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“WE’RE HERE, WE’RE QUEER!”

Exploring queer narratives in the series *Sense8*.

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>This thesis focuses on queer representations of the characters in the TV series <i>Sense8</i> including two gay characters Lito and Nomi. The aim of the research is to define how the notion of <i>queer</i> is defined in the series. Three specific scenes have been selected for a closer look at sci-fi queer sex portrayal while narratives of the two seasons of the series are chosen for identifying queer representations and themes.</p> <p>The data is examined through the perspectives of queer theory, transhuman theory and previous research on queerness on TV and in yaoi/manga. The study is carried out using narrative analysis. This approach allows the thesis to determine reoccurring themes, character representations and development.</p> <p>The findings have shown that there is an established direct connection between the notions of <i>queer</i> and <i>transhuman</i>. The study has identified representations of queer normalisation, the closet and coming out, heterosexual plot and multisexual sex, diversity and inclusivity, traditional and fluid queerness. The thesis has shown that the series attempts to reimagine the default of sexuality while still sustaining heteronormativity.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

In recent years there has been more and more research conducted in the field of queer studies including those focusing on different media. However, even nowadays literature or video materials including movies and TV-series where a queer person would be a main character are not abundant. From this perspective, the series *Sense 8* is unique, since there are eight main characters, each with their own story, who can be considered as queer. The thesis considers them queer for a variety of reasons, including the fact that they represent the other, not ordinary and engage in sexual activities with people of different genders.

Based on my analysis, the series carries social relevance; it can be argued that the showrunners intended for the series to encourage creators of new media to be bolder and push the boundaries. Clearly, the findings indicate that another aim of this series is to communicate through certain narratives that queerness is normal, to draw the attention of the public to the issue. In the ideal world queerness must be normal, it does not need attention, explanation or acceptance.

The society might not be ready to overcome its boundaries and social norms. Some parts of the world might be more open-minded about sexuality and identity proven with widespread celebration of gay prides, legislation of gay marriage in parts of Northern, Southern Americas, Europe, Australia and Asia (Taiwan), changes in adoption rights which are a step in a direction of wider equality and tolerance. Nonetheless, other parts of the world still struggle to accept anything that does not fall into heteronormative agenda. The recent events of anti-gay rhetoric include shooting of an openly gay artist in Puerto Rico in 2019, the rise of far-right groups against equality march in Poland in 2019 and much more.

One of the gloomiest events in Russia will be discussed in more detail as one example of LGBTQ+ phobia in the world. In 2018 Russia saw the creation of an ominous website established by a group that call themselves “Saw”. It is a reference to the movie of the same title where characters are forced to play a horrid deadly game. The headline of the website said “Chechnya Comeback” reminding about hundreds of queer people tortured and killed in a series of purges in the region. The sole purpose of the website was to instigate violence by disclosing a list of gay activists to kill which included their names, addresses and photos. Elena Grigorieva was one of the people on that list. She was an activist, came out as bisexual and received many death threats. When her name was posted on the website the threats became more violent and together with other activists, she managed to close down the website. On 18<sup>th</sup> July she posted a status on Facebook asking police to find the creators of the website. Two days later she was killed. Authorities do not agree to examine the connection between her murder and the “Saw” group or to investigate the website at all. However, this website is one of many problems gay people face in everyday life in the country. Gay dating apps are not safe to use as you can be hunted down, blackmailed, tortured or worse. There is antigay propaganda law prohibiting not only gay prides, but also any symbolics and the spread of any vital information. (Hall, 2019)

At times and in places like this, *Sense8* brings new hope to millions of LGBTQ+ people across the globe. It demonstrates and showcases queerness, including homosexuality, in positive light which can provide comfort, raise tolerance and acceptance and educating the population.

The *Sense8* series (Netflix, 2015-2018) was met mostly positively and with approval (IMDb, 2018). It has a rating of 8.3 out of 10 on IMDb (2018) Internet Movie

Database. Some of the reviews call it “great series”, “best series of 2015”, “Even better than I hoped it would be” and many more (IMDb, 2018). It was nominated twice for Primetime Emmy Awards, twice for GLAAD Media Awards, and it is the winner of GLAAD Media Awards for Outstanding Drama Series in 2016 (IMDb, 2018). The series was hugely popular with the viewers binge-watching episodes instead of taking it slowly (Netflix, 2016). Binge-watching is understood as a practice of watching several episodes of the series, if not the whole season or the series itself very quickly one after another. The binge-watching might be because it is a crazy combination of heterosexual, homosexual, even multisexual sex, orgies, queerness and sci-fi.

It is worth mentioning that the thesis unfolds a dilemma constructed in the series. The society imposes a heteronormative order, the alt-right movements are on the rise globally, non-mainstream sexual identities are discriminated, oppressed and opposed. Sense8 is a fresh new series with a unique style, narratives and conception. It advances and pushes stories of queerness, tries to reestablish the norms of sexuality and sex, blurs the boundaries between them. However, in the end is it all-embracing or does it uphold heteronormativity?

## **1.2 Research aims and questions**

The **research aim** of the thesis is to find out how the notion of queer is defined in the series. The study raises and answers the question of what is achieved with the notions of queerness in the series.

The **research questions** of the thesis which will be enriched in later chapters are:

1. What are the ways the main characters are represented (in particular as queer) in the narratives of the series? What themes in respect to queerness emerge in the series? What tools do the showrunners utilize to build the characters' queer identities?
2. How is the main characters' queerness connected to their abilities, and what do the showrunners achieve with these connections?

### **1.3 Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis continues with chapter two introducing the key concepts connected with the thesis. Firstly, it introduces the concept of queer studies and identity. After that it presents the theory about pansexuality and non-binary sexual identities. Additionally, posthumanism, transhumanism and science fiction are discussed. Finally, the study discusses previous research of queer identity representations in TV series, yaoi and manga.

Chapter three concentrates on and explains narrative analysis which is used for the analysis in the thesis. Moreover, it introduces the data. It describes what the series is about, gives general information about the characters, their abilities and depicts the three chosen scenes as well as reasons why they were chosen.

Chapter four analyses the representations and narratives of the queer characters. The final chapter concludes the thesis, discusses the analysis, findings, lays out limitations to the paper, implications and suggestions for future research.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Setting a scene for queer studies

First, this chapter introduces the main term in the paper – “queer”. Previously the word “queer” was used to describe people, who are attracted to the same sex, and it highlighted the differences from the norms. Nowadays, the term has widely broadened.

Halperin (1997) argues that in contrast to gay identity that is intentionally manifested through confirmation, queer identity does not require any assertive force. In fact, “queer” does not denote a definite entity, it establishes its definition through its contrast to the norm (Halperin, 1997). However, what society considers as a norm does not really exist – there are so many variances (sexuality, gender, other identities) that it can even be questioned if “queer” truly stands in clear opposition to the so called norm. Instead, people put it into opposition to position themselves.

Queer is denoted as anything that is conflicting with and contradictory to the standard, the common, the conventional, the prevalent. It does not have to apply to something specific. “Queer”, then distinguishes not a positivity, but an identity positioned opposite to the norm – “a positionality that is not restricted to gay people but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices”. (Halperin, 1997) This definition is embracing all identities. In this thesis I consider “queer” to be not just gay or lesbian, it is something much bigger than that. It would include bisexual, transgender, pansexual, asexual, and any other identities that deviate from the heterosexual or binary normativity.

Speaking of identity, Judith Butler, a major force of influence in queer scholarship, in *Gender Trouble* (1990) focuses on what identity is and how it is constructed.



She has challenged traditional definitions of gender. She discusses relationships between sex and gender, criticizing common differentiation between them, as well as distinctions between two genders: male and female. She argues that not only gender is socially and culturally constructed – sex is constructed culturally as well. Discussing identity, she points out that “there need not be a “doer behind the deed,” but that the “doer is variably constructed in and through the deed” (Butler, 1990: 195). It can be interpreted as gender is something people do, which makes it a practice. She emphasizes that both gender and identity are constituted through repetition. She also claims that identity is built with the concepts that stabilize it: sex, gender, and sexuality (Butler, 1990).

Butler comes to the conclusion that gender is a performance. She believes that we constantly act out sexual identity. These acts constitute our everyday life – they include behavior, gestures, the way we communicate, walk, dress, make-up and much more. These acts are performances which describe an identity as masculine or feminine, although there are people who are purposefully not performing or acting out masculinity or femininity either to avoid being identified as either or to play with gender norms, or protest. She bases this claim on the idea that taboo against homosexuality produces gender identity and results in idealized and compulsory positions of heterosexuality. By performativity of gender she understands repetition of acts – norms that define masculinity or femininity in society. It is not simply about choosing what gender one will be today. These repeated acts and gestures create the illusion of gender. (Butler, 1990) She argues that these acts are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which

constitute its reality. (Butler, 1990: 185) In other words, you cannot simply be a certain gender, as you do not have to act a certain way, instead it is the opposite – these acts establish the identity, we bring gender identities into being through specific performances.

According to Butler (1990), gender is a performativity that produces identities and regulates norms in the societies, it is:

“a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness”. (Butler, 1990: 190) From this perspective, gender and sexuality are social constructs, they are constructed and imposed by the society. It can be argued that even distinctions between feminine and masculine are merely social constructs and gendered behaviour is completely influenced by the society.

One example of punishments for not adhering to the socially agreed upon notions of femininity and masculinity is homophobia. Such punishment of actions that are placed beyond the norms and defined as “unnatural” serve to ensure what is accepted as “normal”. The society tries to keep its norms in place and whatever is placed outside its conventions is punished.

In her essay *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* (1993) Judith Butler explores the ways in which it is possible to undermine the assumptions of gay and lesbian identity being simple copies of heterosexuality, to reconsider the categories of sex, gender and sexual identity. In her paper she is rethinking what gender and sexual identity are. She considers identity categories unnecessary. She admits the dependency on such categories but tries to

refuse these terms. (Butler, 1993) Not labeling people might be better for queer people as they might feel less different than the society's heteronormative status quo, however, these labels provide familiarity and comfort with knowing your own identity.

Butler argues that the signification of being gay is out of one's control, because the 'I' is already predetermined. To contrast that point of view, it can be argued that the 'I' is rather negotiated constantly. Furthermore, there are people who are 'in between' or are not sure. She points out a certain polarity in the 'coming out' process meaning that being 'out' maintains the idea of 'the closet'. She questions the categories of lesbian and gay being the ethical choice. She claims that there might be specificity to lesbian sexuality, that it is not just a kind of heterosexuality. In her words homosexuality is not just a bad copy of heterosexuality, in fact she derives heterosexuality from gay activity. (Butler, 1993)

Butler contradicts the way of thinking of others that heterosexuality is the original giving an example of drag which is not simple putting on another gender. On the contrary, she argues that there is no proper gender, that masculine does not only belong to male or feminine to female, these notions are created by society. In fact, she points out that there is no original gender that drag imitates, but gender is the imitation itself, a social construct. Besides, in her opinion, heterosexuality is just an imitative strategy, which generates the idealistic idea of heterosexual identity. (Butler, 1993)

In Butler's opinion, it is necessary to invert the notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality, arguing that claiming that gay and lesbian identities exist in heterosexual norms is not the same as to derive gayness from straightness. Butler insists that heterosexuality is an imitation of the idealized idea, which brings her to the conclusion that it is an imitation of itself, and there is no original. Heterosexuality is represented as the original

only through the act of repetition. (Butler, 1993) Butler means to affirm that gay identities are not determined by heterosexual frames.

She also claims that a set of psychic identifications form gender presentation. She presents two views on what forms identity, the 'self': mimetism and loss of love and points out that it might be undecidable which one of them is primary. Mimetism is a behaviour of imitation through which a person reconstitutes or copies certain characteristics. By loss of love I understand Butler as losing love for one of your parents and thus corresponding with them and assuming their gender identity. In case of heteronormative identity a child would lose love for the same-sex parent and assume their identity. Nevertheless, identity is always constituted through differently gendered Others, which leads to the incapacity of the 'self' to achieve self-identity, as it is always disrupted by Others. That would disrupt any possibility of a set of typologies that could describe such identities as gay and lesbian.

Butler insists that gender is an imitation, which constantly attempts to achieve the ideal. It produces the illusion of an inner sex and is constructed as physical necessity. She claims that the psyche is not in the body, but in the process through which the body comes to appear. (Butler, 1993)

She then comes to conclusion that it might be necessary to completely invert the presumptions of heterosexuality that a sex is first expressed through a gender and then through a sexuality. She suggests that the categories of sexual identity, sex and gender are only created and maintained by this compulsory performance of sex and the regime. (Butler, 1993)

As far as sexual orientation is concerned, there are several ways to define it. It is widely understood as to whether a person is attracted to the same sex, the opposite sex, or

both sexes. In 18 states of the USA sexual orientation is defined as heterosexuality, homosexuality or bisexuality. However, other states also include gender identity as a part of sexuality. Moreover, other states included perceived identity into the definition as well. (Tweedy, 2010)

Sexual orientation has been constructed as restricted in society. It is possible to define sexuality more extensively and openly, unrestrained. It can be argued that any sexual preference can be a part of the term of sexual orientation, granted it has a set of associations and connections.

One of such practices is polyamory, and it is analysed as a part of a narrative later in the thesis. Polyamory is a practice or an ability to have more than one sexual or romantic loving relationship at the same time with full knowledge and consent of all partners (Tweedy, 2010). It is relationship-based like sexual orientation and encompasses polygamy if it follows its principles. Moreover, polyamory shares the same problematic sides of sexuality including coming out and discrimination. Furthermore, just like homosexuality and heterosexuality, polyamory has been socially constructed through monogamy and is performative.

Finally, the concept used broadly in the thesis is sexual fluidity. Sexual fluidity is defined as “a capacity for situation-dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness, which allows individuals to experience changes in same-sex or other-sex desire, over both short-term and long-term time periods” (Diamond, 2016). Sexual fluidity varies from person to person and every experience may be very different. Sexual fluidity can be estimated based on its three signs: nonexclusive sexual orientation (bisexual), change in sexual attractions with time and inconsistencies in sexual attraction, behaviour and identity (Diamond, 2016).

## 2.2 Non-binary identities

Even beyond the straight norms and categories, the notion of pansexuality is still outside usual queer activities known to many. It could be said that even though queer is outside the norm, there is also queer norm. Most people would consider gay and bisexual as the opposites of heterosexuality, and so could be considered the queer norm. Marco Vassi (1997) in his article discusses the notion of sex and claims that there are more layers of sex even beyond bisexuality.

Another scholar Callis (2014) dwells on the sexual borderlands and deals with sexual identities that do not fit into the lesbian/gay/bisexual system. Callis describes sexual binaries and gives an outline to the literature on non-binary identities. She concentrates on the sexual identities that are between the borders of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Before sexuality was viewed as binary, as either hetero- or homosexual, but more recently sexualities that are outside of hetero/homosexual borderlines began to come into place and even appeared in popular culture. These sexualities are not framed separately from the binary system, instead, they took their new space inside of it like “cracks”. (Callis, 2014)

Another concept analysed in the narratives of the characters later in the thesis is heteronormativity. Robinson (2016) defines heteronormativity as a dominant system of norms and practices that establishes heterosexuality as natural and supreme compared to other sexualities. The term was first set by Warner (1991) to highlight the default position of heterosexuality that renders sexual minorities insignificant and puts them at risk. Heteronormativity allows for homophobia, the fear of gay people. Heteronormative standards spread everywhere, and in the context of media is found in underrepresentations LGBTQ

people or their stereotypisation. In heteronormative reality heterosexuality and homosexuality are binary contrasts.

Main characters in the series fall outside of heteronormativity. Furthermore, they are even outside of the borders of the heterosexual/homosexual binary system. Their sexual identities are fluid and connected with their mental abilities. This is how the queer/pansexuality studies and transhuman studies come into place.

### **2.3 Transhuman and sci-fi**

First, it is necessary to outline that the genre of *Sense8* is science fiction drama, because the genre defines many aspects of the series. The thesis takes into account the science fiction genre to examine queerness, transhumanism and sensates. I will concentrate on describing what the genre of science fiction is, how it relates to, and how it is implemented in the series.

There are many definitions of what science fiction is as a genre, I will use the one by Jeff Prucher. He claims that science fiction is “a genre (of literature, film, etc.) in which the setting differs from our own world” (Prucher, 2007). According to him, these other worlds can be different from our world by having alternative facts of history, contacting other species, using new technology that does not exist in the real world, etc. Besides, these differences must always be explained in a scientific or rational way. This contrasts the genre of fantasy in which the differences are clarified through supernatural forces. (Prucher, 2007)

The series *Sense8* belongs to the genre of science fiction, as the setting takes place in a world that is similar to ours but is different in that the world of the series also includes those who differ from ordinary people, like the main characters who have special abilities.

This difference is more or less explained in the series in a rational and scientific way, and magic does not exist there.

The genre of science fiction in this particular series is interconnected with the notion of posthumanism. In the essays 'Refiguring the Posthuman' (2004), 'How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics' (2008) N. Katherine Hayles elaborates on the future of the human species, the notion of the 'posthuman'. However, cybernetic enhancements of humans play a huge role in posthumanism, which is not related to the series *Sense8* very closely.

Instead, the theory of *transhumanism* is more relevant to the themes and context of the series. A great contribution to transhumanism was made by Nick Bostrom. Most importantly, his article *Transhuman values* (2005) defines transhumanism, discusses human limitations and transhuman values. In his opinion, transhumanism is "an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology" (Bostrom, 2005). Unlike posthumanism, transhumanism is not limited to technological improvements, it also includes intellectual, physical, emotional, cultural, and psychological development. However, transhumanity is not the final step of evolution. Transhumanists believe that transhuman is a transition, just a beginning, and see the aim in becoming posthuman due to various scientific and technological methods. (Bostrom, 2005)

Discussing possibilities of transhumans, Bostrom argues that "the current human sensory modalities are not the only possible ones, and they are certainly not as highly developed as they could be" (Bostrom, 2005). He agrees that transhumans might have "higher levels of sensitivity and responsiveness" (Bostrom, 2005). The concepts he discusses can be



applied to the main characters in the series. They are not just human, not anymore, they are something more, a new step in evolution. And just like in Bostrom's theory their sensory capabilities are much higher than those of ordinary people.

To conclude, it is apparent that queer and transhuman studies provide a rich theoretical base for the analysis of the series *Sense8* in the thesis. They open new possibilities of looking at the series. The theories enable the study to find out who and what the characters are in the science fiction terms. Moreover, I will be able to identify what their queer representations are.

## **2.4 Queerness on TV**

In this and further sections of this chapter, popular culture and queer culture are explained and further explored as they are a part of the analysis. In addition, as the thesis deals with TV-series, research on queerness on television is discussed, as it provides an insight of queer analysis of TV. A different kind of media where queerness is present is comic books and manga. To have a clearer comprehension of queer analysis this chapter also explains other genres such as manga and comic books that revolve around queer characters and dwells on yaoi in particular.

Queer representations and narratives are often built on the assumption that when people know more, feel the cultural difference and are exposed to more modern ideas, they will change their point of view (Peele, 2007). Television teaches about and even constructs identities. However, many TV programs strengthen the division between the tolerant, the

heterosexual and the intolerable, the queer because the society sees the queer culture only as acceptable, but not desirable.

Although, not every series follows the same principles. The British *Queer as Folk* was one of the most successful TV series worldwide that introduced the world in which most of the characters were gay. The main characters are a group of male openly gay friends who lived their happy and proud lives. The series did not tell the tragedy of queer life, but portrayed homosexuality as a norm. The characters were normal human beings living their lives, while the series focused on portraying their relationship and not coming out to the heterosexual world. Moreover, the homoerotic and the sexual desire were not hidden away but displayed explicitly. (Porfido, 2007)

Some people viewed the series as indecent and argued that it should be left in private. They saw it as an attack on the heteronormative society, as they connected the idea of decency with heterosexuality. However, they never doubted decency of explicit display of heterosexuality, as it reinforced family values. (Porfido, 2007)

Gay characters in other TV series were often secondary, did not have their own narrative, were not a part of the gay community and lived in a completely heterosexual world. On the other hand, they were represented with certain stereotypes. They were often negative characters: losers, lonely or suicidal. They could also be shown as typical feminine guys serving a function of a comic relief. (Porfido, 2007)

While *Queer as Folk's* contribution to the homosexual visibility is undeniable, there were some critics who believed that its representation of gay lives was not true to reality, misleading. Others argued that the portrayal of gay identity in the series was the result of deliberate marketing strategies, an attempt to appeal to the niche market. Companies allow

gay people to be visible, as long as they bring more money as they represent a new untouched market. (Porfido, 2007)

The scenes of sex and lust were liberating and served as a challenge to the heteronormative regime where homosexual desires are seen in a negative light. However, some see this freedom as objects of consumption. The series depicted Manchester's gay district as a spending community where you can be safe and free if you spend money on clothes, clubs, etc. You could have freedom but first you needed to purchase it. Furthermore, the freedom is still confined within one district, beyond which a gay person could feel threatened. (Porfido, 2007)

Nevertheless, *Queer as Folk* empowered real-life people as it was broadcast by a mainstream TV channel. It was an unprecedented statement of equalization and justice.

Another popular show centered around LGBTQ+ community is *Glee*. Premiered in 2009 it portrays the lives of the members of a glee club. As Sarkissian (2014) claims, *Glee* is remarkable because in its first four seasons it has seven regular and frequent queer characters and diverse sexualities and identities. The concept of the closet is highly prominent in the development of the characters. The narratives of coming out are complex, come from big storylines and expand on identity exploration (Sarkissian, 2014).

*Glee* empowers the queer community through its narratives and performances. It presents diverse identities and challenges conventional views on television and societal norms. It prioritises LGBTQ+ characters and narratives, thus impressively engaging with queer youth audiences.

Peters (2016) argues that in TV series the closet is constructed as a dangerous, cruel space, opposite to being out which is encompassed with acceptance. In teen TV series of

2010-2011 homophobia is presented as a major issue for teenagers. The series favor teens who come out and harass closeted teenagers. However, the series have shifted from depicting torments of homophobia to the challenges of staying in the closet. The importance of being out is emphasised as the series confirm that the youth, especially racialised and working class youth are heterosexual until they prove otherwise by announcing so. (Peters, 2016) Such series display a shift in the narratives to a necessary coming out and in turn wholehearted support. However, narratives like these confirm and consolidate binary identities, while proclaiming that homophobia is beaten, unless you are still in the closet.

## **2.5 Yaoi in the West**

Yaoi, shonen-ai, boys' love and slash are the genres that are focused on gay male characters. Slash came from the West, while the other three are from Japan. Yaoi is the largest such genre. It usually comprises literature and artwork about young male characters from manga, comics and anime. In yaoi gay sex can take place with several partners, minors, older people, siblings, people in power and enemies. Frequently sex is nonconsensual, involves violence and may be public. These kinds of interactions are frowned upon in real life and yet are thriving in yaoi. The theme that underlines the genres is overcoming hurdles to connect with each other. (McHarry, 2007)

Another genre, shonen-ai and boys' love, are based on original characters. Slash represents homoerotic works by Western women and, to less extent, men. Most consumers (readers, viewers) of this type of media are women, mainly young, who identify themselves as straight. (McHarry, 2007)

In Japan yaoi and boys' love are present in the mainstream culture and sold in bookstores in cities and small towns, while in the West yaoi can be found mostly on the internet (McHarry, 2007). In November 2019 Google has 81,100,100 results for the word "yaoi". The problem is that it is so popular that you may stumble upon it even if you are not looking for it. It is a problem because yaoi generally has many explicit pictures and narratives not suitable for all ages and situations. Another dilemma is that when there is yaoi about some originally heterosexual characters people might think that this is canon, i.e. original representation (McHarry, 2007). Canon means the original, official story, and a lot of yaoi is written and drawn about stories, mangas and anime that have heterosexual narratives.

In Japan there was controversy that yaoi had little to do with reality. Some argued it was taking over the reality and changing it into masturbation fantasy. It has been argued that these portrayals confuse real-life gay men and force them to conform to these images. In the United States gay men argued that yaoi was not representative of them and they felt troubled by women objectifying them. (McHarry, 2007) As, according to Butler (1993), gay identities expose heterosexuality as imitation of idealization, yaoi undermines the canon of manga and anime and fixed representations of gay identity. Yaoi is not representative of the canonical manga, it inverts it and turns it homosexual. Furthermore, yaoi is not truly representative of gay identity, it is an imitation of idealized homosexuality that enforces its norms onto gay men.

Another idea of Butler (1993) that gender is performative, through gestures and moves is applicable in yaoi as well. Yaoi portraying canonically heterosexual characters taking part in non-heterosexual and untypical acts and situations makes both modern heterosexual and homosexual identities vague (McHarry, 2007).

Most characters in yaoi have sex with other males, however there is little homonormative setting opposed to the heteronormative society. This is contrasted in English stories where creators establish a queer culture opposed to or conflicting with the heterosexual world. Yaoi does not follow fixed concepts of gender and identity, in yaoi bodies are fluid, shift from being dominant and submissive, gender boundaries are limited or do not exist at all. As it worries some people, at the same time it empowers others, especially the youth. (McHarry, 2007)

Magera (2019) claims that shonen-ai and yaoi mangas were never meant to be stories about gay people or for gay people. In fact, it has been argued that the representation of love between the male characters have nothing to do with the real life gay relationships. Women, being the majority of yaoi writers (Arunrangsiwed, 2015), attempt to avoid being sexually objectified and thus favor depicting only male characters in their mangas. In yaoi there are two sexual types of characters: seme (top, active partner) and uke (bottom, passive partner). Seme represents masculinity, so women, the biggest audience (Arunrangsiwed, 2015), associate themselves with uke (Magera, 2019).

Many researchers argue that yaoi characters are considered neither male nor female, but instead represent the third sex. Thus, for the female audience androgynous characters portray idealised relationships on equal conditions. (Magera, 2019)

Yaoi and shonen-ai mangas take a unique place as their characters cannot be ascribed as completely male or female. It is up to the readers to determine how they see the characters. Moreover, the readers can both identify with the characters and distance themselves from them being an outsider (Magera, 2019).

These studies contribute to the understanding of media and queerness in the narratives. Both queer and transhuman theories go beyond the norms imposed by the society. Transhuman is a new step in evolution, while queer can be considered as the Other. Transhuman may also assume the notion of the Other, especially in this series. Sense8 combines both transhuman and queer in the sensates. Sensates are both the Other and another step in evolution, another species.

### 3 DATA: The TV series *Sense8*

#### 3.1 Narrative analysis

The methodological basis for the research is provided by narrative analysis. Such type of analysis provides a deeper insight into the TV series and its characters on several levels. That includes several modalities, including visual and thematic. Narratives are useful because people make sense of the world through the narrative form. They reflect on a certain thought, idea (Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown & Horner, 2004). The best way to understand queer representation in the series is to discover more information, which can be found in the narratives. Characters make sense of their fictional world through their narratives, and the thesis makes sense of the world of *Sense8* through the narratives. Moreover, the writers of the show make sense of the reality through these narratives, and the thesis attempts to identify their message.

According to Bold (2012) narrative can be defined in different ways depending on the context. It can be a story, a sequence of events. Narrative is always formed with temporality, causation and human interest. It involves interpreting people, action, context and experiences. Narrative can be seen in conversation as a sequence of talk. But narrative is not simply a written or spoken story, it can be much more including photos and videos. Narratives include analyzing not just speech, but body language and visuals.

Narratives can be not only written and observational, but also artistic (Bold, 2012). This type of narrative is the one analyzed in the paper. Artistic narratives include photos, videos, movies and in this case TV series. Interpreting them can reveal different layers of meaning.



Analyzing a narrative involves interpreting and reflecting the plot, the context. It includes reviewing reoccurring themes. Thematic narrative analysis involves identifying themes within the narratives. It should not start with themes before analyzing data but focus on looking for themes that come from the data. Visual narrative analysis is about content analysis and semiotics: identifying topics of interest, conveying the meaning of signs and images (Bold, 2012). Narrative is what a story is about (story) and how a story is told (plot) (Belim, 2014). The task of this thesis regarding its narrative research is to interpret the stories. It asks the question of why the story was told and how (Feldman et al., 2004), the idea that agrees with Belim (2004).

In order to analyze the TV series, the following elements should be analyzed (Belim, 2014):

1. Plot and content. This would include characters' actions and different indications. The thesis includes plot and storylines in the interpretations of the narratives.
2. Protagonist features. This step involves action, speech, logos, appearance, gestures, facial expressions, body positions, gaze, speech. These features are used in the analysis of the three specific scenes, especially body, facial expressions, positions and gestures, gaze.
3. Themes and topics. That would be a central insight, revelation of character. There are several queer themes throughout the series, narrative analysis enables their distinction.
4. Deconstruction and reconstruction. Separating TV series into elements and creating new links between them, analyzing fragments to put them in a whole. In the thesis that involves dividing scenes of Sense8 into smaller themes, compiling them and discovering a bigger picture.

5. Denotation and connotation. Denotation is an objective description of meaning. Connotation is subjective meaning and interpretation. Narrative analysis is interpretation of the narratives, the thesis interprets the narratives and identifies their meaning.

With the help of these methodologies the narratives of the main characters are interpreted based on the theoretical concepts of queer and transhuman studies. The analysis is done theme by theme that was identified in the narratives.

Taking narrative analysis into account, the research aim is to find out how the notion of *queer* is defined in the series and narratives of the main characters. What are the narratives that can be considered queer? What is achieved with the notions of queerness in the series?

Therefore, the research questions of the thesis are:

1. What are the ways the main characters are represented (in particular as queer) in the narratives of the series? What themes in respect to queerness emerge in the series? What tools do the showrunners utilize to build the characters' queer identities?
2. How is the main characters' queerness connected to their abilities, and what do the showrunners achieve with these connections?

### **3.2 DATA: the TV series Sense8**

The data used in this research is extracted from the series Sense8. In the analysis those narratives of the main characters, episodes and scenes are chosen when these characters are using their abilities, experiencing queer inclination/attraction and/or when queerness is

brought up. The data was collected by watching the series episode by episode and identifying the most prominent scenes that had queer narratives. When the scenes were chosen, each scene was rewatched again and again for every character involved to identify the elements mentioned in section 3.1.

The narrative analysis will be conducted through the series to identify meaningful queer themes and queer representations. In that sense any scene with a queer theme, background, act, language, plot or visuals is considered data. On the other hand, three specific scenes of the series are chosen to be analyzed in detail from both the narrative and visual aspects. The scenes are described later in this chapter in paragraphs 3.3 and 3.4. The three specific scenes were chosen because they are the only times when the main characters engaged in sexual activities with one another by visiting each other mentally, and thus the scenes prove to be a rich material for the establishment of connection between queer and transhuman introduced earlier.

The genre of the series is science fiction drama. The show is a web television series created by Lana and Lilly Wachowski and J. Michael Straczynski for, distributed and streamed on Netflix. The series first aired on the 5th June, 2015. It has two seasons and twenty four episodes. Episodes are between 46 and 151 minutes long. When I watched the series it evoked many feelings and thoughts that not many media could. Another reason is the unique placement of *Sense8* concept wise. It created an exceptional perspective of queerness worth researching.

As far as the series and its plot is concerned, there are eight main characters. They come from seven different countries, four different continents, and were born on the same day. What makes this series special is that all these eight characters get connected with each

other mentally at the very beginning of the series. Now whenever they face difficulties in their lives they can telepathically *sense* each other. For that reason, they are called *sensates*. Another way of contacting one another is sharing their bodies for mutual assistance. It is also worth mentioning that they can also “visit” each other mentally when they are experiencing strong emotions.

Apart from visiting each other and sharing bodies, these characters also have access to the knowledge of each other and can speak every language that other people inside their cluster, their group, can speak. Moreover, they have unique skills which prove to be vital all the time: martial arts, knowledge of chemistry, fighting skills, shooting a gun, acting, etc.

We know that two of these main characters identify themselves as belonging to sexual minorities from the very beginning, so I will focus on them first.

These characters are Nomi and Lito. Nomi is a transgender woman, blogger, and hacker. Her parents, especially her mother, do not accept her transidentity. It is a major issue for Nomi. The true relationship of her and her family is revealed when Nomi is forcibly taken to the hospital. Her mother does not accept that she has a daughter, she is not even trying. She does not even accept Nomi's new name. She still wants to have her son back and calls Nomi Michael. But eventually Nomi manages to get out of the hospital only with the help of her girlfriend.

The second gay main character is Lito. He is a Mexican actor in the closet. In the series the viewer gets to see the struggles of this character in his everyday life. Unlike Nomi, who is fighting against the corporation that wants to keep sensates under control, Lito deals with a different problem. He is still in the closet, nobody knows about his sexual orientation except his boyfriend, and he is not planning to tell anybody. He believes that he cannot reveal

his true identity to the public because that could lead to him losing his job. However, his friend accidentally finds out that Lito has a boyfriend and for Lito the show goes in the direction of being courageous to tell his secret to the world, staying true to himself and accepting himself.

The show reveals how Nomi and Lito are treated by their families and friends both in different ways. Besides Nomi and Lito, it can also be argued that other six main characters are also queer, in their own unique way. The thesis claims that the main characters in the series became or are still becoming queer either in the moment of connecting to each other or throughout the whole series. When mentally visiting each other sensates are open to having sex with other genders. This suggests that in one way or another these characters were open to experiencing queerness and queer identity.

### **3.3 First demons**

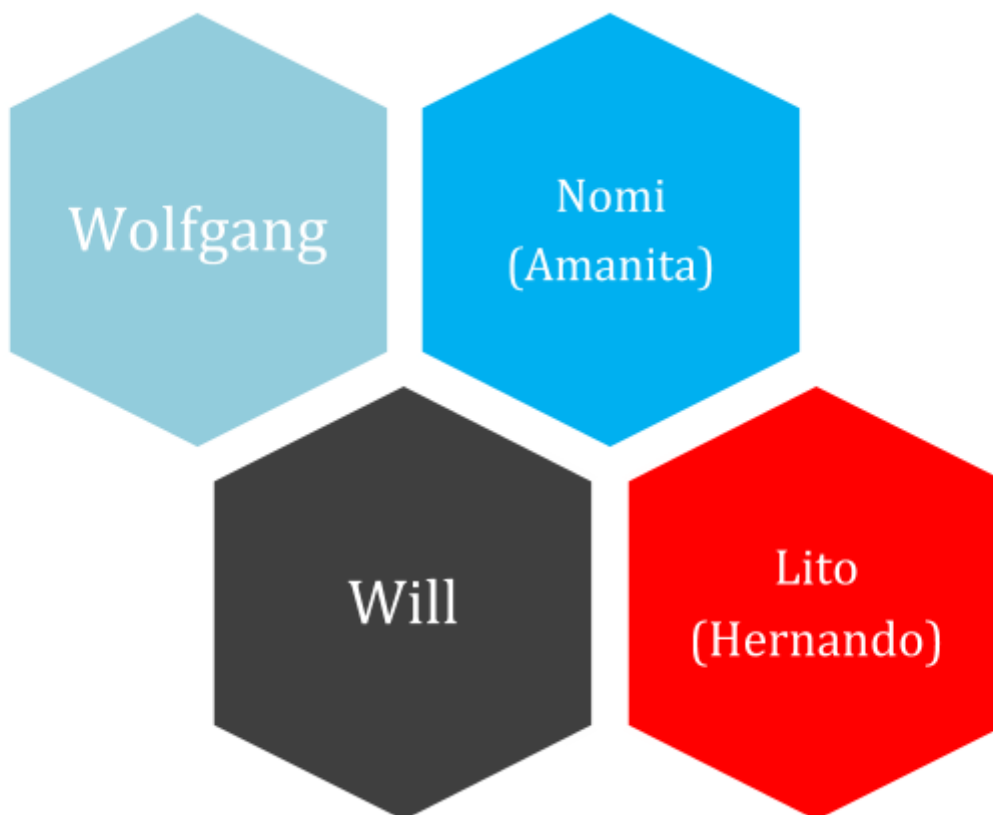
The following extract briefly depicts the first chosen scene and gives general information about it.

This is the first scene (Image 1) that I will be analyzing in detail and it is from the sixth episode of the first season of *Sense8* called “*Demons*”. The scene begins (32:07) with Nomi and her girlfriend Amanita waking up in the morning in Amanita’s bedroom and lasts about 8 minutes. Nomi turns Amanita over, and they start kissing. Amanita is already naked. At the same time Will, who identifies himself as heterosexual, is working out in the gym with his friend Diego. After showing Will, the scene moves to Mexico where Lito is working out on a rooftop with his boyfriend Hernando. The scene moves back and forth from Lito to Will. Sweat is dripping from all over Will’s body. In Mexico Lito is giving Hernando a lap dance as

the camera shows their friend Daniela is also sitting on a bench with them. In another shot Wolfgang is lying naked in a spa. Lito takes off his t-shirt and kisses Hernando. While Will is working out he is joined by Lito whose head is suddenly right above his as Lito is touching Will's arms and his head with his own head. At the same time Lito is standing with Hernando and kissing him. Daniela is enjoying what is happening and taking photos. As Lito and Hernando keep kissing and touching each other, Daniela starts masturbating.



*Image 1*



*Figure 1. Representation of physical location of the characters in the scene*

Back in Amanita's bedroom Nomi is kissing Amanita and in a second she is already kissing Hernando while Lito is kissing Amanita. Nomi is visiting Wolfgang and Will at the same time as well. Lito and Will are joining Wolfgang and Nomi. Nomi and Lito are kissing Will at the gym. As Lito is climaxing, Will is experiencing it too even though he is physically alone.

All 4 sensates are physically located separately in 4 different places (Figure 1).

### **3.4 Going all out or holding back**

In the next extract I briefly describe the second and third scenes in the thesis. These scenes bring new perspectives on the representations of the characters to be analyzed further.

Moreover, new characters are introduced in interactions that have not happened in the series before this scene.



*Image 2*

This scene is from a two-hour Christmas special called “*Happy F\*cking New Year.*” of the second season released for Christmas 2016. Before the scene starts, Kala visits Sun who is in prison and the two have a conversation about sex. Kala opens up to Sun that she is scared to have sex for the first time. In reply, Sun shares one sexual story. I consider the scene to begin when Sun ends her story at 50:37 and to end at 53:35. At the same time Lito and Hernando are dancing in a club. Will and Riley are kissing in bed. Nomi and Amanita start kissing at a picnic. Lito and Hernando move to a restroom. Riley and Will strip down and Lito with Hernando move further to a bathroom stall. Nomi and Amanita are already naked outdoors as well. Will is slowly moving down Riley’s body. Lito is giving Hernando a blowjob. Amanita is performing oral sex to Nomi. Riley and Will switch being on top of one another. When Will and Riley are sitting on the bed, they are joined by the other six sensates. Sensates are also joining Nomi and Amanita at their picnic and Lito and Hernando in the bathroom stall. Viewers get to see some new interactions that have not happened before.





*Figure 2. Representation of physical location of the characters in the scene*



*Image 3*

In the third scene (Image 3) the characters are physically at the same place, but in different rooms. Each of them starts having sex with their partners individually, however slowly the sensates connect to and visit each other. In the end they are all mentally and possibly physically in the same place having sex with one another. This scene includes flashbacks of each sensate with their loved ones from the past episodes.

## 4 QUEER ANALYSIS

This section of the analysis focuses on the encounters when the characters had queer experience whether or not they consider themselves queer. It consists of the scenes when the characters used their powers to connect with each other. First, it explains what it means to be a sensate and then analyze sensates from a queer perspective. After that it elaborates on what queer representations the characters possess. Moreover, this chapter outlines and analyses the queer themes that are present throughout the series.

### 4.1 Sensates

The eight main characters of the series are referred to as sensates. That is because they are more than just ordinary humans (transhuman) since they have special abilities. They can sense each other; they are telepathically connected to each other. No matter where they are physically, they can communicate with each other. Essentially they have become transhuman and the notions of transhuman and sensate are synonyms in this case. There are three ways for them to use their abilities. First, they can just visit each other and communicate. On the screen it looks like there are just two or more people there physically. The second way is to share your body with another sensate. On the screen it is shown as there is just one person there physically, however that person may look like any sensate who is sharing the body. Lastly, they can sense each other and each other's emotions, thoughts and pleasure.

All sensates exist in clusters, i.e. groups of sensates. The main characters are a cluster of eight. A cluster is "born" when another sensate from a different cluster activates

their connection. Until then sensates are ordinary humans, after that, however, they are “reborn”. When reborn sensates develop psycellium, a psychic nervous system that develops



*Image 4. The main characters (Netflix)*

in all sensates. Sensates outside of the cluster can visit sensates in other clusters once they make eye contact, however they cannot share bodies.

Later in the series it is revealed to the viewers that sensates are actually a different kind of species, homo sensorium. They are evolved homo sapiens with a certain genetic mutation.

In this thesis I argue that at least for this cluster being a sensate means being queer. To begin with, sensates are already queer even without the sexual aspect in the way that they are not ordinary humans. They are transhuman. They are mentally, emotionally and psychically more developed than homo sapiens.

On the other hand, when you take sexuality and gender into perspective the characters can be considered queer as well. When sensates engage in sexual activities, gender does not seem to be an obstacle for them. However, that holds true only when they are with each other. Sensates are also a queer species because any sensate can bring other sensates into being no matter their gender.

When sensates are having sex with each other and they are not physically there, they can visit each other mentally and sense each other's feelings and emotions. Visually it appears as though they are there physically.

#### **4.2 Queer victory**

One of the narratives in the series is the narrative of queer victory, viewing and showing queerness in a positive light right from the start. This narrative is present in several storylines and throughout the series, however, it is most visible in the narrative of Nomi.



*Image 5. Nomi and Amanita*

Nomi is one of the characters who can be considered queer in the traditional terms. She is lesbian and a transgender woman. From the very first episode Nomi is living a

happy life with her girlfriend, Amanita. Their life is portrayed as totally normal. From the beginning their homosexual relationship is not shown as troublesome or worrying. They are not in fear of bullying or repression. They are open to the world and the world is open for them, it is completely accepting them. Not only that, if this was a story only about the two of them, it would no longer be about acceptance and tolerance from the other people, but their relationship could be viewed as totally normal, default, something that does not require sympathy or open-mindedness. With narratives like this the showrunners are carrying this idea into the real world. The society is heteronormative and it can stay that way for most of the part, but it needs to include homonormativity as well. The series is mirroring how they are hoping sexuality, sex and gender will be in the future in the real world.

Nomi and Amanita have each other and supportive friends around them. However, it becomes clear that homosexuality is still not widely accepted in the flashbacks of the past. In one of them Nomi was harassed by a lesbian woman, and Amanita had to defend her. Nomi revealed that no one ever defended her before and this moment started the fire of Nomi's love for Amanita.

The queer narrative gets darker when Nomi's mother visits her in the hospital and addresses her as "Michael". Nomi tries to protest against it, but it is of no use. This is no longer a sexuality issue. It is gender identity that Nomi's mother tries to compromise.

Further flashbacks make the already dark queer narrative even grimmer. The story reveals how in childhood Nomi was bullied, insecure and had gender dysphoria. It brings out the issue of transphobia which is widely present nowadays. For the most part Nomi's queer narrative is one of queer normalisation. It is normalising homosexuality, transgender and queerness all in all. Nomi's story evokes empathy, compassion and invites for acceptance.

Going further, the narrative normalises queerness more and more. In the 9 episode of the 2 season Nomi's father defends her from being arrested and calls her "daughter" for the very first time.

One of the last scenes and last higher notes of the series is the wedding of Nomi and Amanita. It also happens to be the ultimate act of queer normalisation. Not only is it the culmination of queer normalisation, it is also the true representation of queer victory. The series shows that no matter your gender and sexuality everyone should be equal and deserves equal rights. From the perspective of the queer viewers, the show is empowering them in their daily lives and personal fights.

#### **4.3 Coming out, twice**

Another narrative essential to the queer representation in the series is the narrative of the closet and coming out. Coming out is the opposite of staying in the closet. Being closeted means living without revealing sexual orientation or gender identity, while coming



*Image 6. Lito giving a lap dance to Hernando*

out is defined as becoming aware of one's sexual orientation or gender identity and beginning to disclose it to others (Rasmussen, 2004). Someone can be out only to certain people or in certain situations. Moreover, coming out is a process and it takes time.

The narrative that closely follows these concepts is the one of Lito. He is a gay actor who is living with his boyfriend in Mexico. At the beginning of the series Lito is in the closet because he believes he would not get good roles if his sexuality was made public. He goes to great lengths to keep his sexuality hidden. He is using a colleague, Daniela, to make everyone believe that he is straight. When she visits their house, they have to tell her that they are dating, and Daniela agrees to keep it a secret and even becomes a close friend of the pair. When her ex finds the photos of Lito and Hernando having sex, Lito lets Daniela go back with her ex to save his face because of which Hernando broke up with Lito. Realizing he made a mistake, Lito rescues Daniela, gets back with Hernando because of which the photos were leaked and his career was ruined.

Lito's narrative in the first season is one of denial and rejection, although not of his true self, but refusing to reveal his true identity not only to the world, but to his closed ones. He is still staying in the closet, and as the closet starts to shake, he digs himself even deeper inside. Even though his coming out was his choice, it was still forced as it was required to save his friend and his relationship. His story shows to the viewers all the suffering and self-struggling that being in the closet causes. Ideally, people should not be forced to come out, they can do so only when or if they are ready and wish so. Moreover, the idea of coming out is created by society, it should not be there in the first place. What is even a closet? It is an artificial idea that only LGBTQ+ people have to go through. Apart from queer people, closet does not exist for anyone else, the rest of the people just live their



heteronormative lives. The movie *Love, Simon* (2018) sums up this point of view and leaves food for thought. The movie questions these societal norms and, although sarcastically, presents scenes of heterosexual teenagers coming out to their parents. Why do heterosexual people not have to go through this? Why do only queer people have to feel this pain and then find the courage to share a part of themselves? Lito seems to wish that was not the case.

In the second season Lito is open about his sexuality and does not deny his homosexuality to save his career. He gets evicted from his apartment, however, on a brighter note his mother accepts and completely supports him. Not being able to find any roles he would like, Lito hosts a gay pride in Brazil and comes out there in front of millions of people. After that he is fired by his agents, however, Daniela finds him a perfect role with the help of the video from the pride.

The second season takes a turn for Lito. If the first season everything was just going down for him, now it is the narrative of normalisation. He left the closet, came out. There are still some bumps on his way, but he still has his friends, his partner and his family's support as well. In some ways his narrative is opposed to the narrative in the first season. He went from a closeted man to the host of one of the biggest gay prides. All in all, his coming out narrative is also the one of queer normalisation. Through his character the show is displaying the real world challenges queer people face everyday of their lives. His narrative also represents the real world scenario of being closeted and then coming out, although in a more drastic way. As viewers grow closer with the character they might become more perceptive of queer issues, more accepting. And that seems to be a real goal of the series in the queer sense.

On the other hand, the concept and the narrative of coming out does not stop there with Lito. The thesis claims that all sensates are considered queer. That implies the same concepts and issues that it brings about. In the beginning of the series all sensates start to learn about their new abilities. However, they do not immediately accept them. At first, they are in denial, thinking they have hallucinations and migraines. Or it can be argued that the sensates are now in the closet. Similarly to gay people, they go through the same issues. At some point they share their secret with their friends and family. That is the process of coming out. Furthermore, gay sensates in the traditional sense have to come out twice in their lives. For example, Lito, being a gay man, has to come out to his boyfriend as a sensate and explain what it involves. That is another parallel between sensates and queer people.

#### **4.4 Heterosexual plot vs multisexual sex**

There are sensates who consider themselves heterosexual, but still take part in sexual practices with other sensates that would appear gay/bi/pansexual. Furthermore, some sensates seem to be more willing or have more desire to engage in such activities. The characters who are most sexually engaged with other sensates, who they are not supposed to be attracted to because of their sexual/gender preferences are Lito and Nomi. They are the two gay characters, and yet in the scenes they sexually interact with all sensates no matter the gender. They have the most screen time in the scenes and they are the ones who are mentally hosting other sensates when they are having sensate sex. The show might be trying to present gay sensates as more sexually open-minded as opposed to heterosexual sensates. That might speak to the viewers, who might feel desires to try something new, to accept the characters' sexuality this way.



*Image 7. Will and Lito*

Nevertheless, there are two more sensates who engage in sexual activities with other sensates of the same gender. They are Will and Wolfgang. Both of them, together with Lito and Nomi, were the original sensates to have the first sensate sex in the first scene. However, out of the two of them Will is more sexually open than Wolfgang. It even seems that Will is as sexually open-minded as Nomi and Lito. He has just as much screen time as



*Image 8. Wolfgang with the sensates in the spa*

them and he is also one of the mental hosts for other sensates in each scene. Will interacts with every sensate no matter the gender and seems to really enjoy every interaction.

Wolfgang seems to be an open-minded character, albeit less than the three above mentioned sensates. He is also one of the original sensates in the first sensate sex scene and he even was hosting Nomi, Lito and Will in the scene. And while he was sexually interacting with them no matter the gender, he just let them interact with him and did not do anything himself. The whole scene in the spa he was just laying there not moving at all. Nevertheless, he still seems to be enjoying the interactions. In the third scene, though, he engages in bisexual sex with Kala and her husband, Rajan.

As a whole, it is important to note that the series has a heterosexual/heteronormative plot, although with some homosexual twists. The majority of the characters and their narratives are heterosexual. However, many sex scenes, if not most, are homosexual. That could be a tribute to what seems to be the show's aim of bringing more tolerance and acceptance into life. Nonetheless, what is more significant is that sex between several sensates is not hetero- or homosexual, it is multisexual. It can be both heterosexual and homosexual at the same time, as sensates can be mentally in different places at once. It can be bisexual, it can be pansexual. There seems to be no boundaries for the sensates as far as sex and gender are concerned. And that seems to be the idea that the series is trying to convey. The showrunners are blurring the boundaries. These boundaries include the boundaries of sex, gender and sexuality. Sensates have sex with the same and opposite genders. The sex they have with each other is multisexual. And they can share their bodies with a sensate of the opposite sex. When they share their bodies, they appear as themselves to the viewers on the screen, but to the rest of the characters they should appear as that physical

body they are in. That would mean that they assume the gender of the body that they are currently mentally in, at least to a certain extent.

#### 4.5 Diversity and inclusivity

A narrative that is present in both queer and non-queer storylines is one of diversity and inclusivity. In *Sense8* it is a multi-layered concept.

The first layer of inclusivity is critical in the queer narratives. While the already analysed sensates Lito, Will, Nomi and Wolfgang are more open to multisexual activities, the others are not. It is true that they still take part in them, but they are not paid much attention to. It seems as though the first sensate sex scene with four characters was a trial which was highly successful and then the showrunners went one step further and just added everyone else from the cluster. It would appear that those heterosexual sensates were added just for the sake of inclusivity and diversity itself. Let's take a look at each of them.



*Image 9. Capheus and Wolfgang*

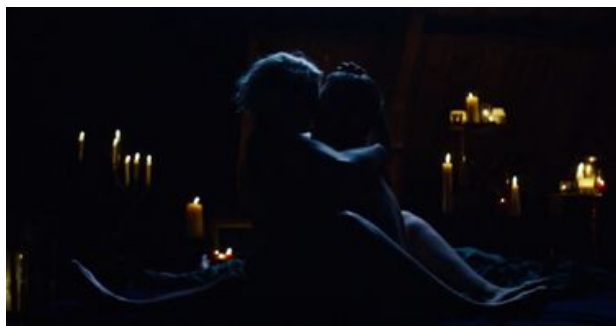


*Image 10. Sun kissing Nomi*

The first sensate with the narrative of queer inclusion is Capheus. He did not take part in the first scene, however, he was shown right after it, seemingly aroused after feeling the sensates. He seems to feel left out and not satisfied for not being included. And in the second scene he is indeed included. The scene is a great comeback for him as he has quite a

few queer interactions there. He is touching Will, Lito and Wolfgang, and even kissing Lito and Wolfgang. Most of the time, though, he is hard to be seen, as the attention and the camera are focused on other characters.

Sun is a part of this narrative as well. Her narrative is not queer in the traditional sense, however, as a sensate she engages in sexual activities with female sensates. Those interactions, though, are limited to touching their bodies, except for one kiss with Nomi. Riley is also considered heterosexual, although she is taking part in sensate sex. However, just like Sun her queer scenes are limited only to touching. She is one of the mental hosts of the second scene, though, but that is due to the fact that Will and her are in the same physical space, i.e. their bedroom.



*Image 11. Riley and Will*



*Image. 12 Kala, Wolfgang and Rajan*

The last sensate in the cluster, Kala, is heterosexual. However, she is queer in other ways. She struggles with the concept of sex and does not know how to proceed with it. She has to go through an arranged marriage even though she does not love her husband, Rajan. However, she falls in love with a sensate, Wolfgang. As she later develops feelings for Rajan as well, she is being torn by a love triangle. In the final episode the relationship seems to be resolved as it is hinted that their relationship will now be polyamorous. In previous sex scenes Kala, even though still being there, is hardly visible and not interacting with anyone, so her inclusion feels forced. In the third scene, however, she has sex with both her lovers, and the

men are interacting with each other as well, however, that would make Wolfgang and Rajan more queer than Kala in the traditional sense.

These sensates are taking part in the multisexual scenes, however, they are not shown to reach that level of sexual openness as the other sensates. They are not given enough interactions, which makes it look like they are there only for the concept of inclusion, i.e. including all the sensates.

The narrative of diversity and inclusivity is presented in different ways as well. The characters are very diverse. They come from different backgrounds, countries and cultures: the USA, the UK, Mexico, Germany, Nigeria, India, South Korea. They come from very different walks of life in terms of interpersonal relationships, social class, economic standing, professional status, the degree to which they are marginalised. They represent different sexualities and sexual practices: straight, gay, pansexual, polyamorous, polygamous. They represent different genders including transgender. All in all, these narratives promote diversity, inclusivity and equality. Furthermore, the series is also educating on various queer concepts and cultures.

#### **4.6. Traditional vs fluid queerness. Reimagining the default?**

As far as the specific sensate sex scenes are concerned, the first scene revolves around four of the sensates: Lito, Nomi, Wolfgang and Will. All in all, all four sensates in the scene are experiencing something unusual. They are becoming queer in one way or another. Heterosexual characters (Will and Wolfgang) are having homosexual encounters, while homosexual characters (Nomi and Lito) sexually engage with the opposite gender, which makes their encounters heterosexual. However, the way they are doing it is different. Will

seems to be surprised at first when he interacts with Lito, but he still seems to enjoy it which is clear from his gaze. Moreover, he begins to touch Wolfgang, Hernando and Lito himself. He is even kissing Wolfgang and Lito. He is portrayed to be feeling pure pleasure, and nothing is getting in his way.

Wolfgang is quite different from Will in this scene. His queer experience occurs when both Will and Lito touch and kiss him. Wolfgang does not mind it; he seems to be open to this new experience and he seems to be even enjoying it which is indicated by his slow head movement and sighs. Nevertheless, something seems to hold him back as he has not moved his body at all and has not initiated anything.

On the other hand, there are two homosexual main characters in this scene. Apart from having sex with her girlfriend, Nomi kisses Hernando, touches and kisses Wolfgang, pulls and touches Will. She initiates touching and kissing the other gender, she even started this scene with her sexual desire. She is open to everything and everyone and seems to be enjoying every single moment. As for Lito, he is having sex with his boyfriend, kisses Amanita, starts touching Wolfgang and kisses Will. It is without doubt that Lito immensely enjoyed this experience as he explicitly says that it was his best orgasm ever.

Both two queer characters, Lito and Nomi, are the initiators of more action in the scene. They help other characters overcome their boundaries and enjoy the pleasure. However, even they themselves experience something new. Even though they are “traditionally” queer, they are even more queer in the scene, in the sense that although they identify themselves as homosexual, in this scene they are also engaged in heterosexual intimacy. Perhaps, in the moments of sharing feelings sensates become pansexual, i.e. gender does not matter for them, but the person does. The idea that the sensates did not mind the



gender could also be supported through the fact that this kind of pleasure they experience is unique and can be felt only with each other.

Another aspect of this scene which does not strike the eye at first is the supporting characters. These are represented by Amanita and Hernando. They are a part of the multisexual intercourse; however, they have no idea of what is really happening as they are not sensates. At some point when Amanita is kissing Nomi, she is actually kissing Lito at the same time. Hernando when having sex with Lito is sometimes actually kissing Nomi instead. Will is touching Hernando as well. Both Hernando and Amanita are homosexual, however, in this scene they are engaged in heterosexual or all in all pansexual activities. That means that they may have transgressed certain boundaries as far as gender and sexual practices are concerned. They have gone beyond the current limitations, assumptions imposed by society.

The second scene is both similar to and very different from the first scene. First of all, it includes all eight sensates, some who were not in the first scene. Kala, Capheus and Sun join the scene as well.

The second scene takes place in 3 places just like the first scene. This time they are a bedroom, a bathroom and a picnic outside. However, the hosts of other sensates in these places are the same characters: Nomi (with Amanita at the picnic), Lito (with Hernando in a bathroom stall) and Will (bedroom) who is joined by Riley this time. This might suggest that these characters or even queer characters in the traditional sense are more open to new sexual experiences.

All three places are contrasted against each other in different ways. First, Will and Riley's bedroom is completely dark with the exception of the candles in the background. This creates an intimate atmosphere for the two of them at first, but later when the other sensates

join them it transforms into a different environment where the darkness opens up new opportunities and everything is possible and allowed. In fact, many queer encounters between different sensates happened in their bedroom. Will and Riley are always in the middle of the action while other sensates surround them interacting with each other.

The second place is outdoors at the picnic on top of a hill overlooking the city with Nomi and Amanita. It is totally different from the bedroom, opposed to it in the sense that it is a very open and bright place. There is plenty of light and the sun is setting another special romantic atmosphere meant for Nomi and Amanita at first. Here interactions are softer with lots of touching.

The third place is the bathroom stall where Lito and Hernando retire to have their intimate moment. Again, this place is completely different from both previous places. It is an extremely confined place not designed for nine people. Lito and Hernando are at the center of attention and other sensates are standing around them interacting with them and each other. The walls in the stall are bright red highlighting the passion mainly between Lito and Hernando.

From a different perspective, sexual scenes, especially sensate orgies are oversexualised. Perhaps, it is yet another means of creating and spreading acceptance and awareness of queer people and culture. It could also be a tool of educating people on many different sexual practices. It is also liberating the minds of the viewers if they are open to it. The series is provocative and does not shy away from queer issues and sexual intimacies. The abundance of sexual scenes also undoubtedly means a selling point. It is the way the series is attracting new viewers. It is a marketing strategy to achieve a greater audience with sex and then make them stay with thorough narratives.

All in all, the idea of sex perpetuates the series. Sex also includes pleasure and desire. The series celebrates sex and queerness. The main characters have partners, but they still have sex with each other. They are polygamous. The sensates are queer not only from the heterosexual perspective, but also homosexual. They no longer fit these categories. They have outgrown them. For the sensates the sexual boundaries are blurred. They are no longer limited by the ideals of society. It can be argued that they have become fluid queer. Their identities have expanded outside the norms. The series is destabilising heterosexuality and indeed blurring the boundaries. However, now there are different boundaries for the sensates. First, their openness and fluid identity only seems to apply when they are having sex. Feeling desire and pleasure might be triggering their newfound identities. Second, their fluid identity and sexuality appears to be conditional only to the sensate sex. Sensates are indeed transhuman. That transhumanity appears to be directly connected with queerness. Becoming transhuman, sensate, connected them with each other and opened their minds to new concepts. They have reached that level of feelings and sensations that must be hard to overcome, and even non-sensates have felt something phenomenal during sex with sensates.

Nevertheless, while the series is destabilising heterosexuality, is it reimagining the default? It is doing so, but only to some extent. The reimagined default would be fluid queerness, however, it is limited and conditional to the sensates or in other words transhuman. It is great for the new species, but the majority of the population is homo sapiens so it does not apply to them. The only way it could catch on with humans is if they are in a relationship with sensates. Then, to some extent, they would become more fluid themselves. Perhaps, that is just what the series is trying to convey – while it tries to reimagine the default, the

heterosexual status quo will remain as a limitation of the human kind, no matter how much the boundaries are blurred.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The thesis has examined the TV series *Sense8* from the perspective of narratives and representations of identities. The theoretical framework is laid out through the introduction of queer studies and its various concepts. To distinguish binary sexualities from others the notions of pansexuality and fluid sexuality are introduced. In order to connect and explain how the characters' queerness is connected with them being sensates, transhumanism is discussed. In order to better understand queer media and queer analyses, previous research of different media genres in the queer setting is discussed. The data of the thesis is chosen as three specific scenes of sensate sex as well as two seasons of the series as a whole and those scenes where queerness is brought up. The methodological approach follows the principles of narrative analysis to identify underlying queer themes, narratives and representations in the series. The analysis chapter answers the research questions set earlier discussing the queer narratives of the characters.

The analysis has provided several ways in which the main characters are represented as queer through their narratives. Several themes in respect to queerness have emerged. A major narrative theme is normalisation, bringing out acceptance and tolerance in the viewers. The series is showing queerness in a positive light right from the start. This theme is most visibly in Nomi's narrative. Her relationship with her girlfriend is not only about acceptance, but it could also be viewed as totally normal, default. This idea is carried into the real world – mirroring the hope for homonormativity. In terms of Nomi's narrative, the series normalises homosexuality, transgender and queerness.

Another theme is the one of the closet and coming out which is mostly related to Lito. In the first season his narrative is one of denial and rejection of his identity, staying in

the closet self-struggling. The second season for Lito is one of growth, self-acceptance and openness. It is the narrative of normalisation through coming out. However, through this the series normalises coming out of the closet with Lito's narrative. It does not challenge this idea, does not question the societal norms, but only reinforces them. On the other hand, the thesis claims that Sense8 expands the idea of coming out not only to traditionally homosexual characters, but to all sensates as they have to accept their identities and share their secrets.

In addition, the thesis has also found the narratives of heterosexual plot and multisexual sex used for different reasons. Most sensates consider themselves heterosexual, yet they still take part in homo/bi/pansexual activities. Moreover, some sensates tend to have more desire to participate in such activities. These characters are Lito and Nomi, the two gay characters who are willing to be engaged in heterosexual activities. The other two more willing characters are Will and Wolfgang. Most characters are heterosexual, and yet many sex scenes, if not most, are homosexual. Sensates have multisexual sex even with several genders at once. This concept seems to be blurring the boundaries for the sensates. The boundaries of sex, gender and sexuality seem to not matter to them anymore.

Narratives of diversity and inclusivity are analyzed and criticised as well. Capheus, Sun, Kala and Riley are all heterosexual characters, not queer in the traditional sense, however, they still take part in homosexual activities, although not as much as other sensates. Although Kala develops a polyamorous relationship with Rajan and Wolfgang. These characters are not shown enough interactions, which makes it look like they are there as a concept of inclusion.

The series is also educating on various practices and terms. The analysis makes a difference between traditional and fluid queerness in the light of the sensates. All sensates are

becoming queer one way or another. Heterosexual characters are having homosexual encounters, while homosexual characters engage in heterosexual activities. And even though Lito and Nomi are “traditionally” queer, in the sense that they identify as gay, they are even more queer because they have heterosexual encounters. Gender might not matter for them anymore.

The thesis highlights abundance of sex in the series and agrees that the show is destabilising heterosexuality and blurring the boundaries between sexualities and sex. Sensates are oversexualised, however, they might be a way of educating people on sexual practices, spreading acceptance or awareness, or a marketing strategy, meant to attract viewers.

The sensates have outgrown the sexual boundaries imposed by the society, they do not fit the categories anymore. The thesis argues that the sensates have become fluid queer. However, the thesis also claims that *Sense8* is reimagining the default of sexuality only to a certain degree while it puts up new boundaries at the same time. Firstly, sensates’ fluid identity seems to come up only when they are having sex. And secondly, fluid identity is limited to sensate sex. The series is in fact destabilising heteronormativity, however, it is reimagining the default only to a certain extent as fluid queerness is conditional.

*Sense8* puts *sensates* at the center of the series. The analysis has shown that sensates are transhuman beings able to sense, mentally visit each other and mentally share their bodies. It appears that being transhuman, i.e. sensate, involves being queer. That transhumanity appears to be directly connected with queerness. Sensates are different from ordinary human beings, thus being the others. Plus, they also engage in sexual activities that cannot be considered strictly hetero- or homosexual, thus considered multisexual in the thesis. Apart from that, sensates share other practices, including polygamy and polyamory.

Becoming transhuman the sensates connect with each other and are more open to new concepts. However, the transhuman-queer connection seems to be limited to cases when sensates are having sex, and even more sensate sex. They are also queer, because they are transhuman, i.e. the Other. Furthermore, their queerness can be seen through the fact that sensates also go through the stages of being in the closet and coming out.

The findings offer a new insight into views on or imaginations of sexuality and queerness, as well as a glimpse on certain intentions of the showrunners. Compared to previous research the thesis has utilised both queer and transhuman studies and narratives and their analysis as its cornerstones. Taking into account previous research and theory it has combined them into media in the form of TV series. The analysis has proven a direct link between queerness and transhumanism. The thesis is reflective of the modern perspective of queerness and may be suggesting the future of, if not the real world, then the next queer related media. The findings offer a new perspective on sexuality with no/limited/blurred or different boundaries and allow for a reimagined default of sexuality. Moreover, the thesis offers different interpretations of queer identities that can be applied in the real world. The social impact of the study calls for liberating of minds and relaxing societal norms in the case of queerness, sex and sexuality. Furthermore, the study provides a reading of how queer narratives are represented and presented in cinematography. The thesis addresses the filming industry and opens up new possibilities for queer and transhuman narratives.

However, the conducted study is limited. First, it has a specific dataset and provides analyses of only one series; further analysis could include more scenes including different media. The thesis is representative of only one type of media – TV series. Moreover, the data was chosen based on my understanding of significance and relatability. Second, the



chosen theoretical framework of the thesis is queer and transhuman studies and the analysis is based on them; different framework may allow for different findings. A big limitation to the study is the fact that I have chosen to focus on the queer aspect of series at the expense of other narratives and themes also represented in the series.

Future research should continue to study queerness in and through different media. It should include different genres, including games, visual and textual modes. It should include different theoretical concepts to provide a deeper analysis. New research may look into new media that will be released in the future as it will provide a more modern and novel outlook of future identities. Narrative analysis proves to be a good tool to study queer media, but may be substituted or expanded by other methodology. The thesis also provides material and thoughts for the cinematographic industry as it can create new media based on the analyzed concepts.

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