications reflexively through an interpretation of semiotic signs (Butler, 1999:12; Lloyd, 2015; Meyerhoff, 2015). This study supports queer theorist Ralph Smith's (2003:346; Phillips, 2014:100) claim that "all human behaviour can be read as textual signification". This study holds that individuals interpret their fellow society members' gender identifications similarly to how they interpret media texts. Just as society members understand media texts differently, they interpret others' gender identifications and expressions variously. The participants' varying interpretations of Idgie's gender identification and presentation illustrate the above assertion (see sections 5.3.3.1 and 5.4.3.1).

3.6.2 Heteronormative and cisgendered dominance

This section concerns the cultural hegemony of heteronormativity and cisgenderism, firstly on a societal level and secondly as maintained through queer-coded movies.

3.6.2.1 Societally dominant heteronormativity and cisgenderism

In most contemporary societies, heteronormativity and cisgenderism are culturally hegemonic. This section examines how cis heterosexuality's cultural dominance is often maintained through semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment. Queer theory exposes heteronormativity and cisgenderism's function as tools for upholding cis heterosexuality as the correct and natural expression of gender and sexuality. Heteronormativity and cisgenderism maintain this cultural illusion by defining any form of gender or sexual queerness as the aberrant binary opposite of cis heterosexuality (Bernsmeier, 2013:15; Carroll, 2012:6; Milani, 2012:62).

Feminist philosopher and poet Adrienne Rich (1980:632) uses the term compulsory heterosexuality to describe heteronormativity's misleading presentation of heterosexuality as natural, fundamental, and essential. This dissertation extends the term to compulsory cis heterosexuality to include cisgenderism. According to Rich's (1980) anti-essentialist argument, cis heterosexuality is constructed, naturalised, and taken for granted as naturally occurring and necessary within heteronormative societies (Carroll, 2012:2; Gupta, 2019:57; Lovelock, 2019:66-67). Compulsory cis heterosexuality positions gender and sexual queerness as incorrect and unnatural expressions of gender and sexual identities (Gupta, 2019:57-58).

Related to the notion of compulsory cis heterosexuality are Butler's interconnected conceptions of the heterosexual matrix and cultural intelligibility. Butler (1999:141, 185) posits that in heteronormative societies, gender, sex, and sexuality function and are inextricably linked through the heterosexual matrix, a tripartite system dictating the terms of cultural intelligibility. The sociocultural interrelationship between sex, gender, and sexuality defines and limits the kinds of sexual and gender identifications that are socially appropriate, acceptable, and understandable. The heterosexual matrix bolsters the culturally hegemonic notion that only identifications adhering to cisgenderism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy are culturally intelligible or make sociocultural sense. This matrix allows for cis heterosexual identifications and the expression of traditional masculinity by men and traditional femininity by women. It renders queer gender and sexual identifications and non-traditional gender expressions culturally transgressive, incomprehensible, and unacceptable (Brickell, 2005:32-33; Butler, 2004:52; Kirby, 2016:43). Put differently, the heterosexual matrix contributes to how

society members interpret others. It encourages individuals to understand cis heterosexual people with traditional gender expressions as socially appropriate, sensible, and relatable. It also prompts society members to interpret those whose sexual or gender identifications or expressions differ from heteronormative prescriptions as culturally inappropriate, abnormal, and unintelligible.

The above conceptions align with semioticians' understandings of semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment (see section 3.3.3). In the heterosexuality/sexual queerness and cisgenderism/gender-queerness binaries, heterosexuality and cisgenderism are constructed as the unmarked, fundamental forms of sexuality and gender identification, respectively, and given primacy over sexual queerness and gender-queerness, the marked, subordinate forms (Butler, 1993a:xi, 3; Lovelock, 2019:67; McLeod, 2016:13-14). By aligning queerness with abnormality, heteronormativity and cisgenderism position cis heterosexuality as normal, socially acceptable, and moral.

Queer theorists (Carroll, 2012:6; Kim, 2017:161; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003:91) and Butler (1993a:3, 2004:217-218) hold that the cis heterosexual/queerness binary relies on its oppression of sexual and gender-queerness to maintain its legitimacy, even as it attempts to dismiss and erase queerness as an anomaly. Heteronormativity and cisgenderism cannot maintain their sociocultural dominance as the 'correct' and 'normal' forms of sexual and gender identity without an 'incorrect', 'abnormal' alternative (i.e. sexual or gender-queerness) over which to dominate. Heteronormativity and cisgenderism do not merely reflect or express cis heterosexuality's societal dominance over queerness, but create and reproduce this hegemony.

3.6.2.2 Heteronormativity and cisgenderism within queer-coded films

Media texts, particularly queer-coded films, often use semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment in their depictions of queer characters. Films upholding hegemonic ideologies often use stereotypes and tropes about LGBTQ+ people to 'other' them. These media texts position sexual and gender-queerness and transgressive gender expressions (i.e. 'masculine' presentations by women and 'feminine' expressions by men) as different from and inferior to cis heterosexuality and traditional gender expressions (i.e. 'masculine' expressions by men and 'feminine' expressions by women). In comparison to 'normal' cis heterosexual identifications and expressions, queerness and transgressive gender expressions are othered as unnatural and abnormal. These stereotypical depictions often relate to the queer characters' gender presentations (see section 3.6.1 for a related discussion on the intertwined relationship between sexuality and gender). The transgressive

gender expressions of these LGBTQ+ characters frequently serve or are deployed, by comparison, to heighten the masculinity of cis heterosexual male characters and the femininity of cis heterosexual female characters.

Filmmakers aiming to communicate queerness frequently depict queer men as effeminate and queer women as masculine. This strategy is often employed by encoders who want to imply queerness subtextually (i.e. via queer coding) without explicitly confirming their characters' LGBTQ+ status. Interestingly, many animated Disney films (especially those produced in the 20th century) employ queer coding to differentiate the movies' antagonists from the protagonists.⁴⁰ The film *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997) emasculates and feminises the villainous Hades through various signs relating to his appearance, attire, behaviour, and speech. The antagonist is tall, lean, and wears flowy, gown-like clothing. These characteristics give him an air of feminine elegance. He also carries himself in a feminine manner and uses feminine gestures. Hades' word and topic choices are also womanly. These signs, framed by sociocultural bodily, behavioural, commodity, and gender codes, communicate Hades' effeminacy and imply his queerness. Some films marginalise female villains by depicting them as masculine. The film *Matilda* (DeVito, 1996), adapted from Roald Dahl's (1988) novel with the same title, is a prime example of such a text. The movie's antagonistic Miss Trunchbull is physically imposing and incredibly strong. She dresses in traditionally masculine attire, walks and carries herself in a manly way, and enjoys participating in physically demanding sports such as shot put, hammer throw, and javelin throw. She lacks traditionally feminine qualities, such as tenderness, nurturance, or warmth.

The semiotic signs via which the above-mentioned villains are portrayed serve several functions. They communicate the characters' transgressive gender presentations. Because transgressive gender expressions are socially aligned with queerness, the signs further imply the characters' queerness. They also differentiate the 'abnormal' queer-coded villains from and subordinate them to the culturally acceptable, cis heterosexual, masculine heroes and feminine heroines. When compared to *Hercules'* hero, Hades' femininity heightens the masculinity of the already manly Hercules. Similarly, the comparison between the masculine Miss Trunchbull and *Matilda's* feminine heroines highlights and increases the femininity expressed by the protagonists, Matilda and Miss Honey. These comparisons differentiate the queer villains from the cis heterosexual heroes and heroines and also portray the villains as inferior to the protagonists.

⁴⁰ See Brown (2021), Kim (2017), Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003), and McLeod (2016) for detailed explorations of the numerous queer-coded Disney movie characters.

Queer theorists (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016:2361; Kennedy, 2014:119-120) and gender performativity scholars (Butler, 1993a:129; Çinar, 2015:54) hold that the dominance of the unmarked form is usually upheld by its apparent naturalness. The unmarked form tends to be transparent and thus draws no attention to its privileged position over the marked form, highlighted by its perceived deviance. For example, the masculinity of cis heterosexual male movie characters is usually overlooked and taken for granted. However, audiences often view the effeminacy of queer male characters as transgressive, unusual, and abnormal (McLeod, 2016:13-14). While most *Hercules* audiences are likely to accept without question Hercules' athletic abilities and his bravery, they would probably view Hades' effeminate behaviour as unsuitable manners for a man.

Queer theorists hold that the cis heterosexuality/queerness binary through which society members learn to understand sexuality and gender is often aligned with other paired signs used to navigate social life, such as natural/unnatural, morality/immorality, majority/minority, among others (Brintnall, 2021; McLeod, 2016:13-14). For instance, in *Hercules*, the unmarked forms of cis heterosexuality and traditional gender expressions are associated with and seen as indicators of bravery, integrity, and heroism – culturally desirable attributes. Marked queerness and transgressive gender presentations are aligned with and indicative of culturally undesirable dishonesty, ruthlessness, and villainy. Through these types of alignments, films such as *Hercules* ensure that cis heterosexuality stands for socially favourable attributes that are, in fact, wholly unrelated to sexual desire or gender identification. They also guarantee that queerness represents socially undesirable qualities equally unconnected to sexual or gender identification. Even though there is no natural, causal relationship between cis heterosexuality and morality or queerness and immorality, *Hercules'* alignment of cis heterosexual Hercules with virtue, and queer-coded Hades with villainy, implies such a connection. The film encourages viewers to draw correlative associations between cis heterosexuality and favourable, socially acceptable characteristics on the one hand, and between queerness and undesirable, culturally unacceptable attributes on the other.

3.6.3 The impossibility of the heteronormative and cisgendered ideal

Many of the arguments made throughout this chapter illustrate the sociocultural dominance of ideologies such as heteronormativity and cisgenderism. Most society members are more frequently exposed to dominant than minority discourses. Therefore, many individuals' subjectivities are primarily constituted in terms of the ideologies that are dominant within their society at the given historical moment. Butler (1999:viii) posits that "the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions". Correspondingly, queer theorists hold that, to a greater or lesser degree, culturally hegemonic

discourses compel subjects to conform to ideologically preferred societal norms (Brintnall, 2021; Carroll, 2012:6; Riggs & Treharne, 2017:102). These norms precede and condition society members' enacting of their identifications (Bernini, 2021:127; Butler, 1988:521, 2013:20). For instance, Western women in the early 1900s usually did not wear trousers because the sociocultural dress and gender codes prohibited them from doing so (Danesi, 2018:167).

However, heteronormativity and cisgenderism can never be fully achieved. Like semioticians and proponents of the encoding-decoding model, queer theorists such as Brintnall (2021) and Hicks and Jeyasingham (2016:2359) hold that all society members' subjectivities are composed of numerous and even contradictory societal discourses. Some of these discourses are not culturally dominant. Society members (sub)consciously construct their social identifications by balancing an approximation of the dominant norms with expressions that deviate from those norms due to personal and social factors (Brintnall, 2021; Fiske, 2011b:66-67; Hewitt, 2018; Riggs & Treharne, 2017:102). Butler's (1999:12; Lloyd, 2015; Meyerhoff, 2015) model of gender posits that a person's historical context, sociocultural positioning, individual psyche, personal experiences and learned understandings of gender influence their enacting of gender identifications as well as their interpretation of others.

Consider the previous example of women who express their femininity through clothing. Even though it is socially acceptable for contemporary women to wear trousers, some women might still prefer to wear traditionally feminine dresses and skirts. This preference could be ascribed to various influences, such as a conservative upbringing, religion, ethnicity, fashion trends, personal associations of traditional femininity with beauty, or the influence of a traditionally feminine role model, whether personally connected to the dress wearer (e.g. a mother or a friend) or an indirect impact, such as a television star, film actress, or fictional character. Another woman with different influences might express her femininity by wearing trousers, even though some society members may view trousers as masculine. This example points to the polysemic nature of the signs used to communicate gender identities.

No society member can fully inhabit the dominant sociocultural norms to which ideologies such as patriarchy, heteronormativity, and cisgenderism compel them to aspire. Most individuals who subscribe to compulsory cis heterosexuality have also encountered and been influenced (if only slightly) by more marginalised discourses, myths, and ideologies throughout their lives. Even though these society members generally adhere to the social norms that compulsory cis heterosexuality requires, they sometimes deviate from some of its prescriptions. Consider, for instance, a childless cis heterosexual housewife who dresses and behaves femininely. She conforms to a large extent to the femininity that patriarchy,

heteronormativity, and cisgenderism demand. She simultaneously subverts some of these ideologies' prescriptions by not procreating with her husband, whether because of physical inability or personal choice (Matte-Kaci, 2019:45, 74; Slagle, 2014:135).

The above example illustrates queer theorists' (Bernini, 2021:48-49; Carroll, 2012:6) assertion that the binary nature of hegemonic conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality limits individuals' expressions of sexuality and gender. These binary structures require all individuals to identify themselves and interpret others as either male *or* female, masculine *or* feminine, and cis heterosexual *or* queer. To an extent, these binaries exclude identifications that deviate from the extremes of male/female, masculine/feminine, or cis heterosexual/queer. This exclusion is attempted and often achieved through direct or indirect disapproval or even threats of punishment for deviating from accepted conventions. This punishment may take many forms, including stigmatisation, ostracisation, oppression, and emotional and physical violence (Brintnall, 2021; Butler, 1988:528, 1990:139-140, 1993:315). Notwithstanding, the childless wife exemplifies the impossibility of fulfilling the above prescriptions. Moreover, there is no single presentation of feminine cis heterosexuality – nor any other type of identification – because individuals' identity expressions are influenced by various sociocultural and personal factors.

In accordance with queer theorists, performativity theorists hold that societally hegemonic heteronormativity, cisgenderism, and patriarchalism simultaneously enable individuals to construct gender and sexual identifications and attempt to restrict those identifications to a range of two binarily opposed acceptable expressions – the presentation of masculine cis heterosexuality by men and feminine cis heterosexuality by women (Butler, 2013:22-23; Gray, 2013:97; Shams, 2020:2-3). Dominant discourses both enable and limit culturally acceptable subject formation. Although these hegemonic ideologies allow for queer sexual and gender identifications and transgressive gender expressions, they render such identifications and expressions abnormal and socially unintelligible (see section 3.6.2 for discussions on unmarkedness/markedness and alignment within the cis heterosexuality/queer binary).

In other words, regulative cis heterosexist norms marginalise transgressive sexual and gender identifications. Ironically, it is this very marginalisation that provides the framework for the expression of transgressive identifications. The construction and communication of identifications that differ from cis heterosexuality and that reject, subvert, or rearticulate dominant norms are enabled through the extreme rigidity of those very same norms (Butler, 1993b:314-315; Riggs & Treharne, 2017:102; Van der Watt, 2017:5). For instance, while it has become acceptable for Western women to wear trousers in the latter half of the 20th century, the reverse has not occurred; it is not and has never been culturally acceptable for Western

men to wear dresses (Danesi, 2018:167). Men need only wear traditionally feminine attire such as gowns, dresses, or skirts to draw attention to themselves and their gender identifications or expressions as transgressive. If it were not for the fact that hegemonic worldviews so rigidly prohibit men from wearing traditionally feminine clothes, individuals such as male drag artists and transgender, nonbinary, and other genderqueer people would not be able to subvert, rearticulate, or reject dominant gender norms simply by transgressing their sartorial restrictions.

3.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter explored the core tenets of semiotics, reception theory, the encoding-decoding model, queer theory, and the theory of gender performativity as they were assessed as pertaining to an investigation of different viewers' interpretations of queer-coded movies.

Using a semiotic understanding of media representation, section 3.3.1 explained how meaning creation is socially negotiated *and* highly individualised. It is a process initiated by communicators who encode texts subjectively using signs framed within codes. Receivers interpret these texts subjectively in ways that may differ from the encoders' specific meanings. Individuals understand texts' meanings differently depending on their psyches and cognitions, sociocultural circumstances, frames of reference, knowledge, and experiences. Additionally, encoders and decoders' subjectivities influence their creation and interpretation of texts. These subjectivities are continuously constituted by the numerous dominant and marginalised discourses, myths, and ideologies to which they are exposed throughout their lives (see section 3.3.2). Particularly relevant to this study was how society members' perceptions of reality and their media engagement perpetually influence each other. Media representations portray depictions of reality that may influence how individuals interpret their surroundings, fellow society members, themselves, and subsequent media texts. Media messages often employ semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment, as well as intertextuality in their portrayals of reality (see section 3.3.3). Using these tools, texts communicate certain (often hegemonic) ideological views and values. Depending on countless personal and contextual factors, different audiences interpret these ideological meanings differently.

As discussed in section 3.4, reception theory posits that audiences interpret media texts and create meanings differently, depending on their horizons of experience, horizons of expectations, and interpretive communities. Stuart Hall's (1973) model falls within reception theory. Hall (2006:163) asserts that mass media communication involves the four independent yet interconnected phases of production, circulation, use, and reproduction (see section

3.5.1). He posits that within these stages the following three determinate moments necessary for meaning creation are located: the communicator's encoding of a text, the encoded message itself, and active audiences' decoding of the text. The encoding-decoding model asserts that media texts usually uphold specific cultural ideologies (see section 3.5.2). The worldviews mainstream media representations promote are usually socially dominant, but some maintain marginal ideologies. Media messages encourage readers to create specific preferred meanings that align with the text's ideological underpinnings. Section 3.5.3 explored how receivers can engage in preferred, oppositional, or negotiated readings of texts. Decoders' reading positions depend on how closely their individual psyches, subjectivities, frames of reference, and cultural circumstances align with the encoders' positionings and the ideological operations underlying both the texts and the systems of production within which the texts were produced.

According to this study's understanding of the tenets of queer theory and Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity, society members use signs situated within cultural codes to construct and communicate their sexual and gender identifications and gender expressions. They also use signs framed by codes to interpret others' identifications and expressions. Depending on personal and social factors, individuals use these signs to create, express, and interpret identifications differently (see sections 3.6.1 and 3.6.3). This study holds that individuals interpret fictional film characters' identifications the same way they interpret their fellow society members' identifications. For instance, a *Fried green tomatoes* viewer (sub)consciously draws on sociohistorical dress and gender codes when interpreting Idgie's attire to understand her sexual and gender identities. This viewer also relies on sociohistorical codes when interpreting the clothing signs and identifications of those they encounter daily.

Queer theorists hold that ideological cis heteronormativity is culturally hegemonic. To a degree, this dominance is communicated and maintained through semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment within the cis heterosexuality/queerness binary (see section 3.6.2). Cis heteronormativity encourages society members to adhere to its ideological norms when constructing, communicating, and interpreting gender and sexual identities. However, individuals are also, to varying degrees, exposed to and influenced by marginalised discourses and have the agency to resist dominant ideological prescriptions (see section 3.6.3). While hegemonic sociocultural norms restrict individuals to an extent, society members also employ the above minority influences and their individual agencies when constructing and communicating their own and interpreting others' sexual and gender identifications.

This study employed the above-described tenets of its theoretical framework to explore how queer and cis heterosexual participants interpreted queer coding in the movies *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. The next chapter explains and motivates the study's research approach, research design, and the methods used to select participants and collect and interpret their data.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

“Secret’s in the sauce”

Louise: “We just have to figure out what we’re gonna do next. We just have to figure out what we’re gonna do.”

Thelma: “I’ll say one thing. This is some vacation!”

- excerpt of dialogue from *Thelma & Louise* (Scott, 1991)

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 explored the study’s tripartite theoretical framework to answer the study’s first specific research question reading: *How can semiotic media representation, Stuart Hall’s (1973) encoding-decoding communication model, and Judith Butler’s (1988) theory of gender performativity be implemented in an investigation of different audiences’ interpretations of queer-coded movies?* (see section 1.4.2) This literature and theoretical overview also provided the foundation for the study’s empirical research.

This study followed a qualitative research approach to answer the study’s second, third, and fourth specific research questions, which read as follows: *How do self-identified queer audiences interpret the queer coding in Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise?* (specific research question 1.4.2.2); *How do self-identified cis heterosexual audiences interpret the queer coding in Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise?* (specific research question 1.4.2.3); and *How do self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences’ interpretations of the queer coding in Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise compare?* (specific research question 1.4.2.4) (see section 1.4.2). In section 4.2, the study’s qualitative research approach is outlined and motivated.

The research design used to collect and analyse the study’s empirical data is presented in section 4.3. Thereafter, section 4.4 describes and motivates the study’s empirical research methods. The study’s sampling methods and measuring instrument are examined in sections 4.5 and 4.6, respectively. Section 4.7 details the thematic analysis used to analyse the gathered data. In section 4.8, the validity and reliability of the research findings are discussed. Thereafter, the study’s feasibility is explored. Finally, section 4.10 considers all the potential ethical issues related to the empirical data collection and analysis.

4.2 A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

Qualitative research is complex and multifaceted, and thus, difficult to define. Notwithstanding, research methodology scholars Creswell and Creswell (2018:41) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016:15) hold that qualitative research can be described as an approach that aims to investigate and improve understanding of specific society members' meaning-making processes. While different qualitative researchers stress different aspects of this approach, most scholars agree that qualitative research concerns meaning creation within specific sociocultural contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:15; Tracy, 2020:3). Qualitative studies employ data collection methods that gather rich, descriptive data from participants or subjects. These studies usually also report their findings in richly descriptive ways to ensure that the participants' perspectives are reflected accurately and appropriately (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:17-18; Tracy, 2020:3-4). Generally, the qualitative researcher plays a significant role in the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes and must account for their impact on the research itself. Qualitative researchers employ self-reflexivity to consider how their past experiences, specific circumstances, and subjectivities might influence the ways they conduct research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:16; Tracy, 2020:2). In section 5.2, the primary researcher self-reflexively considers the role her own subjectivity played in her selection of study topic, expectations of findings, and data collection, analysis, and presentation.

Specifically relevant to this study is the interpretivist nature of a qualitative research methodology. This approach has also been given other labels, such as critical research, naturalism, ethnography, and constructivism (Du Plooy, 2009:30; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:14). From these labels it is apparent that the qualitative approach usually attempts to capture the subtleties of meaning by interpreting individuals' perspectives regarding certain sociocultural occurrences or situations. Qualitative research investigates communication and social phenomena by exploring individuals' subjective experiences, values, feelings, and meaning-making processes concerning said phenomena (Bryman, 2016:375; Rahman, 2016:103). Qualitative researchers explore subjective and socially negotiated meanings. They study how culturally situated individuals make sense of their worlds and the phenomena they encounter within them (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:41; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:15-16).

An interpretivist approach is appropriate for this study. As Chapter 5's explorations of the collected data illustrate, this study investigated how queer and cis heterosexual audiences create different subjective meanings from the same phenomenon – queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. The study's investigation of its participants' subjective meaning-making processes included exploring how the viewers' personal and contextual factors influenced their construction of understandings related to the queer-coded

characters.⁴¹ Thus, the study examined subjective *and* socially negotiated meanings (see sections 5.3.2 and 5.4.2 for explorations of the various factors that influenced the participants' interpretations of the movies).

As mentioned, qualitative research usually provides rich, descriptive data (Leavy, 2017:124; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:17). Queer coding and different audiences' varying interpretations are extremely complex communication phenomena influenced by numerous factors. Therefore, exploring different viewers' understandings requires the collection of detailed, descriptive data to gain perceptive insights into the receivers' interpretations. These insights must also be reported descriptively to ensure accurate comprehension of the participants' specific interpretations. The findings presented in Chapter 5 exemplify the richness of the obtained data and describe the participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations comprehensively and appropriately.

Qualitative research is frequently inductive. Qualitative researchers often engage in inductive investigations to construct hypotheses or theories explaining underexplored phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:17). On the one hand, this study's empirical investigation was deductively guided by the theoretical framework. This framework informed the data collection and analysis processes from start to finish – from formulating the sampling requirements and compiling the various interview schedules, to identifying relevant codes and themes of analysis and interpreting the data within those codes. On the other hand, the data analysis process relied on deductive *and* inductive methods of examination. During the initial stages of the study's thematic analysis, germane themes and codes were identified inductively as they arose from the descriptive information the participants provided. After all the relevant themes, subthemes, and codes were determined, the data not yet indexed or charted were deductively categorised for analysis (see section 4.7 for a detailed explanation of the thematic analysis process).

Although qualitative research was suitable for this study, using such an approach often results in reduced external validity or generalisability of the research findings. While the results are immensely rich and insightful, they are usually limited to a specific and relatively small research sample (see section 6.8 for a discussion on the study's limitations). Qualitative research findings cannot be generalised to an entire population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:276). However, this study did not aim to generalise its findings to the whole population of *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* viewers. Its objective was to provide in-depth

⁴¹ Although the researcher did not investigate these personal and contextual factors directly, many participants volunteered information regarding these considerations and how they influenced their interpretations of the two films (see sections 4.4.1, 5.3.2, and 5.4.2)

insights into a small group of people's interpretations of the queer-coded characters in the two movies. Following a qualitative approach, the researcher obtained the descriptive, perceptive data required to attain those insights (see section 4.8 for elaborations on the results' validity and reliability).

4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The term research design refers to the framework of methods used to collect and analyse empirical data to achieve particular research objectives (Maxwell, 2013:2; Vogt *et al.*, 2012:3). This study followed a descriptive and comparative research design; it compared the rich, detailed data obtained from the queer and cis heterosexual participants to answer its research questions. Table 4.1 indicates this study's specific research questions and the data collection methods used to answer each question.

Table 4.1 Research design

Specific research question		Data collection method
Q1.4.2.1:	How can semiotic media representation, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding communication model, and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity be implemented in an investigation of different audiences' interpretations of queer-coded movies?	This question was answered via a literature and theoretical overview conducted in Chapter 3. The literature and theoretical overview explored semiotic media representation, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding communication model, and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity.
Q1.4.2.2:	How do self-identified queer audiences interpret the queer coding in <i>Fried green tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i> ?	This question was answered by conducting semi-structured interviews and a focus group investigating how eight self-identified queer viewers interpreted the queer coding in <i>Fried green tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i> . The findings of these interviews and focus group sessions are analysed and discussed in section 5.3.
Q1.4.2.3:	How do self-identified cis heterosexual audiences interpret	This question was answered by conducting semi-structured interviews

	the queer coding in <i>Fried green tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i> ?	and a focus group investigating how eight self-identified cis heterosexual viewers interpreted the queer coding in <i>Fried green tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i> . The findings of these interviews and focus group sessions are analysed and discussed in section 5.4.
Q1.4.2.4:	How do self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the queer coding in <i>Fried green tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i> compare?	This question was answered by comparing the findings obtained via semi-structured interviews and focus groups investigating queer and cis heterosexual viewers' interpretations of the queer coding in <i>Fried green tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i> . The findings these comparisons provided are presented in section 5.5.

4.4 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH METHODS

The following section concerns the study's empirical data collection methods, namely semi-structured one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews.

4.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

This study's data were first collected via semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews. Semi-structured interviews are conducted by an interviewer using an interview guide consisting of listed themes or issues and open-ended questions that differ in specificity (Gray, 2022:411; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:110). The interviewer uses the interview guide to elicit in-depth, nuanced, and descriptive responses from participants about their subjective attitudes, opinions, and perspectives on particular and often complex issues (Adams, 2015:499; Leavy, 2017:140). This study used such an interview guide to gain insights regarding the participants' interpretations of queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* (see Table 4.2 for the one-on-one, semi-structured interview schedule).

The interview guide may be adjusted continuously, and the interviewer may even deviate from it, depending on the specific direction of various discussions and the nature and depth of the information the interviewees share (Gray, 2022:411). Because of this flexibility, many qualitative researchers use semi-structured interviews to collect data. This research method

allows interviewers to probe and encourage participants to elaborate on what they have disclosed. It provides researchers with detailed, insightful data (Bryman, 2016:466-467; Gray, 2022:411). Despite its flexibility, semi-structured interviewing still gives the interviewer a necessary degree of structure and control regarding the discussion topics (Brinkmann, 2013:21; Tracy, 2020:158). In this study, the interview schedule was used to obtain data regarding the relevant topics across the entire data set (i.e. from *all* the involved participants). It was also used to gently guide interviewees back to the study's focus whenever their responses strayed off topic.

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews are often used in studies exploring sensitive topic areas. Because of the method's flexibility, the degree to which each participant is comfortable sharing information about a particular issue can guide the researcher during interviewing (Adams, 2015:494; Prior, 2016:112). This study's focus on participants' interpretations of queer coding could be considered sensitive.⁴² During the interviewing process, the researcher never directly broached the topic of queerness. The specific interview guide employed allowed participants to raise the subject of queerness or queer coding voluntarily. When participants raised the topic, the researcher asked follow-up questions based on the information those interviewees provided. Queerness was not discussed with interviewees who did not initiate such a conversation.

Moreover, interviews conducted in a one-on-one rather than group setting usually provide privacy and confidentiality that help to put participants at ease. They then feel comfortable sharing their authentic, unbiased perspectives (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2019:318-319; Bullock, 2016:330). Most of the interviewees were remarkably candid. They were eager to discuss their views and opinions related to their interpretations of the movies and their personal lives.

The research participants were asked to watch *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* privately, in their own time. The length of each film is 130 minutes. Shortly after watching the films, the participants engaged in one-on-one interviews conducted by the primary researcher and moderated by the study's co-supervisor (see section 4.10 for an explanation of the need for moderation). Each interview lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. The participants were offered comfort breaks lasting 5 to 10 minutes at 45 to 60-minute intervals to minimise the risk of participant tiredness or discomfort.

⁴² In the South African context (in which this study's empirical research was conducted), queerness has become much less taboo or controversial in recent decades, with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa providing many LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms (Matebeni, 2021:469; Ngidi & Dlamini, 2017:267-268; Van der Schyff, 2018:36). Despite this social advancement, many South Africans still hold prejudiced views towards queer people (Lesch *et al.*, 2017:127-128; Ngidi & Dlamini, 2017:267-268; Van der Schyff, 2018:36). Thus, the study's focus on queerness could be considered a sensitive topic.

As mentioned, the researcher conducted these interviews without directly or explicitly referencing queerness or queer coding. The participants were not informed of the study's focus on queer coding to ensure that their interpretations of the characters' queerness were not biased or distorted. Even though the participants were unaware of the study's specific focus on queer media representation, they were informed of its broader focus on gender and sexual representation. All potential participants also understood that they would have to superficially disclose their sexual and gender identifications to participate in the study.⁴³ Only individuals who felt comfortable sharing this information were included in the sample. Table 4.2 below presents the probing, open-ended questions used during this study's interviews. These questions elicited elaborate, nuanced, and subjective responses from most participants regarding their interpretations of the queer coding in the two films. Many interviewees also volunteered information regarding recollections of personal experiences, previously held perspectives, and learned understandings evoked by the movies relevant to this study's focus.

Table 4.2 Semi-structured interview guide

	Section A: Introductory question
Q1	Tell me a bit about yourself.
	Section B: General movie consumption questions
Q2	What sort of movies do you like to watch?
Q3	With which type of movie characters do you usually identify?
	Section C: <i>Fried green tomatoes</i>
Q4	Was this your first time watching this film?
	If not, what did you know about the movie before watching it?
	If you have watched it before, tell me about your previous viewing(s).
Q5	What did you think of the movie?
Q6	Were there any scenes that evoked any particular reactions/responses? Please elaborate.
Q7	Did anything depicted in the movie remind you of something in your own life? Please elaborate.
Q8	Please consider the topics covered in the movie. How does your understanding of these topics <i>before</i> watching the movie compare to your understanding of them <i>after</i> viewing the film?

⁴³ This information was required to divide the participants into focus group groups. The subjects were divided into groups according to their self-identified cis heterosexuality or queerness to ensure that each group had a degree of homogeneity (see section 4.4.2).

Q9	Were there any views expressed in the film that made an impression/stood out to you? Please elaborate.
Q10	Did any of the characters stand out to you? Please elaborate.
Q11	With which character(s), if any, did you identify (the most)?
Q12	Please describe any relationships that stood out to you.
Q13	Do you think the movie used any particular stereotypes in its depiction of any of the characters? Please elaborate.
Q14	If you could, would you change anything in the film? Please elaborate.
Q15	How do you think the film would have been different if it took place in this decade?
Q16	Would you recommend this movie to anyone in particular?
	Why them, specifically?
Q17	Please share any final thoughts you might have about the movie.
	Section D: <i>Thelma & Louise</i>
Q18	Was this your first time watching this film?
	If not, what did you know about the movie before watching it?
	If you have watched it before, tell me about your previous viewing(s).
Q19	What did you think of the movie?
Q20	Were there any scenes that evoked any particular reactions/responses? Please elaborate.
Q21	Did anything depicted in the movie remind you of something in your own life? Please elaborate.
Q22	Please consider the topics covered in the movie. How does your understanding of these topics <i>before</i> watching the movie compare to your understanding of them <i>after</i> viewing the film?
Q23	Were there any views expressed in the film that made an impression/stood out to you? Please elaborate.
Q24	Did any of the characters stand out to you? Please elaborate.
Q25	With which character(s), if any, did you identify (the most)?
Q26	Please describe any relationships that stood out to you.
Q27	Do you think the movie used any particular stereotypes in its depiction of any of the characters? Please elaborate.
Q28	If you could, would you change anything in the film? Please elaborate.
Q29	How do you think the film would have been different if it took place in this decade?
Q30	Would you recommend this movie to anyone in particular?
	Why them, specifically?

Q31	Please share any final thoughts you might have about the movie.
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As mentioned in section 1.7.2.2, the interviews were conducted via Zoom. The virtual nature of the interview sessions enabled individuals across South Africa to participate in a location of their choosing. These Zoom interviews were also easier to schedule and arrange than face-to-face meetings, requiring participants to travel to a particular location (Leavy, 2017:142; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:116).

However, conducting the interviews electronically also created certain obstacles. Research methodology scholars hold that the artificial setting and lack of face-to-face interaction inherent to virtual interviewing often hamper the initial bonding process necessary for honest and uninhibited discussions (Bryman, 2016:490; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017:50). At the start of their interviews, some of the participants seemed slightly uncomfortable. The researcher mitigated this disadvantage by facilitating casual conversation until the participants felt more relaxed and comfortable sharing their thoughts and perspectives. Additionally, after an introduction to the interviewees, the moderator turned off her Zoom video and audio functions. This allowed observing the interviews unobtrusively without distracting the interviewees or adding to their initial discomfort. Practical issues regarding internet quality, background noise, distractions, and power outages due to load shedding were considered and minimised as much as possible. In some instances, circumstances necessitated rescheduling interviews to avoid the above logistical difficulties.

4.4.2 Focus group interviews

The one-on-one interview participants also took part in virtual focus groups. These sessions aimed to explore further and deepen the insights gained during the individual interviews. The goal was to conduct the focus groups within a week of the participants' one-on-one interviews to ensure that they could still clearly recall their viewings of the two movies. However, due to the participants' conflicting schedules, the focus group sessions occurred between two and three weeks after the various one-on-one interviews. To the researcher's knowledge, these unavoidable delays did not create any significant challenges regarding the participants' recollections of the films.

Focus group interviews are conducted by a facilitator who leads discussions between 4 to 12 individuals (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2019:317; Bryman, 2016:500-501; Prior, 2018:235). The facilitator proposes specific themes or topics, which the participants then discuss. Ideally, the participants engage dynamically with one another, sharing their views, elaborating on one

another's responses, and posing questions to the group as a whole or to specific individuals (Bryman, 2016:502; Hennink, 2014:3). This study conducted two focus group interviews – one consisted of eight self-identified queer participants and the other comprised eight self-identified cisgendered heterosexual participants. A degree of homogeneity in the composition of a focus group sample increases the likelihood that participants will feel comfortable interacting with one another (Gray, 2022:503). Dividing the focus groups based on the participants' self-identified sexual and gender identifications minimised the risk of them experiencing pressure to withhold their particular interpretations of the films' queer coding or to conform to the group's dominant opinion. The participants in each group differed in terms of factors such as geographical location, relationship status, and occupation, but had at least this one characteristic (i.e. either queerness or cis heterosexuality) in common.

Like semi-structured interviews, the data gathered using focus groups are descriptive and detail the participants' particular attitudes, opinions, and perspectives (Bryman, 2016:502). Focus groups often result in a wider range of shared perspectives, attitudes, and opinions than one-on-one interviews. The reason for this increased diversity is that focus group sessions, if conducted appropriately, enable dynamic interactions and conversations between different participants who hold diverse perspectives, whereas one-on-one interviews obtain information regarding one participant's perspective at a time (Bryman, 2016:501-502; Gray, 2022:499-500; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:114). The focus group facilitator can stimulate and guide complex discussions between diverse participants, allowing for the dynamic exchange of ideas and the exploration of multiple perspectives, opinions, and attitudes (Gray, 2022:500; Prior, 2018:235-236). For instance, in both focus group sessions, participants discussed the 'merits' of interpreting queer-coded characters as heterosexual or queer. Some participants had already expressed their views on the subject during their interviews. They clarified and elaborated on their perspectives during the focus group discussions. Others, who did not raise the topic in their one-on-one interviews, weighed in during the group sessions. The participants' views ranged from an appreciation for the films' focus on platonic relationships to a desire for queer representation to an enjoyment of the ambiguous nature of the queer-coded characters' bonds (see sections 5.3.1 and 5.4.1).

Each focus group session lasted about 90 minutes. In both sessions, the participants declined comfort breaks when offered. As with the individual interviews, the study's co-supervisor moderated the focus group sessions. After greeting the participants at the start of the session, she turned off her Zoom video and audio functions and observed from the background. The focus group sessions were conducted using a similar interviewing strategy employed during the semi-structured interviews. The researcher inductively facilitated discussions between the

participants about their interpretations of the queer coding in the films without directly referencing queerness or queer coding. Conversations were encouraged using an interview guide similar to the one used in the one-on-one interviews, as presented in Table 4.2. The two focus group schedules were composed only after the one-on-one interviews had been conducted and were informed by the data obtained from the latter. These schedules consisted of particular topics and themes raised by the participants during their interviews, the exploration of which assisted in answering the study's research questions.

The focus group schedules are presented in Table 4.3 and were used to initiate discussions between the cis heterosexual and queer participants, respectively. The two interview guides are nearly identical, the only variation being the slightly different focus of the two guides' introductory discussion themes. The topic used to initiate discussions between the cis heterosexual participants in Focus group 1 was adapted slightly for the queer participants' session (Focus group 2). The modified topic prompted the queer participants to expand on and compare their expectations of the films and how these expectations might have influenced their viewings. The above change was made because several queer participants referenced their initial expectations regarding the films' queerness in their interviews. These expectations and how they affected the participants' interpretations of queer coding in the movies are highly relevant to this study's focus.

Table 4.3 Focus group interview guide

	Themes and subthemes to be discussed <i>[and potential prompts]</i>
1. (Focus group 1)	So, I've gotten to know you all a bit during your interviews. But I'd like to introduce you to each other. As I introduce you, please feel free to share something about yourself that you feel comfortable telling us.
	Perhaps also, the types of movies you usually like? <i>If you like movies?</i>
	If you've watched these films before.
1. (Focus group 2)	So, I've gotten to know you all a bit during your interviews. But I'd like to introduce you to each other. As I introduce you, please feel free to share something about yourself that you feel comfortable telling us.
	Perhaps also, how your viewings of the movies compared to what you expected the movies to be like?
	<i>[What did you know about the movies before watching them? Did you read up about any of the movies beforehand? Did you have particular expectations going into your viewings?]</i>
2.	Does anyone have any general comments to make about any of the movies?

	<i>[Something that you really appreciated or didn't appreciate? Something that struck you?]</i>
3.	Two themes that emerged from the interviews were love and friendship. I'd like you to discuss the roles love and friendship play in the movies. Also, what specifically, in the movies gave you those impressions?
	<i>[If you think about the relationships in Fried green tomatoes? Or in Thelma & Louise? Anything that stood out to you? Any interesting bonds? Or dynamics? Characters that comforted or supported one another in notable ways? Any relationships that had particular obstacles or difficulties? Any scenes or events that stood out/exemplified these themes?]</i>
4.	Another prominent topic from the interviews was gender stereotypes in the movies.
	I'd like you to discuss the gender stereotypes that stood out to you. How did these stereotypes contribute to the story?
	<i>[In Fried green tomatoes? In Thelma & Louise? Why were the stereotypes used in the movie?]</i>
	What, specifically, in the films made these characters appear stereotypical?
	<i>[What is it about the character that makes you think they're a stereotype?]</i>
5.	In the interviews, there was a focus on how the films depicted gender relations. Could you please discuss this?
	What stood out to you in terms of gender relations in the movies?
	<i>[Gender roles? In Fried green tomatoes? In Thelma & Louise? Any scenes or events that stood out in terms of these ideas?]</i>
	How do you think these dynamics contributed to the films' stories?
6.	Please discuss how the themes of awakening and liberation play out in the two films. Again, what specifically, in the movies gave you those impressions?
	<i>[Some concepts that came up in the interviews: The idea of constraints. Freedom from constraints. Constraints within a certain time or place. Becoming empowered. Independence. Anything that stood out in terms of those themes in Fried green tomatoes? Or in Thelma & Louise? Any scenes or events that stood out in terms of these notions?]</i>
7.	A theme that was emphasised in the interviews was how the movies handled societal expectations.
	Which specific societal expectations stood out to you? How come? What specifically, in the movies gave you those impressions?
	<i>[In Fried green tomatoes? In Thelma & Louise?]</i>

	What stood out to you about how the characters dealt with/reacted to those expectations? Why do you think that, specifically, made an impression?
	<i>[In Fried green tomatoes? In Thelma & Louise? Why do you think those characters handled it in those specific ways?]</i>
8.	Something else that emerged from the interviews was how the movies reflected certain power imbalances in society. Could you please discuss this? Again, what specifically, in the movies gave you those impressions?
	<i>[Something that came up in the interviews was the idea of social systems that create or reflect differences in power between certain members of society. Anything like that in Fried green tomatoes? In Thelma & Louise? Any scenes or events that exemplified those power differentials? How did these instances of power imbalance contribute to the story?]</i>

A common limitation of focus groups is that certain, often outspoken participants sometimes dominate the discussions, while others are intimidated into silence or feel pressure to conform to the majority opinion (Bryman, 2016:522; David & Sutton, 2011:134-135). To mitigate the above risks, the facilitator emphasised the value diverse views hold for the study. Before introducing the discussion themes, she stressed that the participants should not feel the need to agree or disagree with others' opinions or perspectives. Throughout the sessions, the participants were periodically asked if they would like to add to what had been said thus far. This intervention prevented talkative participants from dominating the discussions and encouraged reticent participants to share their views. As discussed earlier, the degree of homogeneity ensured by dividing the participants into groups according to their sexual and gender identifications also minimised the risk of participants withholding their views or conforming to the group's majority opinion.

Research methodology scholars such as Bryman (2016:522) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016:114) argue that using focus groups is often not ideal for discussions of sensitive or private, personal topics. However, various other scholars (Hennink, 2014:26-27; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011:551; Papastavrou & Andreou, 2012) reason that sensitive subjects need not be avoided or ruled out entirely during focus group sessions. These researchers hold that facilitators should present said topics sensitively. Facilitators should guide the conversation between group members in a manner that allows the participants to collaboratively determine the nature, scope, and depth of these sensitive discussions and, secondly, enables each participant to decide what information to divulge. While the participants generally volunteered more personal information during their individual interviews than in their focus group sessions,

they all seemed comfortable sharing their interpretations of the movies. Any topics that could be considered sensitive were raised by the participants themselves. The researcher facilitated those discussions in such a way that no participant would feel pressure to share information they do not feel comfortable discussing.

As previously stated, this study's focus on queerness and audiences' personal perspectives thereof could be considered a sensitive theme. During the focus group sessions, the facilitator guided the general direction of conversations and proposed topics for discussion. Each participant was able to determine what they were willing to share. Only one instance of a participant guiding the conversation in a direction with which the rest of the group might have been uncomfortable was identified. The facilitator intervened by proposing a new topic of discussion. Since the study's co-supervisor moderated the sessions, she could have intervened whenever she felt the topics were not being handled sensitively. In neither session did she feel the need to do so.

Additionally, the participants likely trusted that the facilitator would protect their interests. She had already established trust and built rapport with the various participants during their interviews. This established bond was used to facilitate the initial familiarising process between the participants. This familiarisation, in turn, facilitated the establishment of trust and confidence among the participants and encouraged open and spontaneous yet respectful discussions. Lastly, dividing the focus groups according to sexual and gender identifications minimised any discomfort the participants might have experienced discussing queerness or sexual and gender identity. In both focus groups, many participants casually brought up or elaborated on the theme of sexual and gender identity – either in terms of their own or the film characters' identifications.

4.5 SAMPLING

The researcher used non-probability sampling to select participants for this study. Non-probability sampling refers to sampling methods that, unlike probability sampling techniques, do not provide every member of a research population with an equal opportunity for participation selection (Bryman, 2016:693; Leavy, 2017:265). This study's research population comprised all *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* audiences. It would have been impossible to employ probability sampling methods, as such a strategy would require allowing every person who has ever watched either of the selected films the opportunity to participate in the study. Non-probability sampling is often used in social research that aims to obtain in-depth descriptions to gain insights into participants' individual perspectives, interpretations,

and meaning-creation processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:96; Pettey *et al.*, 2017:63). It was therefore an appropriate sampling method for this study.

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to obtain a sample of eight queer and eight cis heterosexual participants. Purposive sampling is a sampling technique whereby the researcher uses their judgement to select participants. It is used in studies such as this one that does not aim to generalise findings to an entire population but rather to study specific groups of people, messages, or behaviours (Gray, 2022:233; Pettey *et al.*, 2017:63). Research participants must be selected based on the study's purpose (Bryman, 2016:408; David & Sutton, 2011:232). For this study, participant selection was based on the potential participants' self-identified sexual and gender identifications. Participants were also selected based on their willingness and ability to watch the two movies and to participate in the above-discussed Zoom interview and focus group sessions.

Recruitment flyers targeting cis heterosexual and queer individuals were used to recruit eligible participants (see Annexures C1-C4). These flyers contained the primary researcher's contact details and outlined the study's requirements for potential participants. The flyers were placed on various bulletin boards in Potchefstroom, such as those found in shopping centres. The NWU's RDGC gave permission for the recruitment of NWU-affiliated individuals (see section 4.10). These participants were recruited via flyers posted on bulletin boards on the NWU Potchefstroom campus. Various NWU lecturers also agreed to post the recruitment material and an abstract briefly describing the study on their eFundi pages. eFundi is the NWU's interactive online teaching and learning platform, also used to communicatively connect NWU students and lecturers. The study's primary researcher, supervisor, and co-supervisor also posted the flyers on their personal Facebook and Instagram accounts. Additionally, the NWU Campus Pride Society, a queer and straight ally student social club, posted the recruitment material on their Instagram page and their official and social WhatsApp groups. The chairperson of the Potchefstroom Art Society also shared the study's flyers with the Potchefstroom Art Society guest list. As apparent, this study followed the protocol of purposive sampling and all associated ethical requirements.

Apart from the reduced generalisability of research findings, a possible disadvantage of employing purposive sampling methods is the potential for researcher bias to influence participant selection (Gray, 2022:233; Pickard, 2017:66). However, experienced researchers (i.e. the study's supervisor and co-supervisor) guided and oversaw the primary researcher's selection of participants. This supervision decreased the possibility of researcher bias negatively impacting participant selection.

Snowball sampling entails participants already selected via other methods soliciting additional subjects to participate (Gray, 2022:238; Leavy, 2017:80). In this study, the participants selected through purposive sampling were asked to recommend friends and relatives as potential participants. The researcher and supervisors asked colleagues, students, friends, and family members to propose additional candidates for participation, individuals whom the researcher, supervisor, and co-supervisor did not know personally. Many queer individuals who were initially interested but then decided not to participate knew other LGBTQ+ individuals to whom they recommended the study. A disadvantage of snowball sampling is that it often decreases the representability of the research sample because participants usually solicit others who are in some way like themselves. This sample bias, in turn, reduces the generalisability of the study's findings (David & Sutton, 2011:232; Tracy, 2020:84). However, as previously stated, this study did not aim to generalise its results to the entire population of *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* viewers.

4.6 MEASURING INSTRUMENT

As mentioned in section 4.2, the collected data were analysed inductively *and* deductively. The thematic analysis employed in this study was not based on theoretical statements or guiding arguments. Rather, relevant codes and themes were identified as they arose from the participants' collected data. Notwithstanding, the theoretical concepts underlying the study's theoretical framework, explained in Chapter 3, guided the identification, examination, and analysis of germane codes and thematic categories and subcategories. Section 4.7 elaborates on the specific codes, themes, and subthemes used during the thematic analysis process. The table below broadly outlines the content within the collected data that relates to the study's theoretical foundations and to which the researcher paid particular attention during analysis.

Table 4.4 Theoretical framework-related data

Content type	Semiotics	Reception theory	Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding model	Queer theory	Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity
Filmic instances (signs) pointing to queerness/cis heterosexuality	X	X	X	X	X

Participant's desire for/appreciation of queer representation	X	X	X	X	X
Participant's subjectivity/positioning	X	X	X	X	X

The above type of content within the participants' data was analysed thematically to determine how they understood the selected films' queer coding and how their interpretations corresponded and differed. These findings are presented in Chapter 5. Data regarding filmic instances or signs that point to queerness or cis heterosexuality were used to determine the specific filmic signs the participants used to create their understandings of the queer-coded characters. Analysing this data provided insights into how the various participants created culturally delimited yet subjective meanings from the movies (see sections 5.3.3 and 5.4.3). The above type of content relates to several tenets of semiotics, reception theory, and the encoding-decoding model (see sections 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5). Additionally, participants' understandings of signs regarding the queer-coded characters' sexual and gender identifications concern the concepts of queer theory and the theory of gender performativity discussed in section 3.6.

Content regarding the participants' desire for or appreciation of queer representation was used to provide insights into how their filmic preferences influenced or were influenced by their reading positions, to a degree impacting their interpretations of the queer coding (see sections 5.3.1 and 5.4.1). The roles audiences' desires and reading positions play in their meaning-making processes relate to notions of semiotics, reception theory, the encoding-decoding model, queer theory, and the theory of gender performativity discussed in sections 3.3 to 3.6.

Data related to the participants' subjectivities and positionings comprise the various personal and contextual factors that might have influenced their individual interpretations. The role such factors play in viewers' understandings of media texts is addressed within semiotics, reception theory, the encoding-decoding model, queer theory, and the theory of gender performativity. These factors and their role in the participants' interpretations are explored in sections 5.3.2 and 5.4.2. These sections also explore participants' understandings of gender or sexuality influenced by their *Fried green tomatoes* viewings.⁴⁴ Within a semiotic understanding of media

⁴⁴ None of the cis heterosexual or queer participants expressed any change in views regarding gender or sexuality due to their *Thelma & Louise* viewings (see sections 5.3.2 and 5.4.2).

representation, society members' views, subjectivities, and positionings can be influenced by the discourses they encounter via media texts (see section 3.3).

4.7 THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF COLLECTED DATA

The researcher comparatively analysed the interview and focus group data via thematic analysis (see Annexure F for the thematic analysis framework used to analyse the participants' data). Thematic analysis is a process of identifying core themes or key patterns within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Nowell *et al.*, 2017:2). Whereas content analysis findings represent research participants' direct, surface responses, thematic analysis results provide an interpretation of the responses' underlying meanings. Thematic analysis focuses on content's implicit, subtextual meanings rather than merely explicit, direct meanings (Gray, 2022:759; Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016:35-36). It was an appropriate data analysis method for this study investigating and comparing individuals' subtle interpretations of queer coding, a complex, nuanced communication phenomenon.

Thematic analysis can be approached inductively *and* deductively (Ibrahim, 2012:41; Kiger & Varpio, 2020:5). As previously mentioned, this study's data analysis employed inductive and deductive methods of examination. The theoretical research conducted in Chapter 3 deductively informed and guided the identification of germane thematic categories and the interpretation of the data within those codes, subthemes, and themes. During the initial stages of data analysis, inductive reasoning was used to identify relevant codes and themes from the information the participants provided. Thereafter, the data not yet categorised were deductively classified and charted for analysis. Table 4.5 below outlines the specific themes, subthemes, and codes used during this study's thematic analysis of the collected data. In the table, the films' titles are abbreviated to *FGT* (i.e. *Fried green tomatoes*) and *T&L* (i.e. *Thelma & Louise*).⁴⁵

Table 4.5 Thematic analysis categories

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
1. Interpretations of queer-coded characters	1.1 Interpretations of queer-coded characters as queer (in <i>FGT</i>)	1.1 a) Degree to which participants interpreted queer-coded characters as queer
		1.1 b) Degree to which participants desired confirmation of queerness

⁴⁵ These abbreviations are also used in Tables 4.6 and 6.4.

		1.1 c) Degree to which participants desired/appreciated a focus on platonic relationships
	1.2 Interpretations of queer-coded characters as queer (in <i>T&L</i>)	1.2 a) Degree to which participants interpreted queer-coded characters as queer
		1.2 b) Degree to which participants desired confirmation of queerness
		1.2 c) Degree to which participants desired/appreciated a focus on platonic relationships
	1.3 Interpretations of queer-coded characters as not queer (in <i>FGT</i>)	1.3 a) Interpretations of queer-coded characters as cis heterosexual
		1.3 b) Interpretations of queer-coded characters as friends
		1.3 c) Degree to which participants desired queerness
		1.3 d) Degree to which participants desired/appreciated a focus on platonic relationships
	1.4 Interpretations of queer-coded characters as not queer (in <i>T&L</i>)	1.4 a) Interpretations of queer-coded characters as cis heterosexual
		1.4 b) Interpretations of queer-coded characters as friends
		1.4 c) Degree to which participants desired queerness
		1.4 d) Degree to which participants desired/appreciated a focus on platonic relationships
2. Personal and contextual factors influencing interpretations of queer coding	2.1 Personal views/understandings (influencing <i>FGT</i> viewings)	2.1 a) Views/understandings of queerness
		2.1 b) Views/understandings of romantic relationships
		2.1 c) Views/understandings of friendship
		2.1 d) Views/understandings of gender
		2.1 e) Other relevant contributors
		2.2 a) Views/understandings of queerness

	2.2 Personal views/understandings (influencing <i>T&L</i> viewings)	2.2 b) Views/understandings of romantic relationships
		2.2 c) Views/understandings of friendship
		2.2 d) Views/understandings of gender
		2.2 e) Other relevant contributors
	2.3 Experiences (influencing <i>FGT</i> viewings)	2.3 a) Individual backgrounds/upbringings
		2.3 b) Cultural positionings
		2.3 c) Educational backgrounds
		2.3 d) Experiences of queerness
		2.3 e) Experiences of romantic relationships
		2.3 f) Experiences of friendships
		2.3 g) Experiences of gender
		2.3 h) Other relevant contributors
	2.4 Experiences (influencing <i>T&L</i> viewings)	2.4 a) Individual backgrounds/upbringings
		2.4 b) Cultural positionings
		2.4 c) Educational backgrounds
		2.4 d) Experiences of queerness
		2.4 e) Experiences of romantic relationships
		2.4 f) Experiences of friendships
		2.4 g) Experiences of gender
		2.4 h) Other relevant contributors
	2.5 Learned understandings (influencing <i>FGT</i> viewings)	2.5 a) Taking <i>FGT</i> 's sociohistorical setting into account
		2.5 b) Taking the media landscape in which <i>FGT</i> was produced into account
		2.5 c) Understandings of relevant sociocultural stereotypes
	2.6 Learned understandings (influencing <i>T&L</i> viewings)	2.6 a) Taking <i>T&L</i> 's sociohistorical setting into account
		2.6 b) Taking the media landscape in which <i>T&L</i> was produced into account
		2.6 c) Understandings of relevant sociocultural stereotypes
	2.7 Intertextual influences	2.7 a) Media influences
		2.7 b) Knowledge of film genres

	(influencing <i>FGT</i> viewings)	2.7 c) Study-related influences: Expectations of the study
		2.7 d) Study-related influences: Prior knowledge/understandings of <i>FGT</i>
		2.7 e) Study-related influences: Comparing <i>FGT</i> and <i>T&L</i>
	2.8 Intertextual influences (influencing <i>T&L</i> viewings)	2.8 a) Media influences
		2.8 b) Knowledge of film genres
		2.8 c) Study-related influences: Expectations of the study
		2.8 d) Study-related influences: Prior knowledge/understandings of <i>T&L</i>
		2.8 e) Study-related influences: Comparing <i>FGT</i> and <i>T&L</i>
3. Personal views/ understandings influenced by <i>FGT</i> and <i>T&L</i> viewings	3.1 Personal views/understandings influenced by <i>FGT</i> viewings	3.1 a) Views/understandings related to gender influenced by <i>FGT</i> viewings
		3.1 b) Views/understandings related to sexuality influenced by <i>FGT</i> viewings
	3.2 Personal views/understandings influenced by <i>T&L</i> viewings	3.2 a) Views/understandings related to gender influenced by <i>T&L</i> viewings
		3.2 b) Views/understandings related to sexuality influenced by <i>T&L</i> viewings
4. Filmic signs informing interpretations of queer coding	4.1 Stereotypes (in <i>FGT</i>)	4.1 a) Gender stereotypes
		4.1 b) Queer stereotypes
		4.1 c) Other relevant stereotypes
	4.2 Stereotypes (in <i>T&L</i>)	4.2 a) Gender stereotypes
		4.2 b) Queer stereotypes
		4.2 c) Other relevant stereotypes
	4.3 Gender presentations (in <i>FGT</i>)	4.3 a) Socially normative presentations
		4.3 b) Transgressive presentations
	4.4 Gender presentations (in <i>T&L</i>)	4.4 a) Socially normative presentations
		4.4 b) Transgressive presentations
		4.5 a) Queer-coded characters' relationships with their own partners

	4.5 Relationships with romantic partners (in <i>FGT</i>)	4.5 b) Queer-coded characters' relationships with each other's partners
	4.6 Relationships with romantic partners (in <i>T&L</i>)	4.6 a) Queer-coded characters' relationships with their own partners
		4.6 b) Queer-coded characters' relationships with each other's partners
	4.7 Chosen/found family (in <i>FGT</i>)	4.7 a) Platonic chosen family
		4.7 b) Queer chosen family
	4.8 Chosen/found family (in <i>T&L</i>)	4.8 a) Platonic chosen family
		4.8 b) Queer chosen family
	4.9 Miscellaneous signs (in <i>FGT</i>)	4.9 a) Trauma's role in bonding
		4.9 b) Buddy's significance
		4.9 c) Significance of honey
		4.9 d) Ninny's identity
		4.9 e) Ruth kissing Idgie
		4.9 f) Idgie and Ruth's food fight
		4.9 g) Other miscellaneous signs
	4.10 Miscellaneous signs (in <i>T&L</i>)	4.10 a) Trauma's role in bonding
		4.10 b) Thelma and Louise's mutual commitment/support/loyalty/protectiveness
		4.10 c) Louise kissing Thelma
		4.10 d) Other miscellaneous signs

This study executed the six steps of thematic analysis proposed by Kiger and Varpio (2020:3-7) and Riger and Sigurvinsdottir (2016:34-35). Although these scholars outline the steps linearly, the researcher often oscillated between the various stages and sometimes executed several steps simultaneously. The first step concerns familiarisation with the collected data and was initiated by transcribing the interview and focus group content. The units of analysis used were verbal communication (i.e. words, sentences, and phrases). As advised by various scholars (Gale *et al.*, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:131), the interview and focus group sessions were recorded. These recordings were replayed during the transcribing process to ensure that the transcriptions were as accurate as possible. While transcribing the participants'

data, the researcher made notes regarding her initial understanding of the data's relevant information. Lastly, familiarisation with the data was ensured by re-reading the transcripts and rewatching the interview and focus group recordings.

The second step entails creating initial codes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020:5; Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016:34). The codes generated in this study were deductively informed by the study's theoretical framework *and* inductively identified from the participants' data. After identifying the relevant codes, the data not yet coded were labelled or indexed and charted into their relevant codes. This study's coding process incorporated elements of the framework method of thematic analysis to create a structured matrix in which to map relevant information (Bryman, 2016:585; Gale *et al.*, 2013). The data were organised into rows representing the various participants and columns representing the different codes. This framework provided the structure necessary to analyse the data systematically by participant and thematic category (Bryman, 2016:585; Gale *et al.*, 2013). The matrix allowed analysing core themes or patterns across the entire data set while remaining mindful of each participant's context. This broad, holistic view can be ascribed to the fact that each person's perspectives, opinions, and views regarding a specific code or theme remain connected, via the framework's structure, to the other participants' perspectives on the given code, and to the rest of the information the individual in question provided concerning other relevant themes (Goldsmith, 2021:2071; Hackett & Strickland, 2018). The framework allowed for identifying similarities and differences in the collected data (Gale *et al.*, 2013). These comparisons were necessary to understand the differences and similarities between the various viewers' interpretations of queer coding in the movies. The framework also enabled analysing various relationships between items in the gathered content. This analysis was essential for understanding different factors' influence on the participants' interpretations of the queer-coded characters (Gale *et al.*, 2013).

The third step of thematic analysis requires identifying themes within the coded data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020:5; Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016:34-35). This study executed steps two and three simultaneously to create the framework described above. Some of the themes emerged from the study's theoretical foundations while others were created by combining related codes. Step four entails reviewing the codes and themes to ensure they are relevant and applicable to the research objectives (Kiger & Varpio, 2020:6; Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016:35). During this step some themes were discarded, others combined, and a few added. This step also involved reviewing the numerous themes' data to ensure that the content was charted into the appropriate thematic categories. Step four was carried out throughout the entire data analysis process. The next step calls for defining and describing the themes to explain their relevance to the research objectives (Kiger & Varpio, 2020:7; Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016:34-35). The

table below describes and motivates this study's thematic categories. The final step entails reporting the research findings (Kiger & Varpio, 2020:7). This step is executed in Chapter 5.

Table 4.6 Thematic analysis themes – descriptions and motivations

Theme 1:	Interpretations of queer-coded characters
Description:	This theme concerns how the participants interpreted the queer-coded <i>Fried green tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i> characters. As indicated by its subthemes and codes (see Table 4.5), this theme encompasses the participants' understandings of the characters as queer, cis heterosexual, and/or friends, the degree to which they interpreted the characters in the above ways, and the degree to which they desired the characters to be queer or platonic friends.
Motivation:	This theme is highly relevant to the study as the analysis of its data provided the findings necessary to answer specific research questions 1.4.2.2 to 1.4.2.4. The results obtained from this theme's analysis are also relevant to the tenets of semiotics, reception theory, the encoding-decoding model, queer theory, and the theory of gender performativity used in this study (see sections 3.3 to 3.6).
Theme 2:	Personal and contextual factors influencing interpretations of queer coding
Description:	This theme relates to the numerous factors that may have influenced the participants' understandings of the queer-coded <i>Fried green tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i> characters. As indicated by its subthemes and codes (see Table 4.5), this theme encompasses the participants' views, understandings, and experiences regarding queerness, romantic relationships, friendship, gender, and other relevant issues, their experiences regarding their upbringings, cultural positionings, education, and other relevant experiences, learned understandings related to cultural stereotypes, the films' sociohistorical settings, and the movies' production landscapes, and their intertextual understandings, such as knowledge of other media texts or film genres, expectations of the study, prior knowledge or understandings of the films, and the intertextual comparisons they made between the two selected movies.
Motivation:	The analysis of this theme's data provided insights into how the viewers' different subjectivities, views, and positionings may have influenced their interpretations of the queer-coded movie characters – an issue highly

	relevant to the tenets of semiotics, reception theory, the encoding-decoding model, queer theory, and the theory of gender performativity used in this study (see sections 3.3 to 3.6).
Theme 3:	Personal views or understandings influenced by <i>FGT</i> and <i>T&L</i> viewings
Description:	This theme concerns how some of the participants' views or understandings of gender or sexuality were influenced by their <i>Fried green tomatoes</i> or <i>Thelma & Louise</i> viewings.
Motivation:	The analysis of this theme's data provided insights into how some of the viewers' interpretations of the queer-coded films influenced their understandings, subjectivities, or positionings to a degree – an issue relevant to the tenets of semiotics, reception theory, queer theory, and the theory of gender performativity used in this investigation (see sections 3.3, 3.4, and 3.6).
Theme 4:	Filmic signs informing interpretations of queer coding
Description:	This theme concerns the various filmic signs the participants used to create their understandings of the queer-coded characters. As indicated by its subthemes and codes (see Table 4.5), this theme encompasses the participants' interpretations of gender, sexual, and other stereotypes used in the movies, the characters' socially normative or transgressive gender presentations, the characters' relationships with their own and each other's romantic partners, the movies' depictions of platonic or queer chosen families, and numerous miscellaneous signs.
Motivation:	The analysis of this theme's data provided insights into how the viewers' meaning creation from various filmic signs informed or influenced their understandings of the queer-coded characters. This analysis also improved understandings of the similarities and differences between different audiences' meaning-making processes. The above issues are highly relevant to the tenets of semiotics, reception theory, the encoding-decoding model, queer theory, and the theory of gender performativity used in this study (see sections 3.3 to 3.6).

4.8 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

This section concerns the trustworthiness of the study's findings, that is its interval validity, external validity, and reliability. Internal validity or credibility refers to how well a study's findings reflect the lived realities, perspectives, and meaning-creation processes of the research

participants (David & Sutton, 2011:20). Methodology scholars hold that triangulation can assist researchers in ensuring their data's internal validity. In qualitative research, triangulation entails using multiple research methods, data sources, or researchers to obtain and analyse the data necessary to achieve the research objectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:245; Pickard, 2017:21). This study employed method triangulation via its two data collection methods (i.e. semi-structured one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews). It also used source triangulation by collecting data from 16 participants. Moreover, every participant was interviewed twice, individually and thereafter in a group setting. Using in-depth interviews also increases a study's internal validity (David & Sutton, 2011:20). The individual and group interviews used in this investigation are forms of in-depth interviewing. Finally, the results' internal validity was improved by not discussing the study's focus on queer coding with the participants. Concealing the study's specific topic ensured that the participants' interpretations of the queer-coded characters remained uninfluenced.

External validity is sometimes referred to as transferability in qualitative research and concerns the generalisability of results (Leavy, 2017:114; Pickard, 2017:21). External validity within qualitative social research is complex. This type of research often provides insights into a relatively small study sample's specific meaning-making behaviour. Its findings are usually not easily generalisable to the wider population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:276; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:254). This study is an exemplification of the above-described research. Its results provide in-depth insights into a small group of queer and cis heterosexual individuals' interpretations of queer coding in the selected films. The findings cannot be generalised to the entire population of *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* viewers. Notwithstanding, the results are richly descriptive and can be used – along with previous and subsequent research findings – to improve understanding regarding queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of queer-coded movies.

Reliability or consistency refers to the replicability of research findings (Leavy, 2017:114). Theoretically, studies with high reliability should yield similar results if repeated. However, consistency within social research is often problematic “simply because human behavio[u]r is never static” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:250). Different society members experience the same phenomena in various, equally valid ways depending on countless and changing personal, contextual, and sociohistorical factors. Although the results of qualitative research studies are not as replicable as quantitative findings, social researchers can bolster their results' consistency through triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:252; Tracy, 2020:50). As discussed above, this study employed method *and* data source triangulation.

4.9 FEASIBILITY OF THE STUDY

The most logistically challenging aspect of this study was the time cost of transcribing, capturing, and analysing the data obtained from the interviews and focus group sessions. However, the amount of data to be transcribed and analysed was limited by restricting the sample size to merely 16 participants and by ensuring that the interviews and focus group sessions were relatively short (i.e. mostly between 60 and 90 minutes).

Another aspect of the research design that proved challenging was obtaining the research participants required. Recruitment was difficult because the participants had to be willing to watch two movies and engage in a one-on-one *and* focus group interview. This obstacle was overcome by the relatively small size of the research sample. Using snowball sampling also helped to secure the necessary sample. The subjects recruited via purposive sampling recommended the study to additional participants (see section 4.5).

The researcher conducted the one-on-one and focus group interviews, and transcribed and analysed the collected data herself, eliminating the expense of hiring independent interviewers, transcribers, and analysts. Rather than employing an outside moderator to monitor the interviews and focus group sessions, the study's co-supervisor fulfilled this role (see section 4.10). Finally, the virtual Zoom interviews and focus groups were inexpensive because they did not entail any transport or facility rental costs (Lewis & Muzzy, 2020; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017:49).

4.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher applied for and received scientific and ethical approval to conduct the above-discussed empirical research. The NWU's Scientific Committee of the Focus Area Social Transformation granted the study's scientific approval (see Annexure A1). The NWU's Faculty of Humanities BaSSREC provided ethical approval (see Annexure A2).

The researcher also received approval from the NWU's RDGC to recruit NWU-affiliated participants (Annexure A3). The RDGC approval was granted on two conditions. The first condition stipulated that the recruitment flyers indicate the voluntary nature of participation. The recruitment material also had to specify that there would be no direct benefit to participation apart from contributing to scientific knowledge creation. The second condition required a moderator to sit in on the interviews and focus groups to ensure that any sensitive discussions were handled carefully. The researcher assigned this role to the study's co-supervisor. She was an appropriate choice for moderator because she was already well-informed of the study's aims and theoretical foundations – background knowledge that would

be crucial for successfully fulfilling the moderator position. As the study's co-supervisor, she was privy to the collected data. The RDGC allowing her to act as moderator eliminated the need to provide another person access to the data, thereby protecting the participants' confidentiality and privacy.

The primary researcher received NWU Faculty of Humanities Ethics Training and participated in an Integrated Research Integrity Management Systems (IRIMS) workshop. She also completed the Macquarie University Online Social Science Ethics Training and the TRREE Online Ethics Training, as advised on the NWU BaSSREC Ethics Training website (NWU, 2023). These sessions gave the researcher the skills necessary to conduct research exploring the delicate subject of a humanities research theme such as queerness. The study's supervisor and co-supervisor have experience conducting research via the data collection and analysis methods described in this chapter and guided the primary researcher in her data collection, analysis, and preparation. Both the supervisor and co-supervisor completed the Macquarie University Online Social Science Ethics Training as well as IRIMS training, while the supervisor also completed the TRREE Online Ethics Training.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Each potential participant was given an informed consent form that clearly explained the voluntary nature of participation. The form also stressed that participants would be free to withdraw from the study at any point during or even after data collection (see Annexures D1-D2). This form also emphasised that participants could decline to discuss any topics or answer any questions they did not feel comfortable discussing while continuing to participate in the study if they wished to do so. The informed consent form described precisely what participation in the study would entail and what the researcher's participant needs and expectations were. Thus, only subjects who were willing and able to fulfil the necessary tasks and discuss the required topics, as outlined in this chapter, were selected for participation. The informed consent form also informed potential participants of certain content in the films that could offend, such as the use of racial slurs, racially motivated hate crimes, and sexual and physical violence. Participants were therefore able to minimise the risk of being caught off-guard by said content before viewing the films. They also had the option to decline to participate in the study. Finally, the form informed potential participants that after data collection had been completed, the researcher might contact them to ask additional questions or to follow up on information they provided during the interviews and focus group sessions.

As previously explained, to ensure the scientific integrity and validity of the research findings, the participants were unaware of the study's focus on queerness or queer coding. However, the researcher informed them of the study's concentration on gender and sexual

representation. The researcher answered any questions participants had about the study's purpose honestly and provided clarifying information when asked for it. The researcher phrased these explanations in terms of the study's broader focus on gender and sexuality in media representations and avoided any overt references to queerness or queer coding. Employing this strategy, she circumvented the risk of influencing participants' interpretations of the films. Simply put, the researcher provided honest clarifications regarding the study while continuing to ensure the results' integrity.

The participants' privacy was protected, as the researcher ensured confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher obtained the participants' consent to record the virtual Zoom discussions. One participant opted to keep their Zoom video function switched off for the duration of their focus group session. Meeting passcodes were embedded in all the Zoom meeting invite links, ensuring that only the researcher, the moderator, and the participants with whom the links had been shared had access to these Zoom sessions. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym during the transcribing, data analysis, and reporting processes. The participants were allowed to use their pseudonyms during the focus group sessions if they wished to do so. These pseudonyms will also be used in any resulting publications or presentations. The researcher has not disclosed and will not disclose any information that could be used to identify any of the participants. The researcher further ensured the participants' privacy by not probing them to share information regarding any issues or topics they did not feel comfortable discussing.

Access to the raw data (i.e. the recorded semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions) is restricted to the study's researcher, supervisor, and co-supervisor. All printed, hard copy data are stored in a securely locked location and all electronic, soft copy data are password-protected and stored safely on the primary researcher's personal computer. The data will also be stored in a secure Nextcloud folder. Nextcloud is a software tool NWU researchers use to securely save data to the cloud. All electronic devices containing the study data are stored in locked offices and the primary researcher's locked home. Lastly, because the participants were given legally obtained DVD copies of *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma and Louise* no copyright concerns exist regarding their viewing of the movies.

4.11 CONCLUSION

This chapter has motivated the researcher's choice of a qualitative research approach. As explained in section 4.2, qualitative research investigates subjective interpretations of social phenomena. A descriptive, interpretivist qualitative approach was suitable for this investigation exploring different audiences' subjective understandings of queer coding. In section 4.3, the

study's research design is presented. This research design outlines the study's specific research questions and the methods used to answer each question. Sections 4.4 and 4.5 motivate why and explain how semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and purposive and snowball sampling were used to collect the necessary empirical data. These data collection and sampling methods were appropriate for this study generating in-depth, nuanced understandings of different participants' subjective perspectives on queer-coded movie characters.

Section 4.6 outlines the study's measuring instrument which describes the thematic categories to which any theoretical framework-related empirical data belong. In section 4.7, the researcher's choice of thematic analysis is explained. As mentioned, this method is suitable for analysing qualitative data gathered via semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The section also thoroughly explains how the data analysis was carried out. Thereafter, section 4.8 discusses the validity and reliability of the research findings. In section 4.9, the study's feasibility is outlined. Lastly, section 4.10 describes the ethical considerations relevant to the study's empirical research and how those issues were dealt with. The next chapter presents the empirical research findings obtained using the above-mentioned methods.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

“Sometimes I think I catch a glimpse of her”

Thelma: “I guess I went a little crazy, huh?”

Louise: “No, you've always been crazy. This is just the first chance you've ever had to really express yourself.”

- excerpt of dialogue from *Thelma & Louise* (Scott, 1991)

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter explained and motivated the study's research design, employed to collect and analyse the study's empirical data. Chapter 5 explores the research findings obtained via a thematic analysis of the collected data. The cis heterosexual and queer participants engaged in individual interviews and thereafter participated in Focus groups 1 and 2, respectively (see sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2). During their one-on-one interviews, each participant had the opportunity to provide in-depth explanations and descriptions of their interpretations, thoughts, opinions, and past experiences. The focus group sessions were used to deepen the insights gained during these interviews. While the focus groups allowed for dynamic exchanges between the various individuals, the participants had to take turns sharing their perspectives. Each participant had a greater opportunity to share information during their individual rather than group meeting. The participants generally preferred sharing personal information during their one-on-one interviews rather than their focus group sessions. Throughout Chapter 5, findings obtained from the participants' interviews and focus groups are presented together. In certain instances, distinctions are drawn between the information gathered from interviews and content collected through focus groups. Most of the findings presented in this chapter originated from the participants' one-on-one interviews.

The next section outlines the self-reflexivity employed to generate this chapter's results (see section 4.2 for an explanation of the need for self-reflexivity). Thereafter, section 5.3 investigates the queer participants' interpretations of *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise's* queer-coded characters. It also explores the contextual and personal factors that may have influenced the queer participants' understandings and the specific filmic signs they used to create their interpretations. An examination of the cis heterosexual participants' understandings of the two films' queer-coded characters follows in section 5.4. The section also investigates the factors influencing the cis heterosexual participants' interpretations and the filmic signs they used to construct their understandings. In section 5.5, a comparison and

summary of the queer and cis heterosexual participants' interpretations of queer coding in the two movies are presented.

5.2 RESEARCHER'S USE OF SELF-REFLEXIVITY

As discussed in section 4.2, qualitative researchers often employ self-reflexivity to account for their roles in the data collection and analysis processes and to consider how their past experiences, views, and subjectivities might influence their research results. The primary researcher of this study is a cisgendered gay woman. Certain past media engagement experiences and perspectives shaped by those experiences informed the researcher's choice of study topic and her expectations of the findings. The researcher has, on multiple occasions, interpreted queer-coded film characters queerly while her fellow (usually cis heterosexual) viewers understood the same characters as platonic friends. Because of these experiences, the researcher expected the study's results to reflect similar understandings; she thought the queer participants would interpret Ruth, Idgie, Louise, and Thelma queerly and that the cis heterosexual viewers would understand them as platonic cis heterosexual friends. However, as evidenced by the following sections' explorations, the study's findings were more nuanced than the researcher anticipated. Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, the researcher kept her expectations in mind to ensure they do not subconsciously inform the collected data in ways that 'suit' the researcher's hypotheses or position her expectations as 'correct'. While reporting this chapter's findings, the researcher continuously studied the participants' data within the context of the discussions in which said content arose and the context of each participant's entire data set. This contextualisation was employed to ensure these data were not skewed or misrepresented.

5.3 QUEER PARTICIPANTS

This section is divided into three subsections. These subsections present findings based on data collected from the eight self-identified queer participants (see Annexure E for a list briefly describing the study's participants).⁴⁶ The first subsection answers the study's second specific research question: *How do self-identified queer audiences interpret the queer coding in Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise?* (see section 1.4.2). The second subsection outlines the personal and contextual factors that might have influenced the participants' interpretations.

⁴⁶ The primary purpose of this list is to orient the reader in terms of each participant's pseudonym, pronouns, and group division (i.e. either queer or cis heterosexual). While Annexure E also provides some descriptive information regarding the participants' movie viewing habits, this content is not meant to provide the reader with in-depth insights into the viewers' subjectivities.

The last subsection explores the specific filmic signs the participants used to create their individual understandings of the queer-coded characters.

5.3.1 Queer participants' interpretations

The first subsection of section 5.3.1 explores how the queer participants interpreted Idgie and Ruth, *Fried green tomatoes*' queer-coded characters. The second subsection investigates the queer participants' interpretations of *Thelma & Louise*'s titular queer-coded protagonists.

5.3.1.1 Interpretation of *Fried green tomatoes*' queer-coded characters

Several media studies scholars (Bernsmeier, 2013:69; Proehl, 2018:17, 22; Whatling, 1997:88) hold that the *Fried green tomatoes* characters Idgie and Ruth are queer-coded. Most of the queer participants interpreted these characters similarly and understood Idgie and Ruth as queer. Notwithstanding, they recognised, as this study does, that their queerness is portrayed subtextually via queer coding rather than explicitly stated or confirmed. Specifically, six of the eight queer participants understood Ruth and Idgie as subtextually queer. The two participants who interpreted the relationship between Ruth and Idgie platonically still recognised queer potential between the characters. Lisa thought that Ruth and Idgie might become romantically involved but are ultimately portrayed only as friends. Thembi believed Idgie is in love with Ruth but interpreted the characters' relationship platonically. Thembi also felt that if the narrative took place in this decade, Ruth and Idgie's relationship would be more explicitly queer. The above findings, obtained from Lisa and Thembi's individual interview data, suggest that they thought the characters *could* be interpreted as queer but are not explicitly depicted as such and therefore are correctly interpretable as platonic friends. Nonetheless, to an extent they identified queer potentiality in the movie.

Even though all the queer participants recognised queerness in *Fried green tomatoes*, the degree to which they interpreted Ruth and Idgie as queer differed. As explained above, Lisa and Thembi recognised queer potential in the characters' relationship but thought they are depicted platonically. The remaining six participants felt the characters are not explicitly depicted as queer but coded as such. They viewed the noticeability or apparentness of the characters' subtextual queerness differently. Consider, for instance, Jana's somewhat hesitant interview statement: "[F]rom *my* perspective, they were in a relationship" (original emphasis).⁴⁷ The stress on "*my*" implies Jana's recognition that other viewers might interpret the characters' relationship differently (i.e. platonically) and that such an understanding might be correct or

⁴⁷ The participant quotes used in this chapter were extracted from the participants' one-on-one interviews, focus group sessions, and a few additional sessions used to ask follow-up questions. These sessions occurred between 3 April and 28 July 2023.

justifiable. The difference between the participants' certainty of their interpretations is particularly evident when comparing Jana's statement above to Mian's confident assertion (made during their⁴⁸ individual interview) that Idgie and Ruth's queerness is "not subtle. You don't have to read into it ... [A]nybody who's willing to see it, who doesn't have an issue with these kinds of things, can easily see ... they're very much in love". Charlotte, Linda, and Mian found the characters' queerness to be less hidden or more noticeable and were more confident of the correctness of their queer interpretations than the other participants. All three of these participants expressed their confidence in the above interpretations during their individual interviews *and* Focus group 2.

The queer participants also differed in the degree to which they desired confirmation of Idgie and Ruth's queerness. Lisa wished to see if Ruth and Idgie would become romantically involved if Ruth were to live. Thembi was disappointed that the film is less overtly queer than she expected. She expressed her disappointment in both of her sessions. Charlotte said that if she could change anything in the movie, she would clarify that Ruth and Idgie are in a queer relationship. Of all the queer participants, Mian expressed the greatest desire for confirmation: "I'd like Ruth and Idgie to kiss. That's such a small, stupid thing. It would have been so nice if they could just admit that they are a couple ... Even if they don't kiss, it would be nice to have it blatantly said". Mian made the above statement during their interview and repeated its sentiment during their focus group session.

On the other hand, Jana and Linda expressed no desire for more explicit or confirmed queerness. During his one-on-one interview, Gary expressed disappointment that the characters' queerness is more hidden in the movie than in the novel on which the film is based. However, he explained (i.e. in his interview *and* focus group) that he also enjoyed reading between the lines to identify the characters' queerness. While he interpreted the characters as queer, he also appreciated their relationship's portrayal of friendship. Throughout her *Fried green tomatoes* viewing, Sarah wondered whether Idgie and Ruth's queerness would be depicted more explicitly. However, she understood the unlikeliness of such confirmation, given the conservative media context in which the film was produced: "[I suppose that's] the sad truth of the 90s".

5.3.1.2 Interpretation of *Thelma & Louise*'s queer-coded characters

This study agrees with media studies scholars (Doty, 1993:8; Gilbert, 2021; Symmonds, 2018) that *Thelma & Louise*'s protagonists are queer-coded. However, most of the queer participants did not interpret Thelma or Louise queerly – neither subtextually nor explicitly so. Most of them

⁴⁸ This dissertation refers to participants using their stated pronouns, as confirmed by the researcher.

described the characters as friends or referenced their heterosexuality. Although Gary wondered (during his individual interview) whether some viewers might interpret Thelma and Louise as queer, he did not interpret their relationship as romantic. During her individual interview, Charlotte stated that although some audiences understand the film queerly, she did not interpret Louise or Thelma as queer or romantically involved. Sarah and Thembi initially expected *Thelma & Louise* to be queer but then did not interpret it as such. On the other hand, Linda and Mian interpreted the film's main characters to an extent as queer-coded. Both participants expressed this understanding during their interviews and shared focus group session.

A few queer participants discussed specific signs in the movie that *might* point to queerness. Linda and Mian interpreted signs such as the protagonists' arguably masculine clothing, unkempt physical appearances, and the kiss they share in the movie's final scene as indicators of queerness. Other participants said that even though the above signs might suggest queerness, they interpreted the characters platonically. However, several of these participants agreed with Mian that Louise is more likely to be queer than Thelma (see section 5.3.3).



Figure 5.1: Louise (left) and Thelma (right) moments before blowing up a vulgar truck driver's vehicle (Scott, 1991)

Interestingly, the queer participants differed slightly on whether they desired the relationship to be queer or platonic. Jana, Lisa, and Thembi would have preferred it if Thelma and Louise were queer rather than – as they interpreted them – platonic friends. Thembi and Lisa communicated their platonic interpretation of the characters during their interviews and Focus group 2. They stated their desire for queerness only in the focus group. Jana did not discuss the characters' sexualities at all during her one-on-one interview, only during focus group discussions initiated by other participants. Those participants who understood the characters

as potentially queer wanted the queerness to be more evident. Linda and Mian expressed this desire during their focus group session. On the other hand, Gary appreciated the movie's focus on female friendship – enjoyment he communicated during his interview and focus group. During Focus group 2, Gary further elaborated on the above view, explaining that he believed that if the characters were depicted as queer, the film's celebration of friendship might have suffered to a degree. However, he also expressed frustration that the film could not, in his view, simultaneously represent queerness and friendship. Sarah and Charlotte seemed to enjoy the movie's focus on female friendship. Like Jana, Sarah only discussed Thelma and Louise's sexual identifications during the focus group after other participants raised the topic.

To summarise, all the queer participants recognised *Fried green tomatoes*' subtextual queerness to an extent. However, the degree to which they interpreted Ruth and Iddie as queer differed. The participants interpreted Louise and Thelma's relationship varyingly; some viewers thought they might be queer, whereas others understood them as platonic friends. These varying interpretations align with the tenets of semiotics examined in section 3.3.1. This section adheres to Peirce's (1960b:135) understanding of meaning creation, which allows for variation in the interpretations drawn from signs. Simply put, different individuals can create various meanings from the same signs, as illustrated by the queer participants' differing interpretations of Iddie, Ruth, Louise, and Thelma's relationships and (potential) queerness. Despite the differences in their interpretations, all the queer participants thought the movies' protagonists care deeply for one another. This shared understanding exemplifies section 3.3.1's assertion that the sociocultural codes through which signs (e.g. *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*'s filmic signs) are communicated limit the range of meanings receivers can draw from them.

The participants' shared recognition of the characters' concern for each other also illustrates how most audiences usually identify a text's preferred reading, regardless of whether they accept it (see section 3.5.3). As mentioned in section 2.4, it is impossible to determine precisely what all the communicators involved with the two films' productions intended regarding their encoding of the *nature* of the queer-coded characters' relationships. Notwithstanding, they likely wanted audiences to believe that the protagonists care for each other. All the queer participants accepted this preferred reading. Depending on the encoders' (unknowable) intended meanings, the participants' varying understandings of the exact nature of the women's relationships may fall within a preferred, negotiated, or dominant reading of the films.

According to Hall (2006:163; Xie *et al.*, 2022:193), mass media communication consists of the following four phases: production, circulation, use, and reproduction (see section 3.5.1).

Different viewers react differently to the same text, depending on countless personal and contextual factors and the individual meanings each decoder derived from the text. The participants' appreciation of the two films' implied queerness varied. Some viewers understood or enjoyed the use of queer coding; others wished the queer-coded characters' queerness were more evident; and several participants appreciated the films' depictions of friendship. Thus, the queer participants reacted differently to the films' presentations of the queer-coded characters' relationships. These varying reactions constitute reproduction, as understood by Hall (2006:163).

5.3.2 Personal and contextual factors

This section explores the numerous factors that might have influenced the queer participants' individual understandings of queer coding in the two movies. The researcher did not directly investigate these considerations. Notwithstanding, many participants volunteered information regarding their personal views, understandings, experiences, and circumstances, and how these factors affected their interpretations of the films (see section 4.4.1). Some participants also indicated that their interpretations of the films to an extent influenced their attitudes and understandings of sexuality. Generally, the participants provided more information regarding the personal and contextual factors that influenced their viewing of *Fried green tomatoes* than that of *Thelma & Louise*.⁴⁹

The participants' personal views and experiences influenced their interpretations of the movies' queer-coded characters in numerous ways. For instance, Charlotte has an aunt whom she believes is queer, even though she has not disclosed her sexuality to Charlotte. The participant interpreted Idgie's sexuality similarly to her aunt's. Sarah also has a queer aunt and compared her to Idgie. Charlotte and Sarah's experiences with and knowledge of their (potentially) queer aunts – discussed during their individual interviews – might have influenced their interpretations of Idgie as queer. Although Lisa interpreted Ruth and Idgie as platonic friends, she recognised their queer potential because their relationship reminded her of one of her own queer romantic experiences: "[T]he dynamic was similar. And that's why ... I *thought* they'll get together" (original emphasis).

Charlotte identified with Louise's protectiveness towards Thelma. Like Louise, Charlotte takes on a protective leadership role when she goes out with her friends or her younger sister. Louise and Thelma's relationship also reminded Lisa of some of her platonic friendships. According

⁴⁹ The queer participants provided much information regarding the personal and contextual considerations that influenced their overall *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* viewings. However, this chapter explored only the data related to their interpretations of the queer-coded characters' gender and sexual identifications. The remaining content exceeded this investigation's scope.

to Lisa, she and her friends encourage one another's mischievous behaviour similarly to how Thelma and Louise endorse each other's antics. Lisa and her friends also help one another deal with the consequences of their mischief like Louise and Thelma support each other. Mian thought the protagonists' relationship resembles their friendship with their best friend. Charlotte, Lisa, and Mian's association of Thelma and Louise's dynamics with their own friendships may have influenced their interpretations of the women. All three participants thought Louise and Thelma are friends. Although Mian identified queer potential in the titular characters' relationship, they understood this potential to be unexplored by Louise and Thelma – that the women's relationship remains a platonic friendship throughout the narrative.

Gary identified with Ruth's need to acknowledge her love for Idgie in a socially acceptable manner (see section 3.3.1 for a description of Ruth's courtroom declaration of love). In his interview, he explained that his family is conservative and that most of his relatives are unaware of his queerness. Gary empathised with Ruth because he understands the need to acknowledge romantic love in a subtextual manner. His identification with Ruth in that specific scene could have influenced his recognition of the women's queer relationship to an extent. Gary also explained that he first watched *Fried green tomatoes* as a teenager and at the time likely would have rejected the film's queerness if it were more explicit, as he had not yet accepted his own queerness. Lastly, Gary drew on his experiences growing up in an Afrikaans farming community to interpret Idgie's gender presentation as masculine (see section 5.3.3.1). According to Gary, conservative Afrikaners, particularly those situated within farming communities, usually adhere to similar sociocultural gender norms as Whistle Stop's inhabitants. Gary thought Idgie is expected to subscribe to but transgresses the same norms and conventions Afrikaner women are 'supposed' to adopt.

The above-described personal experiences are highly idiosyncratic. Conversely, several participants who interpreted Idgie and Ruth's relationship queerly identified with Idgie's transgressive gender expression (see section 5.3.3.1). Most queer participants indicated that the character's masculine presentation stood out to them because it aligned with their own culturally transgressive masculinity. Because these participants already identified with Idgie's gender expression, they might also consciously or subconsciously understand her sexual identification to be queer, reflecting their own sexual identifications. This is particularly likely given the sociocultural entwinement of gender and sexuality posited by queer theorists and gender performativity scholars (see section 3.6.1).

Several queer participants also identified with other aspects of Idgie's characterisation. Mian identified with the way Idgie tests the limits of social boundaries. These boundaries may include norms related to gender and sexuality. Gary related to Idgie "in the way she feels out

of place” until she achieves a sense of belonging with Ruth. Gary’s understanding of and identification with Idgie’s societal alienation and eventual happiness likely relate to the participant and the character’s queerness. Jana and Sarah related to Idgie’s rejection of sociocultural norms imposed upon her by relatives and other society members. While the participants did not elaborate on the specific norms, these flouted conventions likely include heteronormativity’s prescriptions (see sections 3.6.1, 3.6.2.1, and 3.6.3 for discussions on heteronormative sexual and gender norms). Sarah also indicated that she identified with Louise because the character transgresses sociocultural expectations of women.

The participants’ learned understandings of the sociohistorical setting in which Idgie and Ruth’s narrative occurs also influenced their interpretations. Numerous participants believed Idgie rejects and Ruth adheres to the preferred gender roles of their community. These views indicate a cursory knowledge of Alabaman society in the first half of the 20th century. The participants’ knowledge of the prevalent norms and gender roles in the American South during that time likely influenced their interpretation of Idgie’s gender expression as transgressive and Ruth’s presentation as culturally conventional. The queer participants’ interpretations of Idgie as masculine and Ruth as feminine are explored more thoroughly in section 5.3.3.1. Most queer participants thought Ruth and Idgie hide their queerness because homosexuality is culturally unacceptable in their community during their lifetime. These viewers believed that queer people living in towns like Whistle Stop during the early 1900s would likely conceal their sexual identities from their fellow society members. It can be argued that without this understanding, the participants might not have interpreted Idgie and Ruth queerly. Because these viewers had knowledge of the queer-coded characters’ heteronormative society, they understood the subtextual nature of Idgie and Ruth’s love as being attributable to the characters’ caution. Without this contextual knowledge, the participants may have interpreted the movie’s lack of explicit queerness as indicating the characters’ platonic friendship.

On the other hand, Lisa interpreted Idgie and Ruth as platonic friends with queer potential (see section 5.3.1.1). Her learned understandings of gender dynamics during the 20th century may have influenced her interpretation of the characters’ relationship. Lisa believed Ruth marries Frank to conform to societal expectations of women. She also felt Ruth and Idgie’s relationship is healthier than Ruth and Frank’s because Ruth and Idgie relate more easily to one another as women. During her interview, Lisa explained that because women were often subordinate to men at the time in which the film’s plot unfolds, men frequently considered their own needs and wants above those of others. Lisa seemed to attribute Ruth and Idgie’s healthy relationship to equal power dynamics between the characters more than romantic feelings.

To an extent, the queer participants also employed their knowledge of *Thelma & Louise*'s sociohistorical setting to interpret its protagonists. Sarah believed Louise's behaviour throughout the film is culturally transgressive for women within the character's context. Like her interpretation of Ruth's motivations for marrying, Lisa believed Thelma marries Darryl and tries to obey him because it is socially expected of her. She expressed this understanding of Thelma's motivations during her focus group session. According to Mian, Louise and Thelma may have romantic feelings for each other that they do not explore for several reasons, one of which is their sexually normative (i.e. heteronormative) society. Mian also attributed Thelma's initial femininity to her adherence to societal gender expectations (see section 5.3.3.1). The participants' understandings of the movie's cultural setting might have influenced their interpretations of the characters' behaviour and how it adheres to or flouts cultural expectations of women.

Several participants also referenced the 1991 media landscape in which *Fried green tomatoes* was produced. During their respective one-on-one interviews, Jana, Charlotte, Thembi, Gary, and Sarah conveyed expectations that Idgie and Ruth's relationship would be more explicitly queer if the movie were made today. To a certain extent, these audiences attributed the implied nature of the characters' relationship to the heteronormative 1991 mainstream media landscape. Moreover, Charlotte, Linda, and Mian thought Idgie and Ruth's queerness is surprisingly apparent, given the movie's 1991 release. If these participants did not know the movie's age or the media shifts that occurred between 1991 and 2023, they might have interpreted the characters differently. These audiences understood Idgie and Ruth's relationship as (potentially) romantic and attributed the subtextual nature of their romance to the filmmakers' reluctance to alienate conservative viewers (i.e. audiences with rigidly heteronormative views or beliefs).

Some participants had particular expectations or intertextual knowledge of the films, which influenced their interpretations varyingly. Intertextual influences, whether direct or indirect, play a significant role in audiences' creation of meaning (see section 3.3.3). During her individual interview, Charlotte said she is "hooked on queer culture" and therefore knew of Idgie and Ruth's queerness before she watched the film. Notwithstanding, she did not expect the queerness to be as apparent as she found it to be. Charlotte was also aware that *Thelma & Louise* follows two best friends whom some people in the queer community interpret as queer. While she did not interpret the characters queerly, she identified certain filmic signs that might point to their queerness (see sections 5.3.1.2, 5.3.3.1, and 5.3.3.4). Gary knew that *Fried green tomatoes* is based on a novel in which the queerness of the queer-coded characters is more evident. This knowledge might have influenced his understanding of Ruth

and Idgie as queer. Linda interpreted Louise and Thelma as potentially queer. However, during her interview she stated that she might have identified the film's underlying queerness *because* she searched for it. The participant's expectation of queerness may have influenced her interpretation of Thelma and Louise's sexual identifications. The specific reasons for Linda's expectation of queerness in *Thelma & Louise* are discussed later in this section.

Because participants were aware of the study's focus on sexual and gender representation, Sarah expected both films to contain queerness. Whereas she thought this expectation might have played a small role in her understanding of *Fried green tomatoes*' queer-coded characters, she did not interpret Louise or Thelma queerly. Jana *and* Thembi interpreted Louise and Thelma platonically, yet to a degree recognised their queer potential (see section 5.3.1.2). Like Sarah, they expected the characters to be queer because of the study's focus on gender and sexuality. However, these expectations did not influence their viewings to the extent that they interpreted Thelma or Louise queerly. This study holds that the participants' intertextual knowledge or expectations bolstered their interpretations *if* this knowledge aligned with their specific understandings of the characters. In instances where the participants' expectations of the films differed from their individual understandings of the movies, the prior knowledge or expectations were not enough to alter the participants' interpretations. For instance, Linda had no prior knowledge of *Fried green tomatoes*' queerness and initially thought the film concerns Southern girls coming of age. Despite this expectation, Linda recognised the movie's queer potential as obvious.

Some participants drew on their knowledge of other movies and conventions regarding film genres to interpret the movies' queer coding. Audiences gain the above type of knowledge via their repeated exposure to media content framed by representational codes such as stylistic, genre, and mass media codes. This knowledge functions intertextually to shape viewers' expectations and interpretations of subsequent media texts (see section 3.3.1). Thembi enjoys watching LGBTQ+ films. It is possible that her previous viewings of films with explicit queer relationships influenced her *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* viewings to an extent. Because she is used to seeing queer relationships openly depicted and confirmed, she may have been more inclined than some others to interpret Idgie, Ruth, Louise, and Thelma's subtextual queerness platonically. Importantly, different viewers' intertextual understandings influence their interpretations of meaning variously. Whereas Thembi's queer media consumption may have played a role in her platonic interpretation of Ruth and Idgie's and Louise and Thelma's relationships, Linda believed her LGBTQ+ media engagement influenced her *Thelma & Louise* viewing differently. As mentioned, Linda's viewing of the movie was influenced to a degree by her expectation of queer representation. Linda explained that

she may have had this expectation because she mostly consumes LGBTQ+ media. Linda thought that because she expected the movie to contain queerness, she was more likely to recognise the protagonists' queer potential than some other viewers.

Thembi further employed her knowledge of queer films and movies set in the American South to describe *Fried green tomatoes* as a queer version of films set in rural contexts. During their individual interview, Mian related their knowledge of fairy tales to the depiction of Iddie and Ruth's romance. Gary drew on his knowledge of the Biblical tale of David and Jonathan to create his understanding of *Thelma & Louise*. Although Gary understood Thelma and Louise platonically, he compared the women's queer potential to Jonathan and David's. While discussing the shifts that have occurred in the queer media landscape since 1991, Gary compared *Fried green tomatoes*' subtextual queerness to the explicit queerness depicted in the 2015 film *Carol* (Haynes, 2015). Linda thought her previous consumption of media texts (specifically, films in which women's queer potential is hidden or coded as platonic friendship) informed her expectations and interpretation of Louise and Thelma's queer-coded friendship. Linda further compared *Thelma & Louise* to other films portraying female friendships. She thought movies depicting female friends often concern the women's search for and realisation of heterosexual romance. Linda believed *Thelma & Louise* portrays women's friendship differently; she thought the movie is less concerned with heteronormative considerations than the above-described films. This comparison might have highlighted Louise and Thelma's move away from heteronormativity in Linda's view and slightly influenced her interpretation of the characters as potentially queer. Lastly, Linda drew on her previous knowledge of Susan Sarandon's work to interpret her characterisation of Louise. Linda enjoyed Sarandon's portrayal of Louise as "feral", illustrated by Louise's progressively unkempt, dirty appearance and socially transgressive behaviour (see section 5.3.3.1). Linda explained that Sarandon's depiction is particularly enjoyable because she rarely portrays this type of unconventional woman. Linda's knowledge of Sarandon's previous roles might have emphasised Louise's transgressive nature in the participant's mind.

Many participants also compared the two films when discussing the movies' queerness. Charlotte, Lisa, Linda, and Gary did not read the queerness in *Thelma & Louise* as strongly as they did in *Fried green tomatoes*. The arguably apparent queerness in the latter might have influenced the participants' understandings of queerness in the former. Participants also employed their learned understandings of sociocultural stereotypes to make sense of the queer-coded characters. These stereotypes relate mainly to tropes regarding gender and sexuality (explored in section 5.3.3.1) and romantic relationships (see section 5.3.3.2). As discussed in section 3.3.3, stereotypes function through semiotic signs and codes and

communicate sociocultural myths. These stereotypical, mythic meanings are naturalised within certain societies or subsections of societies and appear to convey fundamental truths rather than culturally constructed beliefs. The participants' learned knowledge of the stereotypes used in the movies contributed significantly to their understandings of the queer-coded characters (see sections 5.3.3 and 5.3.4).

Thembi's viewing of *Fried green tomatoes* to an extent altered her attitude towards heterosexual people. Even though she interpreted Idgie and Ruth as friends, she believed Idgie is in love with Ruth (see section 5.3.1.1). During her one-on-one interview, Thembi explained that Evelyn and Ninny's (i.e. old-aged Idgie) friendship illustrated that, contrary to her previously held beliefs, queer and cis heterosexual people can be friends and can learn from one another. As mentioned, Gary first watched *Fried green tomatoes* as a sexually closeted teenager. Like Thembi, his initial viewing of the movie challenged and influenced his attitudes and views slightly: "[The film] probably influenced me in my protracted journey of then ultimately becoming affirming of my sexuality and ... of humanity in general". According to a semiotic understanding of media representation, the discourses movies convey might influence audiences' subjectivities, perceptions of their realities, and attitudes towards themselves and their fellow society members (see section 3.3.2). The change in views Thembi and Gary experienced due to their *Fried green tomatoes* viewing exemplifies the above assertion.

Clearly, the queer participants' personal experiences, views, learned understandings, and intertextual knowledge influenced their interpretations of the movies' queer coding in numerous ways, as proposed by semiotics, reception theory, the encoding-decoding model, and the theory of gender performativity. According to a semiotic understanding of media representation, considerations such as the above-described personal and contextual factors play various roles in different audiences' interpretations of texts (see section 3.3.1). Semioticians also hold that the various discourses society members encounter throughout their lives shape their subjectivities, which influence how they create meaning from signs and texts (see section 3.3.2). Individuals access their society's marginalised and dominant discourses through numerous social situations, relationships, media engagements, and formal and informal learning environments, such as those outlined in this section. While it is impossible to fully understand each participant's subjectivity, their various personal and contextual circumstances likely influenced their subjectivities and could have affected how they interpreted the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*.

The above tenets of semiotics are supported by reception theorists and proponents of the encoding-decoding model (see sections 3.4 and 3.5). Moreover, reception theory holds that

an individual's horizons of experience and expectation influence their interpretations of meaning (see section 3.4). The queer participants' contextual and personal factors contribute to their horizons of experience which frame their expectations of subsequent experiences and influence *how* they encounter these new experiences – experiences such as viewing *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* and interpreting the films' queer coding. Reception theory and the encoding-decoding model also posit that receivers are positioned within interpretative contexts from which they draw when receiving a message. These interpretative contexts are influenced by the audiences' various personal and contextual influences (see sections 3.4 and 3.5.1). Lastly, Butler's (1999:12; Lloyd, 2015; Meyerhoff, 2015) constructionist conception of gender asserts that an individual's sociohistorical context, cultural positioning, experiences and learned understandings of sexuality and gender influence how they interpret other people's (including fictional film characters') gender and sexual identifications (see section 3.6.3).

5.3.3 Filmic signs informing participants' interpretations

This section explores the specific signs in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* that the queer participants used to create meanings regarding the queer-coded characters. The queer participants largely created understandings of Idgie, Ruth, Thelma, and Louise via their interpretations of signs related to the women's gender presentations, the characters' relationships with their own and each other's romantic partners, and the notion of a found family. These main signs and other miscellaneous signs are explored below. All the signs discussed in section 5.3.3 are framed within codes of content. These codes relate to all the audio-visual signs the viewers of a film perceive. Codes of content do not apply exclusively to film and television and include thematic codes, production codes, narrative codes, décor codes, costume codes, acting codes, lighting codes, codes of mise-en-scène, and importantly, social codes (see section 3.3.1).

5.3.3.1 Gender presentations

Most queer participants understood and described Idgie as masculine, a tomboy, or butch. They pointed to various filmic instances as indicators of Idgie's masculinity. These signs include the character's attire, reluctance to attend church, refusal to date men, confidence, rebelliousness, gambling, smoking, drinking, fishing, walking barefoot, jumping from a moving train, collecting honey from a beehive, and protective feelings towards Ruth. The participants' interpretations of the above filmic signs align with this study's understanding of the functioning of signs within social codes. According to Chandler (2017:186), social codes consist of verbal language, bodily, behavioural, and commodity codes. The signs participants used to interpret

Idgie as masculine are communicated via these social codes. Clothing codes and gender codes restrict the range of understandings viewers can draw from Idgie's 'masculine' clothing. Ritual codes frame interpretations of the character's 'manly' hobbies and 'rebellious' behaviour (see section 3.3.1).

Several participants also believed *Fried green tomatoes*' filmmakers employed queer stereotypes in their depiction of gender expression (see section 5.3.2). This view likely bolstered the participants' interpretations of the characters as queer. During her interview, Sarah stated that Idgie's masculine attire is a stereotypical indicator of queerness. Charlotte thought the film's depiction of Idgie as masculine and Ruth as feminine relied on cultural stereotypes regarding queer partners' gender roles. For Thembi, Idgie's friendships with predominantly male characters reflected stereotypical attitudes regarding men's relationships with women. Thembi thought these depictions reinforce the notion that men can be friends with women *if* these women are queer – that men cannot have platonic relationships with feminine cis heterosexual women: "[S]he had to be butchy for them to ... [view] her as a friend". Several semioticians and queer theorists argue that films frequently employ stereotypes and tropes associated with queer people to portray LGBTQ+ characters (Bernsmeier, 2013:17; Crewe, 2015:52). These stereotypes usually relate to the characters' gender expressions because gender and sexuality are socioculturally entwined (see sections 3.3.3 and 3.6.2).

Contrary to the above participants' views, Jana thought Idgie's depiction as a masculine tomboy does not necessarily reflect sociocultural stereotypes. She interpreted Idgie's unladylike behaviour and androgynous attire as indications of a masculine nature that suits the character's personality and views of life. Jana interpreted Idgie's tomboyishness as an authentic aspect of her free-spirited character. According to Gary, the movie employs and then does away with stereotypical notions regarding masculine and feminine women. He thought the film conveys Ruth's adherence to feminine ideals (i.e. marrying the man she is expected to marry) negatively and Idgie's flouting of those ideals (i.e. refusing to date men) positively. Gary supported the above interpretation with references to Frank's abuse of Ruth and Idgie's resourcefulness in caring for her loved ones.

While most queer participants discussed their understandings of Idgie's gender presentation more thoroughly than Ruth's, some also noted Ruth's femininity. The disparity between the participants' focus on Idgie and Ruth's respectively 'transgressive' and 'normative' gender expressions reflects semioticians' argument that the marked item in a binary pair is usually more noticeable (i.e. as 'other' or 'abnormal') than its naturalised unmarked opposite (see section 3.3.3). The participants who discussed Ruth's gender presentation pointed to her marrying Frank, religious obedience, and feminine clothing and hairstyle as signs indicating

her femininity. As already mentioned, Charlotte believed the film juxtaposes Idgie's masculinity with Ruth's femininity. Jana also compared Idgie's masculinity with Ruth's femininity. Gary and Linda understood the characters to be illustrating the extremes of their society's gender binaries. They believed Idgie's masculine presentation is socially transgressive, whereas Ruth's feminine expression is culturally acceptable and intelligible. In constructing their understandings of Idgie as masculine and Ruth as feminine, the above participants (sub)consciously employed the semiotic tools of binary opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment (see sections 3.3.3 and 3.6.2.2).

Although not all the queer participants expressly related the queer-coded characters' gender identifications to their interpretations of the characters as queer, their interpretations of these gender expressions might have bolstered their understandings of Ruth and especially Idgie as (potentially) queer. According to queer theorists, culturally dominant understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality restrict individuals' interpretations of others' gender and sexual identifications. Within these hegemonic conceptions, sexuality, sex, and gender are causally related (see section 3.6.1). Idgie's transgressive gender expression encourages interpretations of the character as sexually transgressive, that is sexually queer.

Several participants related Louise and Thelma's gender presentations to their queer potential. Mian believed the women's gender expressions do not reflect sociocultural stereotypes regarding queer women's perceived masculinity. They pointed to Louise and Thelma's long hair and delicate sunglasses as indicators of femininity. Nonetheless, they believed Thelma's clothing and behaviour become less feminine as soon as she and Louise start their journey. They interpreted Thelma's subtly increasing masculinity throughout the movie as an expression of her authentic self and liberation from social expectations. Charlotte and Linda thought both women's presentations gradually become less feminine and more masculine as the movie's narrative progresses. The filmic signs they used to create this interpretation include the women replacing their feminine clothing with more masculine jeans and t-shirts, their hair and overall appearances becoming untidy and dirty, and Louise throwing away her lipstick. Linda interpreted the above signs to be signalling Louise and Thelma's move away from heteronormativity, an understanding she expressed during both of her sessions. Although Charlotte did not understand the characters as queer, she explained (during her individual interview) that the above signs might contribute to some viewers' queer understandings of Louise and Thelma. Sarah also did not interpret Louise or Thelma as queer but thought Louise's decision to go on a trip without a man's protection transgresses societal expectations of women. Sarah understood Thelma's wish to have her husband's permission to go on the trip as an exemplification of the character's normative gender identification.

Idgie, Ruth, Louise, and Thelma's gender and sexual identifications are communicated to and interpreted by audiences via specific filmic signs framed by sociocultural codes. As posited by the theory of gender performativity, the queer-coded characters construct, express, and communicate their identifications through signs such as Idgie's masculine hobbies, Ruth's feminine clothing, Louise's disposal of her lipstick, and Thelma's unkempt appearance (see section 3.6.1). These signs are situated within and communicated via semiotic codes that enable and restrict audiences' interpretations of the signs (see section 3.3.1). The queer participants interpreted Ruth, Idgie, Thelma, and Louise's gender presentations variously and used these understandings partially to construct their interpretations of the characters' sexualities. Thus, society members (i.e. the queer participants) interpret others' sexual and gender identifications differently, depending on their individual interpretations of the signs those people (i.e. the queer-coded characters) use to perform their identifications.

5.3.3.2 Relationships with romantic partners

Linda interpreted Ruth and Idgie asking each other about their respective romantic partners as signs of their underlying queer feelings. Linda also thought Idgie and Ruth share a unique connection they have not been able to create with anyone else. She viewed this strong bond as a manifestation of their queerness. Similarly, Sarah interpreted the lack of a depiction of romance between Idgie and any male character as a sign of her queerness. Jana understood Idgie's refusal to date men as an indication of her untamed, free-spirited nature. Several participants understood the following filmic events as indications of queerness: Idgie not attending Ruth's wedding yet watching from afar as Frank carries Ruth into their new home; Idgie's commitment to saving Ruth from her abusive marriage; and Ruth leaving Frank to raise her child with Idgie.

While they both interpreted Idgie and Ruth's relationship as queer, Gary and Jana allowed for heterosexual romantic relationships between Idgie and Grady,⁵⁰ and Ruth and Buddy, respectively. Jana thought Ruth might be Buddy's girlfriend before he dies. Gary interpreted Ninny as older Idgie and believed the husband she references may be Grady. Despite Idgie's healthy marriage, Gary thought the time Idgie spent with Ruth was likely the happiest years of her life, as evidenced by her telling Evelyn about that era rather than her time as a married woman. Gary also thought Idgie might have married because Ruth encouraged her to do so.

Linda drew on her knowledge of sociocultural stereotypes regarding romantic relationships to interpret Ruth and Frank's relationship. Linda understood Ruth as a stereotypically dutiful

⁵⁰ Sheriff Grady Kilgore (played by Gary Basaraba) is Idgie's friend. The film implies that Grady is romantically interested in Idgie but that she rebuffs his advances (Avnet, 1991).

Southern housewife and Frank as a caricature of an abusive husband. Linda also believed Thelma's romantic interests are depicted stereotypically. According to her, Darryl embodies the trope of the overbearing, controlling, and abusive husband. Linda interpreted JD as a stereotypically handsome swindler. As discussed in section 5.3.2, Lisa thought Ruth *and* Thelma marry to adhere to sociocultural expectations of women. Like Linda, Lisa and Mian interpreted Darryl as a stereotypically domineering, emotionally abusive husband. Lisa attributed Thelma's wild behaviour throughout the film to the character finally breaking free from her husband's oppression. Gary thought Thelma's characterisation initially adheres to stereotypical notions regarding the obedient housewife. However, when Thelma prioritises her friendship with Louise over her marriage (i.e. by going on the trip without asking Darryl's permission), the character discards the stereotype. Mian thought Thelma's concern about getting Darryl's permission to go with Louise characterises her as a stereotypically Southern woman. Notwithstanding, Mian believed Thelma becomes less stereotypical and more independent as the narrative progresses. The participants' knowledge of these stereotypes likely influenced their understandings of the queer-coded characters' romantic relationships, which, in turn, may have influenced their interpretations of the women's sexualities.

Charlotte thought Louise has trouble connecting with men romantically. She did not ascribe this difficulty to the character's queerness, but rather her traumatic past experiences with men. Likewise, she believed Thelma and Darryl's relationship is unhealthy because Darryl is emotionally abusive, and Thelma married too young. Both Charlotte and Jana believed Thelma leaves Darryl to be with Louise because he does not appreciate her, not because she has romantic feelings for Louise. However, like Thembi and Mian, Charlotte thought Louise is more likely to be in love with Thelma than vice versa. These participants referenced the following filmic events to bolster the above understanding: Louise's disapproval of Thelma's romantic interests, Louise's protectiveness over Thelma, Louise killing Harlan to save Thelma, and Louise overlooking Thelma's carelessness (i.e. leaving their money unattended and insisting on offering JD a lift). Thembi and Mian interpreted the above signs as proof that Louise values their relationship more than Thelma – whether it is queer or platonic. Both participants expressed this understanding in their interviews and shared focus group session.

Linda recognised Louise and Thelma's queer potential but did not view their relationship as necessarily sexual or romantic. She believed the characters choose each other over their romantic partners: “[B]oth of them leave the men that they have to be with each other”. Nonetheless, she also thought the filmmakers might have partially included the characters' various male romantic partners to negate interpretations of Louise and Thelma as queer. During Focus group 2, Linda explained that Thelma's dalliance with JD could be interpreted

as a mistake illustrating the dangers of casual sex. On the other hand, Gary interpreted Thelma's sexual experience with JD positively. He thought Thelma enjoys this heterosexual intercourse. Additionally, he believed Louise is happy for Thelma that she has had a pleasurable sexual experience. He did not express any view that Louise is jealous of JD's relationship with Thelma. Mian believed JD subtly manipulates Thelma. Moreover, they thought JD, Jimmy, and Darryl illustrate the dangers of gender-based violence; with Darryl exhibiting the most obvious and Jimmy and JD displaying increasingly nuanced traits of an abuser. While Lisa would have preferred it if Thelma and Louise were queer, she interpreted the women's concern for their male partners as indicators of the protagonists' heterosexuality. She conveyed this interpretation of the signs related to the women's partners during her interview and focus group. Thembi interpreted Thelma flirting with Harlan as an indication of her promiscuity and recklessness.

5.3.3.3 Found family

The concept of found, chosen, or self-created family is particularly relevant to this study's focus on queerness. A family of choice exceeds the boundaries of biological or legal relationships and challenges heteronormative conceptions of the nuclear family (Levin *et al.*, 2020:1; Ritholtz & Buxton, 2021:9). Found families consist of like-minded or mutually supportive individuals and are often the refuge of those who do not feel accepted by or affinity with their own relatives. Many queer people rely on chosen families for a sense of belonging (Levin *et al.*, 2020:1).

All the queer participants believed Idgie and Ruth found a place of belonging and created a type of found family with each other. Most of these participants interpreted the characters' found or chosen family queerly. They pointed to the characters starting a business, living, and raising Buddy Jr. together as signs of this found family. In her individual interview, Linda described Thelma and Louise as belonging to a found family. She interpreted their companionship and support of one another as an indication that the two women give each other a feeling of safety no one else can provide. She thought that these signs likely point to a platonic friendship but could also indicate queerness.

5.3.3.4 Miscellaneous signs

The queer participants mostly employed the signs discussed in the preceding subsections to construct their understandings of Idgie, Ruth, Louise, and Thelma. Nonetheless, the viewers also used several miscellaneous signs to interpret the characters' identifications. These signs include filmic events related to the significance of honey (i.e. in *Fried green tomatoes*), Buddy's

role in Idgie and Ruth's lives, the role of shared trauma (in both movies), Idgie and Ruth's shared activities and kiss, lingering looks between the characters (in both films), Ruth and Idgie's food fight,⁵¹ Idgie's response to Ruth's death, Ninny's identity, Ninny and Mrs Otis' relationship, Ruth's declaration of love for Idgie, Louise and Thelma's reciprocal support and loyalty, Thelma and Louise's easy-going conversations, and Louise kissing Thelma.

Mian thought the jar of honey at Ruth's gravestone signifies Idgie's love for her. They also thought it symbolises Idgie's continued 'unladylike' behaviour. To Charlotte, the honey imagery symbolises Idgie's daredevil nature and Ruth's recognition thereof. At the start of their friendship, Idgie retrieves honey from a beehive (without taking any protective measures to ensure her safety) and gives it to Ruth. According to Charlotte, this dangerous act shows Ruth that Idgie is like her brother, Buddy – Ruth sees them both as charming risk-takers. Moreover, Charlotte thought that if Buddy had lived, he and Ruth might have gotten married. Charlotte's above view that Ruth compares Idgie to Buddy may have influenced her understanding of Ruth as queer. Sarah thought the *Fried green tomatoes* scene in which Buddy comforts Idgie after she refuses to wear a dress to her sister's wedding exemplifies his acceptance of her transgressive gender expression. According to Sarah, Buddy's support gives Idgie the confidence to express herself and her unconventional gender presentation authentically. Sarah communicated this interpretation of Buddy's role in Idgie's life during her individual and focus group interviews. Likewise, Gary thought the story Buddy tells young Idgie (i.e. a tale about how pearls are made from grains of sand) symbolises acceptance of one's deviation from sociocultural norms. Gary also thought Idgie becomes more rebellious after Buddy dies and that Ruth is able to initiate a relationship with Idgie after her brother's death because they both had a connection to Buddy.

Several participants referenced filmic events portraying Idgie and Ruth becoming reacquainted as adults. They understood these depictions as indications of a blossoming queer relationship between the characters. The participants referenced Idgie and Ruth stowing away on a train and the scene in which Idgie throws Ruth a birthday party. In this scene, Idgie and Ruth get drunk, play baseball, swim in a lake, and play cards. Ruth also kisses Idgie on the cheek and Idgie appears stunned.

Charlotte, Gary, Linda, and Mian felt *Fried green tomatoes*' use of lingering shots, looks, and touches between Ruth and Idgie communicates their underlying queer feelings. Lisa thought the way Idgie looks at Ruth at various points throughout the movie communicates her love for the character. Lisa felt Idgie's feelings for Ruth are particularly apparent when Idgie first shows

⁵¹ *Fried green tomatoes* depicts a scene in which Idgie and Ruth playfully smear each other with food in their café's kitchen (Avnet, 1991).

up at Ruth and Frank's house: "[S]he just looked like she was there to confess something ... Her love". The above-described film shots are framed by cinematic codes, that is editing codes and codes of camera point of view (see section 3.3.1). These codes concern the specific ways movies portray audio-visual signs and, as exemplified by the participants' interpretations above, influence how audiences create meaning from those signs. Several queer participants stated that *Thelma & Louise* does not employ the same types of lingering shots and looks as *Fried green tomatoes* and pointed to this vacuum to explain their interpretations of Louise and Thelma as platonic friends. On the other hand, Mian believed *Thelma & Louise* depicts brief moments in which Thelma looks at Louise romantically. Additionally, they felt that "you can ... very subtly throughout the film see the way they look at each other start to shift, as if unearthing some deep feeling that they never had the liberty to experience before". Mian ascribed this inability to explore their queer feelings to their other romantic commitments (i.e. relationships with Darryl and Jimmy) and their heteronormative cultural setting (see section 5.3.2).

Gary and Sarah believed Idgie and Ruth's food-fight scene in the café's kitchen subtextually communicates their sexual feelings for each other. Gary also interpreted the scene in which Ruth dies queerly. In this scene, Idgie tells Ruth she still has much to share with her and Ruth asks her to tell a story instead. Gary believed that because of their society's norms, the characters might not always be able to acknowledge to themselves that they are in a romantic relationship. He interpreted Ruth asking Idgie to tell a story rather than explain her feelings as Ruth's way of saying "[I]t's fine. I had the loveliest life with you. There's nothing I would have wanted more or less. So, I'd just love to hear your voice telling a story as I pass away". As discussed in section 5.3.2, Gary also interpreted Ruth's courtroom declaration of love for Idgie queerly.

Jana struggled to interpret Ninny. She initially thought Ninny is Idgie but Ninny's reference to her husband and child confused her. Jana could not reconcile Idgie's characterisation with the notion of her marrying a man. Jana seemed more certain of Idgie's queerness than her shared identity with Ninny. Charlotte thought Ninny may have accompanied her friend Mrs Otis to the old-aged home because the women are lovers.⁵²

Various participants referenced Thelma and Louise's mutual commitment, support, loyalty, and protectiveness. Most viewers interpreted the above signs as indications of Louise and Thelma's friendship. On the other hand, a few participants believed these signs communicate the characters' friendship *and* their queer potential. Jana thought the various traumatic events that occur throughout *Thelma & Louise* strengthen the protagonists' friendship and reinforce

⁵² In the movie, Ninny explains that she only stays in the old-aged home to support her friend Mrs Otis and that she will return to her house in Whistle Stop as soon as Mrs Otis has settled in at the home (Avnet, 1991).

their resolve to support one another and collectively come up with a solution to their dilemma. She referenced Louise taking responsibility for Thelma's safety, the way the women stick together without betraying each other, and Louise taking charge of their situation. She interpreted the above filmic signs as indications of their friendship. Charlotte understood these signs similarly. Thembi and Gary interpreted Louise and Thelma's decision to die together as a sign indicating their commitment to their friendship. Sarah felt the characters' protectiveness of each other exemplified their friendship.

Lisa and Gary believed Louise takes responsibility for Thelma's safety in the bar because she understands that Thelma rarely has a chance to have fun – they believed Louise enjoys seeing her friend enjoying herself and allows her the opportunity to do so. Gary and Jana thought Louise does not blame Thelma for their predicament and interpreted this as a sign of the women's friendship. Lisa interpreted the characters encouraging each other's mischievous behaviour and helping one another out of trouble as exemplifications of their friendship (see section 5.3.2). Gary understood Louise and Thelma's easy-going interactions and conversations as signs that they are longtime best friends. Linda believed Louise and Thelma are committed to each other, whether platonically or queerly. She interpreted their mutual support and loyalty (i.e. the characters' hope to obtain a positive outcome for the other rather than merely themselves) as signs of this commitment. She also thought that Thelma and Louise remain committed to their relationship partly because no one else could understand their experience, that their shared trauma bonds them to an extent. As mentioned, Mian thought Louise values their relationship more than Thelma, regardless of whether it is queer or platonic. They believed Louise's telephonic conversations with Detective Slocumb exemplify this understanding. They thought Louise talks to him to negotiate a favourable outcome for Thelma rather than for herself.

Several participants pointed to the characters' kiss in their discussions of the women's queer potential. Mian thought the kiss confirms their understanding that Thelma and Louise have underlying romantic feelings for each other. Jana might not have noticed *Thelma & Louise's* subtextual queerness if the filmmakers had not included the protagonists' kiss. While Charlotte thought the kiss could be interpreted as queer, she did not think it reflects romantic feelings. During her interview, Charlotte indicated that because she interpreted the characters platonically their kiss confused her. In the focus group session, she elaborated that she thought the kiss expresses the characters' excitement rather than queerness. Sarah also did not interpret Louise and Thelma's kiss queerly.

Like the results presented in section 5.3.1, this section's findings illustrate how different individuals create various meanings from semiotic signs. The queer participants interpreted

signs in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*'s in numerous ways to create their understandings of the queer-coded characters. In some instances, several participants interpreted the same signs similarly. In other cases, the viewers' interpretations of signs varied considerably. Notwithstanding, the queer participants' interpretations of the above signs were culturally sensible or intelligible due to the limitations on meaning-creation imposed by the semiotic codes framing the signs (see section 3.3.1). Consider, for example, the participants' varying interpretations of Louise and Thelma's mutual support. The queer viewers interpreted the characters' reciprocal loyalty, protectiveness, and assistance differently. Some participants thought the signs regarding the women's support of one another communicated the strength of their friendship, while others understood these signs as indicators of potential queerness. Despite their varying understandings, the participants all understood these signs to be conveying the depth of care between the women.

Semiotic signs and codes have denotative *and* connotative meanings. According to semioticians and proponents of the encoding-decoding model, sociohistorically situated audiences generally interpret denotative meanings similarly, as intended by the text's communicator. However, audiences interpret connotative meanings differently, depending on countless personal, cultural, and contextual influences (see sections 3.3.1 and 3.5.1). For instance, all the participants understood the denotative meaning of Louise placing her lips against Thelma's as a kiss. However, they interpreted the connotation of the kiss differently.

5.4 CIS HETEROSEXUAL PARTICIPANTS

This section is also divided into three subsections. These sections present results based on the data gathered from the eight self-identified cis heterosexual participants (see Annexure E for a list briefly describing these individuals). The first subsection of section 5.4 explores the study's third specific research question: *How do self-identified cis heterosexual audiences interpret the queer coding in Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise?* (see section 1.4.2). The next subsection investigates the personal and contextual factors that might have played a role in the participants' understandings. The final section examines the filmic signs the participants used to construct their interpretations of the queer-coded *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* characters.

5.4.1 Cis heterosexual participants' interpretations

The first subsection of section 5.4.1 investigates how the cis heterosexual participants interpreted *Fried green tomatoes*' main characters, Ruth and Ildgie. The second section

explores the cis heterosexual participants' interpretations of *Thelma & Louise*'s queer-coded main characters.

5.4.1.1 Interpretation of *Fried green tomatoes*' queer-coded characters

The cis heterosexual participants interpreted Idgie and Ruth's relationship variously. Whereas some interpreted the characters as lovers, others understood them as platonic or sisterly friends. Many participants had contradictory interpretations, simultaneously understanding the characters as friends and potentially queer-coded lovers. Simply put, most cis heterosexual participants to a certain extent recognised the film's queer potential. However, they had varying interpretations of the degree to which the characters could be understood as queer. Like the queer participants, those cis heterosexual viewers who identified the movie's queer potential understood it to be subtextual rather than explicitly depicted. All the cis heterosexual participants believed Ruth and Idgie care for each other.

In his one-on-one interview and focus group session, Andrew stated that Idgie herself does not understand her romantic feelings towards Ruth. Catherine thought Idgie and Ruth's relationship is likely romantic but was unsure whether her interpretation was 'correct'. She expressed this hesitant understanding of the characters in her individual and focus group interviews. The participants also differed in the degree to which they desired the characters' relationship to be queer or confirmed as such. Those who felt little need for openly depicted queerness seemed less inclined to contemplate the nature of Idgie and Ruth's relationship than those who wished the queerness were more evident. Neither Maryke, David, nor Shaun referenced Ruth or Idgie's queer potential during their one-on-one interviews. However, during a focus group discussion on this topic (a subject raised by Catherine) all three of these participants expressed enjoyment of the subtextual depiction of Idgie and Ruth's relationship. They did not feel the need to define or classify it as either romantic or platonic. Similarly, Louis recognised the movie's queer potential but did not desire more evident queerness. During his individual interview,⁵³ Louis discussed how the film might have been different if it were produced in this decade: "[Contemporary filmmakers] might convey the relationship between Ruth and Idgie in a much more forced, explicit manner, which ... might spoil the purity thereof". The above statement suggests that Louis may have interpreted an unambiguously queer depiction of Idgie and Ruth's relationship as impure. Louis also felt that because the characters' queerness is implied rather than explicitly stated, there would be little use in speculating on the precise nature of their relationship. Of all the cis heterosexual participants, only Hanna expressly stated that she desired confirmation of the characters' queerness.

⁵³ Most of the findings regarding Louis's interpretations of the movies originated from data collected during his one-on-one interview. Louis's focus group data focused mainly on issues outside the study's scope.

During both her sessions, she expressed a wish that Ruth and Idgie would declare their queerness by sharing a kiss. Nonetheless, like many of the other cis heterosexual participants (i.e. Maryke, David, and Louis), she appreciated the movie's focus on friendship. Again, she communicated this appreciation in her one-on-one interview and focus group session. Alexa did not express an understanding of the characters as queer to any extent.

5.4.1.2 Interpretation of *Thelma & Louise*'s queer-coded characters

None of the cis heterosexual participants expressed an understanding of Louise or Thelma as queer, neither explicitly nor subtextually. Most interpreted and described them as friends. The cis heterosexual participants' views regarding the foundations, strength, and nature of their friendship differed slightly. Louis, Alexa, and Catherine thought their friendship has a familial quality. Louis believed the characters have a sisterly relationship, whereas Alexa and Catherine thought Louise takes on a motherly role towards Thelma. Andrew and David interpreted the characters as childhood friends. In her individual interview, Hanna described the characters as friends who find a place of belonging with each other. While Maryke had trouble imagining how the characters initiated their relationship, she also viewed them as friends. Shaun described the women as friends but did not elaborate on the nature or scope of their friendship.

No cis heterosexual participant expressed any uncertainty about Thelma or Louise's sexuality or wondered whether their relationship might be interpreted as romantic or sexual, nor did they express any desire for the characters to be depicted as queer or romantically involved. Catherine thought that if the movie took place in this decade, the filmmakers might depict the protagonists' relationship as queer because "every [blockbuster] movie has to have some sort of romance". However, she believed if the film were produced by someone who respected the original filmmakers' vision, the characters' relationship would most likely be depicted platonically. She further explained: "I think [the film] doesn't need a romance ... [Thelma and Louise] can just be friends ... [T]he two characters ... just didn't have that kind of chemistry or a relationship. It never felt like that was what they were trying to portray". Catherine expressed the above view during her one-on-one interview.

The female cis heterosexual participants seemed to enjoy the film's representation of platonic female friendship. Alexa appreciated the movie's depiction of "girl power", a description she used during her individual interview. During a focus group discussion on Louise and Thelma's friendship, Catherine commented that to her, their platonic love was most apparent towards the end of the film, when Louise and Thelma face their fate together (see section 5.4.3.4). During this conversation, Hanna also conveyed appreciation for the movie's focus on platonic

rather than romantic relationships. Maryke expressed a similar opinion in her one-on-one interview: “I really liked the ending ... [T]he focus really is on these two women and the journey *they’ve* been on ... [T]here’s not a happy ending where [Louise’s] boyfriend comes riding in on a motorbike to save the day” (original emphasis).

Interestingly, none of the male cis heterosexual participants indicated an appreciation of the movie’s focus on female friendship. Some of them were more concerned with the male supporting characters than the female protagonists. During his interview, David indicated that Detective Hal Slocumb and JD, Thelma’s lover, held his attention more than any of the other characters: “[In] a movie about two women, I don’t understand why but ... those two characters ... stood out more”. Louis thought Hal is *Thelma & Louise*’s most engaging character. He also believed the scene in which Hal interrogates JD is the movie’s finest sequence.

The cis heterosexual participants’ varying interpretations, wishes, and appreciation of both films’ protagonists exemplify many of the same tenets of this study’s theoretical framework discussed regarding the queer participants’ interpretations (see section 5.3.1.2). These conceptions include the following: variation in meanings derived from signs; cultural codes’ restriction of socially sensible understandings; audiences’ identifications of messages’ preferred readings; and viewers’ differing reproductions of texts. As mentioned, some cis heterosexual participants interpreted Ruth and Ildgie as friends *and* potential lovers. These understandings support the study’s assertion that films often communicate competing discourses simultaneously (e.g. heteronormativity *and* queerness) (see section 3.3.2).

5.4.2 Personal and contextual factors

This section outlines the factors that may have played a role in the cis heterosexual participants’ interpretations of the two films’ queer-coded characters. Several cis heterosexual participants provided insights regarding their personal beliefs, understandings, experiences, and circumstances that might have influenced their viewings to a degree. One participant also indicated that her viewing of *Fried green tomatoes* influenced her views on heteronormativity. Overall, the cis heterosexual participants provided slightly more data regarding the factors influencing their *Fried green tomatoes* than their *Thelma & Louise* interpretations.⁵⁴

In his individual interview, Louis causally related his experience with queerness via his relationship with his queer sister to his recognition of Ildgie and Ruth’s queer potential: “[M]y

⁵⁴ The cis heterosexual participants provided much data regarding the contextual and personal factors that influenced their overall viewing of *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. However, this section investigated only the content related to their understandings of the queer-coded characters’ sexual and gender identifications. An exploration of the remaining information was beyond this study’s scope.

sister is ... in a gay relationship. And so, it's ... obviously not difficult or strange for me to identify relationships like that. So, one would assume that Ruth and Idgie felt something stronger than just the love between friends" (see section 5.4.3.4). Louis also drew on previous experiences to interpret Thelma and Darryl's marriage. Louis explained that the characters' dynamics reminded him of unhappy romantic relationships (i.e. in which the partners do not consider each other's interests) he had been exposed to in the past. Like Louis, Hanna believed Thelma is unhappily married. Hanna attributed Thelma's unhappiness to the fact that she married too young (see section 5.4.3.2). Hanna's own occasional regrets for marrying young informed this interpretation of Thelma's marriage. Louis and Hanna's views on romantic partnerships, informed by specific personal experiences, influenced their interpretations of Thelma's heterosexual relationship with Darryl.

Maryke enjoyed the ambiguous nature of Ruth and Idgie's relationship, recognising its queer *and* platonic qualities (see section 5.4.1.1). During a focus group discussion, she drew parallels between these characters' relationship and her own friendships. Maryke has in the past expressed appreciation for her female friends by being physically affectionate towards them. According to her, this type of platonic affection is sometimes interpreted by others as a sign of romantic feelings. It is possible that Maryke's own experiences with ambiguously interpreted female friendship might have influenced her understanding of Idgie and Ruth's relationship and her expectation that others might interpret the protagonists as potentially queer. Maryke also drew on knowledge gained from her Afrikaans upbringing to make sense of the female *Fried green tomatoes* characters' gender expressions. According to her, individuals situated within Afrikaans communities and the American South are likely exposed to similar hegemonic (i.e. heteronormative and cisgendered) gender norms and expectations.

Of all the cis heterosexual participants, Catherine most strongly interpreted Idgie and Ruth as queer. During her one-on-one interview, she described herself as an intersectional feminist who enjoys advocating for marginalised people. She also has many queer friends. These views and experiences could have positioned Catherine in such a manner that she was more likely than some others to interpret Idgie and Ruth as queer. While discussing (in Focus group 1) the characters' potential queerness, Catherine referenced specific understandings she had gained from queer people. Through her experiences with the queer community, she has learned that LGBTQ+ people often create their own found families after being rejected by their relatives. She interpreted Idgie and Ruth's relationship as a type of found family (see section 5.4.3.4). She may not have interpreted them as such if she did not have the above-described experiences with queer people.

Alexa understood Louise and Thelma's relationship platonically (see section 5.4.1.2). During her individual and group interviews, she expressed her view that Louise takes on a motherly role towards Thelma. This familial quality of the protagonists' relationship was more apparent to her during her latest rewatch than her previous *Thelma & Louise* viewing (upon the film's original release). Alexa believed the parental quality of Louise's feelings for Thelma stood out more to her because she became a parent after her initial viewing. Simply put, Alexa noticed Louise's motherly behaviour because the participant identified with Louise's feelings of parental responsibility and recognised her own behaviour towards her daughters in Louise's treatment of Thelma. Alexa interpreted the same film differently at different times in her life. This variation aligns with semioticians' claim that because society members' subjectivities change continuously, they might interpret the same texts or messages differently at various times (see section 3.3.2).

Alexa was surprised that Louise had not previously told Thelma about her past trauma. However, she attributed Louise's reluctance to share this information to the narrative's setting. During her interview, Alexa explained that she grew up in the time in which the film's events unfold and could relate to Louise's reticence: "[I]n the past, we never talked about feminine things like rape, like menstruation, like all of those things. It was just not discussed openly". Without this understanding of the plot's context, Alexa might have interpreted Louise's concealment of her trauma differently; she may have thought Louise does not consider Thelma to be a close friend.

Unlike the queer participants, none of the cis heterosexual participants indicated that they identified with Idgie's transgressive gender expression. However, Hanna and Catherine identified with Idgie's nonconformity in a more general sense. According to these participants, Idgie's rebelliousness and rejection of sociocultural expectations reflect their own lived experiences and subjectivities.

Several cis heterosexual participants drew on their learned understandings of the sociohistorical context in which Idgie and Ruth's narrative plays out to interpret the characters. Louis thought the characters might have explored their queer potential if their story played out today. This view implies that the participant believed Idgie and Ruth deny their queerness because homosexuality was not acceptable in their community during that specific time period. Hanna expressed a similar understanding of the women's relationship. If these viewers did not have the above understanding of the film's setting, they might have interpreted the characters' relationship completely platonically, rather than as potentially queer yet restricted by the characters' adherence to societal norms. Catherine was surprised at how accepting the Whistle Stop community is of Idgie and Ruth's likely queer relationship. She interpreted Ruth

and Idgie's relationship as unusual for their sociohistorical setting and thought that if they were situated in contemporary society, they would not conceal their queerness as they do in the movie. She explained (in her individual interview) that even though LGBTQ+ people have always existed, historically, they tended to conceal their queerness. Andrew, Maryke, Shaun, and Catherine noted that Idgie's behaviour, particularly her gender expression, is unusual for her society's context. This study holds that if the participants had no knowledge of the movie's sociocultural and historical setting, they might not have interpreted Idgie's gender presentation transgressively. The cis heterosexual participants' interpretations of Idgie as masculine are explored in section 5.4.3.1.

Some participants employed their knowledge and understandings regarding romantic relationships within both *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*'s sociohistorical settings. Catherine believed Ruth marries Frank because it is culturally expected of her, not because she loves him or wants to be married. Catherine interpreted Thelma's reasons for marrying Darryl similarly. Alexa believed Ruth remains married longer than she would have preferred because of her sociohistorical context. Alexa thought Ruth is dependent on Frank because women within her context rarely had the opportunities necessary to empower themselves to become independent. According to Shaun, Louise is "an enlightened woman, but she still feels like she needs a man in her life". He attributed this limitation of Louise's independence to the character's patriarchal sociocultural setting. Andrew thought Darryl and Harlan mistreat Thelma partly because their sociohistorical norms allowed men to treat women cruelly or unfairly.

A few cis heterosexual participants also drew on their knowledge of the 1991 media landscape to interpret Idgie and Ruth's relationship. Catherine believed the film's suggestion of queerness is daring given the 1990s' conservative social climate. David thought 1991 audiences may have disapproved of or felt uncomfortable watching movies that depict queerness explicitly. To a degree, these participants attributed the subtextuality of the characters' queerness to the heteronormative mainstream media landscape in which the film was created. If these viewers had no understanding of the film's context, they might have viewed the characters differently. Rather than interpreting Idgie and Ruth as subtextually queer due to the filmmakers' caution, they may have understood them as cis heterosexual with no queer potential. Louis thought the movie's depiction of Idgie as masculine employed stereotypical beliefs regarding queer women that were prevalent at the time of the film's production (see section 5.4.3.1). Several other participants also made use of their learned understandings of stereotypes and tropes to interpret the queer-coded characters. These

stereotypes relate largely to views regarding sexuality and gender (studied in section 5.4.3.1) and romantic relationships (see section 5.4.3.2).

Hanna and Maryke employed their knowledge gained from other film viewings to make sense of the movies. During their individual interviews, they indicated that they appreciated *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*'s depictions of female friendships specifically because films rarely focus on platonic relationships. If these participants' previous film viewing experiences had not shaped their belief that movies too often centre around romantic relationships, they might not have appreciated *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*'s portrayals of friendship. As mentioned in section 5.3.2, intertextual influences such as the above knowledge can play a crucial role in viewers' meaning creation. Catherine also employed understandings gained from previous media consumption experiences to interpret Louise and Thelma as well-rounded characters. Because Catherine has watched many films that depict women stereotypically or two-dimensionally, Louise and Thelma's rich portrayals as fully developed women stood out to the participant.

Of all the cis heterosexual participants, only Louis indicated that he expected the study to concern queerness to a degree. This expectation likely sprung from the participant's awareness of the study's focus on gender and sexuality and may have influenced Louis's recognition of Ruth and Idgie's queer potential. On the other hand, the above expectation seems not to have shaped the participant's interpretation of *Thelma & Louise* to the extent that he identified *this* film's subtextual queerness.

Hanna had watched *Fried green tomatoes* numerous times before participating in the study. Her first viewing of the movie influenced her perspectives on heteronormativity to an extent. She interpreted Idgie and Ruth as a family, whether platonically or queerly. Moreover, the movie's depiction of Idgie and Ruth's family was her first introduction to familial structures that differ from the socially pervasive nuclear family. *Fried green tomatoes* taught Hanna that "[f]amily can have a different interpretation". Hanna discussed the influence *Fried green tomatoes* had on her views regarding heteronormativity during her one-on-one interview. This change in Hanna's views illustrates how film discourses can influence receivers' subjectivities, understandings of reality, and perceptions of others and themselves (see section 5.3.2).

The cis heterosexual participants' personal views, experiences, relationships, understandings, and intertextual knowledge influenced their interpretations of the two films varyingly (see section 5.3.2 for elaborations on how these influences correspond to the optics comprising this study's theoretical framework).

5.4.3 Filmic signs informing participants' interpretations

This section studies the specific signs in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* that the cis heterosexual participants used to construct interpretations of the films' queer-coded characters. The cis heterosexual participants mainly created interpretations of Idgie, Ruth, Thelma, and Louise through their understandings of signs related to the characters' gender presentations, the women's relationships with their own and each other's romantic partners, and the notion of a found family. These signs and other miscellaneous signs are explored below. Like the signs used by the queer participants, these signs are framed within codes of content (see section 5.3.3).

5.4.3.1 Gender presentations

Most cis heterosexual participants interpreted Idgie's gender expression as culturally transgressive. They pointed to the following filmic signs to support their understandings of Idgie as masculine: Idgie's confidence, her refusal to wear a dress to her sister's wedding, her subsequent consistent wearing of masculine clothing, her reluctance to date, and her masculine behaviour (i.e. fishing, gambling, drinking in pubs, socialising with men, and walking barefoot). Andrew, Catherine, Hanna, and Alexa interpreted her masculinity as an indication of rebelliousness or nonconformity. Shaun was unsure of what Idgie's masculinity communicates. He thought it might convey queerness or a rejection of sociohistorical gender norms but that the filmmakers should have communicated their intended meaning more clearly. Hanna did not explicitly connect *Fried green tomatoes*' queer-coded characters' gender expressions to queerness. However, she interpreted Idgie and Ruth as masculine and feminine, respectively, *and* potentially queer. Hanna created her interpretation of Idgie as masculine using the above-mentioned filmic signs. She formed an understanding of Ruth as a "Southern belle" due to the character becoming a wife and mother because it is expected of her rather than what she wants to do. Catherine also interpreted Ruth as feminine, pointing to her soft-hearted nature as an indication thereof. Catherine elaborated that despite Ruth's femininity, she displayed the strength necessary to leave her abusive husband and protect her unborn child. Hanna and Catherine's understanding of Idgie as masculine and Ruth as traditionally feminine probably bolstered their interpretations of the characters as a queer couple.

Some participants thought *Fried green tomatoes* employs stereotypes about women's gender expressions. Louis believed Idgie's portrayal reflects stereotypes about queer women's perceived masculinity. Catherine felt the filmmakers' depiction of Ruth as traditionally feminine and Idgie as masculine used queer stereotypes. Louis and Catherine's view that the film

reflects queer stereotypes likely influenced their interpretation of the movie's implied queerness. During her one-on-one interview and focus group session, Maryke described Idgie as a stereotypical tomboy. Notwithstanding, she believed Idgie's characterisation remains authentic. No cis heterosexual participants referenced Thelma or Louise's gender presentations. However, their understandings of sociohistorical gender roles and stereotypes influenced their interpretations of the characters' romantic relationships, explored in the next subsection.

The cis heterosexual participants' interpretations of Idgie and Ruth's gender presentations reflect many of the theoretical framework's tenets discussed in section 5.3.3.1. These notions include social codes' framing of interpretations of filmic signs, using queer stereotypes to depict LGBTQ+ characters, the sociocultural entwinement of gender and sexuality, employing semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment to create interpretations of queer-coded characters, and creating understandings of individuals' gender and sexual identifications by interpreting the signs those individuals use to construct their identifications.

5.4.3.2 Relationships with romantic partners

Andrew, Alexa, and Hanna thought Grady has romantic feelings for Idgie but that she considers him a platonic friend. Andrew attributed her romantic disinterest in Grady to her unexplored queerness. Conversely, Alexa did not to any degree interpret Idgie as queer and did not relate her rejection of Grady to underlying queerness. She attached little meaning to Idgie placing Grady in the "friendzone". Alexa interpreted Idgie saving Ruth from her abusive marriage as symbolising women's support of one another. Shaun understood this act of Idgie's as exemplifying Ruth and Idgie's growing bond. Hanna pointed to Idgie's rejection of Grady as a sign of her cultural unconventionality. Hanna also thought the fact that Idgie is not affectionate towards many people apart from Ruth indicates her queerness. Catherine believed Idgie becomes upset when she learns of Ruth's engagement because she is in love with Ruth.

Several cis heterosexual participants employed their knowledge of gender stereotypes to interpret the romantic relationships depicted in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. Catherine viewed Ruth as a stereotypically subservient wife. Notwithstanding, the participant thought Ruth breaks out of the stereotype when she leaves her husband to be with Idgie. David thought Ruth and Thelma's romantic partners reflect sociocultural stereotypes concerning abusive (i.e. Frank) and inattentive, domineering (i.e. Darryl) husbands. Louis interpreted Thelma and Darryl's marriage as a typical suburban relationship consisting of an unfulfilled housewife and an inattentive husband (see section 5.4.2). According to Shaun,

Louise's simultaneous independence and reliance on Jimmy exemplify stereotypical notions regarding the emergence of feminism (see section 5.4.2). These participants' understandings of sociocultural tropes informed their interpretations of Thelma, Louise, and Ruth's romantic relationships.

Andrew drew on his interpretation of Louise's feelings towards Thelma's husband, Darryl, to understand the protagonists as friends. In his one-on-one interview, Andrew explained that Louise likely never opposed Thelma's marriage to Darryl even though she dislikes him. He believed she allowed Thelma to marry Darryl because Louise wanted her friend to be happy and thought that marrying Darryl would please Thelma. Andrew thought Louise dislikes Darryl because he is controlling, not because she has romantic feelings for Thelma. He also thought the fact that Louise does not hide her dislike of Darryl from Thelma illustrates the strength of their friendship. Additionally, Andrew thought Louise disapproves of Harlan flirting with Thelma. He did not believe Louise disapproves of this flirtation because she has romantic feelings for Thelma. Rather, he thought Louise is wary of men because of her negative experiences with them.

Many cis heterosexual participants thought Thelma and Louise are unhappy in their romantic relationships. However, they did not attribute the women's unhappiness to underlying queerness. David and Hanna thought Thelma is unsatisfied with her marriage because she married for the wrong reasons – because it was culturally expected of her. Hanna also ascribed Thelma's unhappiness to the fact that she married too young (see section 5.4.2). Andrew believed Louise wants to but cannot commit to Jimmy because she is still suffering from trauma caused by her past sexual assault. Shaun and Andrew also thought Louise rejects Jimmy's marriage proposal because she does not want to implicate him in her crimes. Hanna believed Thelma's sexual affair with JD contributes to Thelma's overall awakening. She thought Thelma experiences this heterosexual intercourse positively. Like Hanna, Louis thought Thelma enjoyed her dalliance with JD. However, he did not attribute as much meaning to it as Hanna did. Louis thought the experience amounted to nothing more than excitement.

5.4.3.3 Found family

Several participants believed Idgie and Ruth create a form of found family together. Catherine and Hanna, who understood the characters queerly, interpreted them as a chosen family. They constructed this understanding from the depiction of Ruth and Idgie living and raising Buddy Jr. together. During her focus group interview, Catherine also pointed to Idgie's father's concern for Ruth's son. Hanna referenced Idgie and Ruth's found family in both her one-on-one interview and focus group. She also placed great importance on Buddy Jr. adopting Idgie's

surname to form her understanding of Idgie and Ruth's queer chosen family. Louis directly associated the queer potential in Idgie and Ruth's shared living situation with his sister and her live-in girlfriend's queerness (see section 5.4.2). Maryke thought Idgie and Ruth form a type of community in which each member supports the other, whether as platonic friends or queer lovers.

Additionally, Maryke and Hanna interpreted Louise and Thelma's relationship as a chosen family. During her interview, Hanna explained that Louise and Thelma find a place of belonging with each other rather than their romantic partners. Maryke understood Thelma and Louise's found family similarly to her interpretation of Ruth and Idgie's. Maryke and Hanna seemed to interpret Thelma and Louise's found family platonically. Louis's interpretation of Louise and Thelma's sisterly relationship, and Catherine and Alexa's belief that Louise behaves motherly towards Louise could also be viewed as interpretations of the women as belonging to a platonic found family.

5.4.3.4 Miscellaneous signs

Like the queer participants, the cis heterosexual viewers employed numerous miscellaneous signs to construct their interpretations of the queer-coded characters. These signs include filmic events regarding Buddy's role in Ruth and Idgie's lives, the role of shared trauma (in both films), Idgie and Ruth's food fight, Idgie and Ruth's shared activities, Ruth kissing Idgie, Idgie's protectiveness towards Ruth, Ruth and Idgie's reciprocal honesty, the characters' mutual support (in both movies), Idgie's reaction to Ruth's death, the significance of honey (i.e. in *Fried green tomatoes*), Ninny's identity, and Louise and Thelma's easy-going conversations.

Several cis heterosexual participants referenced Buddy's role in Idgie and Ruth's relationship. Andrew and Alexa thought Idgie might have transferred some of her affection for her deceased brother to Ruth. In his one-on-one and focus group interviews, Andrew explained that Idgie is initially drawn to Ruth because Buddy likes her and after his death, Idgie views Ruth as a sister. As their relationship deepens, Idgie's familial feelings for Ruth gradually become romantic. On the other hand, Alexa thought Idgie's feelings for Ruth remain familial throughout their relationship. Specifically, she believed Ruth helps to keep Idgie grounded, a responsibility previously undertaken by Buddy. Alexa also believed that if Buddy had lived, he and Ruth would likely be romantically involved. Similarly, Shaun thought Ruth and Buddy are romantically involved before his death. According to David and Shaun, adult Idgie becomes friends with Ruth because Ruth knew her brother. They believed the women's shared trauma of losing Buddy bonds them to an extent.



Figure 5.2: From left to right, Buddy, Ruth, and young Idgie enjoy a leisurely lakeside stroll (Avnet, 1991)

Louis and Catherine thought Ruth and Idgie's food-fight scene might illustrate their underlying queer feelings. However, Louis simultaneously interpreted the women's behaviour in this scene as "childlike interaction, which is pure and has nothing to do with the sexual nature that might be implied". He also interpreted Idgie and Ruth stowing away on a train and swimming in a lake in the above manner – as signs of subtextual queerness *and* childlike innocence. Catherine interpreted Ruth kissing Idgie on the cheek as an indication of the characters' potential queerness. Andrew understood Idgie's protectiveness over Ruth as evidence of her romantic feelings for Ruth. David interpreted the scene in which Ruth asks Idgie if she killed Frank as an illustration of the women's honesty towards each other.⁵⁵

Regardless of the precise nature of the women's relationship, Maryke understood it as one of "unconditional support", a description she used during her interview. She elaborated that the characters "give each other a lot of space ... to just be who they are". Maryke pointed to Ruth's acceptance of Idgie's unconventionality as an example of this support. Maryke understood Idgie's grief after Ruth's death as indicating the women's shared tenderness and Idgie's loss. David interpreted Idgie's emotional response to Ruth's death similarly. Maryke interpreted the image of a jar of honey in the film's final scene as symbolising the celebration of platonic love. Andrew understood the last scene to be signalling Idgie's continued attachment to "Ruth's soul". Catherine thought Ninny is the elderly Idgie. Although she interpreted Idgie as queer, Ninny's reference to her husband Cleo led Catherine to believe that Idgie and Ruth do not become romantically involved. This interview-obtained data indicate that Catherine was more

⁵⁵ In this scene, Ruth expresses her belief that Idgie killed Frank. Idgie denies it but Ruth remains unconvinced, saying that she does not know what to believe (Avnet, 1991).

certain of Idgie and Ninny's shared identity than Idgie's queerness. Hanna thought Ruth's involvement with the church illustrates her adherence to sociocultural expectations. Despite Ruth's normativity, she remains friends with rebellious Idgie. Traditional Ruth's commitment to her nonconforming friend stood out to the participant.

According to Andrew, Thelma's reaction to Louise's suggestion that she had been sexually assaulted in the past illustrates the strength of their friendship. He thought Thelma understands and respects Louise's reluctance to discuss the assault. Andrew felt Thelma allows Louise to open up about her trauma without pressing her for details. He also interpreted the characters' awareness of each other's strengths and weaknesses as signs of their friendship. Hanna believed Louise and Thelma's bond becomes stronger because of the film's traumatic events. David and Shaun supported their interpretations of Louise and Thelma as friends with references to how the women support each other throughout the narrative.

Catherine interpreted Thelma and Louise as friends but doubted how close they were before the film's events strengthen their bond. She thought they do not know each other well at the start of the narrative because Thelma is unaware of Louise's past trauma. She interpreted Louise and Thelma's decision to die together and refusal to betray each other as indications of their friendship's growth (see section 5.4.1.2). Shaun felt Thelma and Louise stick together throughout the narrative because of their commitment to each other. Alexa interpreted Thelma and Louise's easy-going conversations at the start of the film as signs of their longtime friendship. Like Catherine, she was surprised that Louise had not previously told Thelma about her traumatic experience(s). However, Alexa attributed Louise's reticence to the sociocultural norms rather than a lack of depth in their friendship (see section 5.4.2). Alexa thought the women share a deep friendship exemplified by their sharing of responsibilities. Alexa also interpreted Louise's protectiveness towards Thelma as a motherly concern for her friend (see section 5.4.2). Maryke understood Thelma and Louise's friendship as "a balancing relationship". She supported this interpretation with references to how the women take turns assuming responsibility for their safety while allowing the other moments of vulnerability.

Like section 5.3.3's presentation of the queer participants' interpretations of signs in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*, this section reflects how various receivers create different interpretations from filmic signs. While the cis heterosexual participants interpreted the movies' signs in numerous ways, they interpreted some signs similarly. For instance, most of the cis heterosexual participants understood Idgie's gender expression as transgressive. They interpreted other signs (e.g. Idgie's indifference towards Grady) varyingly. Like the queer participants' understandings, the cis heterosexual participants' interpretations of the movies' signs stress the following theoretical operations underlying this study: how semiotic codes

simultaneously enable and restrict meaning creation, how receivers generally agree on denotative meanings, and the polysemic nature of connotative meanings (see section 5.3.3.4).

5.5 CONCLUSION: COMPARING THE PARTICIPANTS' RESULTS

This section summarises and compares the findings in sections 5.3 and 5.4 to answer specific research question 1.4.2.4: *How do self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the queer coding in Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise compare?* (see section 1.4.2)

All the queer and seven of the eight cis heterosexual participants recognised Idgie and Ruth's queer potential to some extent. Moreover, these viewers all understood the characters' queerness to be subtextual rather than explicit. The queer *and* cis heterosexual participants' confidence in their understanding of the characters as (potentially) queer varied. Generally, the queer participants interpreted Ruth and Idgie more strongly as queer and were more certain of the justifiability of this interpretation than the cis heterosexual participants. Only one cis heterosexual participant expressed desire for more apparent queerness in *Fried green tomatoes*. Several cis heterosexual participants enjoyed the ambiguity of Idgie and Ruth's relationship and felt little need to define it as either platonic or romantic. On the other hand, many queer participants wanted confirmation of Ruth and Idgie's queerness, including those who expressed enjoyment of Idgie and Ruth's friendship. Gary was the only queer participant who expressed appreciation for the ambiguous nature of Idgie and Ruth's relationship.

No cis heterosexual participants understood Louise or Thelma as queer, whether explicitly or subtextually. While the participants' interpretations of their friendship's foundations, nature, and strength differed, none of these viewers expressed any uncertainty about Louise and Thelma's platonic friendship or their heterosexuality. Most queer participants also interpreted *Thelma & Louise's* protagonists as platonic friends. However, Linda and Mian identified subtextual queer potential in their relationship. Several queer participants agreed that Louise is more likely to be queer than Thelma. Whereas some queer viewers wished Thelma and Louise were queer, others enjoyed the movie's depiction of platonic female friendship. Conversely, none of the cis heterosexual participants expressed a desire for subtextual or explicit queerness between the characters. All the female cis heterosexual participants expressed enjoyment of the film's portrayal of female friendship. None of the male cis heterosexual participants indicated such an appreciation.

The participants all employed different understandings gained from their particular personal experiences to interpret the two movies' queer-coded characters. Many of the queer

participants understood Idgie's gender expression to be reflecting their own transgressive gender presentations. None of the cis heterosexual participants expressed such an understanding. Numerous queer *and* cis heterosexual participants drew on their learned knowledge of the sociohistorical setting in which Idgie and Ruth's story unfolds to create interpretations of the characters' gender and sexual identifications. They also employed their knowledge of the twentieth-century media context in which *Fried green tomatoes* was produced. Some cis heterosexual and queer participants made use of their knowledge regarding *Thelma & Louise*'s production and narrative contexts to understand Louise and Thelma's gender expressions and sexualities. Several queer and cis heterosexual viewers relied on their understandings of cultural stereotypes related to gender and sexuality and romantic relationships to make sense of Ruth, Idgie, Thelma, and Louise's identifications.

A few cis heterosexual and queer participants drew on their knowledge gained from previous film viewings to create their understandings of both *Thelma & Louise* and *Fried green tomatoes*' queer coding. For numerous reasons, some of the queer participants expected the movies to contain queerness. These expectations influenced their interpretations of the queer-coded characters differently. Of all the cis heterosexual viewers, only Louis described an expectation of queerness, likely due to the study's focus on gender and sexuality. This expectation might have influenced his interpretation of Idgie and Ruth's relationship but did not appear to inform his understanding of Louise or Thelma's gender or sexuality. Whereas several queer participants compared *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*'s queerness to create their understandings, no cis heterosexual participant made similar comparisons.

One cis heterosexual and two queer viewers described how their first *Fried green tomatoes* viewing slightly influenced their personal views on heteronormativity and sexuality, respectively. None of the participants expressed a change in views on sexuality or gender due to their *Thelma & Louise* viewings.

The participants used many of the same filmic signs to construct their understandings of the queer-coded characters. However, they interpreted these signs in different ways. Most cis heterosexual and queer participants interpreted Idgie as transgressively masculine. Both groups of participants pointed to Idgie's confidence, attire, and behaviour to support the above understanding. Some participants (both queer and cis heterosexual) related the character's masculinity directly to her potential queerness. This study holds that those participants who interpreted Idgie queerly *and* described her as masculine likely employed interpretations of her gender identity as transgressive to understand her as queer, regardless of whether they expressly described such a connection. Some participants interpreted Idgie's masculinity as an expression of her rebelliousness or nonconformity. While most queer and cis heterosexual

viewers discussed Idgie's gender presentation more thoroughly than Ruth's, a few indicated that they understood Ruth as traditionally feminine. They pointed to her adherence to societal expectations of women as an illustration of this femininity. A few queer participants drew correlations between Thelma and Louise's gender presentations and their queer potential. None of the cis heterosexual participants referenced Louise or Thelma's gender expressions.

The queer and cis heterosexual participants interpreted signs related to Idgie and Ruth's relationships with Grady and Frank in several ways. The queer participants mostly related these signs to the characters' queerness. Some cis heterosexual viewers understood these signs as indicators of the characters' queer potential, while others related them to Idgie's unconventionality. The majority of the cis heterosexual participants interpreted Thelma and Louise's romantic relationships similar to how most of the queer viewers understood these relationships. Most participants from both groups thought Thelma's marital issues stem from Darryl's mistreatment of her and Thelma's romantic inexperience rather than any queer feelings for Louise. Similarly, they ascribed Louise and Jimmy's romantic challenges to Louise's traumatic past experiences with men, and not Louise's potential queerness. A few queer participants believed Louise is more likely to be in love with Thelma than vice versa, and pointed to the following signs as evidence thereof: Louise's disapproval of Darryl and JD, Louise's protectiveness over Thelma, Louise killing Harlan to rescue Thelma, and Louise overlooking Thelma's carelessness. Other participants (both queer and cis heterosexual) interpreted the above signs to indicate the women's friendship. Queer *and* cis heterosexual participants pointed to Thelma and Louise's romantic partners as signs indicating their heterosexuality.

Several queer and a few cis heterosexual participants interpreted Idgie and Ruth raising Buddy Jr., working, and living together as indicators of a chosen family. Most of these participants interpreted this self-created, found family queerly. A few cis heterosexual and one queer participant (i.e. Linda) also understood Louise and Thelma's relationship as a found family. Linda thought this found family likely points to platonic friendship but might also indicate queerness. The cis heterosexual participants seemed to understand Louise and Thelma's found family platonically.

The queer and cis heterosexual participants interpreted many other miscellaneous signs in various ways. Some of their understandings aligned while others differed. These signs include Buddy's role in Idgie and Ruth's lives; the significance of honey in *Fried green tomatoes*; Ninny's identity; Idgie and Ruth's food fight; Ruth kissing Idgie; the role of shared trauma in bonding; Louise kissing Thelma; and Thelma and Louise's mutual support and loyalty.

In conclusion, all the queer and most cis heterosexual participants interpreted the queer-coded *Fried green tomatoes* characters as potentially queer. However, queer participants generally placed more importance on Idgie and Ruth's queerness and expressed a greater desire for confirmation thereof than the cis heterosexual participants. Many of the cis heterosexual viewers were ambivalent about the characters' potential queerness. They appreciated Idgie and Ruth's ambiguous relationship and felt little need for more apparent queerness. Most participants understood Louise and Thelma's relationship as a platonic friendship. Several queer participants wished the characters were depicted as explicitly queer – those who understood the protagonists platonically *and* those who thought Louise and Thelma have queer potential. No cis heterosexual participant wondered whether Thelma or Louise might be interpreted as queer or expressed a desire for queerness in the movie.

Some of the personal and contextual factors that influenced the participants' interpretations of the characters' queerness aligned while others varied. The participants employed similar learned understandings regarding the films' sociohistorical settings, production contexts, and use of cultural stereotypes. However, the participants' personal experiences, views, and intertextual knowledge influenced their understandings in various ways. The participants largely employed the same signs to create their understandings of the queer-coded characters. They interpreted some of the signs similarly and others varyingly.

The above conclusions support the study's assertion that meaning creation is subjective *and* socially delimited. The participants interpreted the queer-coded characters in numerous ways and used various signs (interpreted varyingly) to construct their interpretations. Moreover, the participants had different desires regarding the queerness of the characters. These wishes likely influenced and were influenced by their reading positions and interpretations. The differences between the participants' understandings exemplify the highly individualised nature of film interpretation. The viewers drew on varying individual experiences, views, understandings, and knowledge to interpret the movies' signs in differing ways. Notwithstanding, these personal and contextual considerations are socially situated, and the participants' specific interpretations of the filmic signs are framed by cultural codes. Despite the variation in interpretation, the participants' understandings all made sociocultural sense, that is they were culturally restricted.

The next chapter presents conclusions based on the study's literature and theoretical overview and empirical results. It also acknowledges the study's limitations and makes recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

“Let’s keep going!”

Sipsey: “It’s all right, honey. Let her go.”

Idgie: “I can’t.”

Sipsey: “Let her go. You know, miss Ruth was a lady. And a lady always knows when to leave.”

- excerpt of dialogue from *Fried green tomatoes* (Avnet, 1991)

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The first chapter of this dissertation introduced the study’s focus, that is different audiences’ interpretations of queer-coded films. The study explored and compared eight self-identified queer and eight self-identified cis heterosexual viewers’ interpretations of queer coding in the 1991 movies *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. In Chapter 2, the use of queer coding in movies was explored. The chapter also briefly outlined *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*’s plotlines and contextualised their employment of queer coding. Queer coding refers to the process whereby fictional characters are subtextually depicted as queer. While their sexual and gender identifications are not explicitly stated or confirmed, these characters may appear queer to some degree to certain viewers. In film, queer coding occurs between the movie’s creator(s) and their film and between the movie and its viewers. The filmmakers intentionally or unintentionally encode certain characters as subtextually queer. They create these depictions using specific filmic signs framed within sociocultural codes. Audiences then interpret the film’s signs to make sense of the characters. As queer-coded characters’ LGBTQ+ status is merely implied rather than confirmed, different receivers may decode the characters’ identifications varyingly. Some viewers may understand the characters as queer, while others might interpret them as cis heterosexual. Viewers could even understand queer-coded characters as simultaneously cis heterosexual and potentially queer.

The next chapter presented the study’s literature and theoretical overview, delineating the study’s theoretical framework. Specifically, Chapter 3 explored relevant concepts of semiotics, reception theory, the encoding-decoding model, queer theory, and the theory of gender performativity to answer specific research question 1.4.2.1. Chapter 4 detailed the study’s research design and methodology. The chapter described and motivated the study’s qualitative research approach, research design, and empirical research methods, that is semi-structured one-on-one interviews and focus groups. Chapter 4 also explained the study’s use

of non-probability purposive and snowball sampling methods, its measuring instrument, and the thematic analysis employed to analyse the gathered data. Additionally, the chapter outlined the validity and reliability of the research findings, the study's feasibility, and the ethical considerations related to the study's data collection, analysis, and presentation. In Chapter 5, the empirical results were explored to answer specific research questions 1.4.2.2 to 1.4.2.4.

This final chapter summarises the study's noteworthy findings to answer its general research question. The next section summarises the study's answer to specific research question 1.4.2.1. Then, section 6.3 briefly recapitulates the study's research design and methodology. In sections 6.4 to 6.6, the study's empirical results and answers to specific research questions 1.4.2.2 to 1.4.2.4 are summarised. Thereafter, in section 6.7, the study's general research question is answered. Section 6.8 outlines the study's limitations. Finally, in section 6.9, recommendations for future research are presented.

6.2 SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTION 1.4.2.1

The study's first specific research question reads: *How can semiotic media representation, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding communication model, and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity be implemented in an investigation of different audiences' interpretations of queer-coded movies?* (see section 1.4.2) The section 6.2 subsections summarise the literature overview's main findings regarding each of the above theoretical lenses.

6.2.1 A semiotic understanding of media representation

According to a semiotic understanding of media representation, meaning creation is a simultaneously subjective *and* socioculturally delimited process. Society members draw from their personal experiences, circumstances, learned understandings, intertextual knowledge, and subjectivities when interpreting signs to create their individual interpretations. The meanings of signs are not fixed but can be interpreted differently by different receivers (see section 3.3.1). Filmic signs (communicating sociocultural discourses, myths, and ideologies) can be interpreted so divergently that the same sign can simultaneously maintain socially dominant and minority ideologies – depending on how the individual audiences interpret the signs (see section 3.3.2). However, signs are framed by semiotic codes that limit the range of meanings people can draw from the signs to create connotative understandings that, while individualised, make cultural sense (see section 3.3.1).

Semioticians posit that throughout their lives, members of society are continually exposed to countless discourses through different social situations, experiences, relationships, and,

highly relevant to this study, media engagements. The discourses individuals encounter continually shape their everchanging subjectivities. Because hegemonic discourses are culturally ubiquitous, naturalised, and dominant, most people are more frequently exposed to hegemonic than minority myths and ideologies. However, individuals do not necessarily accept or adopt these pervasive dominant worldviews. Society members are individuals with their own psyches, cognitions, and agency. People often resist dominant ideologies' socially naturalised values and norms. The same discourse may influence different society members' subjectivities and understandings of their realities variously, depending on the individuals' specific considerations and circumstances (see section 3.3.2).

The concepts of semiotic opposition, unmarkedness/markedness, and alignment are pertinent to this media studies investigation. Binary opposites do not occur naturally but are so widely used within social life and media texts that individuals often perceive them as natural rather than socially constructed. Within a culture, opposites are so entwined that the appearance of one item in an oppositional pair usually calls the other to mind (see section 3.3.3). Semioticians posit that most pairs of opposites consist of an unmarked and a marked item. The unmarked item is generally perceived as more fundamental, natural, and socially acceptable than its marked opposite, over which the former dominates. Socially dominant discourses usually associate unmarked forms with favourable or desirable qualities, while aligning their marked counterparts with the unfavourable, marked cultural opposites of those attributes (see section 3.3.3). Queer-coded films serving heteronormative interests often use the above semiotic tools to depict queer-coded characters. These movies frequently position queer characters as different from and inferior to cis heterosexual people. This opposition further associates queerness with abnormality, transgression, or unacceptability while aligning cis heterosexuality with normality, social acceptability, and cultural intelligibility (see section 3.6.2.2).

The semiotic notion of intertextuality is also relevant to this audience reception study as intertextuality influences media texts' construction, communication, and interpretation. Intertextuality refers to the relationship texts have with other texts that shape or influence the former's creation and reception. Audiences' interpretations of movies are often influenced directly or indirectly by other texts. Receivers' understandings of primary texts (e.g. queer-coded films) may also be informed by secondary texts (e.g. promotional articles, reviews, or interviews) or tertiary texts created by audiences (e.g. gossip or social media commentary). Moreover, some audiences employ their knowledge of secondary or tertiary texts to bolster their queer readings of queer-coded movies (see section 3.3.3).

6.2.2 Reception theory and the encoding-decoding model

Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding model falls within reception theory. The tenets of reception theory and Hall's (1973) communication model explored in this study align with the above-described semiotic concepts. Reception theorists assert that actual audiences have agency they use to interpret texts according to their individual frames of reference (see section 3.4). Hall's (2006:163) conception of the mass media communication process comprises four stages, namely production, circulation, use, and reproduction. Production refers to the encoder's creation of a text. The decoders receive and interpret the encoded message during circulation and use, respectively. Reproduction constitutes the audience's reactions to the interpreted text. Depending on their personal and contextual considerations, individual cognitions, and subjectivities, different decoders may receive and interpret the same text varyingly. Depending on the specific understandings they created from the text, different audiences may react differently to the same text. The subjective meanings receivers derive from the text may impact them in various ways (see section 3.5.1).

Receivers' interpretative communities and horizons of experience and expectations influence how they understand the meanings of texts. According to reception theorists, audiences are situated within specific interpretative contexts that inform their interpretation of meaning. Interpretative communities consist of receivers who have similar connotative associations or understandings of sociocultural codes, adhere to similar ideological norms and values, or share interpretative strategies for understanding texts (see section 3.4). Reception theorists hold that a person's horizon of experience is composed of the countless experiences they engage in throughout their life. This horizon of experience continuously informs the individual's perspectives, viewpoints, and knowledge, and frames their expectations of subsequent experiences. In other words, an individual's horizon of experience shapes their horizon of expectations. These expectations of experiences influence *how* the person engages in future experiences. A society member's horizons of experience and expectations influence their reading position (see section 3.4).

According to the encoding-decoding model, audiences can occupy preferred, oppositional, or, most likely, negotiated reading positions. Decoders' reading positions are informed by their frames of reference, sociocultural circumstances, and subjectivities, and how closely these factors align with the encoders' positionings, the systems of productions within which the texts were encoded, and the ideological operations underlying the texts (see sections 3.5.2 and 3.5.3).

Audiences whose individual considerations align them comfortably with the text's underlying (likely dominant) ideologies would probably construct a reading similar to the preferred reading intended by the communicator (see section 3.5.3). Audiences with minority ideological views are unlikely to accept a mainstream text's dominant reading without question. Notwithstanding, they are likely to still recognise the encoder's intended meaning. These readers understand the preferred reading because they have been so frequently exposed to hegemonic discourses throughout their lives that they have learned to understand and interact with those as well as their own minority discourses. Audiences whose circumstances, frames of reference, views, and cognitions directly oppose their society's dominant ideologies would probably reject the hegemonic meanings preferred by most encoders altogether. These decoders engage in oppositional readings. Although they understand the intended meanings, they also recognise that the content's ideologies contradict theirs. These individuals construct interpretations of the texts using their alternative (usually minority) subjectivities, cultural positionings, and ideological subscriptions (see section 3.5.3). Most audiences adopt negotiated reading positions that neither adhere entirely to nor contradict the hegemonic ideologies underlying most media texts. These readers usually employ negotiated readings – accepting parts of the meaning as intended by the communicator and rejecting others, thereby constructing specific meanings that reflect their lived experiences, positionings, and understandings (see section 3.5.3).

6.2.3 Queer theory and the theory of gender performativity

Semioticians' above-described conception of the functioning of discourses, myths, and ideologies in individuals' creation of meaning is exemplified through queer theorists and Butler's (1988:521; 1999:30-31) understandings of heteronormativity and its sociocultural operations. Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity is positioned within the field of queer theory, which holds that all categories used to make sense of sociocultural realities and of sex and gender are socially constructed, subjective, and ideologically informed (see section 3.6.1). Butler (1999:141, 185) asserts that in heteronormative cultures, sex, gender, and sexuality operate and are interconnected through the heterosexual matrix, which attempts to dictate the terms of cultural intelligibility. This cultural interrelationship between gender, sex, and sexuality defines and restricts the types of identifications and expressions viewed as culturally acceptable and intelligible. The heterosexual matrix to an extent delimits how individuals express themselves and interpret their fellow society members (see section 3.6.2.1).

People's expression and interpretation of identifications are constrained to a degree by sociohistorical norms and values. These conventions regulate gender and sexual expression

within societies and precede and inform individuals' enacting and interpretation of sexuality and gender (see section 3.6.1). However, no society member can adhere entirely to the prescriptions imposed by heteronormativity. An individual's sociohistorical context, psyche, experiences, and learned understandings and knowledge influence their enacting of gender and sexual identifications and their interpretation of others' identifications. Thus, members of society express and interpret identifications in numerous individualised ways (see sections 3.6.1 and 3.6.3). Like semiotic codes, hegemonic heteronormativity and cisgenderism simultaneously enable and restrict individuals' meaning-making. These dominant ideologies allow people to construct gender and sexual identifications but to a degree restrict expression of those identifications to a range of two binarily opposed normative identities, the presentation of feminine cis heterosexuality by women and masculine cis heterosexuality by men. Ironically, this attempted restriction provides the framework for expressing and interpreting transgressive identifications. People such as masculine women, feminine men, and sexually or genderqueer individuals are able to express their identities as intelligible in their sociocultural contexts *because of* heteronormativity and cisgenderism's rigid limitations. These ideological restrictions also allow others to interpret the above types of individuals' gender and sexual identifications in culturally understandable ways, albeit as transgressive rather than normative (see section 3.6.3). This study's empirical research explored how different viewers used specific filmic signs in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* to interpret certain characters' gender expressions as culturally conventional and others' as transgressive (see sections 5.3.3.1 and 5.4.3.1).

The optics explored in section 6.2 allow for simultaneously subjective and culturally restricted meaning creation. These lenses also consider the influence receivers' circumstances, positionings, and subjectivities (including their sexual and gender identifications) have on their meaning creation. This framework enabled an investigation of the participants' understandings of queer-coded characters, and how the viewers' personal and contextual considerations influenced their interpretations of filmic signs. In section 6.4 to 6.6, these empirical findings are summarised.

6.3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study's research design presented in Table 4.1 described the study's aims (see section 4.3). Firstly, the study aimed to determine via a literature and theoretical overview how the chosen theoretical framework could be implemented in an investigation of queer-coded movies. Secondly, the study sought to gather descriptive data from its participants (i.e. through semi-structured one-on-one interviews and focus groups) and then to thematically analyse said content to determine and compare how the queer and cis heterosexual participants

interpreted the queer coding in *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. The first aim was addressed in Chapter 3, which provided the foundation for and informed the empirical findings presented in Chapter 5. The next section summarises the empirical results and illustrates the applicability of the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3 and recounted in the above section 6.2.

6.4 SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTION 1.4.2.2

The findings discussed in sections 6.4 to 6.6 are based on the study's thematic analysis of data classified into the relevant codes, subcodes, and themes outlined in Table 4.5 (see section 4.7). The study's second specific research question reads as follows: *How do self-identified queer audiences interpret the queer coding in Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise?* (see section 1.4.2) This question was answered by analysing the data related to Theme 1: *Interpretations of queer-coded characters*.

Table 6.1 Theme 1: *Interpretations of queer-coded characters*

Subthemes	Codes
1. Interpretations of queer-coded characters as queer	1.1 Degree to which participants interpreted queer-coded characters as queer
	1.2 Degree to which participants desired confirmation of queerness
	1.3 Degree to which participants desired/appreciated a focus on platonic relationships
2. Interpretations of queer-coded characters as not queer	2.1 Interpretations of queer-coded characters as cis heterosexual
	2.2 Interpretations of queer-coded characters as friends
	2.3 Degree to which participants desired queerness
	2.4 Degree to which participants desired/appreciated a focus on platonic relationships

All the queer participants viewed *Fried green tomatoes* as potentially queer. The degree to which they interpreted the queer-coded characters (i.e. Ruth and Idgie) as queer varied. However, they all agreed that their queerness is subtextual rather than explicitly depicted. The queer participants' desires regarding the queer-coded *Fried green tomatoes* characters differed. Five of the eight viewers wished the women's queerness were portrayed more explicitly rather than merely hinted at. However, one of these participants enjoyed reading between the lines to detect queerness. Another viewer expressed an understanding of the sociocultural factors that may have influenced the filmmakers' use of queer coding. Two

participants communicated no desire for confirmation of the characters' queerness (see section 5.3.1.1).

The queer participants understood Louise and Thelma in various ways. Although two receivers interpreted the characters as potentially queer, most thought they were platonic friends. The queer participants also differed on whether they desired the women's relationship to be depicted platonically or romantically. Three queer viewers wished the protagonists were queer rather than – as they interpreted them – platonic friends. Those viewers who recognised the film's queer potentiality wanted the queerness to be depicted more explicitly. On the other hand, the remaining three receivers appreciated the film's portrayal of platonic friendship, as they interpreted Louise and Thelma's relationship (see section 5.3.1.2).

6.5 SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTION 1.4.2.3

The third specific research question reads: *How do self-identified cis heterosexual audiences interpret the queer coding in Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise?* (see section 1.4.2) Like specific research question 1.4.2.2, specific research question 1.4.2.3 was answered by analysing the data contained in the codes outlined above in Table 6.1.

Seven of the eight cis heterosexual participants recognised *Fried green tomatoes'* queer potential. These receivers understood the protagonists' queerness to be subtextually implied rather than explicitly portrayed. The extent to which these participants understood the characters to be interpretable as queer varied considerably. The cis heterosexual participants also differed in how much they wished Ruth and Idgie to be romantically involved. Most did not desire the characters' queerness to be confirmed and seemed less inclined to contemplate the precise nature of the women's relationship than the one viewer who desired explicitly depicted queerness or romance (see section 5.4.1.1).

No cis heterosexual participant interpreted Thelma or Louise as either explicitly or subtextually queer. Most of these viewers understood and described the women as friends. The cis heterosexual participants' understandings of the foundations, strength, and nature of Thelma and Louise's friendship differed to an extent. Notwithstanding, none of these participants communicated a desire for the characters to be depicted queerly. All the female cis heterosexual participants appeared to appreciate *Thelma & Louise's* representation of platonic female friendship. Conversely, none of the male cis heterosexual viewers expressed any particular enjoyment of the movie's focus on specifically *female* friendship (see section 5.4.1.2).

6.6 SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTION 1.4.2.4

The study's last specific research question is as follows: *How do self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the queer coding in Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise compare?* This question was answered firstly by comparing the queer and cis heterosexual participants' data contained in the categories in Table 6.1.

6.6.1 Participants' interpretations of queer-coded characters

While all the queer and most cis heterosexual viewers recognised *Fried green tomatoes'* queer potentiality, the queer participants placed more importance on Ruth and Idgie's queerness and communicated a greater desire for an explicit portrayal of queerness than their cis heterosexual counterparts. Most cis heterosexual *and* queer viewers interpreted Thelma and Louise's relationship as platonic. Several queer viewers wanted the characters to be depicted queerly and recognised filmic events that may point to the women's underlying romantic feelings. No cis heterosexual receiver expressed any uncertainty regarding Louise or Thelma's gender or sexual identifications or wished they were portrayed queerly.

The participants' desires regarding the movies' depiction of queerness (see Table 6.1, Codes 1.2 and 2.3) and platonic friendship (see Table 6.1, Codes 1.3 and 2.4) may have influenced and been influenced to an extent by their interpretations of the characters' queerness (see Table 6.1, Code 1.1), cis heterosexuality (see Table 6.1, Code 2.1), or platonic friendship (see Table 6.1, Code 2.2). Generally, the data show that the more strongly the participants desired depictions of queerness, the more likely they were to interpret the characters as queer, and vice versa – those participants who understood the characters queerly, tended to express a need for queer media representation. Likewise, the greater the participants' wish for or appreciation of portrayals of platonic friendships, or the smaller their desire for queer visibility, the greater the likelihood they would interpret the characters as cis heterosexual friends. Inversely, most of the viewers who interpreted the characters as friends stated a desire for or appreciation of depictions of platonic friendships and did not express a need for queer media representation.

This study holds that the above results reflect queer audiences' need or desire for queer media representation. It is important to note that these findings were generated by analysing data from a relatively small research sample and cannot be generalised to all movie viewers. Notwithstanding, the results indicate that LGBTQ+ audiences are more likely than cis heterosexual viewers to desire queer media visibility. This finding further suggests that individuals enjoy watching films that depict characters with whom the viewers can identify;

characters whose subjectivities (which include gender and sexual identifications) reflect those of the audiences. The above section 6.6.1 results also indicate that those (likely queer) receivers who yearn for LGBTQ+ representation in movies are more likely to interpret queer-coded characters queerly than viewers (likely cis heterosexual) who do not have a need to see depictions of queer film characters. Finally, the (mostly) queer participants' wish that the queer-coded characters were depicted as explicitly queer rather than coded as such speaks to the complex role queer coding plays within queer media representation (as mentioned in section 1.1). It may be prudent for future studies to investigate these results using a larger research sample (see section 6.9 for recommendations regarding subsequent research).

6.6.2 Personal and contextual factors influencing participants' interpretations

The queer and cis heterosexual participants used various understandings gained from their personal experiences and circumstances to interpret the films' queer-coded characters (see sections 5.3.2 and 5.4.2). Findings related to these influences were generated by thematically analysing the data contained within Theme 2: *Personal and contextual factors influencing interpretations of queer coding*.

Table 6.2 Theme 2: *Personal and contextual factors influencing interpretations of queer coding*

Subthemes	Codes
1. Personal views/understandings	1.1 Views/understandings of queerness
	1.2 Views/understandings of romantic relationships
	1.3 Views/understandings of friendship
	1.4 Views/understandings of gender
	1.5 Other relevant contributors
2. Experiences	2.1 Individual backgrounds/upbringings
	2.2 Cultural positionings
	2.3 Educational backgrounds
	2.4 Experiences of queerness
	2.5 Experiences of romantic relationships
	2.6 Experiences of friendships
	2.7 Experiences of gender
	2.8 Other relevant contributors
	3.1 Taking the movies' sociohistorical settings into account

3. Learned understandings	3.2 Taking the media landscape in which the movies were produced into account
	3.3 Understandings of relevant sociocultural stereotypes
4. Intertextual influences	4.1 Media influences
	4.2 Knowledge of film genres
	4.3 Study-related influences: Expectations of the study
	4.4 Study-related influences: Prior knowledge/understandings of the films
	4.5 Study-related influences: Comparing the two films

The participants' views or understandings (see Table 6.2, Codes 1.1 to 1.5), experiences (see Table 6.2, Codes 2.1 to 2.8), and intertextual knowledge (see Table 6.2, Codes 4.1 to 4.5) were relatively individualised or personal and influenced their interpretations of the movies in specific idiosyncratic ways. Particularly relevant to this study is the data's suggestion that the more experience with or exposure to queerness audiences have had throughout their lives, the more likely they are to interpret queer-coded characters as queer. This result pertains to both queer viewers and cis heterosexual receivers who have engaged with queer people to some extent. Future research could investigate this relationship between receivers' exposure to queerness and their interpretations of queer-coded characters more thoroughly (see section 6.9).

Whereas the participants' personal views, experiences, and intertextual understandings influenced their viewings differently, the queer *and* cis heterosexual viewers drew on similar types of learned knowledge or understandings regarding the movies' sociohistorical settings (see Table 6.2, Code 3.1), production contexts (see Table 6.2, Code 3.2), and sociocultural stereotypes (see Table 6.2, Code 3.3). Generally, these understandings influenced the viewers' interpretations similarly. The participants varied in terms of considerations such as occupation, geographical location (within South Africa), relationship status, and ideological beliefs (see section 4.4.2). However, all the participants were South African, and most were young, white, and university-educated (see section 6.8). It is probable that the participants have throughout their lives been exposed to similar sociocultural situations, experiences, and learning environments, and have consumed similar types of media content. These similar experiences would have contributed to their sociocultural understandings and knowledge. For these reasons, the participants shared certain understandings regarding gender and sexual

norms and stereotypes (i.e. within the films' sociocultural contexts, their production contexts, and the viewers' own societies).

6.6.3 Participants' views informed by film viewings

A few participants indicated that their film viewings shaped their personal views to a degree. Results regarding these influences were generated by analysing the data classified into Theme 3: *Personal views or understandings influenced by Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise viewings*.

Table 6.3 Theme 3: *Personal views or understandings influenced by Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise viewings*

Subtheme	Codes
1. Personal views/ understandings influenced by film viewings	1.1 Views/understandings related to gender influenced by film viewings
	1.2 Views/understandings related to sexuality influenced by film viewings

A cis heterosexual and two queer participants explained that their first *Fried green tomatoes* viewing informed their personal views on heteronormativity (see Table 6.3, Codes 1.1 and 1.2) and sexuality (see Table 6.3, Code 1.2) to an extent. None of the participants communicated a change in views on gender or sexuality due to a previous or their study-related *Thelma & Louise* viewing (see sections 5.3.2 and 5.4.2). Although only a few participants described an alteration in understandings of sexuality due to their film viewing, these assertions exemplify how movies' discourses can influence viewers' subjectivities, views of their realities, and attitudes towards their fellow society members and themselves.

6.6.4 Filmic signs used to create interpretations

The queer and cis heterosexual participants employed many of the same filmic signs to create their interpretations of the queer-coded characters' identifications. The viewers interpreted some of these signs similarly and others varyingly (see sections 5.3.3 and 5.4.3). Data regarding the specific signs the viewers used to create their interpretations were categorised within Theme 4: *Filmic signs informing interpretations of queer coding*, as detailed below.

Table 6.4 **Theme 4: *Filmic signs informing interpretations of queer coding***

Subthemes	Codes
1. Stereotypes	1.1 Gender stereotypes
	1.2 Queer stereotypes
	1.3 Other relevant stereotypes
2. Gender presentations	2.1 Socially normative presentations
	2.2 Transgressive presentations
3. Relationships with romantic partners	3.1 Queer-coded characters' relationships with their own partners
	3.2 Queer-coded characters' relationships with each other's partners
4. Chosen/found family	4.1 Platonic chosen family
	4.2 Queer chosen family
5. Miscellaneous signs	5.1 Trauma's role in bonding
	5.2 Buddy's significance (in <i>FGT</i>)
	5.3 Significance of honey (in <i>FGT</i>)
	5.4 Ninny's identity (in <i>FGT</i>)
	5.5 Ruth kissing Idgie (in <i>FGT</i>)
	5.6 Idgie and Ruth's food fight (in <i>FGT</i>)
	5.7 Thelma and Louise's mutual commitment/support/loyalty/protectiveness (in <i>T&L</i>)
	5.8 Louise kissing Thelma (in <i>T&L</i>)
	5.9 Other miscellaneous signs

The participants' interpretations of the queer-coded characters' gender identifications (see Table 6.4, Subthemes 1 and 2) and how these interpretations relate to the viewers' understandings of the characters' sexual identifications are particularly relevant to this study's examination of sex, gender, and sexuality. Most participants (i.e. queer *and* cis heterosexual) viewed Idgie as transgressively masculine (see sections 5.3.3.1 and 5.4.3.1). These participants used signs related to Idgie's clothing, confidence, and behaviour to construct their interpretation of the character's gender expression. A few participants thought Idgie's masculinity communicated her rebelliousness. This study argues that those viewers who understood Idgie as queer *and* masculine probably employed readings of her gender identity as transgressive to interpret her as queer, even if they did not explicitly describe such a correlation. Some viewers also viewed Ruth as traditionally feminine and relied on signs

regarding Ruth's conformity to sociocultural expectations and norms to construct their interpretations of the character (see sections 5.3.3.1 and 5.4.3.1). Whereas a few queer decoders related Louise and Thelma's gender presentations to their implied queerness, none of the cis heterosexual viewers referenced either character's gender identity or expression (see sections 5.3.3.1 and 5.4.3.1).

The participants' interpretations of the *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* signs outlined in Table 6.4 were restricted by their understandings of sociocultural codes, norms, and conventions. However, the various participants still created subjective, individualised interpretations of filmic signs regarding Idgie, Ruth, Louise, and Thelma's sexual and gender identifications. They constructed their interpretations of the films' representations of gender and sexuality by drawing on their individual knowledge, cognitions, experiences, and frames of reference.

6.7 GENERAL RESEARCH QUESTION

The specific research questions discussed above were answered to ultimately answer the study's general research question reading: *How do self-identified queer and cis heterosexual audiences interpret the queer coding in Fried green tomatoes and Thelma & Louise?* (see section 1.4.1) This question is addressed here.

The queer and cis heterosexual participants mostly identified *Fried green tomatoes*' queer potential yet disagreed on the degree to which Idgie and Ruth could be understood as queer and the extent to which they wished the characters were depicted queerly. Many cis heterosexual participants were ambivalent about the characters' queerness and even enjoyed the ambiguous nature in which they believed the women's gender and sexual identifications were depicted. Conversely, the queer participants tended to place greater importance on Idgie and Ruth's queerness and more strongly desired confirmation of the women's romantic relationship than their cis heterosexual counterparts. All the cis heterosexual and most queer participants understood Louise and Thelma as platonic friends. Whereas no cis heterosexual participants doubted the characters' heterosexuality or wished they were portrayed as lovers, many queer participants wished the women were depicted queerly. Only a few queer participants thought Thelma and Louise might be queer. Notwithstanding, some of those queer viewers who interpreted the characters platonically identified certain filmic events that may enable queer readings of the women.

As discussed in section 6.6.1, the above results indicate that queer audiences often wish to view unambiguously queer movies depicting characters whose gender and sexual identifications clearly reflect the viewers' own queer subjectivities. These audiences are more

likely to interpret queer-coded characters queerly than receivers (likely cis heterosexual) who do not desire media representations of queer characters. Several of the LGBTQ+ participants' wishes regarding the queer-coded characters' portrayals indicate that while the depictions provided by queer-coded films satisfy queer viewers' need for representation to an extent, these audiences often dislike or resent the subtextual nature of the portrayed queerness, wishing the characters were univocally depicted as queer rather than merely coded as LGBTQ+.

The queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the queer-coded characters were influenced similarly by their (similar) understandings of the narratives' sociohistorical settings, the production contexts in which the movies were produced, the stereotypes depicted in the films, and the viewers' understandings of their own sociocultural contexts and norms. The similarity between these understandings is likely due to the participants' shared geographical location (i.e. South Africa) and its accompanying commonly shared sociocultural situations, experiences, learning environments, and importantly, media engagements. The participants' interpretations were also influenced in specific idiosyncratic ways by varying personal views, experiences, and intertextual knowledge. Particularly relevant to this study is how the viewers' experiences regarding queerness influenced their recognition of the films' queer potential. The queer participants, whose subjectivities include their queer sexual and gender identifications, were more likely than the cis heterosexual viewers to understand Ruth, Idgie, Louise, and Thelma as (potentially) queer. Moreover, some of the cis heterosexual participants discussed the exposure they have had to queer discourses and people throughout their lives. It seems that the more experiences the cis heterosexual participants have had with queerness, the more likely they were to recognise the films' subtextual queerness. The above findings suggest that the greater an individual's exposure to queerness, the greater their ability to recognise (coded) queerness as culturally sensible or intelligible.

The queer and cis heterosexual participants employed many of the same filmic signs to create their interpretations of the queer-coded characters' identifications. The viewers interpreted some of these signs similarly and others varyingly. Many of these signs relate to the queer-coded characters' gender identifications, the interpretation of which is influenced by the viewers' understandings of gender and sexual norms and the socially situated entwinement of sexuality and gender. The aforementioned knowledge of norms include the participants' understandings of gender and sexual conventions within the movies' narrative settings and production contexts as well as the viewers' own cultures. Other signs the participants employed to interpret the characters include filmic events concerning Idgie and Ruth's and Louise and Thelma's relationships with their own and each other's (potential) romantic

partners, found families, trauma's role in bonding, Buddy's role in Ruth and Idgie's lives, honey's symbolism (in *Fried green tomatoes*), Ninny's identity (in *Fried green tomatoes*), Ruth and Idgie's food fight, Ruth kissing Idgie, Louise kissing Thelma, and Louise and Thelma's mutual support and loyalty.

Regardless of how the participants interpreted the movies' signs to create understandings of the specific nature of Ruth and Idgie's and Louise and Thelma's relationships, all the queer and cis heterosexual participants thought the protagonists care deeply for each other (see section 5.5). The different participants' interpretations and reactions to the texts' meanings (i.e. as understood by each receiver) corresponded and differed in certain ways, illustrating the individualised yet socially restricted nature of meaning creation.

6.8 THE LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study had certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the relative scarcity of literature on queer coding proved challenging. This sparsity created obstacles for the dissertation's context chapter, providing background information on the study's focus (see section 2.2). The term queer coding has only recently been defined and applied in academic literature. However, the phenomenon itself is not recent, and many researchers and theorists have studied it, albeit under different labels. Literature on queer reading practices, against-the-grain readings, queer spectatorship, and perverse spectatorship relate to queer coding and underlie much of the study's discussions on queer coding as a communication phenomenon and its occurrence in historical and contemporary films (see sections 1.1 and 2.2).

The study's research sample was also impacted by various issues. Firstly, the sample used was relatively small, due to financial and time constraints on the researcher and the difficulty in obtaining participants. Each participant had to be given legally obtained DVD copies of the two films. This requirement had financial implications, restricting the number of participants that could be included. Because the researcher conducted the interviews and focus group sessions and transcribed and analysed the gathered data herself, the sample had to remain relatively small. Recruiting participants proved challenging as each had to be willing to watch two different films and participate in individual and focus group interviews. While the study achieved data saturation, using a larger sample might have enabled the researcher to deliver deeper insights regarding different people's interpretations of queer coding in the selected movies. Although restricted, the sample size was not a significant limitation as there was no intention to generalise the study's findings to the entire population of *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* viewers. This study aimed to provide richly descriptive understandings

of a small group of cis heterosexual and queer viewers' interpretations of the two movies' queer coding (see section 4.8).

The second issue regarding the sample concerns its demographic homogeneity. Most of the participants were young, white, university-educated, South African adults. This homogeneity might have decreased the variety of viewpoints expressed in the individual interviews and engaged during the focus group discussions, limiting the range of perspectives included in the collected data and analysed to generate the study's findings. Homogeneity regarding the participants' gender division also shaped the sample. While the cis heterosexual pool comprised four women and four men, more queer women than queer men participated. Notwithstanding, the research sample was equally divided between queer and cis heterosexual individuals. This composition of eight queer and eight cis heterosexual participants aligned with the study's focus on and allowed for comparison between queer and cis heterosexual viewers' interpretations.

As discussed in section 4.8, it is often difficult to replicate qualitative research conducted within the social sciences. Guaranteeing this audience reception study's reliability or consistency could prove challenging as different people experience the same phenomenon (e.g. viewing queer-coded movies) differently depending on their individual circumstances and sociohistorical positionings. Notwithstanding, this study attempted to increase the reliability of its results through method and data source triangulation (see section 4.8).

6.9 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the above limitations, this study can help to improve understanding of different society members' meaning-creation processes. The study's findings provided valuable insights into how queer and cis heterosexual audiences interpreted queer coding in the two selected films. The results contributed knowledge concerning how the different participants' meaning-making processes and final interpretations corresponded and differed, the personal and contextual considerations that influenced their interpretations, how the various viewers' personal and contextual concerns related and differed, and how different individuals created varying *and* similar meanings from many of the same and some differing filmic signs.

Notwithstanding, certain recommendations can be made for future research to add to or build on this study's findings. The first recommendation concerns the study's sample limitations (see section 6.8). Replicating this study with a larger, demographically diverse research sample might be prudent. Such research could more thoroughly explore how different audiences, with varying personal and contextual circumstances (e.g. differing exposure to queerness) and

media representation needs (e.g. varying desires regarding queer media visibility), interpret queer-coded films and how their understandings align and differ (see sections 6.6.1 and 6.6.2). While a larger sample might not guarantee data saturation, it would likely generate more insights regarding the phenomena under investigation than this study was able to produce. Moreover, a large, demographically heterogeneous sample might increase the generalisability of the research results.

Future studies might also examine audiences' interpretations of queer coding in films other than *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. Depending on the specific research objectives, these investigations could focus on films predating this study's 1991 movies, more recent films, movies adapted from or inspired by other texts, or films depicting male queer-coded characters rather than female characters. Subsequent studies might examine audiences' interpretations of queer coding in mediums other than film, such as television series, novels, plays, comic books, and video games. Lastly, researchers may conduct a similar investigation using a different theoretical framework. Studies exploring audiences' understandings of queer-coded texts could be informed by frameworks incorporating adaptation theory, affect theory, cognitive film theory, feminist film theory, implicit inversion theory, sexual script theory, or social learning theory – to name just a few applicable lenses.

6.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter summarised the study's focus, literature overview findings, research design, and empirical results to answer the study's general research question. The chapter also detailed the study's limitations, and recommendations for future research.

The study explored eight queer and eight cis heterosexual participants' interpretations of queer coding in the 1991 films *Fried green tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. It employed a theoretical framework incorporating a semiotic understanding of media representation, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding model (which falls under reception theory), and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity (situated within queer theory). This tripartite framework buttressed the empirical research conducted using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a thematic analysis to determine how the various participants interpreted the movies' queer-coded characters. The empirical results also concern the various personal and contextual considerations influencing the participants' interpretations and the specific filmic signs they used to create their understandings of the relevant characters. The participants' individual considerations and subjective interpretations of the filmic events corresponded and varied in numerous ways and played significant roles in their final understandings of the characters' sexual and gender identifications.

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ANNEXURES

ANNEXURE A: NWU APPROVAL LETTERS

Annexure A1: Scientific Committee Approval Letter



NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY
YUNIBESITHI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA
NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT
POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS

Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: (018) 299-1111/2222
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Focus Area: Social Transformation
Scientific Committee
Tel: (018) 299 1647
Fax: (018) 299 1776

22 November 2021

Mx Hannelie Otto/Dr Annemi Conradie

Communication Studies
Potchefstroom Campus

APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Student name: Harris, EL

Student no: 24074020

Supervisor: Mx H. Otto

Ethical risk level: Low risk

Title of the study:

"Lesbians? Where?": Queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of queer coding in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*

This letter hereby serves to confirm that the research proposal of the above-mentioned study has been approved by the Scientific Committee of the Focus Area Social Transformation.

Ethical clearance is required. Please visit the BaSSREC website for further information:
[Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee \(BaSSREC\) | Humanities | Humanities | NWU | North-West University](#)

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LM Fourie'.

Prof. LM Fourie

Research Director: Focus Area Social Transformation

Annexure A2: BaSSREC Approval Letter



Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Fax: 018 299-4910
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Senate Committee for Research Ethics
Tel: 018 103 4446
Email: nkosinalhi.machine@nwu.ac.za

07 September 2022

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the **Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC)** on **2022/07/20**, the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby **approves** your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-SERC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title: 'Lesbians? Where?': Queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of queer coding in Fried Green Tomatoes and Thelma & Louise

Study Leader/Supervisor (Principal Investigator)/Researcher: Mx H Otto & Dr Annemil Conradie

Student/Research Team: EL Harris (24074020)

Ethics number:

N	W	U	-	0	1	0	0	0	-	2	2	-	A	7
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Status: S = Submission, R = Re-Submission, P = Provisional Authorisation, A = Authorisation

Application Type: Single study

Commencement date: 25/07/2022

Risk: Low

Expiry date: 25/07/2023

Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):

General conditions:

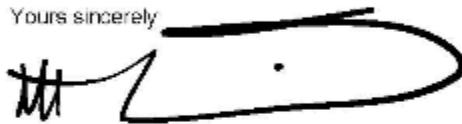
While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- The study leader/supervisor (principal investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the BaSSREC:*
 - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and*
 - without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.*
- The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the BaSSREC, prior to implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.*
- Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for an external audit.*
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.*

- In the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-SCORE and BaSSREC reserves the right to:
 - request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;
 - to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process;
 - withdraw or postpone approval if:
 - any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected;
 - it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the BaSSREC or that information has been false or misrepresented;
 - submission of the annual (or otherwise stipulated) monitoring report, the required amendments, or reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately, and / or
 - new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.
- BaSSREC can be contacted for further information or any report templates via BaSSREC-Admin@nwu.ac.za.

The BaSSREC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the BaSSREC or the NWU-SCORE for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely,



Prof E. Idemudia

Chairperson NWU Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Copy of letter: 02251830010 User: 02251830010deskid: 01105444020VALLE Test of STUDY.docm
8 November 2018

File reference: 215442

Annexure A3: RDGC Approval Letter



Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: +2718 299-1111/2222

Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Research Data Gatekeeper Committee

NWU RDGC PERMISSION GRANTED LETTER

Based on the documentation provided by the researcher specified below, on **18-January- 2022** the North-West University (NWU) Research Data Gatekeeper Committee (NWU-RDGC) hereby **grants permission** for the specific project (as indicated below) to be conducted at the NWU:

Project title: "Lesbians? Where?": Queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of queer coding in Fried Green Tomatoes and Thelma & Louise"

Project leader: Miss Erica Harris

Researcher/Project Team:

Ethics reference no: N W U - 0 1 0 0 0 - 2 2 - A 7

NWU RDGC reference no: NWU-GK-086

Specific Conditions: The consent form and the recruitment forms must clearly stipulate that: Participation in the study is voluntary and there is no direct benefit in taking part in the study except for advancing scientific knowledge.

Approval date: 18/01/2022

Expiry date: 18/01/2024

General Conditions of Approval:

- The NWU-RDGC will not take the responsibility to recruit research participants or to gather data on behalf of the researcher. This committee can therefore not guarantee the participation of our relevant stakeholders.
- Any changes to the research protocol within the permission period (for a maximum of 1 year) must be communicated to the NWU-RDGC. Failure to do so will lead to withdrawal of the permission.
- The NWU-RDGC should be provided with a report or document in which the results of said project are disseminated.
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemics the Committee would like to advice the researcher to practice the necessary caution and adhere to the National Covid-19 Guidelines when conducting research with participants.

Please note that under no circumstances will any personal information of possible research subjects be provided to the researcher by the NWU RDGC. The NWU complies with the Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000 (PAIA) as well as the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPI). For an application to access such information please contact Ms Annamarie De Kock (018 285 2771) for the relevant enquiry form or more information on how the NWU complies with PAIA and POPI.

The NWU RDGC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher and wishes you well with your project. Please do not hesitate to contact the NWU RDGC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Prof Jeffrey Mphahlele



Chairperson NWU Research Data Gatekeeper Committee

Original date: (22251930) 09/Nov/2018
18 November 2018

Current date: (22251930) 15/Nov/2018
15 November 2018

File reference: 1.1/2.3

ANNEXURE B: CONFIRMATION OF LANGUAGE EDITING



Monica Botha
T/a I'Avenir Consulting
Postnet Suite 043
Private Bag X9
QUEENSWOOD
0121

Cellular: 083 269 0757
E-mail: monicalbo@iantic.net

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This serves to confirm that I have edited and proofread the dissertation entitled

**“Lesbians? Where?”: Queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations
of queer coding in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise***

prepared by Ms EL Harris in accordance with the requirements of the Degree Master of Arts in Communication at the North-West University, according to the specifications of the University, where available, and the latest standards for language editing and technical (computer-based) layout.

Editing was restricted to language usage and spelling, consistency, formatting and the style of referencing. No structural writing of any content was undertaken.

As an editor I am not responsible for detecting any content that may constitute plagiarism.

To the best of my knowledge, all references have been provided in the prescribed format.

I am not accountable for any changes made to this dissertation by the author or any other party after the date of my edit.

(Electronically signed – actual signature withheld for security reasons)

MONICA BOTHA

22 November 2023

Sole Proprietor: Monica Botha

*Business Planning Corporate Systems Engineering Corporate Document Standards
Business and Academic Document Technical and Language Editing*

ANNEXURE C: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYERS

WANTED

**RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
FOR AUDIENCE
RECEPTION STUDY**

 DO YOU IDENTIFY AS
QUEER?
DO YOU LIKE TO WATCH
MOVIES?
**THIS STUDY MIGHT
BE FOR YOU!**

We are looking for individuals who identify as
sexually and/or gender queer to watch *Fried
Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*.
Participants will then candidly discuss their
interpretations of the movies in a one-to-one
interview and focus group session.



 **INTERESTED?**

For more info, contact the primary
researcher, Erica Harris, at
e24074020@gmail.com or 066 009 3446



Participation is entirely voluntary. There is no direct benefit to participating, apart from
advancing scientific knowledge.

WANTED RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS FOR AUDIENCE RECEPTION STUDY

DO YOU IDENTIFY
AS QUEER?

DO YOU LIKE TO
WATCH MOVIES?

**THIS
STUDY
MIGHT BE
FOR YOU!**

**WE ARE LOOKING FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO
IDENTIFY AS QUEER TO**

- Watch *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*.
- Candidly discuss their interpretations of the movies in a one-to-one interview and focus group session.

INTERESTED?

For more info, contact the primary researcher, Erica Harris, at
e24074020@gmail.com or 066 009 3446

Participation is entirely voluntary. There is no direct benefit to participating,
apart from advancing scientific knowledge.

The flyer has a dark blue background. At the top right, there is a decorative header with a series of orange chevrons pointing right. In the top left corner, there are three small yellow dots. On the left side, there is a light blue circle containing the text 'OPEN CALL' in dark blue. The main title 'WANTED' is in large, bold, yellow capital letters. Below it, the subtitle 'RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS FOR AUDIENCE RECEPTION STUDY' is in bold, yellow capital letters. On the left side, there are three questions in yellow capital letters: 'DO YOU IDENTIFY AS STRAIGHT?', 'DO YOU ENJOY WATCHING MOVIES?', and 'THIS STUDY MIGHT BE FOR YOU!'. A vertical orange line separates these questions from the main text on the right. The main text on the right is in white capital letters. It starts with 'WE ARE LOOKING FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO IDENTIFY AS HETEROSEXUAL TO WATCH *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES* AND *THELMA & LOUISE*.' followed by 'PARTICIPANTS WILL THEN CANDIDLY DISCUSS THEIR INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MOVIES IN A ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP SESSION.' Below this is the word 'INTERESTED?' in orange capital letters. Then, it says 'FOR MORE INFO, CONTACT THE PRIMARY RESEARCHER, ERICA HARRIS, AT E24074020@GMAIL.COM OR 066 009 3446'. At the bottom, in small white capital letters, it says 'PARTICIPATION IS ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY. THERE IS NO DIRECT BENEFIT TO PARTICIPATING, APART FROM ADVANCING SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE.'

WANTED

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS FOR AUDIENCE RECEPTION STUDY



We are looking for individuals who identify as heterosexual to watch *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. Participants will then candidly discuss their interpretations of the movies in a one-to-one interview and focus group session.

DO YOU IDENTIFY AS STRAIGHT?

DO YOU LIKE TO WATCH MOVIES?

THIS STUDY MIGHT BE FOR YOU!

INTERESTED?

For more info, contact the primary researcher, Erica Harris, at e24074020@gmail.com or 066 009 3446

Participation is entirely voluntary. There is no direct benefit to participating, apart from advancing scientific knowledge.

ANNEXURE D: INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

Annexure D1: Queer participants informed consent form



Building F13, Room 116
Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC)
21081719@nwu.ac.za

DATE:

BaSSREC Authorization

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM

Title of the research project	Queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of gender and sexual representation in <i>Fried Green Tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i>
Ethics number	NWU-01000-22-A7
Principal investigator	Erica Harris
Student number	24074020
Address	B1/39, 1 Molen street, Potchefstroom, 2520
Email address	e24074020@gmail.com
Contact number	066 009 3446

You are being invited to take part in a research project that forms part of my master's degree dissertation. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this project. Please ask the researcher any questions about any part of this project that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you could be involved. Also, your participation is **entirely voluntary** and you are free to decline to participate. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do initially agree to take part. Prior to the publication of the study's results (or at the point of the publication process), you may also withdraw the data you generate.

This study has been approved by the **Basic Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) of the Faculty of Humanities of the North-West University (NWU-01000-22-A7)** and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of the international Singapore Statement on Research Integrity (2010) and the ethical guidelines of the National Health Research Ethics Council. It might be necessary for the research ethics committee

members or relevant authorities to inspect the research records to make sure that we (the researchers) are conducting research in an ethical manner.

What is this research study all about?

- This study is an investigation of queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*; specifically, their interpretations of the gender and sexual representations in the films. The study will involve the use of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and thematic analysis of the collected data.
- The researcher has been trained to use these methods mentioned.
- Approximately 12-16 participants will be included in this study.
- The objectives of this research are:
 - To determine how queer and cis heterosexual audiences interpret the gender and sexual representations in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*.
 - To determine how queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the gender and sexual representations in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* compare.

Why have you been invited to participate?

- You have been invited to participate because this study aims to investigate both queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*, and you have indicated that you identify as sexual and/or gender queer, and that you are willing to watch these two movies before participating in the study.
- You have also indicated that you have access to a DVD player or DVD-compatible device via which you'll be able to watch both films. The researcher will provide you with a legally obtained DVD copy of each film if you decide to participate in the study. As a show of appreciation for your participation in the study, you will be allowed to keep the DVDs.
- You have also indicated that you have access to a device, such as a personal computer, laptop, or mobile phone, via which you can participate in the interview and focus group sessions conducted through Zoom.
- You will be excluded if you are not at all comfortable with discussing your interpretations of the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*, or your thoughts, feelings, and emotions evoked by these two films. However, it must be stressed that you will be excluded only if you are completely unwilling or unable to discuss the above-mentioned information in any way. Thus, you will not be excluded if there are specific topics or certain areas of discussion that you would rather wish to avoid, or prefer to discuss briefly rather than in-depth.
- You will be excluded if you don't watch *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* before your interview session commences.

What will your responsibilities be?

- To repeat, you must watch the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* individually and in your own time, prior to participation in the interviews. The length of each film is 130 minutes. Shortly after watching the movies, you will engage in a one-to-one, in-depth, semi-structured interview, conducted by the researcher and lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. The interview will take place electronically via Zoom. The researcher will embed meeting passcodes in all the Zoom meeting invite links, thereby ensuring that only the researcher and the participants with whom the links have been shared will have access to these Zoom sessions. You will be asked to consent to the audio-visual recording

of the Zoom session. The researcher will schedule said Zoom interview for a time that suits you.

- You will also be asked to participate in a focus group session with five to seven other participants. This focus group interview will occur within a week after the one-to-one interview has been conducted, will last between 1 and 1.5 hours. The focus group session will take place electronically via Zoom. The researcher will embed meeting passcodes in all the Zoom meeting invite links, thereby ensuring that only the researcher and the participants with whom the links have been shared will have access to these Zoom sessions. You will be asked to consent to the audio-visual recording of the Zoom session. The researcher will schedule the focus group session for a time that suits all the participants participating in the focus group
- During these interviews and focus groups, you will be asked to discuss your interpretations of the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. Depending on the nature and direction of the conversation, you will likely also be asked to discuss, if you feel comfortable doing so, personal experiences, circumstances, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and perspectives that might have contributed to your understanding of the films. However, you may decline to discuss any topics or answer any questions you do not feel comfortable discussing.
- The study's co-supervisor, Dr. Annemi Conradie-Chetty, will moderate the interviews and focus group sessions.
- Before participating in the one-to-one interview, you will be asked to disclose your sexual and gender identifications to the primary researcher. While you will not be compelled to discuss your sexuality and/or gender beyond initial confirmation of your particular identifications, it is possible that, depending on the nature and direction of the discussions, these topics might be raised again throughout your one-to-one interview and/or focus group session. However, you may decline to discuss these topics or answer any questions you do not feel comfortable discussing.
- You should note that the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* contains content that may cause offence, such as the use of racial slurs, racially motivated hate crimes, and sexual and physical violence. If you are unwilling and/or unable to view content of this nature, feel free to decline to participate in the study. Alternatively, you are welcome to ask the researcher for more detailed descriptions of said content, in order to prepare yourself for the possibility, and/or to minimise the risk, of being offended by it.
- There is a possibility that, after you have participated in the one-to-one interview and focus group session, the researcher will have additional questions or might like to further follow up on information you provided during said sessions. In that case, the researcher will contact you personally to follow up with you.
- You will have seven days to indicate whether you would be willing to participate.
- You will be requested to sign this Informed Consent Statement before the commencement of the study.
- Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Moreover, you are free to withdraw from the study at any point during or even after data collection. You may also, at any time during the interview or focus group session, decline to discuss any topic or answer any question you do not feel comfortable discussing, while still continuing to participate in the study if you wish to do so.

Will you benefit from taking part in this research?

- There is no direct benefit in taking part in the study.

- The indirect benefit will probably be contributing to knowledge generation about different audiences' media reception, consumption, and interpretation.

Are there risks involved in your taking part in this research and how will these be managed?

The possible risks in this study, and how these will be managed, are summarised in the table below:

Possible risk	Mitigation strategy
Emotional distress of the participants.	During the interviews and focus groups, the researcher will continually check in with the participants to confirm whether they are comfortable with the questions asked and/or are willing to share the information requested. If at any point a participant experiences emotional distress, the researcher will desist with the line of questioning causing the participant's unease.
Tiredness and discomfort.	Comfort breaks of 5-10 minutes will be provided at 45-60-minute intervals during the interviews and focus group sessions.
Lack of privacy and comfort during interviews and focus groups due to the personal nature of the researcher's questions regarding the participants' interpretations of the movies.	During the interviews and focus groups, the researcher will continually check in with the participants to confirm whether they are comfortable with the questions asked and/or are willing to share the information requested. If at any point a participant feels uncomfortable or that their privacy is being violated, the researcher will desist with the line of questioning causing the participant's unease.
Lack of privacy and comfort at possibly being asked to discuss personal information regarding experiences, circumstances, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and perspectives related to their understanding of the two films.	During the interviews and focus groups, the researcher will continually check in with the participants to confirm whether they are comfortable with the questions asked and/or are willing to share the information requested. If at any point a participant feels uncomfortable or that their privacy is being violated, the researcher will desist with the line of questioning causing the participant's unease.
The films contain certain content that may offend the research participants (i.e., the use of racial slurs, racially motivated hate crimes, and sexual and physical violence towards women)	The researcher will inform participants that the films contain this type of offensive material before they watch the films so that they can prepare themselves for the possibility, and/or can minimise the risk, of being offended by said content. The researcher will also give participants the opportunity to decline to view the films and participate in the study.

After the interview and focus group sessions, participants might feel the need to debrief with a counsellor.	At the end of each interview and focus group session, the researcher will share a counsellor's contact details with the participants. Thus, any participants who feel the need to debrief with a counsellor after these sessions will be able to do so.
The researcher cannot guarantee complete confidentiality of the information shared during the focus group sessions, as some participants may discuss the study outside of their focus group sessions.	Throughout the focus group sessions, the researcher will remind participants that they do not need to share any information they do not feel comfortable discussing. During the focus group sessions, participants do not need to share any information that could be used to identify them. At the end of each focus group session, the researcher will also ask the participants to kindly not discuss (with people outside the study) the information their fellow participants shared.

- However, we do believe that the benefits to you and to science (as noted in the previous section) outweigh the risks we have listed. If you disagree, then please feel free not to participate in this study. We will respect your decision.
- Should we learn, in the course of the research, that someone is harming you, or that you are intending to harm someone, then we must tell someone who can help you/warn the person we are intending to harm.

Who will have access to the data?

- The *handling, storage, security and analysis of data* are critical in ethical considerations. The researcher will ensure that all hard copy (printed) data is safely locked away and that all soft copy (electronic) data is password-protected and stored safely on the primary researcher's personal computer, as well as a secure Nextcloud folder, shared only with the researcher, the study's supervisor, and co-supervisor. Nextcloud is a software tool used by NWU researchers to securely save data to the cloud. Any devices, such as laptops, external hard drives, or flash drives containing the gathered data will be stored in locked offices and the primary researcher's, the supervisor's, and the co-supervisor's locked homes at all times.
- Only approved people in the research team, i.e., the primary researcher, the study's supervisor, and co-supervisor will/may have access to the raw data where the need arises. At the analysis stage, as will be the case throughout, the use of coding, via pseudonyms, will reinforce participants' non-identification, hence upholding the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity.
- *Anonymity* will be ensured by choosing your own fictitious names/I will assign a fictitious name or a letter, for example, Participant A, to you before the interview starts. Only this name will be used in the research process.
- *Confidentiality* will include the use of pseudonyms for participants. It involves not disclosing any information gained from an interviewee deliberately or accidentally in ways that might identify an individual.
- *Privacy* will be ensured by not probing unnecessarily if you do not wish to discuss particular matters. Moreover, if interviewees freely share potentially identifying

information about themselves, the researcher will not reveal details that could be used to identify said interviewees.

- I will not use a *transcriber* for the purpose of the transcripts after the interview. I will be responsible for transcribing the data – apart from the study's supervisor, co-supervisor, and myself, no other person will have access to the data.
- I will not use a *translator/interpreter* for the purpose of the interviews/explaining the informed consent, etc. I will perform these duties myself.
- The data will be *stored safely in electronic form* for a period of five years after which it will be deleted. An IT consultant will be consulted on how to permanently delete the files in question.

What will happen to the data?

The data from this study will be reported in the following ways: It will be included in my unpublished Master's degree dissertation, which will then become part of the NWU dissertation repository, and possibly in relevant academic journals in the form of academic articles and/or further research studies. In all of this reporting, you will not be personally identified. This means that the reporting will not include your name or details that will help others to know that you participated (e.g., your address or the name of your school).

Data may be re-used in the form of academic articles published after the publication of my master's degree dissertation or may possibly be re-used in further research I conduct, such as my PhD thesis.

Will you be paid/compensated to take part in this study and are there any costs involved?

No, you will not be paid/compensated to take part in the study. However, there will be no costs involved in participating either.

How will you know about the findings?

- The general findings of the research will be shared with you via email, after the successful completion and evaluation of the Master's degree dissertation.
- If you would like feedback on your personal results, then contact me, Erica Harris, at e24074020@gmail.com

Is there anything else that you should know or do?

- You can contact the primary researcher, Erica Harris, at 066 009 3446 and e24074020@gmail.com if you have any further queries or encounter any problems.
- You can also contact the study's supervisor, Ms. Hannelie Otto, at 083 565 5976 and Hannelie.Otto@nwu.ac.za, or the co-supervisor, Dr. Annemi Conradie-Chetty, at 083 647 4474 and conradieannemi@gmail.com with additional queries.
- You can contact the chair of the Basic Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Prof Erhabor Idemudia) at 018 389 2899 or Erhabor.Idemudia@nwu.ac.za if you have any concerns or complaints that have not been adequately addressed by the researcher.
- You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own records.

Declaration by participant

By signing below, I _____ agree to take part in a research study entitled: 'Queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of gender and sexual representation in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*'

I declare that:

- I have read and understood this information and consent form and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to both the person obtaining consent, as well as the researcher (if this is a different person), and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I understand that what I contribute (what I report/say/write/draw/produce visually) could be reproduced publically and/or quoted, but without reference to my personal identity.
- I consent to an audio and/or audio-visual recording of the one-to-one interview and focus group sessions in which I will participate.
- I am aware of the fact that I may request that the researcher does not continue with said recording if I request it.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.

Signed at (place) _____ on (date) _____ 20 _____

Signature of participant

Signature of witness

- | | |
|--|--|
| • You may contact me again | ☐ Yes ☐ No |
| • I would like a summary of the findings of this research | ☐ Yes ☐ No |
| • I would like feedback on my functioning/wellbeing as reflected in the questionnaires I completed | ☐ Yes ☐ No |

The best way to reach me is:

Name & Surname: _____
Postal Address: _____
Email: _____
Phone Number: _____
Cell Phone Number: _____

In case the above details change, please contact the following person who knows me well and who does not live with me and who will help you to contact me:

Name & Surname: _____

Phone/ Cell Phone Number /Email: _____

Declaration by person obtaining consent (if not the researcher)

I (*name*) _____ declare that:

- I explained the information in this document to _____
- I encouraged him/her to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as discussed above
- I did/did not use an interpreter.

Signed at (*place*) _____ on (*date*) _____ 20 _____

Signature of person obtaining consent

Signature of witness

Declaration by researcher

I (*name*) _____ declare that:

- I explained the information in this document to _____
- I encouraged him/her to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as discussed above.
- I did/did not use an interpreter.

Signed at (*place*) _____ on (*date*) _____ 20 _____

Signature of researcher

Signature of witness

Declaration by researcher and participant

Personal face-to-face interviews during Covid-19 restrictions

Additional declaration by participant in those instances where the participant requests to participate in a personal face-to-face semi-structured interview:

By signing below, I _____, acknowledge the following information related to the required measures regarding Covid-19:

I declare that:

- It is my personal choice and preference to participate in a personal face-to-face semi-structured interview with the researcher.
- This requires that I consent to the following strict measures to safeguard the personal health and safety of myself and that of the researcher/interviewer/primary investigator:
 - I consent to the researcher taking my temperature before the interview using a thermometer. ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - I confirm that my temperature measured at _____ degrees. ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - I consent to use the three-ply mask provided by the researcher. ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - I consent to wear the three-ply mask for the full duration of the interview. ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - I consent to the researcher sanitising the interview context using a sanitiser with an 80% alcohol content before the commencement of the interview. ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - I consent to the researcher using a sanitiser with an 80% alcohol content before and during the interview if required. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Signed at (*place*) _____ on (*date*) _____ 20 ____

Signature of participant

Signature of researcher

Annexure D2: Cis heterosexual participants informed consent form



Building F13, Room 116
Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC)
21081719@nwu.ac.za

DATE:

BaSSREC Authorization

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM

Title of the research project	Queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of gender and sexual representation in <i>Fried Green Tomatoes</i> and <i>Thelma & Louise</i>
Ethics number	NWU-01000-22-A7
Principal investigator	Erica Harris
Student number	24074020
Address	B1/39, 1 Molen street, Potchefstroom, 2520
Email address	e24074020@gmail.com
Contact number	066 009 3446

You are being invited to take part in a research project that forms part of my master's degree dissertation. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this project. Please ask the researcher any questions about any part of this project that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you could be involved. Also, your participation is **entirely voluntary** and you are free to decline to participate. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do initially agree to take part. Prior to the publication of the study's results (or at the point of the publication process), you may also withdraw the data you generate.

This study has been approved by the **Basic Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) of the Faculty of Humanities of the North-West University (NWU-01000-22-A7)** and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of the international Singapore Statement on Research Integrity (2010) and the ethical guidelines of the National Health Research Ethics Council. It might be necessary for the research ethics committee

members or relevant authorities to inspect the research records to make sure that we (the researchers) are conducting research in an ethical manner.

What is this research study all about?

- This study is an investigation of queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*; specifically, their interpretations of the gender and sexual representations in the films. The study will involve the use of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and thematic analysis of the collected data.
- The researcher has been trained to use the methods mentioned in the previous sentence.
- Approximately 12-16 participants will be included in this study.
- The objectives of this research are:
 - To determine how queer and cis heterosexual audiences interpret the gender and sexual representations in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*.
 - To determine how queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the gender and sexual representations in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* compare.

Why have you been invited to participate?

- You have been invited to participate because this study aims to investigate both queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*, and you have indicated that you identify as cis heterosexual, and that you are willing to watch these two movies before participating in the study.
- You have also indicated that you have access to a DVD player or DVD-compatible device via which you'll be able to watch the two films. The researcher will provide you with a legally obtained DVD copy of each film if you decide to participate in the study. As a show of appreciation for your participation in the study, you will be allowed to keep the DVDs.
- You have also indicated that you have access to a device, such as a personal computer, laptop, or mobile phone, via which you can participate in the interview and focus group sessions conducted through Zoom.
- You will be excluded if you are not at all comfortable with discussing your interpretations of the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*, or your thoughts, feelings, and emotions evoked by these two films. However, it must be stressed that you will be excluded only if you are completely unwilling or unable to discuss the above-mentioned information in any way. Thus, you will not be excluded if there are specific topics or certain areas of discussion that you would rather wish to avoid, or prefer to discuss briefly rather than in-depth.
- You will be excluded if you don't watch *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* before your interview session commences.

What will your responsibilities be?

- To repeat, you must watch the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* individually and in your own time, prior to participation in the interviews. The length of each film is 130 minutes. Shortly after watching the movies, you will engage in a one-to-one, in-depth, semi-structured interview, conducted by the researcher and lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. The interview will take place electronically via Zoom. The researcher will embed meeting passcodes in all the Zoom meeting invite links, thereby ensuring that only the researcher and the participants with whom the links have been shared will have

access to these Zoom sessions. You will be asked to consent to the audio-visual recording of the Zoom session. The researcher will schedule the interview for a time that suits you.

- You will also be asked to participate in a focus group session with five to seven other participants. This focus group interview will occur within a week after the one-to-one interview has been conducted and will last between 1 and 1.5 hours. The focus group session will take place electronically via Zoom. The researcher will embed meeting passcodes in all the Zoom meeting invite links, thereby ensuring that only the researcher and the participants with whom the links have been shared will have access to these Zoom sessions. You will be asked to consent to the audio-visual recording of the Zoom session. The researcher will schedule the focus group session for a time that suits all the participants participating in the focus group.
- During these interviews and focus groups, you will be asked to discuss your interpretations of the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*. Depending on the nature and direction of the conversation, you will likely also be asked to discuss, if you feel comfortable doing so, personal experiences, circumstances, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and perspectives that might have contributed to your understanding of the films. However, you may decline to discuss any topics or answer any questions you do not feel comfortable discussing.
- The study's co-supervisor, Dr. Annemi Conradie-Chetty, will moderate the interviews and focus group sessions.
- Before participating in the one-to-one interview, you will be asked to disclose your sexual and gender identifications to the primary researcher. While you will not be compelled to discuss your sexuality and/or gender beyond initial confirmation of your particular identifications, it is possible that, depending on the nature and direction of the discussions, these topics might be raised again throughout your one-to-one interview and/or focus group session. However, you may decline to discuss these topics or answer any questions you do not feel comfortable discussing.
- You should note that the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise* contain content that may cause offence, such as the use of racial slurs, racially motivated hate crimes, and sexual and physical violence. If you are unwilling and/or unable to view content of this nature, feel free to decline to participate in the study. Alternatively, you are welcome to ask the researcher for more detailed descriptions of said content, in order to prepare yourself for the possibility, and/or to minimise the risk, of being offended by it.
- There is a possibility that, after you have participated in the one-to-one interview and focus group session, the researcher will have additional questions or might like to further follow up on the information you provided during said sessions. In that case, the researcher will contact you personally to follow up with you.
- You will have seven days to indicate whether you would be willing to participate.
- You will be requested to sign this Informed Consent Statement before the commencement of the study.
- Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Moreover, you are free to withdraw from the study at any point during or even after data collection. You may also, at any time during the interview or focus group session, decline to discuss any topic or answer any question you do not feel comfortable discussing, while still continuing to participate in the study if you wish to do so.

Will you benefit from taking part in this research?

- There is no direct benefit in taking part in the study.

- The indirect benefit will probably be contributing to knowledge generation about different audiences' media reception, consumption, and interpretation.

Are there risks involved in your taking part in this research and how will these be managed?

The possible risks in this study, and how these will be managed, are summarised in the table below:

Possible risk	Mitigation strategy
Emotional distress of the participants.	During the interviews and focus groups, the researcher will continually check in with the participants to confirm whether they are comfortable with the questions asked and/or are willing to share the information requested. If at any point a participant experiences emotional distress, the researcher will desist with the line of questioning causing the participant's unease.
Tiredness and discomfort.	Comfort breaks of 5-10 minutes will be provided at 45-60-minute intervals during the interviews and focus group sessions.
Lack of privacy and comfort during interviews and focus groups due to the personal nature of the researcher's questions regarding the participants' interpretations of the movies.	During the interviews and focus groups, the researcher will continually check in with the participants to confirm whether they are comfortable with the questions asked and/or are willing to share the information requested. If at any point a participant feels uncomfortable or that their privacy is being violated, the researcher will desist with the line of questioning causing the participant's unease.
Lack of privacy and comfort at possibly being asked to discuss personal information regarding experiences, circumstances, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and perspectives related to their understanding of the two films.	During the interviews and focus groups, the researcher will continually check in with the participants to confirm whether they are comfortable with the questions asked and/or are willing to share the information requested. If at any point a participant feels uncomfortable or that their privacy is being violated, the researcher will desist with the line of questioning causing the participant's unease.
The films contain certain content that may offend the research participants (i.e., the use of racial slurs, racially motivated hate crimes, and sexual and physical violence towards women)	The researcher will inform participants that the films contain this type of offensive material before they watch the films, so that they can prepare themselves for the possibility, and/or can minimise the risk, of being offended by said content. The researcher will also give participants the

	opportunity to decline viewing the films and participating in the study.
After the interview and focus group sessions, participants might feel the need to debrief with a counsellor.	At the end of each interview and focus group session, the researcher will share a counsellor's contact details with the participants. Thus, any participants who feel the need to debrief with a counsellor after these sessions, will be able to do so.
The researcher cannot guarantee complete confidentiality of the information shared during the focus group sessions, as some participants may discuss the study outside of their focus group sessions.	Throughout the focus group sessions, the researcher will remind participants that they do not need to share any information they do not feel comfortable discussing. During the focus group sessions, participants do not need to share any information that could be used to identify them. At the end of each focus group session, the researcher will also ask the participants to kindly not discuss (with people outside the study) the information their fellow participants shared.

- However, we do believe that the benefits to you and to science (as noted in the previous section) outweigh the risks we have listed. If you disagree, then please feel free not to participate in this study. We will respect your decision.
- Should we learn, in the course of the research, that someone is harming you, or that you are intending to harm someone, then we must tell someone who can help you/warn the person you are intending to harm.

Who will have access to the data?

- The *handling, storage, security and analysis of data* are critical in ethical considerations. The researcher will ensure that all hard copy (printed) data is safely locked away and that all soft copy (electronic) data is password-protected and stored safely on the primary researcher's personal computer, as well as a secure Nextcloud folder, shared only with the researcher, the study's supervisor, and co-supervisor. Nextcloud is a software tool used by NWU researchers to securely save data to the cloud. Any devices, such as laptops, external hard drives, or flash drives containing the gathered data will be stored in locked offices and the primary researcher's, the supervisor's, and the co-supervisor's locked homes at all times.
- Only approved people in the research team, i.e., the primary researcher, the study's supervisor, and co-supervisor will/may have access to the raw data where the need arises. At the analysis stage, as will be the case throughout, the use of coding, via pseudonyms, will reinforce participants' non-identification, hence upholding the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity.
- *Anonymity* will be ensured by choosing your own fictitious names/I will assign a fictitious name or a letter, for example, Participant A, to you before the interview starts. Only this name will be used in the research process.
- *Confidentiality* will include the use of pseudonyms for participants. It involves not disclosing any information gained from an interviewee deliberately or accidentally in ways that might identify an individual.

- *Privacy* will be ensured by not probing unnecessarily if you do not wish to discuss particular matters. Moreover, if interviewees freely share potentially identifying information about themselves, the researcher will not reveal details that could be used to identify said interviewees.
- I will not use a *transcriber* for the purpose of the transcripts after the interview. I will be responsible for transcribing the data – apart from the study's supervisor, co-supervisor, and myself, no other person will have access to the data.
- I will not use a *translator/interpreter* for the purpose of the interviews/explaining the informed consent, etc. I will perform these duties myself.
- The data will be *stored safely in electronic form* for a period of five years after which it will be deleted. An IT consultant will be consulted on how to permanently delete the files in question.

What will happen to the data?

The data from this study will be reported in the following ways: It will be included in my unpublished Master's degree dissertation, which will then become part of the NWU dissertation repository, and possibly in relevant academic journals in the form of academic articles and/or further research studies. In all of this reporting, you will not be personally identified. This means that the reporting will not include your name or details that will help others to know that you participated (e.g., your address or the name of your school).

Data may be re-used in the form of academic articles published after the publication of my master's degree dissertation or may possibly be re-used in further research I conduct, such as my PhD thesis.

Will you be paid/compensated to take part in this study and are there any costs involved?

No, you will not be paid/compensated to take part in the study. However, there will be no costs involved in participating either.

How will you know about the findings?

- The general findings of the research will be shared with you via email, after the successful completion and evaluation of the Master's degree dissertation.
- If you would like feedback on your personal results, then contact me, Erica Harris, at e24074020@gmail.com

Is there anything else that you should know or do?

- You can contact the primary researcher, Erica Harris, at 066 009 3446 and e24074020@gmail.com if you have any further queries or encounter any problems.
- You can also contact the study's supervisor, Ms. Hannelie Otto, at 083 565 5976 and Hannelie.Otto@nwu.ac.za, or the co-supervisor, Dr. Annemari Conradie-Chetty, at 083 647 4474 and conradieannemari@gmail.com with additional queries.
- You can contact the chair of the Basic Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Prof Erhabor Idemudia) at 018 389 2899 or Erhabor.Idemudia@nwu.ac.za if you have any concerns or complaints that have not been adequately addressed by the researcher.
- You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own records.

Declaration by participant

By signing below, I _____ agree to take part in a research study entitled: 'Queer and cis heterosexual audiences' interpretations of gender and sexual representation in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma & Louise*'

I declare that:

- I have read and understood this information and consent form and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to both the person obtaining consent, as well as the researcher (if this is a different person), and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I understand that what I contribute (what I report/say/write/draw/produce visually) could be reproduced publically and/or quoted, but without reference to my personal identity.
- I consent to an audio and/or audio-visual recording of the one-to-one interview and focus group sessions in which I will participate.
- I am aware of the fact that I may request that the researcher does not continue with said recording if I request it.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.

Signed at (place) _____ on (date) _____ 20 _____

Signature of participant

Signature of witness

- | | |
|--|--|
| • You may contact me again | ☐ Yes ☐ No |
| • I would like a summary of the findings of this research | ☐ Yes ☐ No |
| • I would like feedback on my functioning/wellbeing as reflected in the questionnaires I completed | ☐ Yes ☐ No |

The best way to reach me is:

Name & Surname: _____
Postal Address: _____
Email: _____
Phone Number: _____
Cell Phone Number: _____

In case the above details change, please contact the following person who knows me well and who does not live with me and who will help you to contact me:

Name & Surname: _____

Phone/ Cell Phone Number /Email: _____

Declaration by person obtaining consent (if not the researcher)

I (*name*) _____ declare that:

- I explained the information in this document to _____
- I encouraged him/her to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as discussed above
- I did/did not use an interpreter.

Signed at (*place*) _____ on (*date*) _____ 20 _____

Signature of person obtaining consent

Signature of witness

Declaration by researcher

I (*name*) _____ declare that:

- I explained the information in this document to _____
- I encouraged him/her to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as discussed above.
- I did/did not use an interpreter.

Signed at (*place*) _____ on (*date*) _____ 20 _____

Signature of researcher

Signature of witness

Declaration by researcher and participant

Personal face-to-face interviews during Covid-19 restrictions

Additional declaration by participant in those instances where the participant requests to participate in a personal face-to-face semi-structured interview:

By signing below, I _____, acknowledge the following information related to the required measures regarding Covid-19:

I declare that:

- It is my personal choice and preference to participate in a personal face-to-face semi-structured interview with the researcher.
- This requires that I consent to the following strict measures to safeguard the personal health and safety of myself and that of the researcher/interviewer/primary investigator:
 - I consent to the researcher taking my temperature before the interview using a thermometer. ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - I confirm that my temperature measured at _____ degrees. ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - I consent to use the three-ply mask provided by the researcher. ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - I consent to wear the three-ply mask for the full duration of the interview. ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - I consent to the researcher sanitising the interview context using a sanitiser with an 80% alcohol content before the commencement of the interview. ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - I consent to the researcher using a sanitiser with an 80% alcohol content before and during the interview if required. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Signed at (*place*) _____ on (*date*) _____ 20 ____

Signature of participant

Signature of researcher

ANNEXURE E: PARTICIPANT LIST

	Pseudonym	Pronouns	Brief description of film-viewing habits
Cis heterosexual participants	Andrew	He/him	Andrew likes watching anime movies.
	Louis	He/him	Louis enjoys Edgar Wright's films.
	Maryke	She/her	Maryke is a film enthusiast with a penchant for eccentric female characters.
	Catherine	She/her	Catherine enjoys discussing her movie-viewing experiences with others.
	David	He/him	David likes Paul Thomas Anderson's movies.
	Shaun	He/him	Shaun is usually drawn to film characters who work hard to overcome their obstacles.
	Alexa	She/her	Alexa likes watching movies produced between the 1980s and the early 2000s.
	Hanna	She/her	Hanna is a science fiction and horror film enthusiast.
Queer participants	Jana	She/her	Jana generally identifies with eccentric or odd supporting characters rather than protagonists.
	Charlotte	She/her	Charlotte rarely watches films but enjoys dramas and horror movies.
	Lisa	She/her	Lisa likes thrillers and comedy films.
	Thembi	She/her	Thembi has recently become an LGBTQ+ film enthusiast.
	Linda	She/her	Linda does not often watch films but enjoys Marvel movies.
	Gary	He/him	Gary enjoys avant-garde as well as mainstream movies from many different genres.
	Mian	They/them	When watching movies, Mian usually identifies with outcasts and misfits.
	Sarah	She/her	Sarah enjoys thrillers, crime dramas, and documentaries.

ANNEXURE F: THEMATIC ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

The thematic analysis framework is too extensive to be included in the dissertation itself. The framework can be located [here](#), in a Google Drive folder shared by the primary researcher.

ANNEXURE G: TURNITIN REPORT

13128388:Erica_Harris_dissertation_-_TurnItIn_draft.docx			
ORIGINALITY REPORT			
3%	3%	1%	1%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS
PRIMARY SOURCES			
1	repository.nwu.ac.za Internet Source	1%	
2	researchspace.ukzn.ac.za Internet Source	<1%	
3	open.library.ubc.ca Internet Source	<1%	
4	repository.up.ac.za Internet Source	<1%	
5	vital.seals.ac.za:8080 Internet Source	<1%	
6	en.wikipedia.org Internet Source	<1%	
7	www.coursehero.com Internet Source	<1%	
8	scholarworks.waldenu.edu Internet Source	<1%	
9	etd.uwc.ac.za Internet Source	<1%	