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Queerbaiting and its Consequences

The term “queerbaiting” has become a huge buzzword in online spaces over the past few years. Google Trends shows that the first time the term was googled was in 2004, with the “interest” in the term reaching a significant peak in June of 2021, when several articles were written on the subject. In the 2010’s, the term queerbaiting was popular in fandom spaces to describe a phenomenon queer fans noticed in TV shows like *Sherlock* or *Teen Wolf*. These shows would “tease” fans with heavy queer subtext, or sometimes with marketing that hinted that the queer relationship would become “canon” later on, but would never confirm that the characters were queer or that there were any queer relationships within the show. Queer fans hungry for representation in the media felt angry that they were being exploited by the writers/producers of these shows, and used queerbaiting as an attack on them. However, in the past couple years queerbaiting has more often been used to describe when a public figure presents in a way that is perceived as queer (whether that’s the way they act, dress, etc.) but do not identify as queer or do not define their sexuality.

This recent usage of the term and the discourse on the subject are harmful to real life queer people, despite the term originating from an understandable desire for queer representation and equality in media. The conversation around queerbaiting pressures queer people to neatly define their identity in a way that is consumable for other people, or else risk being labeled as a queerbaiter.

So, what is queerbaiting? While there's a lot of disagreement on this, a basic definition to work off of is that queerbaiting is when a piece of media uses queer subtext to lure in queer audiences, with no intention of ever making this representation explicit (Hardman and Woods). It's important to note that queerbaiting is a term from the fan's perspective, and not from the showrunners or writers of these shows. The writers of BBC's *Sherlock* for example have never come out and said that they used queer subtext intentionally with the relationship between John and Sherlock to try to make money off of a queer audience. However, this is the perspective of a lot of queer fans of these "queerbaiting" shows (Franklin). Another important layer of the term queerbaiting is that there are different types of queerbaiting. There's cultural queerbaiting, which refers to the type that I described before, social queerbaiting, which refers to "real life" queerbaiting that people experience in their interactions with other people day-to-day, and consumer queerbaiting, which refers to advertising practices intended to target queer consumers (Hardman and Woods). These different types of queerbaiting outlined can all overlap and impact each other.

The conversation around queerbaiting ultimately stems from a lack of queer representation in the media. While the number of queer characters and queer relationships on television have increased over the years, it's still a relatively small number (Hardman and Woods). Representation in media can be important in queer people's journey to accepting and

developing their own identities, so a lack of representation often has negative impacts on them (Hardman and Woods). Queerbaiting often leads to queer audiences feeling exploited and betrayed, since they feel as if they were promised something, and then it was taken away from them. Queer fans accusing networks and writers of queerbaiting is their way of fighting back and demanding better representation.

Sometimes what fans call queerbaiting is actually queer subtext that is being intentionally incorporated into a piece of media by queer artists. It's not necessarily a marketing ploy, or something deeply sinister, but another form of expression of queer identity. Since the Hays Code, subtext has been a way for queer artists to signal queerness to other queer people, even if it goes unnoticed by straight people (Franklin). However, a lot of queer audiences are interested in explicit representation of queerness in the media they consume (Franklin). This means a kiss between queer characters, a queer relationship, a coming out scene, etc. It's understandable for queer people to look for this in their media, especially since explicit queer representation in the media is still rare. Sometimes queer fans view these shows keeping the sexualities of their characters ambiguous as a way of downplaying their queerness and keeping the show accessible for straight audiences (Franklin). Queer subtext is often seen as "not enough" representation, despite the fact that many characters who are written with queer subtext will do just about everything *but* say they're gay, or kiss the character they're in a "homoerotic bromance" with. Many queer theorists say that sexuality is not necessarily something that you are, but is a set of repeated behaviors that one performs to reinforce their identity (Gauntlett). With this in mind, wouldn't these characters who are written with such heavy queer subtext be performing queerness? Queer representation is almost gatekept by fans who have a more rigid view of queerness and queer representation. Queer readings of television shows like *Sherlock* are simply

a different way of engaging with media. The fact that Sherlock and John never kiss or come out doesn't make the queerness embedded in the text any less "real" or an invalid form of queer representation.

A more recent development in the conversation around queerbaiting is that the term has started being used to describe celebrities, and not just television shows. Harry Styles is basically the poster child for queerbaiting, placed at the center of many heated debates on social media. Some queer people argue that someone like Harry Styles, who doesn't publicly label his sexuality, is using this ambiguity and mysteriousness for his own financial benefit. He can get the benefits of having a devoted queer fanbase who posit him as some sort of queer icon, while also not having to face the consequences of openly identifying as queer (Down and Meyers). Other queer people argue that an individual person can not queerbait in the way that a piece of media or a corporation can (Blakiston). Similar arguments are applied to other celebrities accused of queerbaiting.

Discussing queerbaiting as it refers to celebrities is complicated for a few reasons. One is that a lot of celebrities, at least in the public eye, are somewhere between a character and a real person. Many celebrities, such as Harry Styles, have a carefully crafted persona that is the only version of themselves that they show to the public (Fathallah). This persona is crafted by stylists, PR, as well as the celebrity themselves. It's hard to cast judgements on who a celebrity *truly* is, because we're seeing a heavily curated version of themselves. Another reason that this conversation gets complicated is because of the concept that gender and sexuality are performative, meaning that sexuality is about repeated actions and behaviors, rather than just a solid identity (Gauntlett). An earlier example of celebrity queerbaiting might be some of the members of the bands Fall Out Boy or My Chemical Romance, who would sometimes kiss other

men on stage, simulate gay sex, or “act gay”/“dress gay” in order to make a statement (Fathallah). Despite Pete Wentz, the bass player in Fall Out Boy, adopting queer aesthetics and making out with other men on stage, he identifies as straight (Feigin and Million). However, queer theorists might say that kissing a man on stage (repeatedly) is a queer act, despite Wentz not identifying with the label. Is this really baiting, if you are seeing the actualization of this sexuality in front of you?

Accusing real people of queerbaiting also seems to ignore the fact that identity is not something that is fixed, but something fluid that has to be continuously reinforced by actions (Gauntlett). Expecting celebrities to come out, neatly define their identity with one label, and then stick to it, is lacking understanding of how identities work. With real people, things are rarely so black and white as they might be with fictional characters. It seems like a mistake to apply a term originally meant to describe television shows and fictional characters and marketing teams to a complex person with a complex identity. This is something that Styles seems to understand as well. When asked about his sexuality and gender identity in interviews, he often says that doesn't see fashion and gender expression as something that is super binary, and instead notes that he likes to experiment and have fun with his own self expression (Hamish).

Queerbaiting is a complex debate, and is something that the queer community can't seem to agree on, and probably won't anytime soon. There's a lot of justifiable pain and frustration within the queer community about lack of representation and about being exploited by these industries who often don't care about them. This debate can get heated pretty quickly, especially in online spaces, and I would argue that the discourse doesn't actually have a positive impact on the queer community. Moving forward, I would hope to see people approach this topic with more nuance and a less binary understanding of how queer identity works. When a subject is so

personal, it can be hard to do this. However, I think nuance and understanding are essential when approaching a topic as complex as identity.

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