


Michał Kaftanowicz

Uniwersytet Łódzki

Katedra Informatologii i Bibliologii

e-mail: m.kaftanowicz@wp.pl


 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2954-7776>

pod red. dr hab. prof. Uł Agaty Walczak-Niewiadomskiej

Uniwersytet Łódzki

Katedra Informatologii i Bibliologii

e-mail: agata.walczak-niewiadomska@uni.lodz.pl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9292-1805>

Queerbaiting as a strategy for building the image of a brand's product on the example of movie industry

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/0860-7435.40.06>

Abstract: The article focuses on defining the term queerbaiting as a marketing strategy with examples from three TV series: “Wednesday”, “Killing Eve” and “Sherlock” and analyzing posts created on X.com where fans online expressed their views on the topic. Trying to find a fixed definition is problematic because it is a relatively recent concept that appeared in academic literature. The thesis highlights the problem of defining the term but also broadens it to *rainbow washing* – a strategy used not only in the movie industry to lure audiences by supporting the LGBT+ community.

Keywords: queerbaiting, marketing, TV series, rainbow washing, LGBT+

The article aims to present the marketing strategy known as *queerbaiting* and describe how it is used in the movie industry. The topic was chosen mainly because of its innovative approach – in most of the academic literature available, it is almost impossible to find an extensive description of the term. The majority of them focus on specific examples, such as negative representations in movies and TV series or controversies surrounding celebrities, rather than analyzing them as a marketing strategy that may potentially be hurtful to communities, the LGBT+ one as example. The potential explanation for a scarcity of resources regarding this topic may stem from the fact that it is a relatively new topic in the academic space. This article aims to fill the research gap and therefore provide a much-needed theoretical framework.

The article aims to analyze the public reception regarding queerbaiting in movies and TV series based on social media content analysis, which is “the process of examining vast amounts of user-generated content on social media platforms to extract meaningful patterns, sentiments, and trends” (Abeer, 2023). This method was chosen because it is going to accurately describe and portray the conflicted feelings of social media users and how controversial the topic is. Moreover, posts on social media platforms will be a suitable indicator of the response online, while the TV series mentioned previously was aired worldwide, and also after the series was finished. The research is qualitative as the analysis is based on the online response rather than quantifying the number of reactions for each TV series. As a source, X.com, formerly known as Twitter, was chosen as a platform where people write very short and concise responses that may serve as a type of reaction to what is happening in the original post. The posts will be presented both as written texts and also as posts with added pictures as tools to exhibit the reaction of a given user. Both methods are used to portray the variety of reactions that can be both strictly reactional, as well as comedic or sarcastic in response.

Another important aspect is the time frame. The challenge pertaining to all three examples varies accordingly to the time of airing. In “Wednesday” it is season one, and in the case of “Killing Eve” it is the final fourth season – the reactions and responses are from 2022, when the topic was still actual and viral in social media. However, “Sherlock” had finished a little bit earlier, in 2017. Thus, the posts are from that year because people were frustrated, so they used Twitter as a tool to express their dissatisfaction and frustration. The tweets used as examples were chosen by searching the hashtag “[name of the series] queerbaiting” and examining the responses and how they varied from one another. In the case of “Wednesday”, there was a viral post from Variety that garnered 132 comments and 2,4k retweets; therefore, most responses were taken from there. So, the time frame really depends on the time when the specific series

aired its final or most recent season. It is worth mentioning that online posts on X represent only a specific demography and fanbase, not the entire population. However, it serves as a portrayal of different responses according to whether the series has finished, what the finished product was, and so on.

The natural order would be to then research exactly how many posts are visible under a given keyword and therefore, provide quantitative data on this subject. However, X does not provide such information on their platform. Although there are external analytical tools on the Internet that allow users to discover how many tweets are under a given hashtag or keyword, most of them require a paid subscription. Several of these sources offer the option to examine statistics from the preceding seven days; however, this functionality is of limited relevance to the present analysis, given that the television series under consideration were the subject of discussion several years ago. For that reason, it is not possible to give an exact number of responses for this research. This limitation affects the ability to present how broad the issue is from an analytical standpoint. However, the research is still valid as the examples still portray the general response and the audience's perspective on the issue of queerbaiting.

Lastly, the purpose of the research was to gather data in order to study and explore the reaction that already exists on social media. It serves as an appropriate tool because it underlines the actuality of the audience's frustration and other feelings that were expressed through the posts at that time. It would be difficult to conduct different research currently due to the nature of reception, which might fluctuate over time. People tend to look at certain movies and TV series differently in retrospect, but having access to posts written when the topic was still very actual and current in fans' minds might reflect why queerbaiting is so harmful to fans who are promised the representation in their favorite TV series, and then they are met with disappointment after watching the final product.

[The phenomenon of queerbaiting

The origins of the concept are tightly connected with fan communities, where enjoyers of certain movies or TV shows started to notice the innuendos of same-sex relationships happening on the screen, which were designed to spark an interest and create a conversation among people on the Internet or in other places. The treacherous nature of this word and concept stems from the fact that it is a relatively new term that appeared in the scientific space relatively recently. Furthermore, it is still unclear whether using this tactic to promote the product, in this case movies and TV series, is socially acceptable. While some argue it starts the conversation and creates a space for the LGBT+ community,

others perceive it as harmful, taking parts from the culture and exploiting it in order to obtain profit and make the final product successful or talked about. The aim is to underline the duality of the term as a sign of the present times that might have a detrimental effect on potential viewers and might be perceived as a form of manipulation, created to cause controversies in the community, and furthermore, make a final product more popular and controversial.

The term itself is a merge between two words: “queer”, which according to an online dictionary means “of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to members of one’s own sex” (Queer definition) and “baiting” which by definition means “to persecute or exasperate with unjust, malicious, or persistent attacks” (“Bait” definition). Reading these two definitions gives a slight idea of what the term might entail in the context of luring the audience in the movie industry. Moreover, the word “bait” is what causes the conversation in the first place – people question whether producers choose to implement queerbaiting method into their marketing strategy (Tinoco, 2022).

The first aspect worth mentioning concerns the language. When one wants to find out scientific articles about queerbaiting in the Polish language, it is very challenging and might even be considered almost impossible. In the Google Scholar and EBSCO databases, the number of articles is 25 and 8, respectively. Most of them only mention queerbaiting but focus more on queer representation in movies and TV shows rather than explaining the term and developing on it. This shows a gap in research, where a new term is hard to define, and what is more, people perceive it as ambiguous. Naturally, there are more sources in the English language, but as mentioned already, the majority of them consist of authors’ private reflections and opinions rather than objective descriptions of the term with its history and public reception.

Moreover, the topic of queer identities, the discrimination and struggles that people from the LGBT+ community may be going through, has been discussed and written about for a long time. However, the written articles focused solely on the subject of queerbaiting did not start appearing until 2021, according to the EBSCO database. The first article is titled *Is stage-gay queerbaiting?: The politics of performative homoeroticism in emo bands*, published by Judith Fathallah (2021). a slightly different situation can be observed on Google Scholar – the first articles mentioning the term in the title appear in 2015, which still can be interpreted as relatively recent. What is more, the overwhelming majority of articles written on the topic of queerbaiting refer to specific examples such as K-pop bands, celebrities or popular TV series. It is very challenging to find sources that focus solely on the term itself and its reception by the viewers. Most of them describe certain relationships or public images, with interpretation and explanation provided by the author.

[The history of queerbaiting

In order to understand the term, it is essential to explain and write more extensively about its history, which is challenging to ascertain. A symbol of this is the fact that there are so many definitions of this term in scientific publications, and it is impossible to determine which one is the most accurate. What is more, one of the most fundamental questions concerning the term is its purpose – why do companies decide to use this tactic to promote a movie or TV series?

To start with, what is the definition of queerbaiting? As mentioned, there are multiple of them, underlining different aspects of its nature. It was originally defined as an unrealized queer subtext or plot used to lure queer audiences (Nordin, 2015). However, there are better definitions focusing on the marketing aspect of it, for instance:

Queerbaiting' refers to the perceived intentional practice of 'baiting' audiences with the promise of queer representation, through marketing, or subtextual hints and gestures, but ultimately failing to meet expectations (McDermott, 2021).

What it means is that queerbaiting at its basis is a form of deceit or manipulation, created to lure the audience and convince them to watch a certain movie or TV series with the appeal that there will be characters or relationships that are queer-coded. However, the end product does not portray that in any way, which leads to frustration or even a sense of betrayal from the viewers who started the watching experience with some kind of expectation, initiated by producers or creators of a movie or TV series. The phenomenon commonly referred to as *rainbow washing* has also emerged within contemporary discourse – a form of queerbaiting that refers to not only the film industry, but marketing as a whole (Abraham, 2019). For example, during Pride Month in June, some companies decide to advertise their products using a rainbow flag or slogans that might be interpreted as support for the LGBT+ community (see Fig. 1). Its purpose is to position itself with progressive society and also stay relevant among potential new customers.

Figure 1. Burger King's advertisement for Pride Month (2014)



Source: Calvario, 2022

The ambiguity of the term queerbaiting stems from the duality of its nature: first of all, the representation in the media matters. According to research done by GLAAD, which is Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (Where are..., 2005), less than 2% of characters portrayed on the screen identified as a part of the LGBT+ community, whereas in 2019, that number increased to 11% (Where are..., 2019). This is a significant change because society is mainly heteronormative, so queer representation serves as an educational tool to improve the self-esteem of young people and validate what they feel. That is why, the hope of plots connected to queer representation just to never portray them in the final product may be a cause for frustration and concern. That can lead to whole communities feeling exploited and used only as a marketing tool. The criticism comes from the need for better queer representation, not only in movies or TV shows, but also in society. However, the research on these practices is still underrepresented. Analyzing fan discussions and the online discourse, queerbaiting is a relatively negative term (Brennan, 2019). Nevertheless, it has been argued that outside of social media and queer community, this phenomenon might even go unnoticed (Nordin, 2015).

Naturally, there are a plethora of reasons why companies might want to use queerbaiting to promote their product. First, it captivates viewers who identify as part of the LGBT+ community by making sure that heterosexual audiences will not feel isolated by the depiction of queer characters. This tactic allows them to widen their audience while still being approachable and relatable to a majority. What is more, it shows that the company supports the community and gay rights, which might be important for people who want to share similar values with businesses. Even if that image is portrayed only on the surface, these actions can increase brand loyalty and a good reputation on the market.

However, queerbaiting is mostly based on subjectivity – it is challenging to determine where the line is. Some people appreciate the inclusion, whereas others view that as a calculated move from the company’s perspective in order to make more money. This debate highlights the ambiguity of the term and how many ways it can be interpreted.

The history of queerbaiting is a more treacherous subject that reflects the complex history and struggles of the LGBT+ community, which will not be a topic in this article. According to Google Trends, the term was first googled in 2004, reaching the peak of interest in 2021 when a lot of articles were written about the concept, and queerbaiting gained popularity among fans online concerning inclusivity in media (Urbank, 2023). What is interesting, “prior to its current usage, queerbaiting described a number of homophobic, mostly verbal practices” (Brennan, 2019) toward the LGBT+ community. Only later was it expanded and modified into the term it is today – a dissatisfaction with the queer representation in media. This change is essential, it symbolizes the need for a new term, caused by activities and tactics that were unfamiliar and newly discovered in a scientific space.

The last term that is worth exploring relates to queer characters often being killed throughout a movie or TV show, which is called Bury Your Gays. This phenomenon can be traced back to the AIDS crisis, during which gay men were presented in the media as pathological or criminal (Kagan, 2018). It led to a harmful stereotype that queer movements try to break and replace with positive images.

The trope of killing or punishing LGBTQ characters is often linked to the historical censorship of explicitly depicting or endorsing ‘perverse acts’ in literature and on screen in Great Britain and the United States (Hulan, 2017).

This trope is especially harmful for queer communities because it can be perceived as a stereotype that gay people do not deserve to have happy endings at the end. What started as a way to have representation in the media is now recognized as a strictly negative and damaging tactic.

To sum up, the history of the term queerbaiting is a rather complex and ambiguous one – just like the term itself. It started as a homophobic remark, aimed at the LGBT+ community, and later evolved and expanded into a marketing tool designed to lure audiences identifying as queer into thinking that their product has similar plots, without presenting meaningful portrayals of it on the screen. Nowadays, it is not only used by the movie industry but also by different companies to represent surface-level alignment with the community in order to make more money from it, which leads to growing frustration and opposition on the Internet. More and more people online express their dissatisfaction and call out major companies that mislead the audience by creating seemingly inclusive products. The whole term shows the paradox – for such

a long time, the LGBT+ community has been fighting for genuine and authentic portrayal in the media, highlighting the struggles and homophobia that they had to go through just to encounter businesses that manipulate them by advertising their product with tropes that do not reflect the final product.

Analysis of selected TV series accused of queerbaiting

As a result of the term queerbaiting being so controversial and ambiguous in the Internet environment, there are movies and TV series that are discussed by fans periodically. It might be due to the topic raised by one of the characters or general demeanors that seem suspicious to some. It is crucial to remember that most accusations are based on people's perception, and there is a possibility that a given movie or TV series did not try to use queerbaiting as a strategy to lure the audience. However, when it comes to certain TV series, the arguments are stronger and appear convincing to many people.

“Wednesday” – Netflix

To begin with, it is fundamental to explain the general plot of each TV series that will be analyzed in this article. The first one, „Wednesday”, was created by Netflix, with its first season being released in 2022. The TV series serves as a part of the universe of “The Addams Family”, a supernatural black comedy created in 1964 by David Levy (Goldstein, 1991). It follows the title character, Wednesday Addams – a young girl who, after being expelled from school after nearly killing a classmate, is sent to Nevermore Academy, which is a school for outcasts. There, she attempts to solve a murder mystery with the help of her new friends while trying to master her psychic ability and mature as a young teenager (Wednesday summary). The series was a great success – within three weeks it became the third most-watched English-language Netflix series (Furdyk, 2022). Naturally, with growing popularity comes a strong fanbase online and online visibility since people want to express their opinions, share theories, and find other fans who may share similar views as them. That is why it was a huge controversy when Netflix released one of many posters promoting the first season (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2. The promotional poster for “Wednesday”

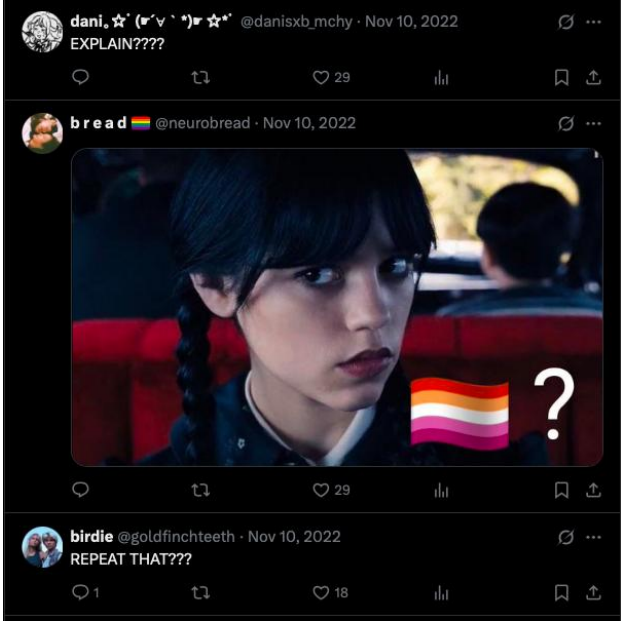


Source: @vulture (X.com), accessed April 19, 2025

The post went viral immediately, receiving a mixed reaction from the fans. The poster clearly suggests that the titular character might be a part of the LGBT+ community, which is not mentioned or even suggested in the TV series itself. Wednesday Addams is involved romantically with two boys and has a friend who is a girl, but the creators portray the relationship as a deep friendship and nothing more than that. Nevertheless, it is crucial to mention that at the time of writing this article, the TV series was not finished, with a second season being released in September 2025, and third being announced.

After the viral post on X.com, some fans seemed genuinely thrilled and excited about the possibility of a queer relationship taking place in a very famous and iconic, in terms of gothic cinematography, universe (see Fig. 3). Many fans speculated how the producers were going to introduce this topic to a huge audience worldwide.

Figure 3. Comments under “Variety” post



Source: X.com¹

There would not be any exaggeration in saying that people online definitely craved a queer representation in such an iconic universe. Wednesday is a character portrayed as very sarcastic and off-putting in terms of her style and manner of speaking. What is more, in both “The Addams Family” movies from 1991 and 1993, Wednesday is not interested in romantic relationships with boys, rejecting their advances throughout both movies. That is why many fans thought it would be a very smart idea for the creators of the TV series to explain that by introducing Wednesday Addams as a part of the LGBT+ community. All the constituent elements were already present: people online already theorized about the sexual orientation of the titular character, and it was already known that the series would feature Wednesday’s roommate Enid Sinclair – a girl who is seemingly the total opposite of the dark, gothic aesthetic that the Addams family is known for. However, during the plot of the TV series, the two girls grow friendly towards each other, which would be the perfect material for an “enemies to lovers” trope that is so popular in many movies, TV series, and even books.

¹ Examples of other written responses on X.com: “Pleaseeere be true” @hotbon79 [original text]; “HOLD ON” @mavellarke; “WHAT, EVERYONE MOVED” @SULEMIO; “WHAAAAT” @brinamonalisa.

Queerbaiting as a strategy...

On the contrary, it is worth mentioning that some fans were suspicious of this tactic from the creators, doubting whether it is true or a deliberate marketing method of Netflix (see Fig. 4). The reason for that is straightforward – there were already numerous occasions when viewers were promised similar storylines in different series, only to feel exploited later. Therefore, the clear uncertainty is rooted in repeated experiences. One can easily see how significant of a mark queerbaiting has left on the fans – they already developed critical lenses through which they can predict whether they are being queerbaited or not. What was once just a theory online, perhaps an unintentional narrative from the creators that was speculated on, is now being called out online by many fanbases. Fans actively interpret and hold the producers accountable for their unethical methods of promoting their products. In this context, fans grow frustrated and demand transparency in a way from major companies, which reflects the larger critique of the movie industry as a whole. The desire to watch meaningful queer relationships happening on screen resulted in active participation in calling out the creators by people online.

Figure 4. People suspecting “Wednesday” of queerbaiting



Source: X.com

This response is already treacherous for a number of reasons. Firstly, “Wednesday” is a modern TV series. At the time of writing, it has only one season that aired in 2022, with a second one to premiere in 2025, confirmed by Netflix (Romero, 2025). It is probably the main reason why there is not a lot of discourse regarding the harmful consequences of their clear queerbaiting. People are still hopeful, expecting that possibly this plot will be implemented in seasons to come. It is still ambiguous whether the creators released the controversial poster to give a sort of promise to fans worldwide, a confirmation of what people can expect to happen to Wednesday in the series or is it just a marketing strategy to lure the audience, especially from the LGBT+ community to create buzz online and watch the final product in the end. “Wednesday” is an extremely popular show, and introducing a queer relationship into the plot would be a huge relief and satisfaction for those who are already excited and hopeful about the possible outcome of the story.

To sum up, “Wednesday” is an appropriate example to explain the fans’ reception of a TV series that is still airing. There is still a possibility that the promise made by the series’ creators will come true. However, the blatant provocation coming from the poster is worrisome. Nowadays, people demand transparency and accountability in such topics, which is definitely a marker of change in the movie industry. This tactic may not be tolerated anymore, and the attempt to attract the queer audience with a possibility of LGBT+ representation might harm the final product more than benefit it in the long run.

“Killing Eve” – BBC America

The second TV series that will be analyzed is “Killing Eve”, a British spy thriller produced by Sid Gentle Films for BBC America and BBC Three. The series premiered in 2018, with the final, fourth season premiering in 2022. It follows a British intelligence investigator, Eve Polastri, tasked with capturing a dangerous psychopathic assassin, Villanelle. As the story progresses, the two women develop a strange relationship that is both passionate and obsessive at times. Furthermore, the nature of the relationship is what seemed controversial for fans worldwide. The story is challenging to interpret because the viewer observes two vastly different women performing a job that is the opposite of what each does from a legal standpoint, and somehow, they both hate and desire one another. The controversies arose because of the promotional campaign launched by the BBC (see Fig. 5 and 6).

Figure 5. Promotional poster for “Killing Eve”



Source: Killing Eve: season two

Figure 6. Promotional poster for “Killing Eve” season 2



Source: Killing Eve: season two

As can be seen, with the release of the second season, the BBC decided to launch a promotional campaign with very simple yet suggestive posters. There were displayed in various places in the city, with sentences such as “Has anyone seen my girlfriend?” or “I’m going to make you sorry, baby”. This indicates that the creators want the viewers to believe that the relationship between the two women is romantic, with the hashtag #crazy4Eve on all posters. This was met with mixed reactions from the fans, as the series was already facing accusations of queerbaiting online. What is more, for a long time, “Killing Eve” was regarded as one of the most popular examples of queerbaiting in the media. For its first two seasons, the creators of “Killing Eve” really enjoyed playing with

the idea of two women who do not know if their relationship is rooted in obsession and hatred or passionate love. It was apparent in the sexual tension between them or in their interaction. That is why it was pretty natural that, over time, fans grew frustrated over the constant teasing and suggestions that this series might feature a lesbian relationship. The constant “will they, won’t they”, which is a term used to describe a “coupling between two people who share romantic chemistry, but whose relationship is threatened by uncertainty, external obstacles” (“Will they, won’t they”) used to be a very controversial topic in various social media platforms. Many fans wondered whether the relationship would go in any direction or leave the viewers dissatisfied until the end. All the theories and questions were finally answered in the final, fourth season of the TV series, ending after almost 4 years of a heated debate on why the creators decided to tease their fans for so long with little to no explanation up until the finale. In the dramatic, last episode of the series, the two women confess their love to each other and, just a few minutes later, one of them is killed by an unknown assassin, leaving the other one alone. This left the fans extremely frustrated and almost lied to (see Fig. 7).

Figure 7. The response of fans for “Killing Eve” finale



Source: X.com

Queerbaiting as a strategy...

The interpretation is deeply connected to the *Bury Your Gays* that was explained in the previous chapter. After a very long time of hunting each other, constantly looking for each other, they meet and share a kiss. However, there is no happy ending for them either way, which naturally angered the fans. The series, airing its first season in 2018, has already not avoided the topics of sexual identity and questioning what the motive of each of the characters is. At first, the series was very popular; fans seemed intrigued and enjoyed the little hints given by the producers. However, with each season, there was a growing frustration and discussion on whether the audience was being queerbaited. It could be best observed by the positive reviews of each season. On [rottentomatoes.com](https://www.rottentomatoes.com), a popular website for critics, season 1 of “*Killing Eve*” received 96% of positive reviews, whereas the final season got only 52% of positive reviews (*Killing Eve*). This metric portrays how a TV series that started very promising and exciting for viewers turned into a tiring and frustrating final product.

On the contrary, some people try to defend “*Killing Eve*”, stating that not every relationship needs to be physical to be romantic. Some people argue that Eve and Villanelle’s passion and obsession with each other can still be regarded as queer.

Figure 8. A tweet about the queerbaiting in “*Killing Eve*”



Source: X.com

While the argument has its merits, it seems to avoid the fact that the posters, serving as a promotional campaign for the series, describe a relationship that is clearly physical and sexual. What is more, in the last episode, the two women kissed, with one of them dying in the arms of the other. That implies that their relationship was not platonic, even though the creators avoided showing any of it. It is the reason why fans online are upset by the ending and the TV series as a whole – the ultimate objective of the producers remains ambiguous. Some may even argue that the ending was created to please the fans. For years, people complained about the uncertainty, accusing the company of queerbaiting their viewers. It is possible that the team responsible wanted to disprove the accusations by creating a bittersweet ending. However, this method failed, and there is still a clear dissatisfaction regarding the TV series.

To sum up, “Killing Eve” is a very treacherous example of queerbaiting. On paper, the creators provided a queer relationship in the finale of the series between Eve and Villanelle. Nonetheless, after years of portraying an unclear dynamic between the two women, it was not enough for the fans to finish the series on such a disappointing note. People felt exploited by this unethical portrayal, and that is why the series still sparks discussion in terms of whether the finale was the main plan from the creators’ perspective or was it a last-minute decision to please the viewers at home. Either way, it was proved unsuccessful, and what was once a very quality, highly respected TV show left people upset and disappointed.

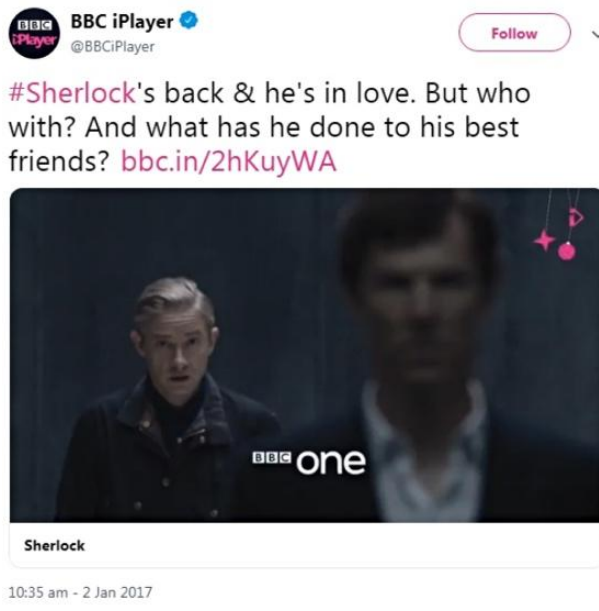
“Sherlock” – BBC Wales

The last TV series that will be analyzed in terms of the accusations of queerbaiting is “Sherlock”, a British crime drama with elements of comedy, following a detective, Sherlock Holmes, a very well-known character from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s “Sherlock Holmes” detective stories. The series premiered in 2010, with the finale of season four airing in 2017. “Sherlock” aired on the BBC, a British network, but got popular worldwide shortly after. Episodes of the series served as individual stories, depicting different crimes happening mostly in London, very often inspired by the source material. Sherlock is a detective, helping the police to capture the culprit, while Dr. John Watson is his partner in solving the crimes. Like the other two examples, the series received praise for the high quality of the production and acting performance by Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman. Throughout the duration of the series, many people grew suspicious of the intensity and nature of the relationship between the two main characters. Some people perceived it as a friendship, with the intense nature stemming from how antisocial the

Queerbaiting as a strategy...

character of Sherlock was, while others were looking for more in the relationship between the two gentlemen. Furthermore, the series sometimes made jokes about how close Sherlock and Watson were, humorously stating that they were a couple. However, the most controversies came out as a result of online posts promoting the final season published by BBC, the network responsible for creating “Sherlock” which played with the idea of the two main characters being romantically involved (see Fig. 9).

Figure 9. Post on X.com made by BBC

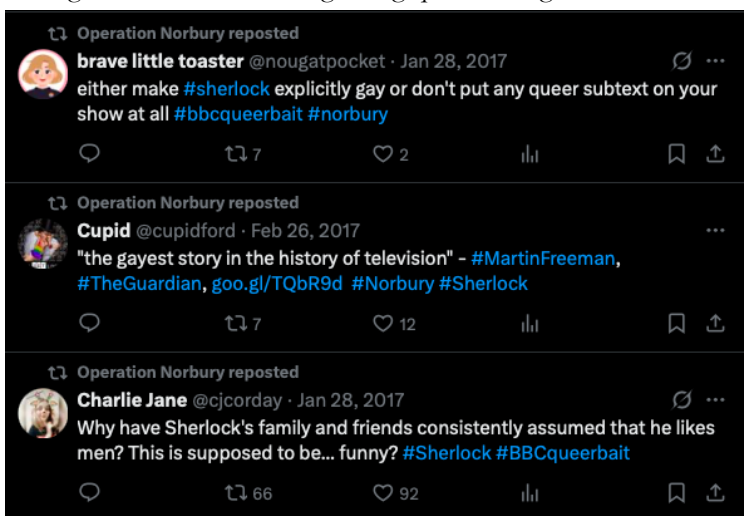


Source: Romantic tropes...

Based on that post, one can assume that the creators of the series want the viewers to believe that they will finally get a plot where Sherlock Holmes and John Watson end up together. However, it did not correlate with the actual storyline in the series, which made the audience feel exploited and manipulated. The frustration was that massive because the creators themselves had no shame in admitting that “flirting with homoeroticism in *Sherlock* is much more interesting” (Romantic tropes...). This situation leaves the fanbase puzzled as to why the creators opted for including homoerotic humour in the first place, while the final storyline ultimately disregards such implications. This blatant disregard for the LGBT+ community that at that time, already struggled with ethical and respectful depiction of queer relationships in movies and TV series, makes

the example that much irksome and compelling at the same time. The creators of the series exacerbated the ambiguity by releasing highly suggestive promotional materials and openly acknowledging their enjoyment in provoking the audience's speculation regarding their potential queer subtext of the friendship between the two main characters. After airing the final fourth season of the series, fans were visibly upset, accusing the producers of giving them false hope and, therefore, disrespecting the viewers. An account on X.com, called "Operation Norbury" was active during this period and sought to draw attention to the issue by reposting negative comments made by fans online.

Figure 10. Comments regarding queerbaiting in "Sherlock"



Source: X.com

What is especially compelling is the second post made by @cupidford, quoting the actor portraying dr. Watson, who describes the series as "the gayest story in the history of television". It is a bizarre statement for a TV series that had no queer characters in the plot, both characters having female love interests during the duration of the series, and also was accused of queerbaiting their viewers. People online felt disrespected by these types of statements made not only by actors but by the creators themselves and demanded answers from them and the BBC. However, the producers never addressed the issue and comments made by people, making "Sherlock" one of the most popular examples of queerbaiting in television.

To sum up, "Sherlock" can be regarded as one of the earliest TV series that created a notable discussion online regarding queerbaiting, based on the marketing campaign. Naturally, there were series where people suspected that

the creators tried to give false hope to the fans, but it is hard to find one that almost openly admitted it, both by marketing “Sherlock” as a love story between the two main characters and the statements made by people responsible for the screenplay and direction of the series. To this day, there are still blogs and social media posts that wonder why creators chose to go this route, which left the LGBT+ community feeling exploited and lied to by the promise of a modern Sherlock being a queer character.

To recapitulate, the three TV series chosen to be analyzed in this article have one thing in common – at some point during their airing were accused of queerbaiting their audience. What is interesting is that they were all released at different times. “Sherlock” was the first one, airing in 2010, with “Wednesday” being the last, airing in 2022. The reason for choosing them is because of the marketing campaign that was completely misleading to the potential audience. There are many more examples of movies and TV shows that are questioned similarly; nevertheless, the creators themselves never say publicly whether that was intentional or not. As a result, there could be an argument that the accusations from the fanbase do not have a reflection in reality. Therefore, they do not suit the purpose of the article; what is being analyzed is a deliberate marketing campaign aimed at attracting members of the LGBT+ community, with no end result being seen in the final product.

Comparative analysis

The analysis of social media posts has proven that queerbaiting is a very divisive and subjective topic. It is almost impossible to confirm whether the creators of a movie or TV series wrote certain characters deliberately to have fans question and speculate on their sexual identity and therefore, create an online visibility regarding the final product. As it was shown, many fans demand answers from networks responsible for airing the series, but it seems not realistic, as it would greatly affect their credibility and reputation worldwide. That is why the subject of queerbaiting is controversial – because it is based on people’s opinions and theories. Nonetheless, there are movies and TV series that are accused of it more than others, which may be a suitable indicator in this case.

Out of the three examples presented in this article, two of them are considered remakes, which means “to make a new film that has a story and title similar to an old one” (“Remake” definition). What it indicates is that there is an already existing fanbase, people who watched the original movies or TV series and are familiar with the universe and certain characters. For that reason, there is a set of expectations that people put on the producers, simply because

they want their favorites to still fulfill their desires regarding the original. Perhaps that could be an explanation why there is such a heated discussion online about “Sherlock” and “Wednesday”. Fans worldwide have already connected with their characters, have a certain idea about their appearance, behavior, way of expressing themselves, and in some cases, even sexual orientation. For example, there are countless articles online theorizing whether Wednesday Addams is a queer character because of her outsider nature and a general lack of interest towards boys. With that in mind, when Netflix announced a new TV series focusing primarily on the teenage years of Wednesday, a lot of people wondered if the creators would be willing to portray a very iconic character in a world of gothic horror and dark comedy, as someone who is a part of the LGBT+ community. Naturally, it would be a clever move in terms of representation, for example. The fans’ dreams were later fueled by Netflix itself by releasing posters during the marketing campaign of the series that would suggest that years of theories online might become a reality. Probably that is why so many fans express their dissatisfaction and accuse the producers of queerbaiting. This effect is easily discernible in the case of “Sherlock”, given that the series represents a finalized narrative. In “Wednesday” there is still an argument that maybe screenwriters wanted to keep the plot of Wednesday’s sexuality for later seasons, but “Sherlock” already aired its final season in 2017, so the fans must accept that they were probably queerbaited by the creators. What is more, the series is likely to be the earliest examples of queerbaiting in TV series that are so blatant. Naturally, there were others accused of misleading their audience with the promise of queer characters, but there were mainly theories and speculations, nothing to base the accusations on, because the creators were not eager to comment publicly on this topic. “Sherlock” was one of the first, where producers had no shame in admitting their actions were deliberate. It can be proven both by their interviews and the marketing campaign, where it was indicated that the main character is in love, which propelled fans to the conviction that Sherlock and Dr. Watson will be involved with each other romantically. It did not happen, so all the suggestions were created to appeal to the viewers, which is unethical and shows a great disrespect towards the LGBT+ community that values and searches for representation in pop culture.

The case of “Killing Eve” is also noteworthy and can be best described as unusual. The first conclusion, based on the analysis of the series, is that both “Sherlock” and “Killing Eve” were produced by the BBC, specifically their American and British branches. It makes one wonder why, after a substantial backlash connected to queerbaiting regarding “Sherlock” did not discourage a huge company like the BBC from premiering another series with a controversial relationship, this time between two women. Even more interesting is

the fact that the first season of “Killing Eve” aired only a year after the finale of “Sherlock”. It could be possible that the online visibility works, and the BBC saw an opportunity in making a profit by queerbaiting their viewers. Naturally, there is no proof or research on whether this method is cost-effective for companies, but the timeline is certainly questionable.

As it was already mentioned, the series was accused of queerbaiting, practically since the worldwide premiere of the first season, due to unusual dynamic and chemistry between the two main characters. Throughout the entire airing of the series, people online complained that the screenwriters play with their viewers, making them believe that Eve and Villanelle are in love, just to never actually show it on screen. Finally, after four years of heated discussion online, the two women kissed, confirming their romantic relationship, just for one of them to be killed by an unknown assassin. It is a bittersweet ending, which raises a question of whether it was planned from the beginning. When asked about the finale, the showrunner, Sally Woodward Gentle, said: “We sort of knew what was going to happen quite early on, but we were open to something else sort of declaring itself, but it never really changed” (Rosario, 2022). Based on this statement, it can be assumed that the tragic conclusion to the story was one of the possible scenarios. However, one could argue that the screenwriters saw the backlash online and wanted to, perhaps, show the viewers that they were right about the nature of the relationship between the two characters, with subsequently keeping the drama and high stakes of the series’ plot. This aspect was never commented on, but the fact that the creators waited until the last moment to portray the romantic connection between Eve and Villanelle is a rather disappointing end to the story.

To sum up, there are clearly certain similarities between the three TV series. Firstly, two out of them are focused on a character from an already existing universe, both in terms of books and movies, which already has a fanbase with specific expectations. Secondly, two series out of the three examples were aired by the same broadcaster, the BBC, which may open a discussion on whether queerbaiting is a profitable and effective marketing campaign. On the contrary, each series presented the relationship differently, connected with the time of airing. “Wednesday” is the only one that is still in production; therefore, there is a possibility that producers will listen to the viewers and present the main character as a part of the LGBT+ community, following the backlash, but also the excitement expressed by the fans online. “Killing Eve” finished airing and was a prime example of queerbaiting in the movie industry, which is often mentioned online regarding the topic. However, the creators proved people wrong by portraying a queer relationship in the finale of season four, which was not enough for the fans, and the episode became the lowest rated one out of the

whole series with 3.5 stars out of ten on IMDb.com. This fact, connected with previously mentioned comparison of season 1 and season 4 on rottentomatoes.com, may signal that queerbaiting as a marketing strategy may be flawed in many ways, and the temporary online visibility around a TV series might, consequently, tarnish its reputation and quality. Lastly, the creators of “Sherlock” very visibly enjoyed playing with the idea of queer relationship between the two male characters. Nevertheless, this was never actually portrayed in the plot of the series, besides a few suggestive dialogues, which only confirms the producers’ awareness of the fact that viewers speculate on the nature of the relationship between Sherlock and Dr. Watson, which probably indicates that “Sherlock” is the most visible example of queerbaiting out of the three presented in the article.

Conclusion

What is essential to understand, the article and the arguments are not to pressure the creators of movies and TV series to explicitly declare the sexual identity of each character they are portraying on the screen. Similarly to real people, those written on paper may be on the spectrum, and it is not necessary to state it sometimes. However, the issue arises when producers deliberately try to lure audiences, especially those from the LGBT+ community, by giving them false hope of representation. It is especially upsetting because there are so few movies and TV series that respectfully and ethically portray queer characters in the plot. That is why so many people who struggle or question their sexuality are searching for a piece of media that would maybe comfort or reassure them. What is seen by the major companies as an adequate marketing method is, in fact, an exploitation of the community that is already tormented and underappreciated in the real world. Those tactics are potentially harmful to many people, as they express online.

In the long term, this newly developed mistrust reinforces the thought that queer representation is only needed when it is profitable. It denies the idea of diversity and intensifies the level of alienation among queer people, while showing viewers that empathy and the value in expressing oneself are very crucial foundations.

To address the research problems established in the introduction of the article, it can be deduced that most of them were answered throughout the paper. For instance, it was established how queerbaiting is defined in the literature and why it is controversial as a marketing strategy. Moreover, how it can be contextualized in marketing with a different term – rainbow washing. However, it is still ambiguous to strictly determine what is the relationship between queerbaiting tactics and audience reception. While this article proved majorly

negative feedback due to the feeling of being exploited and deceived coming from the viewers, it is crucial to mention that the topic has not been exhausted. It is a subject for further research: what people in real life think about this method. a particularly effective approach to this issue would involve conducting a survey and ascertain students' perspectives on the issue. That would probably provide more unbiased and objective opinions regarding queerbaiting, because most people online who critique the TV series are fans, so naturally, they might feel more attached to it and consequently, feel disappointed when their favorite relationships presented on-screen end up being a marketing strategy. By comparing these two points of view, the study could better determine whether the issue is seen universally or is limited solely to fan communities.

The media holds a very strong power; by assimilating and teaching viewers the idea that being different is perfectly normal, it reinforces the way people behave in the real world. That is why it is fundamental to portray genuine relationships and give the representation that so many people need. Queerbaiting contradicts this notion, and it is beneficial to hold the creators accountable, make it clear to them that what is needed are authentic and honest queer relationships in movies and TV shows.

Bibliography

- Abeer, Mohamed (2023). Social Media Content Analysis Tools: Unleashing The Power Of Data. In: *AIMtechnologies* [online]. Accessed May 10, 2025, from: <https://www.aimtechnologies.co/2023/07/30/social-media-content-analysis-tools-unleashing-the-power-of-data/>
- Abraham, Amelia (2019). Why Culture's 'Queerbaiting' Leaves me Cold. In: *The Guardian* [online]. Accessed April 2025, from: <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2019/jun/29/why-cultures-queerbaiting-leaves-me-cold-amelia-abraham>
- "Bait" Definition. In: *Merriam-Webster* [online]. Accessed August 12, 2024, from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bait>
- Brennan, Joseph (2019). *Queerbaiting and fandom*. University of Iowa.
- Budzinski, Oliver & Gaenssle, Sophia (2018). The economics of social media (super-)stars: an empirical investigation of stardom and success on YouTube. *Journal of Media Economics*, 31 (3–4), 75–95.
- Calvario, Liz (2022). Burger King Austria ad agency says it 'messed up' with same-bun 'Pride Whopper' campaign. In: *today.com* [online]. Accessed February 26, 2025, from: <https://www.today.com/food/restaurants/burger-king-austria-ad-agency-apologizes-pride-whopper-rcna33594>
- Fathallah, Judith (2021). Is Stage-Gay Queerbaiting? The Politics of Performative Homosexuality in Emo Bands. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 33 (1), 121–136. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2021.33.1.121>
- FAQ. In: *Space Time* [online]. Accessed April 15, 2023, from: <https://www.pbsspacetime.com/faq>
- Furdyk, Brent (2022). "Wednesday" sets viewing record, officially Netflix's third most-watched English-language series ever. In: *IMDb* [online]. Accessed April 19, 2025, from: <https://www.imdb.com/news/ni63865078/>

- Goldstein, Patrick (1991). COVER STORY: Meet the New Addams Family: The weird brood from Charles Addams cartoons and '60s TV is back in a big-name, \$30-million movie. *Los Angeles Times*. Archived from the original on November 15, 2020 [online]. Accessed April 19, 2025, from: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-03-31-ca-2330-story.html>
- Hulan, Haley (2017). Bury Your Gays: History, usage, and context. *McNair Scholars Journal*, 21 (1), 6.
- Dalewska-Greń, Hanna (2002). *Języki Słowiańskie*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PWN.
- Kagan, Dion (2018). *Positive Images: Gay Men and HIV/AIDS in the Culture of Post Crisis*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Killing Eve: Season Two (2021). In: *BUILDHOLLYWOOD* [online]. Accessed April 19, 2025, from: <https://www.buildhollywood.co.uk/work/killing-eve-season-two/>
- Killing Eve. In: *Rotten Tomatoes* [online]. Accessed April 19, 2025, from: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/killing_eve
- Marich, Robert (2005). *Marketing to Moviegoers: a Handbook of Strategies Used by Major Studios and Independents*. Milton: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780080491776>
- Marich, Robert (2013). *Marketing to Moviegoers: a Handbook of Strategies and Tactics*, 3 ed. Southern Illinois University Press.
- McDermott, Michael (2021). The (broken) promise of queerbaiting: Happiness and futurity in politics of queer representation. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24 (5), 844–859. Accessed February 26, 2025, from: <https://journals-1sagepub-1com136p1xi8u0696.han3.lib.uni.lodz.pl/doi/pdf/10.1177/1367877920984170>
- Nordin, Emma (2015). From Queer Reading to Queerbaiting: The battle over the polysemic text and the power of hermeneutics [online]. Master's Thesis, Stockholm University. Accessed February 26, 2025, from: <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:839802/fulltext01.pdf>
- “Queer” definition. In: *Merriam Webster* [online]. Accessed August 12, 2024, from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/queer>
- “Remake” definition. In: *Cambridge Dictionary* [online]. Accessed August 12, 2024, from: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/remake#google_vignette
- Romantic tropes and Queerbaiting in BBC's Sherlock (2019). In: *Blog groovymutant* [online]. Accessed April 19, 2025, from: <https://groovymutant.wordpress.com/2019/06/20/romantic-tropes-and-queerbaiting-in-bbcs-sherlock/>
- Romero, Ariana (2025). “Wednesday” renewed for a woeful season 2. In: *Netflix Tudum* [online]. Accessed April 19, 2025, from: <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/wednesday-season-2-renewed>
- Rosario, Alexandra Del (2022). “Killing Eve” series finale: EP talks ‘degree of inevitability’ behind [spoiler]’s death; spinoff plans. In: *Deadline* [online]. Accessed April 19, 2025, from: <https://deadline.com/2022/04/killing-eve-series-finale-recap-ep-villanelle-dies-spinoffs-1234992692/>
- Tinoco, Francisca (2022). A very queer riddle: Breaking down Hollywood’s queerbaiting problem. *Cinema*, 18–28. Accessed November 10, 2024, from: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/reader/46b8eb6daccf18e7322b25adbe0f925fc7af56ce>
- Urbank, Lily (2023). *Queerbaiting and Its Consequences* [online]. Accessed November 10, 2024, from: <https://soar.suny.edu/entities/publication/f25b24b2-8476-47aa-bdd7-e5d9bd1cf728>
- Wednesday summary. In: *IMDb* [online]. Accessed April 19, 2025, from: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13443470/plotsummary/>
- Where We Are On TV: GLADD’s annual report on LGBTQ inclusion (2005). In: *GLADD* [online]. Accessed November 10, 2024, from: <https://www.glaad.org>

Where Are We On TV: GLADD's annual report on LGBTQ inclusion (2019). In: *GLADD* [online]. Accessed November 10, 2024, from: <https://www.glaad.org>
“Will-they-won't-they” definition. In: *Wiktionary, the free dictionary* [online]. Accessed April 19, 2025], from: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/will-they-won%27t-they>

Queerbaiting jako strategia budowania wizerunku produktu marki na przykładzie przemysłu filmowego

ABSTRAKT: Artykuł koncentruje się na zdefiniowaniu terminu „queerbaiting” jako strategii marketingowej na przykładach trzech seriali telewizyjnych: „Wednesday”, „Killing Eve” i „Sherlock” oraz analizie postów opublikowanych na X.com, w których fani online wyrażali swoje poglądy na ten temat. Próba znalezienia kompletnej definicji jest problematyczna, ponieważ to stosunkowo nowe pojęcie, które pojawiło się w literaturze akademickiej niedawno. Praca podkreśla problem zdefiniowania terminu, ale także rozszerza go na „rainbow washing” – strategię stosowaną nie tylko w przemyśle filmowym, ale w szeroko rozumianym marketingu, mający na celu zwabienie klientów poprzez wspieranie akcji na rzecz społeczności LGBT+.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *queerbaiting*, marketing, seriale telewizyjne, *rainbow washing*, LGBT+