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STRUGGLES OF HUNGARIAN QUEER MEDIA

Negotiating LGBTQ+ in/visibility under the Orbán regime

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ABSTRACT

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At the centre of this study is the “Child Protection Law” that was adopted by the Hungarian government in 2021. This law can be seen as an anti-LGBTQ+ law since it prohibits LGBTQ+ representation for minors in the media and in schools. The Child Protection Law has been criticised as it for compromising freedom of expression. Other anti-LGBTQ+ policies and media restrictions have also taken place in Hungary during the Orbán regime, which has challenged the lives of those whose profession deals with showcasing queer themes in the media. To understand these challenges, my research question is *How are Hungarian queer creators negotiating in/visibility under the Orbán regime?* with sub questions a) *What kind of challenges do Hungarian queer creators face under the Orbán regime?* b) *What routes do they find for creative expression, agency, and queer in/visibility under the restricted environment?*

In this thesis I study the intersections and entanglements of the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, the shifts in media and cultural sphere, and the in/visibility of queer people in the context of Hungary. This thesis situates in an interdisciplinary field of queer-feminist media studies and political studies. I have used a queer lens throughout the thesis as a deconstructive tool for unravelling dichotomies. The framework of my study consists of theories and literature of representation and queer in/visibility. In addition, I explore the political circumstances in Hungary to give context to the phenomena.

I have collected the empirical data of my thesis through in-depth interviewing. I interviewed five Hungarian media creators who self-identified as queers in order to shed light to the factors that influence the creation of queer content as well as the general media sphere in Hungary. I conducted the interviews in February 2024. To analyse the data, I have used reflexive thematic analysis. Accordingly to queer and feminist methodologies—which are the standpoint of this thesis—I have used reflexivity all through this process. I discuss my own position as a researcher and producer of knowledge throughout the study.

The main three themes of my analysis are: *regulations and restrictions (of creative expression), routes for agency and queer in/visibility and resisting by visibility, resisting invisibility*. The first theme explores the governmental anti-LGBTQ+ legislation through the experiences of the queer creator. According to the queer creators the anti-LGBTQ+ laws have impacted the Hungarian media sphere by creating an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty where creators sometimes need to rely on self-censorship. The second theme illustrates obstacles these queer creators are facing in the production processes as well as the workarounds around them. While queer creation is restricted, the creators have found alternative routes for visibility, such as transnational solutions and independent media. The final theme highlights the importance of queer representation in resisting the oppressive regime.

The Hungarian queer creators face restrictions in their professional lives. Among restriction they have found new routes for agency and creative expression. Nevertheless, they worry for their futures within these on-going dynamics, where their identities and professional lives are entangled with the policies that keep regulating their visibility and existence.

Keywords: *queer, anti-gender, media, in/visibility, lgbtq, representation, Hungary, freedom of expression, self-censorship*

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For my loved ones who allow me to be me.

And finally,

For M.

Every queer deserves to live.

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1 INTRO

The day that I am writing this, 18th of March 2025, marks the day that the Hungarian government has passed a bill to ban Pride, the protest and celebration of the liberty of sexuality and gender. The Euronews article (2025) that covers the news states that, according to the law, authorities are allowed to use a software designed for facial recognition to identify the attendees of Pride events. The attendees of Hungarian Pride will be sanctioned due to the violation of “child protection”. This new law stands in the line of several laws that have been put to act during the so-called Orbán regime. These laws are commonly referred to as anti-LGBTQ+ laws in public discourse as well as in academic settings. Prior to the Pride-ban, the Fidesz-KDNP coalition led by the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has, for example, changed the Constitution to address marriage to be merely between a man and a woman, banned adoption from same-sex parents, and prohibited changing the sex assigned at birth (see chapter 3.2). Many scholars have argued that the Hungarian government’s approach to LGBTQ+ rights aligns with the current discourses of anti-gender movement and the rise of nationalistic right-wing populism in Europe and beyond (e.g. Pető & Kováts, 2017).

At the centre of this study is the “*Child Protection Law*” that was put into effect by the Hungarian government in 2021. The Child Protection Law bans representing “homosexuality and gender transition for minors (under 18) in the media, in advertisements, and in schools” (Rédai, 2023). Due to this law, for example, books targeted for children and young people—such as *Heartstopper* and *Meseország mindenkié*—must be wrapped in foil and sold with age restriction (+18) and over 200 meters away from any school or church and any LGBTQ+ representation in TV broadcasting before 10 pm is prohibited (Rédai, 2023). For this law media products such as *Modern Family*, *Billy Elliot* and *Harry Potter* are now in the same category of +18 with the goriest horror movies (Kovács, 2021).

The Child Protection law has been criticised by the European Union for violations of “human dignity, fundamental rights, protection, equality, and solidarity” and thus the EU funds for Hungary have been frozen since 2022 (Euronews, 2025). But the law continues to exist. Laws that ban LGBTQ+ representation from children are prohibiting children’s right to

receive information and express their gender and sexuality, making them counterproductive as an act that claims to protect children (Thoreson, 2015). Moreover, the laws are also affecting creative freedom and thus reinforcing culture of censorship, which is an indication for an authoritarian regime (Tai, 2014). It can also be stated that the Child Protection Law is compromising queer representation, which has been studied to play an important role in the general acceptance of sexual and gender minorities but also in bringing feelings of belonging and worthiness for those who belong to the LGBTQ+ community (see chapter 2.1). Thus, restrictions of the media visibility of LGBTQ+ people and their experiences can potentially harm the personal lives of queer people and the general attitudes towards the community (e.g. Hylton et al., 2017; Kondakov, 2019).

In addition to the legislative measures on LGBTQ+ media representations, the power relations in the Hungarian media and cultural sphere have notably changed during the Orbán regime. Public media ownership has almost completely switched to state-owned, critical academic degrees have been shut down and cultural institutions, such as museums and universities, have become governed by the state (Bodoky, 2019). As a result, fewer counterarguments are presented for the government's narrative and professionals are starting to rely on self-censorship (Gomez, 2025). The Fidesz government is also using the media as a vessel to spread misinformation and anti-gender discourse about LGBTQ+ issues, further affecting the queer population of Hungary (e.g. Štětka & Mihelj, 2024).

In this thesis I study the intersections and entanglements of the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, the shifts in media and cultural sphere, and the in/visibility of queer people in the context of Hungary. Rather than doing analysis on representation that evaluates what gets to be visible on screen, this study explores how state and industrial factors influence the creation of queer content. Hence, I approach the issue from the perspective of the *queer creator*, a person working in the wide-ranging field of media and culture—such as film, TV, and journalism—who is part of the LGBTQ+ community as well as handles queer subjects with their work. My goal is to know how Hungarian queer creators navigate under a regime that is restricting queer visibility, giving insight to their personal views on governmental legislation, professional challenges, and queer representation in general. As such, my research question is:

How are Hungarian queer creators negotiating in/visibility under the Orbán regime?

With two sub questions:

- A) *What kind of challenges do Hungarian queer creators face under the Orbán regime?*
- B) *What routes do they find for creative expression, agency, and queer in/visibility under the restricted environment?*

To answer these above questions, I have conducted five in-depth interviews with Hungarian queer creators. Choosing the creators' experiences as the focus of the research helps to understand the crossroads where the Orbán regime and its legislation meet the professional and personal lives of Hungarian queer creators and sheds light on how the regulations actualize in their daily realities. Studying this issue will not only help to understand the local experience but also provide knowledge for the transnational flows of anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ agendas, since laws comparable to the Hungarian Child Protection Law have been introduced, for example, in Romania, Latvia, Lithuania, and most recently in Georgia and Bulgaria in 2024 (Reclaim, 2024). Studying governmental restrictions on media from the perspective of (self-)censoring practices and routes professionals find for individual creativity could—according to Schimpössl and Yablokov (2020)—offer insight into where the media sphere is headed globally. Approaching governmental restrictions on queer visibility through the creators' perspective also aims to fill the gap in research that has predominantly focused on visual data rather than the production processes (Edwards & Moss, 2024).

This study approaches the multi-faceted issue with an interdisciplinary queer-feminist lens on media and politics. In chapter 2, I illustrate how queer-feminist media studies have approached and problematised media and its power relations. Inspired by the theories of (queer) representation, (queer) visibility, and (queer) censorship, I compile the framework for this study. The chapter claims that understanding representation not just in terms of what gets to be seen but also how the processes behind the in/visible can provide a new angle to the relationship between queer creation and LGBTQ+ social justice efforts. Hence, in this chapter I will also discuss the role of queer creator, its agency, and the universal Human Right to freedom of expression. Chapter 2 also sheds light on the ways queer in/visibility has been negotiated under restrictive legislations globally. Following in Chapter 3, I locate the issue of LGBTQ+ media regulation in the political atmosphere of post-socialist Hungary

and the global anti-gender movement, exploring the legislation and policies regarding LGBTQ+ community and its media in/visibility.

In chapter 4 I introduce the research design of my thesis. In this study I have used in-depth interview and semi-structured interview questions as the data collection method for studying the experiences of Hungarian queer creators. These creators' narratives offer nuanced research material for the study, based on which I utilized thematic analysis to interpret their experiences. In chapter 5 I go through the main results of the study. Through a qualitative analysis of the interview data, I illustrate the links between anti-gendered policies of the Orbán regime and the ways these queer creators are navigating LGBTQ+ in/visibility. The analysis is constructed in three main themes which are *regulations and restrictions (of creative expression)*, *routes for agency and queer in/visibility* and *resisting by visibility, resisting invisibility*. In chapter 6, I conclude the thesis by further discussing and summarising the struggles of Hungarian queer media.

2 MEDIA CULTURE AND QUEER IN/VISIBILITY

Media culture has a significant role in the modern world. We base our perceptions of not only of ourselves but other people, cultures, and the surrounding world on the constant stream of visual presentations of mediated culture. By interpreting media, we often divide the world into us and others, normal and abnormal. This is evident especially when it comes to marginalised people and media representations. On one hand, media culture can make the marginalised group visible, or on the other hand, invisible. Still, media does not produce itself in a vacuum; it is controlled and created by something and someone and therefore it is tightly tied with society and the norms and regulations that it is produced and published under. On this ground, understanding media and its production processes can help us understand the world around us.

In this chapter I explore the theoretical framework of the study. In chapter 2.1 I discuss the concepts of media *representation* and *visibility* with a queer-feminist lens. Following in chapter 2.2 I introduce the concept of a queer creator alongside exploring the concepts of

agency and creative freedom, validating the role of the creator as a research subject. Finally, in chapter 2.3 I introduce previous studies about governmental restrictions on LGBTQ+ representation and explore the roles of self-censorship and resistance in these contexts.

2.1 Queer media studies, representation, and the politics of visibility

A special feature of modern media culture is the role of images and visual orders (Rossi & Seppä, 2007). The way we see and interpret the world around us, ourselves and each other has largely been shaped by the ways we understand seeing (Coon, 2018). Traditionally the issues of media and visual culture have been studied in the academic fields of art history, media studies, cultural studies, theology, archaeology, and film studies (Pajaczkowska, 2000). Yet the visual mediation of our culture today is so evident and ingrained that questions of media and visual culture are also questions of other disciplines that aim to understand social issues (Rossi & Seppä, 2007). Studying visual culture is thus not only studying everything we see, but rather understanding the cultural and historical context of the visual together with critical analysis on gaze, audience, media, and production (Rossi & Seppä, 2007). For this thesis, the most important angle that the study of visual culture offers, is the question of what lies behind with what is visible and invisible. In other words, I aim to understand how the in/visible is intertwined with politics and power.

To answer this question, I explore the issue of in/visibility, politics, and power with theories from a queer-feminist approach to society and visual culture. In addition to being a methodological approach for this thesis, I also use *queer* as an umbrella term to refer to all LGBTQ+ identities. Queer theory seeks to dismantle and theorize the construction and status of heterosexuality as a norm. According to Kondakov (2022 chapter 3) queer theory is thus suitable to understand complex and unstable power relations in our societies, since through the discipline's history it has dealt with the concept of fluidity. Queer theory can be used to identify current unjust conditions of non-heterosexual people and seek to find routes towards a better situation (Kondakov, 2022 chapter 3). Queer thinking is based on queer politics, which calls for the rights of gender and sexual minorities. As a form of critical theory, queer is suitable for questioning the dominant meanings of visual representations of gender and sexuality (Vänskä, 2007). Similarly, Pajaczkowska (2000) describes that the feminist

approach to visual culture interrogates the issues of gender and sexuality and their relations to *representation*.

Representation is a key concept in the study of the visual culture. According to Rossi (2015), representation can be understood, among other things, as follows: to bring to mind, to put before the eyes, to illustrate, to describe, and to implement. Paasonen (2010) describes representation as a process that can produce images and shape thoughts, as well as present people and things in a certain way and in certain roles. Moreover, representation is an issue of power and politics (Rossi, 2015). There is no representation that exists outside of power relations, which are gendered, sexualised, racialised and intertwined with age and class (Rossi, 2015). The analysis of representation can thus provide answers to the questions of who are those who are represented, or who/what determines who is represented, and who ultimately watches (Rossi, 2015). By understanding representations, we can understand our own positions and those around us and thus provide insight for change.

Representation also has a role in the lives of queer people and other marginalised groups. Rossi (2015) claims that the more visibility certain groups of people get, the more power they have, and thus it is important that people in different positions are represented. Otherwise, our understanding of society completely leaves out people who are placed on the margins of power hierarchies (Rossi, 2015), such as queer people. Queer media representations can challenge normative ideas and roles about sexuality and gender (Rossi 2007). Rossi (2007) states that positive images can also pave the way for minority rights by bringing formerly invisible things to the attention of the general public, making the invisible visible (Rossi, 2007; 2015). Similarly, Dyer (1993) claims that the way people are represented in media is related to how they are treated in life (Paasonen 2010, 45; cit. Dyer 1993). For example, diverse and positive queer stories have been shown to increase the well-being of queer people and reduce homophobia (e.g. Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018; Gomillon & Giuliano, 2011). Especially entertainment media has studied to be effective in fostering acceptance towards queer people (Gonta et al., 2017) This occurs because diverse representation offers place for empathy, undoing stereotypes and understanding for the complexity and diversity of cultures (Patel, 2024).

Representations can also offer place for empowering and community-building. When stories and images of queer people are presented, the community becomes a lived reality (Coon, 2018). This occurs because identifying with representations of media culture can strengthen the self-image, belonging and well-being of marginalised people (Vänskä, 2007; Rossi, 2015). Media representations might be the only example of one's own minority (Mäkelä et al., 2006). Thus, for example, queer people who are not in contact with other queer people in their daily realities can find sense of belonging and community through LGBTQ+ media representation (Coon, 2018). This community-building through visual imagery is connected to the power structures of society (Persson, 2015). Belonging is not equal to formal citizenship but is recognition beyond; while someone might belong to a certain nationality, the constructed norms of national community might exclude those who do not conform to these standards (Persson, 2015; cit. Parker et al. 1992). For example, people living in countries where LGBTQ+ visibility is restricted in the society and media, queer people can find belonging through representations across the national borders.

Dynamics of visibility are complex. As stated before, representations and queer visibility can have multiple positive impacts, such as increasing sense of belonging and change of public attitudes towards acceptance. Yet, visibility does not straightforwardly secure inclusion and acceptance. Recent studies that focus on queer issues beyond the West have challenged the positive notions of visibility, offering a more nuanced approach to the issue. Štětka and Mihelj (2024) critique the dominant narrative of the relationship of media and queer visibility claiming that it simplifies the idea of visibility. When a marginalized group gains more visibility, in addition to the positive outcomes, it can make them more vulnerable and exposed to hatred and scapegoating (e.g. Persson, 2015; Mihelj et al., 2023). Especially under oppressive environments, where queer visibility is regulated by government to reinforce anti-LGBTQ+ agendas—for example in Russia, Poland, and Hungary—queer visibility might be unwanted and even dangerous. According to Mihelj et al. (2023) the effects of queer visibility can vary based on the dynamics of who is being observed, by whom, and in which circumstances, meaning different platforms (for example internet vs. TV) and different ways to represent (anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda vs. queer film representation).

Wiedlack (2023) also critiques the Western demand for queer visibility, which often frames visibility in direct opposition to invisibility and closeted isolation. Wiedlack offers the concept of in/visibility as an alternative approach to the politics of visibility. In this thesis I use this

concept of in/visibility—in addition to using the terms visibility and invisibility separately—since it challenges the dichotomy of the issue of the visible. I view the term in/visibility as being able to cover the idea that visible and invisible are not merely an issue of either or; people can be visible and invisible simultaneously. According to Wiedlack (2023) In/visibility allows queer people to connect with LGBTQ+ community and individuals through strategies such as language use or art while maintaining the safety of their closet from those who are against them (Wiedlack, 2023). Through this kind of strategic in/visibility queer people living under oppressive regimes can find resistance (Mihelj et al., 2023). It can be stated that representation and visibility have an ambiguous role in queer lives. And it is for this reason that it is crucial to understand the local contexts instead of merely implementing Western ideas in every circumstance.

While recognizing the ambiguity of visibility, there is still significance in acknowledging that recognition and inclusion do not exist without visibility; the forms visibility can change, but to belong as a viable subject comes with visibility (Persson, 2015). For example, O'Dwyer (2018) argues that instead the growing visibility, activism, and pressure from the EU has increased the support and activism around CEE (Central and Eastern European) countries regarding LGBTQ+ issues (O'Dwyer, 2018). My interpretation of this is that while Western thinking about queerness is centred around the individualistic idea of visibility—meaning to be queer is to “come out” for the public and to be visible at Pride (Neufeld & Wiedlack, 2020)—there are layers to visibility. While safety can be found in staying invisible, the queer visibility on film, TV and other media products can also offer sense of belonging and enhance social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people.

2.2 Queer creator – agency through creative expression

While many studies on media representations have focused on the analysis of LGBTQ+ on-screen representations, in this study I look what is beyond screen. Media studies scholars argue that the issues of visibility are not only about the quality or the quantity of how a certain group is being represented but also about the conventions of media productions (Mäkelä et al., 2006). Hence, in this thesis I explore the experiences of media creators and claim that queer representation in production processes is also significant.

The main character of my thesis is the queer creator, not the format or platform of creative work. Queer creator is a filmmaker, an artist, a writer, a journalist; a creator who is part of the LGBTQ+ community. Queer disrupts conventional understandings of normativity, and queer creators actively contest the dominant social structures and practices that typically shape media production (Brasell, 1996). Queer production studies which draws and extends from feminist production studies, explores the concept of a queer producer (Martin, 2018) who in this thesis I call the creator. Feminist production studies claims that the increase in female creators is largely a result of increased availability of accessible ways for creation and participation for non-males (Martin, 2018). Similarly, queer production studies explore how queer creators claim space by creating media products that reflect their own experiences. The study of queer production does not merely consider mainstream or commercial media but considers that it is equally worth studying the ways queerness takes space and forms in representations outside of the mainstream (Martin, 2018). Looking outside the mainstream media can shed light on the ways queers work to represent queerness through alternative media creation and the possible obstacles in doing so around hegemonic industries (Martin, 2018).

The role of creator is important in visibility and representation. Generally, diversity in media production can lead to more accurate representations of different communities challenging stereotypes (Edwards & Moss, 2024). Stereotypical representations could reinforce negative attitudes and add social polarisation (Dembe, 2024). To avoid stereotyping, it is essential to adopt policies that encourage nuanced storytelling, provide opportunities for underrepresented voices, and support inclusive content creation (Dembe, 2024). Diversity in production not only strengthens the cultural impact of media, creating a media landscape that reflects the diversity of the world, but it can also have an economic effect since it can impact audience reception and engagement (Dembe, 2024). With this notion I aim not to simplistically claim that all queer stories must be told by queer people, but to merely state that in order to see complex, authentic and non-stereotypical stories about any minorities, it can be beneficial if the creator is familiar with the issues presented in the stories. Diversity in media creation also adds to the artistic richness of visual culture (Patel, 2024).

A queer creator is not only someone who makes a living through production or enhances the economic value of media products via diversity; queer creator is also someone who takes part in community-building (Coon, 2018). The forming and the maintenance of queer

communities take place through production, distribution, and exhibition of queer media (Coon, 2018). This has manifested, for example, in non-commercial queer film festivals and other queer events that bring queer creatives and audiences together to create community by occupying space (Coon, 2018). The stories told by queer creators contribute to making the imagined community more real, helping those who identify with it feel connected (Coon, 2018). For some queer people, media creation is a form of activism. Through the alternative stories told in their art, film, and other visual outlets, they aim to actively change the normative media landscape that has made their community invisible and marginalised (Coon, 2018).

The concept of queer creator can also be approached by creative agency and creative freedom — and the possible limitations of them. According to Buckingham (2017), in media studies agency includes the following characteristics: individual choice, autonomy, self-determination, and creativity. Meaning to have agency in production of media is to be able to have power to do the before mentioned. In this thesis I use the concepts of agency and creative freedom as overlapping concepts which both refer to the individual's power, ability and freedom of creative expression. Individuals' agency regarding creative expression is protected in the United Nations (UN) Human rights declaration, which underlines the importance of the matter:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” –Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, Article 19, 1948).

Article 19 of the UDHR guarantees the right to freedom of expression, which is elaborated by Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 2011; 2012), which protects the right for everyone to create and receive information about sexual orientations or gender identities. This includes political discussion and journalism as well as cultural and artistic expression (ICCPR, 2011; 2012).

According to Buckingham (2017) creative agency happens among the societal structures, such as political systems and economy. These structures shape, limit and regulate the actions of individuals (Buckingham, 2017). Meaning that, for example, governmental

regulations can impact the agency of creators. As Butler (2015) argues, while the ideals of freedom of expression, agency, and the right to be represented are often upheld as universal, the reality is that access to representation is tightly regulated. Our culture that is deeply mediated and structured by norms of the visible, certain groups may be systematically excluded and rendered invisible through legal, cultural, or institutional mechanisms. The limitations of creative agency are described by Stachyra and Jedrzejewski (2014) as a form of social exclusion, the process where certain individuals—voluntarily or involuntarily—are marginalised in society and prevented from participation in society's cultural elements. Agency and regulation are not mere opposites or a question of either or. Sometimes the regulations create new forms of agency.

2.3 (Self)-censorship and resistance – when state silences queers

While media has increasingly served as a platform for exploring and expressing diverse identities, structures of power have frequently obstructed this potential, constraining creative expression (Ndanyi, 2021). Laws and regulations that limit the visibility, agency, and creative freedom of queer people have historically taken place and are still happening globally, following a growing academic interest for these dynamics. The restrictions of LGBTQ+ visibility have been studied, for example, in the context of the U.S. (e.g. Leech, 2024), Kenya (e.g. Mwangi, 2014; Ndanyi, 2021; Wainaina et al., 2023), Kazakhstan (e.g. Article 19, 2015) and Nigeria (e.g. Onanuga, 2022). According to Štětka and Mihelj (2024), most research has examined the visual data rather than the impacts on the production of queer media. This thesis seeks to respond to this shortage. Still, there are some studies that explore restricted queer representation and its social impacts and industrial effects. Especially in the contexts of China and Russia, LGBTQ+ media restrictions have been researched. For this reason, this chapter explores the queer media restrictions in these contexts. In this chapter I will not explore in depth the legal aspects of these two contexts since this is not a study about law. Instead, I will refer to the regulations with simplified term used in many studies, “queer censorship”. The examples from two different contexts offer understanding in the different yet similar ways queer creators respond to queer censorship and find agency and resistance under restriction.

In China, queer representations are often regulated and banned by the Chinese government (Xie, 2023). The queer censorship laws impact Chinese queer creators and their creative freedom vitally (Shaw & Zhang, 2018; Yang & Gahb, 2021). Censorship reportedly restricts the production and distribution of content that has any queer representation (Shaw & Zhang, 2018). Chinese filmmakers who aim to address queer themes face challenges finding domestic audience and funding for their work which limits their possibilities for any mainstream attention (Shaw & Zhang, 2018). The ambiguity of official regulations and censorship leaves space for uncertainty, which can manifest as further self-censorship (Xie, 2023). Self-censorship can be seen as a subtler form of censorship (Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020). According to Cook and Heilmann (2012) self-censorship often arises in response to oppressive regimes, where individuals alter their expressions under external pressure. Schimpfössl & Yablokov (2020) argue that in some contexts, particularly in authoritarian regimes, self-censorship may even be perceived as productive, potentially creating new and creative routes for creation. Then again, self-censorship can also decrease creativity and can simplify media products (Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020)

Hence, despite the regulations, Chinese creators have found new routes to avoid the restrictions of the government, creating new possibilities for building identity and community through the screen (Xiaopei et al., 2019). Due to the lack of governmental funding, Chinese queer filmmakers have adopted different, cost-effective forms such as short film (Xie, 2023) and independent filmmaking strategies (Nunes, 2018). In addition, new digital media technologies have offered alternative platforms for distributing and accessing queer content, creating routes for agency and visibility in digitalised space (Shaw & Zhang, 2018). According to Xie (2023), international stakeholders in production and distribution processes play an important role in bringing queer representation to the screens in China. Getting funding from abroad allows local filmmakers to have more creative freedom (Xie, 2013). In addition, embassies, and cultural institutions (such as Goethe-Institut) play a part in showcasing art and media that could be censored by the government, since they offer a liberal and established space even in restricted states. (Xie, 2023).

Another route for representation under the censorship has been through queer film festivals and according to Xie (2023) they are the main outlet for showcasing of queer films in China. Xie (2023) states that queer film festivals contribute to queer community building and developing local film culture. However, film festivals do still face governmental disapproval

and some screening events have been banned by the government, some because of the self-censorship of other stakeholders of said events (Xie, 2023). Accordingly, self-censorship does not always imply that the queer creator would censor themselves but, as described in relation to Chinese queer cinema by Xie (2023), the governmental censorship mechanisms can prompt self-censorship across the media sphere due to their vague guidelines which leave room for interpretation causing stakeholders from celebrities and audiences to grassroots communities and mainstream media producers all implement their own strategies to follow the laws.

Although Chinese queer artists have found these new ways to showcase their work and build community through, the creators do not always earn any money from their creative work (Shaw & Zhang, 2018) and broader visibility as well as access to legal protection are still needed (Nunes, 2018). Nevertheless, Chinese queer artists continue to practice their work in order to contribute to a social movement and community (Shaw & Zhang, 2018).

Similar dynamics in the queer media sphere can be found in the Russian context. Russian queer censorship laws give valuable context for this study since Russia and Hungary are culturally and geographically close to one another. In 2013, any positive representations of “non-traditional” sexualities aimed to minors were banned in Russia, followed by an extension to adults in 2022 (Andreevskikh, 2024). Since then, there has been a growing interest in academia in the strategies through which contemporary Russian media deals with LGBTQ+ rights (Andreevskikh, 2024). According to Emil Persson (2015) the regulation of queer visibility is a governmental attempt to position queer people as not belonging to the heterosexual nation of Russia. Since the introduction of this legislation there has been an increase in homophobic public discourses, physical violence against queer people (Kondakov, 2019; Kondakov & Shtorn, 2021; Wiedlack, 2023; Katsuba, 2024) and mental health issues among queer people (Hylton et al., 2017).

The legislation has challenged not only the everyday lives of Russian queer people, but it has also impacted the Russian queer media sphere with penalties and sanctions (Andreevskikh, 2024). Similarly to China, The Russian queer censorship legislation has had an immediate impact on different media outlets, such as filmmaking, by challenging queer representation (Strukov, 2023). As in the case of China, the ambiguous nature of the queer censorship laws complicates their interpretation, thereby creating additional challenges for

creators (Andreevskikh, 2024). Despite the challenges, after the 2013 legislation there continued to be a range of queer representations in films, but the new legislation in 2022 stopped many productions of queer cinema and abolished public screenings of queer films and queer festivals (Strukov, 2023). While the visibility of queer creators in Russia is challenged, their agency and creative freedom exist in new ways to express and belong outside the heteronormative norms (Andreevskikh, 2024). Like in other contexts of queer censorship, after the censorship laws, the role of online activities and social media platforms increased in the context of queer media and community-building in Russia (Strukov, 2023).

According to Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2020), censorship in Russia, as in many other authoritarian regimes, frequently takes the form of self-censorship. Russian queer artists have developed alternative ways of expression, that exist between visibility and invisibility, aiming to strengthen community without exposing it (Wiedlack, 2023). These alternative ways of expression can be things such as experimental films that explore queerness through aesthetic choices and queer gaze rather than clear, visible queer representation. This kind of art is accessible for those who are queer and can read it as such, whereas those who do not understand it cannot weaponize it (Wiedlack, 2023). Neufeld and Wiedlack (2020) explore this kind of phenomenon with a concept of in/visibility. This way of self-censoring and self-determined visibility distances itself from the Western visibility paradigm. According to Neufeld and Wiedlack (2020) resistance and agency exists in being able to represent queerness while staying invisible (Neufeld & Wiedlack 2020). All in all, the Russian law restricting the work of the media industry and the lives of queer people illustrates the complicated relationship between media and queer representation.

To conclude, government regulations and societal norms play a crucial part in the representation of queer people, agency, and creative freedom. Examples from China and Russia show that under restrictive environments the representation of queer people is both achieved and restricted, visible, and invisible. New routes for creative agency have been formed through alternative formats and platforms. State control, social acceptance and creative freedom are intertwined in complex ways which shape the way queer identities are represented and understood globally and locally. The following chapter will locate governmental regulations in post-socialist Hungary.

3 HUNGARY, ANTI-GENDER, AND ANTI-LGBTQ+

Restricting the visibility of different identities in media or art does not happen by accident. Measures of censorship and restrictions of freedom of expression are calculated acts of political power and oppression (Ndanyi, 2021). In democratic states, art is uncontrolled and uncensored production (Sládková, 2014) whereas censorship on media and creative work is “a fundamental pillar of depotism and the second phase of totalitarianism” (Ndanyi, 2022 p. 36). In a totalitarian society, creative production is shaped by the laws and regulations of the ruling regime, serving as a tool to reinforce its authority (Sládková, 2014). Even creative work that resists or critiques the oppressive system remains embedded within its ideological framework, ultimately functioning as a political act against those in power (Sládková, 2014). Within such a cultural landscape, the state actively constructs a national identity grounded in fabricated ideals and exclusionary norms, promoting a dichotomy between an idealized “us” and a marginalized “them” deemed incompatible with the national narrative (Ndanyi, 2021). This chapter explores the political shifts that can be seen affecting the LGBTQ+ in/visibility in Hungary.

Hence, this chapter outlines the political framework for this thesis by examining prior research on queer issues and LGBTQ+ rights in Central and Eastern European and post-socialist countries, with particular attention to the recent emergence of the anti-gender movement. Chapter 3.1 introduces the anti-gender movement, locating it to the intersections of LGBTQ+ community and media. Chapter 3.2 provides a short history and exploration on political shifts in Hungary, focusing on the anti-LGBTQ+ legislations. Lastly, in chapter 3.3 I highlight the local shifts in media sphere and provide insights on Hungarian queer visibility.

3.1 The post-socialist queer amidst anti-gender discourses

Recently there has been a growing interest in academic research for LGBTQ+ issues in Central and Eastern European (CEE) and post-socialist countries, due to the political shifts in the area (e.g. Buyantueva & Shevtsova, 2020; Neufeld & Wiedlack 2020). This has caused some academic debates, since some of the research can be seen as contributing to the East/West dichotomy, positioning the East as the “other” and the “lesser than” and

internally “homophobic” against the “progressive” West (Neufeld & Wiedlack, 2020). For example, Buyantueva and Shevtsova (2020) critique the adoption of norms and values from the “West” to the post-socialist context. They argue that post-socialist region is a complex geopolitical space that includes its specific LGBTQ+ histories, highlighting the regional specificity of queer. Buyantueva and Shevtsova (2020) emphasise that the post-socialist region would benefit from more studies done by local researchers. Nevertheless, they acknowledge the local challenges in researching LGBTQ+ topics in these settings, where state has created limitations on LGBTQ+ related scholarship (Buyantueva and Shevtsova, 2020).

In order to distance myself from the Western approach to the post-socialist and CEE region, I treat the concept of the “West” as a social construct and critique narratives that frame the “East” as inherently less progressive. One approach to dismantle the West/East dichotomy is to approach the issue of governmental restrictions on LGBTQ+ people with a critical queer lens that has been explored by, for example, Binnie (2016). According to Binnie, approaching queer issues with the outline of nation borders risks nationalisation of queer and may contribute to homonationalism. Homonationalism refers to how certain nations—especially Western democracies—apply LGBTQ+ rights into nationalist ideologies in ways that reinforce racism (Masri, 2022). This does not mean, that research should not consider the state, but to acknowledge that nations are constructions and regions, ideas, and cultures (like queer) exist and flow beyond national borders (Binnie, 2016). Keeping this in mind, I treat the local subject of my study (Hungarian queer creator) in a queer way and contextualize it in the broader political sphere.

It might be tempting to see the political climate of post-socialist countries as an indicative of continuously weak democracies or as relics of the region’s authoritarian, communist past, but Štětka and Mihelj (2024) claim that this interpretation overlooks the reality that resistance towards LGBTQ+ rights has only recently start to gain significant momentum. Historical examples—such as the word *homosexuality* being established in a correspondence between a Hungarian author and a German activist (Kondakov, 2022 chapter 3 cit: Takács et al., 2017), Poland decriminalizing homosexuality as the second country in Europe in 1932 (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024) as well as pioneering LGBTQ+ cultural production in Central and Eastern Europe (Imre, 2013)—serve to disrupt assumptions of linear or hierarchical progress in queer rights. Moreover, Hungary legalized same-sex relations in 1962

(Buyantueva & Shevtsova, 2020). For comparison to my own national context, in Finland homosexuality was decriminalized in 1971, and at the same time a ban on “promotion of homosexuality” (similar to the Child Protection Law in Hungary today) was imposed (Seta, 2025). The ban affected how the media treated homosexuality and was not removed until 1999 (Seta, 2025). This comparison is not meant to state that any context would be better than the other, but to showcase that political flows around LGBTQ+ rights are not linear.

While the lingering traces of socialist authoritarianism may have contributed to the recent surge in anti-LGBTQ+ action, it has been largely driven by *illiberal* politicians who have deliberately fueled fears around queer rights to serve their political agendas (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). Illiberalism refers to a democracy that meets the minimal criteria but falls short on democratic standards, often opposing liberalism (Linnamäki, 2022). Mos (2022) describes that the debate on LGBTQ+ rights is happening simultaneously with Europe facing the decrease of democracy where academic freedom and media pluralism are both threatened. Mos (2022) argues that the dynamics around the decrease of the rights of LGBTQ+ and the decline of democracy are not merely a theoretical possibility but a lived phenomenon which should be paid attention to scholarly and otherwise. According to Štětka & Mihelj (2024) to understand the issues of LGBTQ+ one has to understand the issues of illiberalism and *anti-gender*.

Anti-gender movement is a complex phenomenon that has been studied by, for example, Kováts & Pöim, 2015; Graff & Korolczuk, 2017; Mayer & Sauer, 2017; Stambolis-Rushtorfer & Tricou, 2017; Pető & Kováts 2017 and Garbagnoli, 2017. According to Graff and Korolczuk (2017) anti-gender mobilisation happens by the far-right conservatives who oppose gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights because they see them as a threat to the “traditional family values”, meaning the ideal being a nuclear family consisting of father, mother, and children. The enemy of anti-gender is the “gender ideology” (Mayer & Sauer, 2017). “Gender ideology” is a concept coined by the far-right and it refers to, for example, gender equality, rights of LGBTQ+ people and gender studies—or any research that aims to challenge the idea that sex and gender are social constructions (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Amid the rise of anti-gender campaigns, issues such as abortion rights, sex education, and same-sex marriage have come under increasing threat (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). This backlash has coincided with the ascent of populist right-wing parties in countries like Hungary, Poland, the United States, Turkey, and Brazil (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

Anti-gender movement views “gender ideology” as a new wave of authoritarianism disguised as an ambition for equality via destruction of the traditional idea of gender (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Anti-gender actors present themselves as opposing global liberal actors, whose support for “gender ideology” and LGBTQ+ aims to revolutionize the lives of ordinary people and dismantle the systems of family and civilization (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). Anti-gender movement argues that multinational actors, such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN), are spreading an ideology that threatens not only national sovereignty, but also the natural order and common sense (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Pető (2015) claims that while on the surface it looks like anti-gender movements are simply opposing the “gender-ideology”, actually the rhetoric against the “gender-ideology” acts as tool to unite political efforts aimed at reshaping European values on a deeper level. Graff and Korolczuk (2022) also conceptualize the vilification of “gender ideology” as part of a bigger political conflict that compromises the future of democracy by fueling polarisation of societies. The ultraconservative groups and right-wing populists aim to change the political, cultural, and educational institutions with the intent to end the “ideological and political dominance of progressive liberalism in the West” (Graff and Korolczuk 2022 p. 5).

Graff and Korolczuk (2022) explain the success of anti-gender movements by their ability to exploit parental concern for their children and families. Threats of “family values” and children being at risk in the middle of liberal ideas about gender and sexuality have proven effective in bringing different global actors together (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). However, the global far-right should not be viewed as a single mass, although the shared opposition to liberalism provides several points of intersection. Like Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) suggest, anti-gender campaigns are an intersection for conservative movements that have emerged from different historical and geopolitical backgrounds. In the following chapter I will introduce the political context where the anti-gender mobilizations have taken place in Hungary.

3.2 The Orbán regime and (anti-)LGBTQ+

Previous studies covering LGBTQ+ themes in Hungary have covered issues such as same-sex parenting, Pride, coming out, and homophobia and public attitudes towards LGBTQ+

(see e.g. Renkin, 2009; Kurimay & Takács, 2017; O'Dwyer, 2018; Béres-Deák, 2019; Tamássy, 2019; Hátter Society, 2022; Rédei, 2023, Sipos & Bagyura, 2024). Studies covering the recent anti-LGBTQ+ actions have mainly been from the field of law and political studies (Nuñez-Mietz, 2019; Linnamäki, 2022; Vida; 2022). Most studies pinpoint the start of the decline of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights in Hungary to the year 2010, when the so-called Orbán regime was established, meaning when Viktor Orbán rose to power with the Fidesz government (e.g. Takács et al., 2022; Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). This chapter gives background for the current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the LGBTQ+ legislation throughout the existence of Fidesz.

In 1988 when Hungary was reaching the end of the socialist era, among a group of other students, Viktor Orbán founded *Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*, Fidesz (eng. the Alliance of Young Democrats), which a year later transformed into a political party (Lendvai, 2018). In their first parliamentary elections the party placed in opposition (Lendvai, 2018). Fidesz was still a minor party, described as liberal-cosmopolitan formation (O'Dwyer, 2018) and at the time Fidesz party strongly criticized nationalistic parties and their connections with the Catholic Church (Lendvai, 2018). Around that time Fidesz' approach to LGBTQ+ issues could have been seen as relatively supportive and Viktor Orbán has reportedly answered some surveys on LGBTQ+ issues positively (O'Dwyer, 2018).

Eventually, in 1998 Fidesz won the parliamentary elections for the first time, with support from right-wing parties, making Orbán—who had become the party lead—one of the youngest prime ministers in Hungary (Lendvai, 2018). In 1999 it was added to the Constitution that discrimination based on sexual orientation was prohibited (O'Dwyer, 2018). Around the time (2004) when Hungary joined the European Union, the Hungarian government added six additional grounds for discrimination on top of the preliminary 14 grounds defined by EU – including “gender identity” (O'Dwyer, 2018). During the first Orbán regime (1998-2002) other modifications were made which changed the political sphere, the increase of the power of Prime Minister being among them (Lendvai, 2018). Perhaps the most crucial shift for the contemporary political atmosphere of Hungary was the redefinition of Fidesz from a liberal party to a Christian-nationalist-populist party that declared opposition to the European Union and the liberal left (O'Dwyer, 2018). In 2002, Fidesz lost the election and joined the opposition where it started to build its own media empire (Bodoky, 2019).

Around 2006, Ferenc Gyurcsány (MSZP), who was the Prime Minister at the time, gave a speech in the parliament about having been lying to the general public about the economy of the state (O'Dwyer, 2018). Viktor Orbán used this speech which leaked outside of the parliament to create a narrative about the illegitimacy of the government (O'Dwyer, 2018). Following the mistrust in the previous Prime Minister, the economic crisis of 2008 as well as austerity measures from the EU, Fidesz and the Christian Democratic Party (KDNP) won the parliamentary election, and so the conservative and right-wing populist party coalition rose to power in Hungary in 2010 (Vida, 2022).

The beginning of the second Orbán regime (which still continues today) marks the shift towards the attacks on “gender ideology”, equality, and the rights of LGBTQ+ people. As soon as the Fidesz government took office, it made anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ agenda the centre of its policymaking (Vida, 2022) by, for example, removing by the time recently added amendment that ordered school staff to avoid gender stereotyping in schools (Takács et al., 2022). In 2012 Fidesz replaced the Constitution with Fundamental Law without consulting opposition, strengthening the power of the party (Vida, 2022). The Fundamental Law, for example, redefined marriage by declaring that “the institution of marriage is the union of a man and a woman” and “the family is the basis of the survival of the nation” (Vida, 2022, cit: Hungarian Government, 2012). This has been followed by multiple additions to the Fundamental Law, which have highlighted the importance of reproduction and Christianity (Vida, 2022). These changes foregrounded the future family policies that aimed to support the “traditional family”—such as strict abortion laws—and contributed spreading the discourse of LGBTQ+ as an enemy of the state (Takács et al., 2022; Vida, 2022).

In 2016 European Council set an Action Plan for supporting sexual and gender minorities and Hungary was the only country to reject it (Rédai, 2023). In 2018 Orbán removed the discipline of gender studies stating there is only two genders, male and female (Buyantueva & Shevtsova, 2020). In 2020 the government passed a law that made gender transition illegal following a ban on adoption for same-sex couples as well as single parents (Takács et al., 2022.) The anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric intensified the same year in October, when Orbán attacked *Meseország mindenkié* (eng. A Fairytale for Everyone)—a children’s book with queer characters—which was labelled as “LGBT-propaganda” and “spreading gender ideology” (Rédai, 2023). These policies catalysed support for the book and for the Hungarian queer community from within the state but also from abroad (Rédai,

2023). According to Rédai (2023) Meseország mindenkié became a “symbol of resistance against oppression, stigmatisation, discrimination in an increasingly authoritarian regime”, while also causing a moral panic around the wellbeing of children and the perceived “gender ideology”.

In 2021, the Hungarian parliament amended a law titled *Act LXXIX of 2021 On harsher sentencing for paedophile criminal offences and amendments to certain laws to protect children* (Act LXXIX, 2021). The law is commonly referred to as the Child Protection Law in the Hungarian political and media discourse (Tamássy, 2024). According to Rédai (2023) the law is also referred to as the “Paedophile Law” or “Propaganda Law”. For better understanding, hereafter I refer to this law as the Child Protection Law, which is the term commonly used by the research participants. When talking more broadly about the Hungarian legislation that restricts LGBTQ+ rights, I use the term anti-LGBTQ+ laws or legislation. The Child Protection Law is a series of amendments containing acts of LGBTQ+ rights restrictions, such as, banning all content with portrayals of homosexuality or gender transition from minors and, which includes broadcast and advertising (Act LXXIX, 2021) The amendment on media also states that all media, including advertising, that promotes homosexuality or sex reassignment must be rated +18 (Act LXXIX, 2021). To put it simply, the law is banning LGBTQ+ representation from minors (Rédai, 2023). In practice this law prohibits broadcasting of LGBTQ+ content before 10 pm as well as advertising featuring LGBTQ+ themes (Reclaim, 2022). LGBTQ+ books with themes must be wrapped in foil and sold separately in age restricted areas and all goods with LGBTQ+ themes are forbidden to be sold within 200 meters from schools or churches (Reclaim, 2022). These actions are fined and restrictions in broadcasting or the government can close a store for 90 days if the goods are incorrectly sold (Reclaim, 2022). The law also limits the freedom of expression (Reclaim, 2022).

The Child Protection Law has affected the Hungarian media sphere, as will be discussed further in the analysis of this study. In the next chapter I shed light to other changes in the media sphere during the Orbán regime and give context to queer visibility before and after.

3.3 Hungarian media sphere and queer in/visibility

According to Kurimay and Takács (2016) by the mid-1980s, while it was still very marginalised and stigmatised, queer subjects were often discussed in public sphere in Hungary. During that time, Hungary provided one of the only spaces in Europe for queer subjects to enter public discussion and a space where queer culture was found in film (e.g. *Egyásra Nézve*, eng. *Another Way*, 1982) or in books (e.g. *Furcsa Párok: homoszexuálisok titkai nyomáb*, eng. *Strange Couples: Tracing the Secret Footsteps of Homosexuals*, 1984) and discussed in radio shows (Kurimay & Takács, 2016). Since the millennium, different forms of queer representation started to take form in Hungary, such as tabloids, online articles, films, and TV-series (Turai, 2020). Alongside Budapest Pride, annual LGBTQ+ film and cultural festivals have been held since 1997 (Timár, 2013). In July 2007, the 12th LGBT festival in a Budapestian cinema was opened with a “coming-out” speech by the Chief of Staff of the then Prime Minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány. Timár (2013) describes the event as a sentimental and a meaningful political gesture, that was followed by a wave of public coming-outs by celebrities.

Following, Fidesz started to include anti-gender narratives and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, the situation Hungarian queer media started to shift. On one hand Mihelj et al. (2023) state that Hungarian political actors have made anti-LGBTQ+ agenda a part of their policymaking and mobilized it through media, which can be seen as anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda. On the other hand, the Child Protection Law that was put into effect in 2021 legally restricts the visibility of queer in media. These changes have taken place in the context of other notable media shifts in the post-socialist Hungary and under the Orbán regime.

At the end of the socialist period, in March 1989 there were mass demonstrations in Budapest calling for freedom of the press. One of the organisers of these demonstrations was Fidesz, the same party that would almost 30 years later force the opposition MPs out from a building with armed guards when they demanded more freedom for the media (Bodoky, 2019). After the first elections as a post-socialist state (1990), Hungary was celebrated as an example of democratisation (Magyar, 2016). This period of media freedom lasted until early 2000s, when stricter control was applied to the sector (Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020). The illiberal political shifts touched on in previous section played a part in

what was to become—as Bajomi-Lázár (2014) calls it—“media colonisation” by Viktor Orbán and Fidesz (Balázs, 2014).

After the 2010 elections, Fidesz’s government implemented a new act on media which gave authorities more power to regulate media content, to extent where they “almost completely capture the media” (Polyák & Horváth, 2022). After this act, Hungarian radio and television became performers of the state (Kovács, 2014) and for example, all members of new Media Council were appointed by the Prime Minister (Balázs, 2014). According to Euromedia Ownership Monitor (2022) numerous independent or critical media outlets have been shut down, sold to pro-government owners, or lost licenses, while government-friendly religious and commercial media have gained presence (Bajomi-Lázár & Krasztev, 2022). The government exerts indirect control over most media through different outlets although the outlets remain formally independent (Bajomi-Lázár & Krasztev, 2022). While some actual independent outlets remain, especially online, they face practical obstacles, including difficulties accessing printing facilities and press events (Bajomi-Lázár & Krasztev, 2022). Kovács (2014) compares the Hungarian political situation and media sphere to the Emerald City in Wizard of Oz; in Hungary, professional journalists (and other media creators) are either “personal henchmen, or direct enemies” of the government.

There has been a notable decline of press freedom in Hungary (Bajomi-Lázár & Krasztev, 2022). In 2025, Hungary placed at 68th in press freedom rankings based on the World Press Freedom Index which evaluates, for example, pluralism, media independence, legislative framework, and self-censorship (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). According to Bátorfy (2018) this change is due to Fidesz’s media empire where the party owns most of the Hungarian media outlets. Due to the research conducted by Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2020), acts of self-censorship have become prevailing in the media sphere. Some journalists, for example, have revealed that in order to keep their jobs they pass on information to colleagues working outside state owned media (Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020). According to Polyák & Horváth (2022) the Hungarian state is using censorship tools on media since 2010. These changes in the media sphere has led according to the loss of public’s ability to trust media (Polyák & Horváth, 2022). The media landscape of Hungary has become increasingly uneven and its heavily used in favor of pro-government narratives (Bajomi-Lázár & Krasztev, 2022). This can be seen not only in journalism and broadcasting, but also in filmmaking. The National Film Institute (NFI) that is under the state’s control,

predominantly funds films that align with the ideology of Orbán (Rutai, 2025). These examples are just some of the changes of the media sphere and mediated queer in/visibility that have taken place during the Orbán regime. In this research I argue, that one of the groups these shifts are especially impacting is LGBTQ+ people, both as creators and as audiences.

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

Studying media culture calls for systematic attention to media production to further understand the social issues and power hierarchies in the media sphere (Gray, 2016). Moreover, it is important that the study of media also includes research about who gets to create and in what conditions. While queer representation has been widely studied, as I am writing this, only a little research has been done in order to understand the experiences of queer people as media creators. Thus, one of my motivators for this research is to shed light on the role of queer in creation of media. The main catalyst for this thesis is to be able to bring to attention the experiences of those queer creators who are working under governmental restrictions on LGBTQ+ visibility, since there is lack of research on the area (Štětka and Mihelj, 2024), especially in the context of Hungary.

In this chapter I outline the methodology used in my research as well as the process of data collection, analysis, and the reasons why such methods were used. Chapter 4.1 explores and reasons in-depth interviewing as the method for data collection for this research. Chapter 4.2 illustrates the process of planning and doing the interviews. The following chapter, 4.3, introduces thematic content analysis as a tool for analysing in-depth interviews. Finally, in chapter 4.4 I discuss the limitations, ethical questions, and my own position as a researcher.

4.1 In-depth interviewing as a primary data collection method

The purpose of this study is to understand the ways the Orbán regime is challenging the ways queer creators dealing with queer themes are experiencing working in the media sphere in Hungary. I chose to approach this subject with a qualitative research method, in-depth interviewing, for multiple reasons.

According to Alasuutari (1995) qualitative, unlike quantitative, research methods aim to understand experience in a deep and nuanced way, allowing the researcher to explore the richness of cultural phenomena. Qualitative research aims to provide a deep understanding of society by learning about the experiences, circumstances, and perspectives of the research participants (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Qualitative research does not seek to uncover any objective truth, but rather to understand how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences from their own perspective (King et al., 2019). Hence why I consider qualitative research a suitable method in approaching individual experiences and perspectives of queer creators.

When the research aims to understand the individual's experience, it is logical to ask them (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002). Instead of using a questionnaire, I decided to use interviewing as the research method of this study which, according to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002), gives the researcher a more participatory role in asking questions due to its elastic nature. I decided to use specifically in-depth interviewing as a data collection method because it offers a possibility to have long interviews with each participant with a conversational format, which is suitable when the aim of the study is to understand the participants' subjective experience, beliefs, and attitudes (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). I assumed that I would not find many people to interview, since my study focuses on a marginal experience instead of a universal one. Hence, it made sense for me as a researcher to choose this method that allows me to have just a few participants and focus on each participant's story in-depth (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002). In-depth interviews also use primarily open-ended questions and a semi-structured format (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020), which allowed me to approach my study more freely than with, for example, a structured interview. This ensured that each participants' perspective, feelings, and experience could be heard since the questions could be adjusted according to the participants and their unique situations.

In-depth interviewing is also commonly used as a method in studying experiences around media (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). Usually this is because it helps researchers to understand and identify underexplored topics related to media, such as unique needs among a specific demographic or a marginalized group (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). In addition, this interviewing method offers tools for interviewing situations where sensitive themes are discussed, and participants might be hesitant to talk (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). I consider these notions especially important in the context of my thesis.

An in-depth interview resembles a conversation while following a certain level of structure and moreover is guided by the methodological approach (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). Researcher's part is to unravel the construction of knowledge, analyse the data and interpret it. It is the responsibility of the researcher how this process answers the research question (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). The advantage of in-depth interview is that it is versatile and adjustable. The conversation-like approach of in-depth interview allows the researcher to gather information that is unique to the interview setting; it gives the participant freedom to include what they feel is important, not just what is being asked (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020).

I consider this study to also partly position as—what Juvonen (2017) defines as—an *insider interview* (fin. sisäpiirihaastattelu). Juvonen's (2017) definition of an insider interview means that the group where the interviewer and the interviewee belong differs from the general public and societal norms. I, like the participants, position myself as a queer person and I consider that to separate me and the participants from the general public. I also am someone who works with film and visual products and thus, in addition to my academic background, I contribute to this study with my knowledge and "insiderness" on the field. According to Juvonen (2017), insider interview differs from other interviewing methods with its ability to provide common ground where the interviewer can find it easier to get answers for sensitive questions. With all that being said, I also position myself as an outsider, a foreigner in Hungary. Especially for this reason I consider in-depth interviewing as a right method for the data collection for this study. Because of its interactive nature, in-depth interview provides a space where there can be follow-ups, clarifications, and understanding (Rutledge and Hogg, 2020). I consider this aspect crucial in a setting where, for example, native language is not being used and other cultural differences might occur. Instead of approaching each interview with the same structured interview based on well-researched theories, I wanted to learn about the struggles of Hungarian queer creators through a more dynamic approach.

Semi-structured in-depth interview provided this kind of setting, where I would give each participant space to tell their own story in their own terms. To create the best possible understanding between the researcher and the participant, I made my position as an insider/outsider clear in the recruiting process.

4.2 Planning the interviews and collecting data

When I came up with the idea of doing this research, I had been working in Budapest for a few months, getting to know the field of culture and becoming aware of the restrictions the government was enforcing on it. At this point, I did not have a full structure of this thesis in mind since I was not sure what kind of people I could reach out to—or if I could get anyone to participate. But I was initially inspired by the intersection of the Hungarian anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and queer representation in film/media, which I decided to be the overarching theme for my study. With this theme in mind, in December 2023, I started reaching out to my connections in the cultural sphere as well as the local LGBTQ+ community and NGOs with an e-mail (appendix 1.1) asking if this topic could be something they or anyone they knew could take part in. I was encouraged to continue with this theme and eventually with my connections, and through a snow-ball effect, I ended up finding enough people to participate. A more structured idea for the research started to come together when I received responses from people who were on the “creator side” of media.

I got 17 responses in total. I ended up with five participants who were all Hungarian queer people who could provide a perspective on production and viewing of queer media in Hungary. In addition to those five participants, I chose one person to participate in a practice interview. Initially, I was not looking for only queer people but anyone who might be impacted by the anti-LGBTQ+ laws. But when I got enough responses from people who self-identified as queer, I decided to focus solely on their voices and experiences. The choice of participants was affected by factors such as logistics; it was easier to interview people who lived in Budapest, since I decided to do the interviews face-to-face, as in-depth interviews are traditionally conducted (Rutledge and Hoggs, 2022) in order to create a relaxed and natural environment for the interviews. Language barriers played a part in the recruiting process; I know there were more people interested in participating, but because the interviews were held in English, some people decided not to participate.

Although I did not know any of the participants beforehand, I might have subconsciously made some preferences in selecting the participants. In addition, I also made conscious choices for the versatility and accountability of this research. In doing so I wanted to have a relatively diverse group of people for this marginal topic of the study to have different perspectives on the issue of queer production. The participants ages ranged from around 25 to 50 at the time of the interviews. The self-descriptions of their gender identities and sexual/romantic orientations and identities varied between the participants, but to guarantee anonymity I will not enclose them nor the exact ages. I refer to the participants as queer or being part of the LGBTQ+ community. In this study I use both LGBTQ+ and queer as umbrella terms for all sexualities and genders that do not abide by the heteronormative societal norms. Both queer and LGBTQ+ (or different variations such as LGBT, LGBTQIA+) were used by all the participants. While they all live in Budapest, the participants' background varied between having always lived in Budapest, to coming from small towns to countryside. Some of them shared experiences of living abroad, some did not, but all of them identified as Hungarian.

The participants all have it in common that they are openly queer at their work setting, they have dealt with queer topics in their creative and journalistic work and that all of them work/have worked in multiple positions in media sphere. The professional backgrounds of these creators include positions in filmmaking, documentary filmmaking, journalism, scriptwriting, TV producing, videographing, directing, video journalism, TV journalism, media marketing, film distributing, editing, and hosting. Some of them had originally started careers in some other field but had switched to media later in life, for some, the only experience of employment is in the media. Their experience in media vary from less than five years to more than twenty years. All of them have a university degree in media.

Due to the small cohort, niche subject and somewhat sensitive theme of the study, I have aimed to anonymise the data as much as can to ensure the maximum security for all the participants. For this reason, I decided not to make individual pseudonyms for each of the participants so that the reader could not recognise any person based on the quotes. To guarantee anonymity I will not discuss any of the participants professional positions in-depth or individually where some experiences or careers could be recognisable and thus I will mostly refer to them as participants or queer creators. Moreover, I mention some specific fields of media (such as film and TV) with my own consideration where I think the

descriptions provide important context, while still providing anonymity. The purpose of this was not to create one singular narrative but to still point out the differences of these experiences.

For further securing anonymity and to distance myself from gender assumptions, I have decided not to use any gendered pronouns in this research. Because although I am writing in English (a language that has gendered pronouns), both my native language (Finnish) and the native language of the participants (Hungarian) do not have gendered pronouns. As a personal act of resistance for Anglo-American culture I want to highlight the importance of language as creator of reality; Finnish nor Hungarian language (unintentionally or not) do not gender anyone with pronouns and I have decided not to do so even in English. For this reason, I refer to everyone in this study with they/them pronouns. I acknowledge this might erase someone's gender identity.

I arranged the interviews through e-mail and offered the participants space to ask questions and review a privacy notice beforehand. After scheduling the interviews, I started to plan the interview questions. My interviews were semi-structured, meaning I had notes on some preliminary questions, which varied between interviews but as a whole can be seen in appendix 1.3. My questions were based on the theoretical background in gender studies and media studies as well as my own position as an insider in the queer community and as a creator. My experience in working in Hungary also provided some knowledge for structuring the interviews. I did not conclude in-depth research before the interviews to distance myself from the topic and to let the data "speak for itself". Main topics that I wanted to touch upon were the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and its impact on the media sphere, the possible challenges the creators were facing in their professional life, and queer representation in Hungarian media.

According to the logic of in-depth interviews the questions were semi-structured and primarily open-ended. With every interview I went through the same themes and a few central questions, but some sub-questions changed or switched places and there was room for conversation and new questions. I added some questions for following participants according to their unique context. I also brought some knowledge from the first interviews to further discuss in later interviews. During the interview, I gave the participants an opportunity to remove their answers, pause the interview or to ask me questions (see appendix 1.2).

Although the interviews stayed conversation-like, they were still informed by the research question. In some interviews we talked more freely outside of the set-in questions and, in some less so.

I conducted all the interviews at my workplace at the time, in Budapest. The interviews took place at the end of February 2024. For scheduling reasons I ended up doing all the interviews, excluding the practice interview, in a timespan of a week, which was hectic but quickly became a routine. Most interviews lasted around one hour and a half, except one that lasted just over an hour. Before the recording the participants gave written informed consent, which gave me permission to record the interviews and save the data. I used two recording devices to have two copies of the interviews.

I approached the interviewing situation with a queer-feminist approach. Keeping in mind Oakley's (1981) feminist approach to a research interview, I presented my own identity through the process. During the interviews, I did not merely ask questions but participated in conversation and thus challenged the traditional power relationship in an interview (Landman, 2006; cit: Oakley 1981). In the beginning of the interviews, I asked each participant explicitly about their preferred terms of identification. Before recording I gave a short intro (appendix 1.2) which included the purpose of the study and my aim for safe space. I also reminded the participants that they could correct me if I was to use wrong terms.

Before this study I had not done a research interview, and thus the interviews caused me stress. I was worried that the answers would be too short or that I would not be able to ask insightful follow-up questions. Reflecting upon my experience, I can say that my fears were proven wrong. Although I know I must have been nervous, each interview went well. In the interviews I was able to form connections with all the participants and I felt that everyone was eager to talk with me about the themes of the study. I think our shared language around queer culture was one of the driving forces of the interviews. The tone stayed friendly and even humoristic through the process, although some of the themes that were brought up during the interviews were heavy. At some points when the discussed topics seemed obvious, I had to remind myself and the participant that I was still a researcher and not a friend.

In-depth interviewing turned out to be the right choice for this study since it allowed both the interviewer and interviewee to have a more relaxed space to speak a language that was not either one's native tongue. Doing the interviews face-to-face allowed me to capture all the emotions, metaphors and jokes I could have missed through a screen. I transcribed all the interviews by myself to Microsoft Word with time stamps. Transcribed material is between 21 to 43 pages per interview, a total of 150 pages. All the interviews and transcripts are stored in cloud behind a password.

4.3 (Reflexive) thematic analysis

For analysing the research data, I utilised thematic analysis, which is a form of qualitative content analysis (Juhila, 2021). Thematic analysis is a method used to examine data by identifying, reporting, and interpreting recurring patterns or themes within a dataset, offering a method for qualitative analysis that is both approachable and adjustable to different theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Methodologically, thematic analysis is grounded in recognizing how individuals interpret their experiences, while also considering the way broader social contexts impact and shape those interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2006) making it suitable for the purpose of this study. Accordingly, thematic analysis is a widely used approach for qualitative research for examining rich, descriptive data (Naeem et al., 2023), for example, interview transcriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Usually, thematic analysis includes the following steps that Braun and Clarke refer to as: 1) *familiarising yourself with the dataset*, 2) *coding*, 3) *generating initial themes*, 4) *developing and reviewing themes*, 5) *refining, defining and naming themes* and 6) *writing up* (2021 pp. 34–35).

Braun and Clarke (2022) conceptualize *reflexive thematic analysis*, which considers the position of the researcher alongside pre-existing concepts of thematic analysis as an analysing method. Braun and Clarke emphasise that subjectivity in qualitative research is not necessarily an issue in itself; what matters is the extent to which the researcher critically reflects on how their own assumptions and preconceptions influence the selection of methodology, the interpretation of data, and the overall construction of knowledge (2022). I have aimed to be as reflexive in this thesis as I can, since according to Braun and Clarke, it is the key to good analysis to strive to understand researcher's own perspective and position (2021). For example, according to Braun and Clarke (2021) thematic analysis cannot be

conducted in a theoretical vacuum. Salo (2015) states that the researcher can never erase previously learned theories or knowledge from their mind which makes pure data-based approach practically impossible. Accordingly, while leaning more towards a data-based approach, my thesis is located somewhere between data-based and theory-based research approaches. I have broadly outlined the theoretical basis of my thesis before conducting the interviews but avoided reading too much to be able to approach the issue with a more objective manner. Reflexivity and my own position will be further discussed in the following chapter (4.4).

Following the model of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2021) the first step of my analysis was the familiarisation of the data, which means a step where the researcher immerses themselves in the content to deepen their understanding of the material. In practice, I began the process by listening to each interview closely. At this stage I did not yet have any pre-selected themes in mind to which I would arrange the pieces of the analysis. The analysis process proceeded to transcription phase, where I again listened to the interviews and wrote them down thoroughly down to every word with some mentions of long pauses and struggles to find words or laughter to indicate the tone of voice to help the analysing. During this process I pseudonymised the material by editing the participants personal information for further anonymity. This and titling the materials numerically in a transcription order that was different from the interview order also helped me to distance myself from the material, which could offer me broader viewpoints and help me find connections from the data. After a thorough transcription process, I started to read the material. During the first couple rounds of reading, I wrote down thoughts, ideas, and key words in my notebook. Using different highlighting colours in Microsoft Word, I also roughly highlighted sections of emerging themes, such as mentions of challenges, professional worries, queer visibility, self-censorship, or other issues that were potentially relevant to the research questions. While this was still part of the familiarisation, this was also the beginning of the second step: coding.

Coding, in thematic analysis, means a systematic identification of features of the data that are relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I began coding by outlining the topics that generally repeat in the material and began to assemble a thematic outline from the material. I came up with three initial themes which I arranged as individual files wherein I gathered all the material that I thought were fitting for said theme. I gathered the

data fragments together by theme, removing the data from its initial setting where each interview was placed separately. At this point the themes were still somewhat changing and moving, but the more I read through the data, the more it came together. Eventually I came up with three main themes and seven subthemes. The three main themes I have identified from the data are: *regulations and restrictions (of creative expression)*, *routes for agency and queer in/visibility* and *resisting by visibility, resisting invisibility*. The themes that I identified do not exclude each other but are rather reflexive and overlapping with each other. Moreover, I view the themes as guides for interpretation and not as strict boundaries.

While still making sense of the coherence and the contradictions of the material, I was simultaneously studying literature conducted with similar research issues. This helped me deepen my knowledge on the themes of the study. On this basis I began to draft the analysis chapter. After identifying the main themes and sub-themes, the final step of analysis involved exploring their underlying meanings and situating them within the broader context of the interaction between anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, professional agency, and queer visibility. Finally, when writing the analysis, I arranged the data fragments under each theme in an order which created a cohesive story. I ended up bringing the themes together with previous theories in individual discussion chapters after every main theme to deepen the analysis and to separate the results from the conclusions.

During the writing of the analysis, I still shaped and renamed some of the categories to match the content of the analysis better as well as due to stylistic choices. I based naming the main themes on previous studies about queer visibility, to match the terms previously used and to make the study readable. I was especially inspired by Sipos' and Bagyura's (2024) study on Budapest Pride. Their analysis used what they call "the 3R lens" which aims to "scrutinize three aspects to better understand silencing and disruption of silencing", which I thought matched my aim to understand negotiations of visibility and invisibility. In their analysis Sipos' and Bagyura's (2024) have created the 3R lens where they look at Budapest Pride through three different categories, which are regulations, routes, and resistances. (Sipos & Bagyura, 2024). I only came across this article after initially naming the main themes of my thesis as *legislations and policies*, *challenges and navigations*, and *fight for visibility*, which then I changed to resemble the 3R lens. All the main themes of my study discuss the negotiations of queer visibility and invisibility. According to Braun and Clarke (2021) in reflexive thematic analysis it is not important what route you take into your research

but for it to be broadly guided by the initial research question and purpose that the researcher wants to understand and thus parts of my research have evolved and expanded during the process.

In chapter 5, I present the conducted analysis, including illustrative quotes from the data to support the conclusions. In the analysis chapter of the study (chapter 5) I have stylised some quotes by shortening some sentences for readability. These were cases where the participant, for example, was struggling with English words. In these cases, I would cut some of the parts where the participant was trying to find words in the middle of the sentence, and I have added [--] to showcase the change. At some points I have changed a word in the quote for anonymity, such as in cases where the participant describes their sexuality. In some cases, I have added a word for context. All changes are marked with []. Other than this, no changes were made to the data.

4.4 Limitations, ethical questions and positioning myself

My master's thesis is a qualitative study and falls within the scope of queer-feminist methodology. According to Nikander (2012), feminist methodology is a theoretical approach that concerns research practices, the research relationship, and the epistemology of research. This includes considering, for example, under what conditions it is possible to know and produce knowledge (Nikander 2012). Characteristics of feminist methodology include, among others, questioning and renewing the conditions of mainstream research, dismantling of dichotomies, the problematisation of the relationship between the knower and the known, the critique of objectivity, and using reflexivity throughout the research (Nikander, 2012). In accordance with the queer-feminist methodology, I have reflected my own position throughout the entire process of writing the thesis (Hekanaho, 2010). For example, as explored in the previous chapter (4.3), I have conducted the analysis in a reflexive manner. My approach to the issue of queer representation has also sought to dismantle norms and dichotomies. I consider choosing queer as the subject and as the approach of my thesis is already questioning social norms. In addition, I aim to unravel the West/East dichotomy and normative assumptions of gender and sexuality as well as the in/visibility of them. In this thesis I have also aimed to highlight the role of queer in media productions which remains as an overlooked category in media studies.

Qualitative research involves complex ethical questions that can be considered through the principles of good scientific practice. According to the European Guidelines on Research Ethics, the fundamental pillars of good scientific practice are reliability, respect, honesty, and responsibility (TENK 2023). Committing to these principles requires sensitivity and precision at every stage of the research (Vuori 2021), which I have also committed to do. The main ethical questions and limitations of this thesis are the small cohort, the sensitivity of the subject and the theme of the study, and on one hand my own position as an insider as a queer creator, and on the other hand my position as an outsider in Hungary.

The main limitation of in-depth interviewing is that it relies on a small cohort (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). Although the choice for small sample size is often necessary, it prevents the use of random sampling and compromises the generalisation of the results (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). I conducted five interviews, which might impact the legitimacy and usability of the collected data. The question is whether the results from a small cohort can provide insight to a broader culture. I argue that they can. Feminist studies have long theorised that personal is political (Rossi, 2015) and basing on that notion, I claim the personal issues of a small group are also political and thus can provide useful information about the world around them—making them worth studying.

Other limitation of in-depth interviewing is that the researcher's tone and phrasing can influence the answers given by participants (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). But as is often the case in qualitative research, I view the relationship between the researcher and the research subject as constructive (Jokinen, 2016). This refers to the process where throughout the research I describe the social reality from a certain position while simultaneously reproduce a version of it (Jokinen, 2016), meaning also that the results of this study would have been different in case someone else did the interviews and the analysing process. In line with queer and feminist research traditions, I aim to be transparent with the choices and limits that have shaped the analysis. In addition, I acknowledge how my own identity and background have informed and supported the research process.

My identity is part of this research through my own gender and sexuality, which both I consider queer. Through this personal connection, I can treat queer themes and issues sensitively. I have treated each participant's individual identity with respect and without trying to impose my own ideas about queerness or LGBTQ+ community. To ensure this I have

given the participants room for self-identification from the beginning of the recruitment process and during the interviews. I approached the issue of identity by discussing the terms and lingo they preferred to use about themselves and about their community. In this process I have tried to make my own choices visible throughout; I have described my own gender identity, justified why I chose to approach the issue with a queer lens and explained why I chose to refer to all of the participants as queer and with gender neutral pronouns instead of their individual identifications.

It has required special sensitivity from me to write about the Hungarian media field and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. While by the time of beginning this thesis project, I had little to no knowledge about the Hungarian cultural context, my knowledge increased during my time living in the country. As explained before, as a Finnish person I was still in many ways an outsider which has affected the way I approach and write about this issue. I have little experience on showcasing (queer) films in Budapest at a Finnish film festival, but I am not Hungarian, and I have never created any queer content in Hungary nor been dependent on Hungarian funding. It is important to note that although I have some knowledge of Human rights, understanding the legal systems of any country is a new approach to me. Moreover, reading about the Hungarian legal system and culture in English might have limited some valuable knowledge which a person speaking Hungarian could attain. In addition, not sharing a native language is a disadvantage of the study since our understanding of culture relies on understanding language. Then again, sharing understanding about the media sphere and the queer experience—which both are using English lingo to begin with—helped me to navigate all the interviews sufficiently.

Being in this position offers me a chance to study this matter both as an outsider and an insider. I consider this a unique perspective to the issue. Being an insider adds depth while being an outsider allows me to distance myself and ask questions that maybe an insider would not have thought about asking. I view this both a strength and a limitation of this thesis. In addition, as an outsider I have the privilege to avoid the consequences that a Hungarian researcher could be facing when researching this subject, since the gender studies discipline is banned in Hungary. With that being said my goal is to present the study as a nuanced, non-normative exploration of queer experiences, avoiding moral judgements on the Hungarian government.

In social science research, adopting a particular perspective can often involve taking a normative stance. This can lead to labelling certain actors or ideas as inherently “good” or “bad,” potentially stigmatising not only those “bad” actors and ideas but also the individuals who support them. In the context of my research, this challenge arises especially when examining Viktor Orbán and the Orbán regime. The objective of this thesis is not to morally judge the political stance of the Hungarian government or Viktor Orbán – or those supportive of them. My goal as a researcher is to shed light on the lived experiences of those impacted by the regime as well as to examine the broader societal phenomena. While doing so, I also emphasize the importance of the freedom of expression—a universal Human Right that Hungary’s government has committed to uphold—and I approach the issue from this perspective. While as a queer person I wholeheartedly stand behind the freedom of our community, I also recognise my potential biases as a queer person coming from a Nordic democracy.

5 ANALYSIS : NEGOTIATING QUEER IN/VISIBILITY

The main objective of this chapter is to answer the research question:

How are Hungarian queer creators negotiating in/visibility under the Orbán regime?

as well as the following two sub-questions:

- A) *What kind of challenges do Hungarian queer creators face under the Orbán regime?*
- B) *What routes do they find for creative expression, agency, and queer in/visibility under the restricted environment?*

To answer these questions, I have analysed the research data and identified the main themes as results of the study. Three main themes and altogether seven sub-themes emerged from the analysis. The three main themes identified are *regulations and restrictions (of creative expression)*, *routes for agency and queer in/visibility* and *resisting by visibility, resisting invisibility* (Table 1). These have been discussed ahead, supported by examples from the interviews. I carry the negotiations of in/visibility as well as the concepts of agency, representation, and creative expression through all these themes. Each theme also includes a discussion, where I connect the results to previous theory and literature from the field.

NEGOTIATIONS OF IN/VISIBILITY

5.1	<i>Regulations and restrictions (of creative expression)</i>	<u>5.1.1 Contradictory anti-LGBTQ+ legislation</u> <u>5.1.2 Atmosphere of fear leading to self-censorship</u>
5.2	<i>Routes for agency and queer in/visibility</i>	<u>5.2.1 Changes in the media sphere</u> <u>5.2.2 Obstacles and workarounds in production processes</u> <u>5.2.3 Finding queer representation</u>
5.3	<i>Resisting by visibility, resisting invisibility</i>	<u>5.3.1 The need for representation and to represent</u> <u>5.3.2 Feelings about the situation on the media field</u>

Table 1. Themes around experienced negotiations of in/visibility and their subthemes

5.1 Regulations and restrictions (of creative expression)

In this part of the analysis I explore the ways the research participants personally view, explain, and contextualize the governmental anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, in order to shed light on participants' own voices and understandings of the regulation. The chapter illustrates how the laws, especially the Child Protection Law, has impacted the Hungarian media sphere by creating an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty which causing restrictions of creative expression.

5.1.1 Contradictory anti-LGBTQ+ legislation

The participants refer to the Hungarian anti-LGBTQ+ policies as complicated processes that are hard to understand and interpret. While on one hand some participants say that their knowledge of the laws could be lacking—whether it was because they are not lawyers or because they have tried to forget the reality of these laws—some on the other hand report that for their work they have had to read the laws frequently and thoroughly.

Participants describe that the dynamics against LGBTQ+ did not start with any singular law but has rather been a process of various forms and types of laws and policies connected to the general change in the political atmosphere. According to one participant, when it comes to rights of Hungarian LGBTQ+ people, the “kind of a big one” was the modification of the Constitution which declared family as “father, mother, and their children” and that since then it has just “gotten worse”. Another participant says that a decade ago they thought that they were going to have a very good future with the rights of LGBTQ+ people, but that instead “we didn't get better rights during this time of period [--] but a lot of rights were taken away.” Some participants also feel disappointment for the lost potential of their country. One participant says that if it wasn't for Viktor Orbán, who tries to stay in power with whatever the cost, Hungary could have been a progressive country of science and a knowledge-based economy. They wonder how much these laws are holding Hungary back, since historically Hungary is known to be a country of many cultures and has prided itself of its friendliness and openness. These notions represent the disappointment and the decline for the policies regarding LGBTQ+ rights.

All the participants agree that while the society got more accepting towards LGBTQ+ people and thus has changed “in a good way”, the laws changed towards the opposite direction. This leaves the participants in a contradictory position where on one hand the governmental regulations are against them, but on the other hand their lived reality does not necessarily match the legislation. Participants note that they can only speak about their own experience and all of them highlight that the acceptance of queer people is an intersectional issue where experiences can vary whether you come from the capital or from the countryside, whether you are gay or trans, or whether you are Romani or white and so on. Participants report that although the society thus far has changed in a more accepting direction, these anti-LGBTQ+ laws have brought up fear for things possibly getting worse. One participant addresses the impacts of the law as such:

I think this is one of those laws that are very sneaky, and you don't really see the effects right away, but long term they are really destructive and will have huge consequences.

This quote explains that the effects of the anti-LGBTQ+ laws are not necessarily something you can see in the society right away. Another participant adds to this notion by stating that although according to them there has not yet been any vivid change in the attitudes towards queer people, they fear that it will change “because we've seen it before that Fidesz can steer public opinion quite well because at this point, they own media”, referring to the dominance the Fidesz party has in media-ownership (see chapter 3.3).

The latest anti-LGBTQ+ law (during the time of these interviews in 2024) is the Child Protection Law that was implemented in 2021. The law bans “depicting” or “promoting” any LGBTQ+ related in media and in schools. One of the issues of this law, according to the research participants, is that the wording of it is open to interpretation and thus the law seems to be hard to fulfil. One participant describes the Child Protection Law:

The law says that anything that promotes homosexuality or gender transition or any of that's kind of controlled by the state. What gets into the media if and if they deem it a kind of, like it's promoting—whatever that means—homosexuality, then they ban it. [--] But in reality, it's banning everything completely...everything that is about, homosexuality or being transgender or being anyone in the LGBTQ+ community.

The very characteristic part the previous quote is the participant's side note "whatever it means" which shows the unclarity of the law which, according to the participant, is actually then banning queer representation altogether. According to Rédai (2023) when the Child Protection Law was applied, there were multiple complaints since the law was hard to interpret. Most of the participants add to this note, describing the law as ambiguous and impossible to follow:

So basically, you can't, you can't fulfil this law. [--] So, the wording is: 'you're not supposed to show a gay relationship or gay life, as something that's better than, heterosexual life'. So, define that for me. So, if there are [--] three stories; one of them is the gay, relationship story and then [--] the straight couples are quarrelling and then the gays are, I don't know, on vacation. Did you did you break the law? Did you show them as better? So, it's like unfulfillable.

This quote explains a situation where the participant is wondering how they could create a story with queer representation without breaking the Child Protection Law. The same participant says that due to the law's ambiguous nature they have had to read the law "over and over again" to double check that everything follows the law as well as it can be followed. Yet they still find it unclear, which shows the nature of the law. Another participant reasons the unclarity of the law by stating that it is purposefully worded as it is "because if you don't know, what surely is the bad thing, you can easily do that bad thing". These cases showcase the nature of the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and the Child Protection Law, which is leaving the creators who would like to address LGBTQ+ themes in their creative work in a precarious situation, where they do not know what can be said and what cannot.

One of the aspects of the Child Protection Law is, what one participant describes as, that it "blends LGBTQIA people with paedophiles and just equates the two". One participant says this has been harshly implemented in governmental communication:

[T]he communication of these laws were really, really complicated and really, really damaging because, for example, if, our government wanted to talk about the new laws that kind of tried to protect the children from the LGBTQ media and the LGBTQ propaganda, as they call it, they didn't just introduce the law [--] but they deliver the message

that [--] the LGBT community are mostly pedophiles and trans people are trying to change the sexes and the gender of the, of the children. They kind of have a message that all these LGBTQ people are trying to go to kindergarten and rape all these children. I mean, it sounds like a nightmare, but they really had this kind of communication.

This quote shows how the anti-LGBTQ+ law is not only regulating queer representation, but the media communication by the government is also promoting an anti-LGBTQ+ narrative and thus impacting the representation of people in the media. This kind of governmental messaging has caused negative feelings in the rest of the participants. The anti-LGBTQ+ communication around the Child Protection Law by the government can be stigmatising and could add to the general hostility against queer people.

Participants find it hard to reason the Child Protection law. One participant comments on the law: "even if I wanted to look at it rationally, I don't see the point." Another one reasons that the anti-LGBTQ+ laws are there just to punish anyone who does not align with Orbán's financial interests. Third participant adds a notion: "I guess they kind of have a strategy that they try to say who a real Hungarian is and who is not a real Hungarian." This narrative of queer people not being "real Hungarians" is repeated by all the participants. One participant describes the issue:

We are Hungarians, but they don't really, treat us equals. Because if you are a real Hungarian, you have to be, you have to be a Christian. You have to be straight. You have to have a family. You, you have to think like that and that and that. [--] and it's also a big thing for them that, they kind of, taking away this national pride from, from people from the LGBTQ community.

This described feeling of alienation is common with the participants, who state that in addition to the professional worries they might have, this situation is bad for the psyche of the whole LGBTQ+ community. These laws and this situation have made them feel like "citizens in the second line", as one participant puts it.

One theme that continued through the interviews when discussing the anti-LGBTQ+ laws is the hypocrisy of the Orbán regime:

It isn't of course a child protection law. It is a communication tool that they can take out wherever they want. I mean [--] we just realized a week ago that, that our president, who is now our ex-president, thank God, pardoned the aid of a paedophile. So much for the, the the Orbán values.

The quote describes how the Child Protection Law and the people behind it do not actually, according to the participants, aim to protect children, making the law hypocritical. The logic of child protection in the Child Protection Law is indeed debatable, like the participant describes. The law does not include any measures or resources to actually prevent child sexual abuse or to help victims of abuse (Rédai, 2023). This juxtaposition between protecting children and recognizing the rights of LGBTQ+ people has been debated in the national and transnational legal system (Thoreson, 2015). According to Thoreson (2015) when children's rights are being protected at the expense of LGBTQ+ rights, it weakens the state's claimed interest in protecting children since restricting LGBTQ+ rights restricts children's rights, making the law counterproductive. Another participant showcases the hypocrisy of the Child Protection law as follows:

Then I see the ads in daytime television, and they show sex - heterosexual sex. So, what is going on? So.. so, like that's okay for a five-year-old to see? Between two, I don't know, episodes of Friends or whatever? Like you know, it's just everything is so contradictory and so hypocritical, if that's the word for it.

Here the participant refers to the part in the Child Protection Law, where it says that you are not allowed to show anything related to LGBTQ+ between 5am to 10pm, stating that it is contradictory to be able to see heterosexual sex during that time. All the participants agree that they do not think the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation of Hungary has actually ever been about being against LGBTQ+ people and the community but the laws are merely implemented as "just a tool to divide the country" in order for the Fidesz to stay in power. As one participant states:

I don't really even think that they have anything about against gays. They have several gays in the Fidesz party—they have quite high level. [--] there are people that I know personally. [--] The main goal is to keep people divided ideologically so they don't have a chance to stand up for democratic values.

The above quote goes to show how contradictory the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation of Hungary is; these laws are regulating and restricting the rights and the visibility of queer people, but at the same time they are being put in act by people some of whom, according to the participants, are also queer. To further showcase the hypocrisy of the Fidesz party, the same participant tells a story about the original Fidesz founder who wrote the new Constitution (see section 3.3) and allegedly later on got caught in a gay orgy and had to resign (Thorpe, 2020). These examples showcase the contradictions and hypocrisy of the Hungarian LGBTQ+ policies which might add to the mistrust in the government and add to the feeling of unfairness and uncertainty in the treatment of LGBTQ+ people in governmental bodies, leaving the people in fear.

5.1.2 Atmosphere of fear leading to self-censorship

All the participants describe feelings of fear or shock of the time when the Child Protection Law was implemented, even though they were already used to the state's anti-LGBTQ+ policies. One participant describes the feelings they experienced when thinking about the laws: "these laws and what they are saying about us, it's very, you know... It is basically a knocking out. Stomach turning. Kick in the gut." Another participant describes the personal feelings about the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation:

On a personal level, you feel prosecuted. You, you know, just going into a going into a bookstore and looking at a book and seeing the, the foil that they wrap around the books. And I was like, okay; so on the one hand, this protects the books, so it'll be good longer. So, the joke's on them. On the other hand I was like, [--] if you really think about it, they just say, anyone who's considered a minor, reading anything about your life or someone like you, it's, is is somehow, corrupting. That's not, I mean, it's really stupid.

Here the participant has uncomfortable feelings about their identity being sold as something that would harm minors, even though they jokingly cover the notion of queer themed books being wrapped in foil making the books last longer. One participant says that they have been able to forget the laws, but now that they think about the laws, it is bringing up a lot of traumas they have had to deal with on a daily basis in Hungary. They also describe not

reading the news to secure their mental health. Another participant describes the unpleasant feelings around working with queer themes in Hungary:

I'm angry a lot of times. Of course. I really hate that I know the feeling of fear. I, I really hate that I had some moments when I regretted my [work] or I regretted my experiences because I felt that I'm in danger, or maybe in the future I will be in danger.

This quote shows that the situation in Hungary for queer creators can cause feelings of anger and fear, which can make them regret their work. The same participant clarifies that sometimes they feel that people outside of Hungary think that LGBTQ+ people are attacked on the streets daily due to media's descriptions of Hungary abroad. They state, that although sometimes direct attacks happen—and it might have become more regular—the reality for them is that there is no open terror on the streets. This participant explains that you can be happy as a queer person in Hungary but at the same time the government wants you to be silenced. And for them this is another kind of terror:

You don't have to be attacked on the street to feel, to be an outsider in your own country as a Hungarian person. [--] What people have to understand is that, this is because of the fear. And now everybody's kind of have this fear in Hungary that if they say something bad or if they say something, act somehow badly that that is bad in the eye of the government, something will happen to them, and it will have consequences.

These examples show that queer creators have had to go through multiple negative emotions regarding their government's legislation that affect both their personal lives and their professional careers as creators.

Fear for consequences can lead to self-censorship which is common to state controlled media spheres (Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020). Consequently, all of the participants have—or know people on the field who have—relied on self-censorship. One participant says that they have never faced direct censorship measures from the government, but that they “must have this kind of self-censorship” with their work. Another participant explains how self-censorship works, saying that when one does not know how to exactly follow the law with queer themes, it is easy to opt out and never publish anything queer related. Another

participant adds that the government has been able to create an atmosphere of fear in Hungary, where “a lot of people have to learn again what is self-censorship”, referring to the country’s socialist past where self-censorship and censorship measures were common. They state that people, especially those working in media, “a lot of people have to play a game that they don’t want to play”, referring to new ways and loopholes people need to find in order to be able to work in media. One participant describes self-censorship in the Hungarian media as follows:

Censorship is self-censorship in Hungary. So.. and the channels take care of that no matter what they say. In the end this is, this is a money business for them. The only channel that, that money doesn't count is, is the state channel. And there of course they would never show anything that that goes against the public facing ideals of Orbán.

This notion explains how the broadcasting media relies on self-censorship because it financially benefits them. They also explain that the state-owned media would never showcase anything that would go against the “ideals of Orbán”, emphasizing the power the Prime Minister holds over media.

Sometimes self-censorship is not conducted by the creator but a stakeholder in production processes. One participant describes that a premiere of their new queer film was taking a place in a theatre, but the venue told them that they would not be allowed to publish any pictures from the event because they did not want to be associated with such a film. This hindered the promotion of their premiere, which is commonly an important PR event for a film. According to another participant, self-censorship by a stakeholder has happened for example with books when there has already been a foreign book translated in Hungarian and then the Hungarian publisher has just opted out in the middle of the process. They add:

...because who knows what will happen to these firms or to these brands or to these people? And, and this is the fear that we are talking about. Maybe nothing happen, maybe something will happen, but we can never be sure about that. And if you are not a fighter, I can totally understand if someone says that I run a family business here, I won't publish this book because this can pose me a danger or this can affect my life really badly.

This answer demonstrates the thought process around self-censorship; because the laws are unclear and although people do not always face consequences for going against the law, sometimes they do and thus they are left with uncertain and even fearful feelings. There has been a change in the process of self-censorship. According to one participant, before the Child Protection Law, producers were afraid of the audiences' reactions, now they fear of getting their funding being cut off by the government. As a result, as one participant describes it: "so basically people have opted to just exclude gays because that's the only way you can do this".

In the interviews participants also describe self-censorship as having to alternate their work according to the platform where it is being published. For the journalists this means considering if the work is being published online versus on paper whereas those who work for film or TV must "follow different rules" for streaming services and linear TV. One participant describes how they had to change their work from streaming service to linear TV:

[L]ike in 2024 no one is producing for anything, any fiction for after the ten-hour mark. Because the viewers are not there. So, it's just a business question. So, we basically have to cut out everything there. [--] I had to cut out, you know, I shortened sequences where, where I would show like.. there are several [queer] scenes in it, sex scenes. I would just shorten, you know, they wouldn't see the hand going into the panties or the whatever. [--] Yeah. So not breaking the law.

Here they describe how in the broadcasting TV you are not allowed to "promote" LGBTQ+ people before 10 pm and because no one is watching TV after 10 pm, for business reasons they have had to alternate their work. And because it financially benefits the creators of the work to showcase their work when the viewers are there to see it, they have to do these kinds of self-censorship practices.

Another participant says that in their work they "try to stay away from political things", because they do not want to get in trouble with criticising the government too harshly. They add that it does not mean that they are not trying to communicate about LGBTQ+ themes, but rather that they have had to learn to be "clever about it" and "play by the rules". Sometimes they have decided to be more critical about the government in their work and thus far it has not led to any trouble. The issue of self-censorship is complicated, because

some of the participants have relied their whole careers on creating LGBTQ representation. One participant wonders that if they would not publish anything anymore, they would be safe, but they have still continued to do so even in a constant state of alertness and fear.

5.1.3 Discussion

The contradictory anti-LGBTQ+ legislation is a multifaceted phenomenon that impacts and challenges the personal and professional lives of the queer creators. The ambiguity and unclarity of the Child Protection Law plays a crucial role in the professional lives of the queer creators. The nature of the law follows the examples from China and Russia explored in chapter 2.3, where the restrictions on queer visibility are implemented with laws that are hard to understand and to follow. In addition, similarly to the studies from China and Russia, measures of self-censorship are taking place in the queer media sphere. The Hungarian queer creators struggle with fear and uncertainty with working with queer subjects due to the legislation and public discourse around LGBTQ+ community. The ambiguity of the law fosters a climate of fear and uncertainty that serves to marginalize sexual and gender minorities (Takács et al., 2022). This is confirmed by the participants who view the legislation as contradictory and unclear, causing professional and personal anxieties.

These negotiations around visibility and invisibility, are tangled with negotiations of the nation and who can be a citizen of it (Persson, 2015). This also can be seen in the interviews, where the participants described notions of alienation from their home country. Moreover, the anti-LGBTQ+ policies can be seen as stigmatizing, since they equate queer people with paedophiles which could not only enhance the discrimination and thus add to the fear already experienced by all of the participants of the study. According to Nuñez-Mietz (2019) no society is “naturally” anti-LGBTQ+ or perceives queer community as an existential threat. In authoritarian societies, the ruling elites use minorities as scapegoats to accumulate political power (Nuñez-Mietz, 2019). Similarly to Russia, where according to Persson (2015) queer people are used as scapegoats and portrayed as “dangers to the nation”, in Hungary, the participants of this study feel that they and their community is portrayed as the “enemy of the state” because of the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and governmental communication about the laws. Hungary's political landscape promotes a censored society where rights and protections are reserved only for those who conform to the government's definitions of sex,

gender, and sexuality (Takács et al., 2022). These accounts are repeated in the interviews, where participants describe not feeling like proper citizens and being used as tools for state propaganda. This further feeds into stigmatisation of Hungarian queer people.

Unlike shown in studies, for example in Russia (see chapter 2.3), the governmental anti-LGBTQ+ discourse does not seem to have had much change in the societal acceptance on queer people, which the participants of this study confirm for their part. When asked about opinion to legal recognition, 17% of Hungarians opposed legal recognition of same-sex couples in 2024, in 2021 the percentage was the same, so the public opinion does not seem to have changed after the Child Protection Law that was adopted in 2021. (Jackson, 2021; Ipsos, 2024). This can be seen in the answers of the queer creators of this study, who have not reported much change in the public attitudes, on the contrary. Although the participants feel that there is a contradiction between public attitudes towards queer people versus the government communication, they think that this could both change, and that the government has already been able to create an atmosphere of fear.

These cases shown in this chapter about the contradictory legislation are an indicator of the subtle way the Hungarian government is not fully banning all queer representations, but how the uncertainty of the laws eventually could lead to queer invisibility due to fear and self-censorship. These examples illustrate the environment where queer creators—whose professional lives and identities are intertwined with policymaking—are living and working. Moreover, this chapter has shown how the creative expression of the creators is being regulated by their government.

5.2 Routes for agency and queer in/visibility

This chapter further focuses on the queer creator and their professional experiences with working in the Hungarian media sphere with queer themes. First, this chapter illustrates general changes of the industry. Following, this chapter explores the routes queer creators find for queer visibility and the obstacles that make them invisible, including examples of funding, distribution. Finally, this chapter showcases the in/visible queer representation of Hungarian media described and experienced by the queer creators working on the field.

5.2.1 Changes in the media sphere

When asked if they thought that the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, especially the Child Protection Law had affected media and film industry regarding LGBTQ+ representation, the participants had two types of answers. For some of them, the impacts were clear:

I think it's a recent step. Like for a while it didn't affect it, like in a very obvious way. Obviously, it affected it, because most media, like films and stuff can only be made like with some support from the state, as most European film industry does. And obviously they stopped from doing any queer representation.

In this answer the participant describes that the influence the governmental regulations have had for the media and film industry have been gradual but distinguishable. It is important to note here that because most media and film work with government money, queer representations are no longer being funded since it does not suit the government's principles. The other type of answer to this question was, that it is hard to say if the anti-LGBTQ+ laws had affected the media and film industries. This answer makes sense since the direct effects laws and regulations have cannot really be seen from just one person's experience. Some of the participants explain the situation being linked to the general shifts in economy after COVID-19 and some rationalise that all the changes in the media sphere are probably affecting the situation also for queer creators and audiences. One participant says that after the state started funding their previous film school, all the teachers and the curriculum got replaced and all the graduation films with LGBTQ+ themes disappeared, even though there had been many in recent years. The same can be seen in the general environment of the film industry:

And I think especially my generation would make films, feature films about, at least in part about LGBTQ identity, because I feel like my generation is much more open about it than the older ones. And I think it's not happening because it's so hard to find funding and it's so hard to just even start making a film. So, as I was thinking about this, I'm sure that the law has an effect as well, but it's already almost impossible to get funding, so it's hard to say how much more that obstructs you from getting funding. I would say that if the funding was the same as it always was then still it would be a disadvantage to come up with an LGBTQ story. I would feel that way, but I'm not sure. You know, it's like, really

hard to to separate these layers of making it hard for filmmakers to make original films at the moment.

This answer shows that multiple factors are affecting the filmmaking industry as it is. The participant feels that the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation might play a part in the decrease of new queer films. They also describe that they would assume there being more queer films, since their generation seems to be more open towards queer issues. This participant had graduated with a queer themed film themselves and they had faced no issues in representing queer themes in school works. They continue to explain that before the Child Protection Law, in local film festivals half of the movies in LGBTQ+ category were from Hungarian filmmakers, but last year there was none. "That's kind of scary to me", they add. In general, according to them, there hadn't been new short films representing queer themes in recent years, "but it could be just a coincidence".

Other participant says that the laws really affect how you make content about LGBTQ+ community and for the community, but according to them it is more complex than that, since even before the law they felt that there was a lot of pressure on how you communicate about LGBTQ+ related themes. According to another participant while there are still queer people who are visible in media, the representation was definitely more evident couple years before the Child Protection law: "I mean it's not for nothing that RTL fired their gay hosts one by one" referring to staff changes in a Hungarian TV channel group.

In the interviews some changes in the media sphere were reported by two participants as good changes. One participant says that: "after they started wrapping books in cellophane, several independent book publishers started." They add that they are working with one queer writer who has managed to sell out all of their books through a new independent publisher, even though they now do not have proper funding or publicity that state owned publishing houses would have. Another participant describes the positive changes as having more themes to cover in their work, since after the anti-LGBTQ+ laws there has been more public discussion about LGBTQ+ themes in Hungary. These accounts illustrate the changes of queer media under the Orbán regime.

5.2.2 Obstacles and workarounds in production processes

Part of the creative process and reality of being a creator is being able to fund your projects. Getting funded by the government has become harder for all the participants, but some alternative funding methods have also been found. One participant describes the recent changes in the production processes in filmmaking in Hungary. They say that they are not able to get funding for their films from the government despite having been funded before the Fidesz governance. They report that there is one independent producer who offers a few small grants, but they have not been able to get one. All the other participants who have worked with film also report that it is impossible to get funded by the government.

Another participant describes that a decade ago it was easy to get funding for creative queer projects from the state and independent funders, but because of the homophobic communication from the state, some stakeholders have withdrawn. This shows that the stakeholders are not functioning with the logic of what the audience demands but what the state requires. The participant adds that some possibilities remain since they still have their job to this day. They claim that that is due to knowing the right people who are in the business and who are also queer people and want to invest money in queer media creation. Nevertheless, according to the participant, the ways to create are very limited.

One participant reports that the government basically does not support documentaries at all, queer themed or not. Then again, one participant has relied on documentary filmmaking instead of making a queer themed feature film—despite it being their dream—due to its lower production cost. They report that they have not even tried to get funding for their films from the state. They too have found one independent Hungarian source for funding, but they have had to lie in the process in order to get a few hundred euros, which is now their entire budget. They also struggle with other parts of the production, since it includes a lot of asking favours because there is no money for equipment nor pay checks. They describe that this has put them in a really uncomfortable situation because they are expecting professional work and they would want to pay for the professionals in their team, but they can't. Similarly, another participant says that one way they are funding their films is by crowdfunding. According to them the LGBTQ+ community is very supportive, but it still is not sufficient enough to fully fund any projects. Both of these examples show, that queer production relies

on queer community. For the former, it seems burdening and while the latter describes it as part of community-building.

Another participant who has worked with film reports that they have not faced any opposition with filmmaking, but they state that they are “so set on things” that if they want to make an LGBTQ+ film, they will find a way to make one:

So for me, it's not an option if like a producer says; 'yeah, I give you money, but the can you just cut this character?' or whatever. Like, I'm not going to do it. Like I'm going to find someone else. It's not a problem for me, because if I want to make an LGBTQ film, like I will go to whatever length I need to go to-to make it, because I'm like a stubborn person.

This answer can be seen as an example of resistance, which has worked for this filmmaker, since they have found an independent film producer to fund their film that deals with queer themes. They say that they don't fear the opposition, but that they are “working in a very narrow road here”. If they wanted to get funded by the state, it could be a problem and that is why they don't even consider it.

Another way those creators working with film have tried to get funding is from abroad. Some report trying to get funding by sending their film to foreign film festivals. Another filmmaker reports that they have just gotten funding from a foreign embassy. The issue with foreign funding for filmmakers, according to one participant, is that film-industries abroad prefer co-productions and the basic rule for co-production is that you have to get part of the funding from your own state. This sometimes rules out the option of getting funds from abroad, since the filmmakers are unable to get even partly funded by the state. Still, for all the participants foreign funding seems to be the primary source they could rely on if they wanted to make a film.

One participant concludes that while it's getting riskier to produce queer media, for the creators and all the stakeholders involved, it's also getting riskier for the audiences to consume, because everything is connected to the anti-LGBTQ+ legislations and atmosphere. With this they refer to the fact that for the audience it can be risky to go and see, for example, a queer movie or attend any event where queer art is distributed in fear of

association with LGBTQ+ community. This can decrease the viewership of these mediums and make it seem like there would be no need for queer representations. In contrast, this could increase the viewership on those queer representations that can be viewed from home, such as streaming.

Finding audiences and distributing creative work is an essential part of creative work. In the current media environment, queer creators have faced some struggles distributing their work but also have found alternative routes to do so. The broadcasting hours (after 10 pm) where you're allowed to broadcast queer content have affected those participants' work who work with TV. One participant says that there are no viewers for any TV shows after 10 pm. This has made them switch to only working with streaming platforms since streaming does not have to abide by Hungarian law. One of the participants describes a situation where they had done an advertisement for TV which they had been very proud of. Because of the advertisement's queer theme, it only got shown during night-time and with a +18 sign on it which was disappointing for the participant.

One of the participants who works with distributing films to cinemas says that because everything that has queer representation has to be marketed as +18—even if it was originally made to be an R-rated film—it is hard to find audience for queer films. The age restriction can make the film seem like it would handle dangerous themes, since usually films like horror films get a rating of +18 and thus audience can be hesitant to go see the films. In addition, according to the participant, you are not allowed to show a trailer of a +18 film before a film that is not +18, which leaves little room for marketing even foreign queer films—even when you technically can show them in theatres. Since queer characters in advertising are also forbidden, according to this participant this hinders the advertising of queer films and thus the audience does not find their way to see the films in cinema.

When asked about the importance of mainstream attention and the importance of audience for their work, the participants' answers varied. One participant says that they find mainstream attention important, but it would be hard to accomplish without state funding for their project. Another one says that state funding would help, but mainstream attention is not impossible without it either. Regarding queer filmmaking, according to one participant, queer people do not have big and established professional circles like some other filmmakers might have, referring to some filmmakers who have been able to make successful films with

some mainstream attention without government funding. These filmmakers might have had established careers but after the changes in film funding in Hungary, they have not been able to get funding for films that handle themes that go against the values of the Fidesz government—but these filmmakers and films this participant is referring to are not queer.

One filmmaker says that the best way to get recognition for a queer film is from an A-listed film festival abroad. They state:

We make films for an audience; we would want to get as much publicity as possible. I think I see that on myself and I see that with everyone else that if we get like a chance for an interview or to go to a foreign festival or anything, we take that and it's very important to us and we hold on to that.... That's like the glimpse of hope for some people to at least find us.

According to this participant unless you get lucky in a festival, you “might as well bury your film”, because it's not going to be shown in theatres in Hungary. They had personally faced many rejections from film festivals abroad and spent a lot of money trying to get it distributed without results. So eventually because they really wanted people to see their film, they ended up uploading it on YouTube: “I was like; no one is seeing these films like these files are just on my computer. Like, I made these for an audience. It's not reaching anyone.” Other participant reports difficulties getting critics to write about their work, which can be a crucial part in getting more attention for creative work.

While all the participants report facing issues with working with queer themes or knowing other queer creators who have faced harsh opposition for their work, only two participants had personally faced any direct interference from government for their works. One participant reports that they got fined for a film where they criticised the government with a few sentences. They had an option to censor the film but they decided not to. Another participant says that their work was reviewed and commented by government officials, but they ended up not sanctioning the work.

5.2.3 Finding queer representation

When talking about how these changes in media sphere had affected queer representation, the participants answers were relatively similar. When talking about mainstream media representation of queers, the answer was always that the participants did not feel like the media would represent queer people or the LGBTQ+ community. One participant says that couple years before the Child Protection Law, the representation was better. One participant adds that “I mean, there’s an anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda against the LGBTQ community” in the state-owned media, joking how some representation still exists. Another participant adds that if there ever was queer representation in mainstream media it had to be through queer coding: “It’s for us to know, but you know, the old ladies from the village will be just like, this is a weird type from the big city. So, it’s not like representation-representation”. This example of queer coding introduces a self-censoring strategy that queer creators can use to represent queerness in disguise from the general public, making the queer in/visible.

The issue with state media representation is also an intersectional issue, according to the participants. One participant says that the lack of representation does not only concern queer people but all minorities, such as Romani people: “there's nobody other than white, straight Hungarians in films. So, it's not even a queer issue. It's a minority issue.” Other participants also add that the representation of queer people is usually representation of white gay men, not other sexual or gender minorities let alone queer people from different races or ethnicities.

Besides the mainstream, the participants describe that queer representation can, alongside their own works, be found in alternative platforms. Some participants describe that some queer people have just switched their platform from mainstream media to social media platforms, where queer presentations are still allowed. One participant explains that all the queers had to leave the state channels, but at the same time they had gained much larger audiences on social media. This example goes to show the dual nature of censorship laws; while they aim to regulate content, they can unwillingly create alternative means to expression and belonging (Onanuga, 2022).

All the participants highlight the role of independent media and its importance in making queerness visible. Two participants describe how in the independent filmmaking scene there

still are queer films that are made by queer people, and that they are good and multi-layered stories. One participant reports that they are “satisfied really” with current queer representation, since there has been an increase of representation in independent media with the emerge of different platforms, including film, video, and contemporary art. They also emphasise the role of international film festivals in bringing queer films to Hungary. Pride events are also mentioned in being places for queer film and art representation in Hungary. Another participant expresses gratitude for the liberal journalistic media, where there’s still some people writing about queer issues and raising critical questions about gender. They say that in a way there is good representation and much of the credit goes for the allies of queer community.

All the participants describe that there are still various forms of representation for queer people in Hungarian media, but people need to be open about consuming queer content and intentionally search for it. One participant says that for them the lack of representation of queer people in mainstream media is tolerable since, “there are workarounds if you know where to look”. One participant describes queer representation:

I was like, okay, great. So, all of these things were just kind of swept under the rug. So like, they exist. And if you are very lucky, you can find them. But like it's almost impossible. And I think the biggest effect of that is that there were already the majority of the population, they don't have to care about LGBTQ identity and now they don't even see it, or they just see that, you know, “we protect the state from the gender propaganda” or whatever billboards are out there now.

This answer shows that queer representation in Hungary is limited and challenging to find, even if one purposefully wants to find it. Although queer people still continue to exist, their existence has been further made invisible for the general public—while still made visible in the state’s anti-LGBTQ+ communication.

When asked about their personal lives and what kind of queer media they consume and connect with, all the participants report not being able to connect with mainstream Hungarian media. One participant says that they feel equally connected with independent media from Hungary as well as the media from abroad. Rest of the participants state that they feel more connected to media from outside of Hungary, which in the interviews are usually referred to

as outlets like streaming platforms—such as Netflix and HBO. Western media is mentioned in all interviews, more specifically countries like the U.S., Great Britain and Germany are mentioned as those the participants connected to the most. The importance of internet and transnational social media platforms are also highlighted through the interviews when talking about connecting to the consumed media. When asked where they felt most connected to in the media sphere one participant's answer was:

Anywhere. Like I feel more connected to Netflix [--] than Hungarian media or cinema... or whatever. And I think it's horrible for Hungarian culture. But it's so typical in a way to these oppressing regimes, that whatever they preach, they're going to do the opposite as a result. So, they can talk about national identity and national culture as much as they want, but they're actively destroying it.

This quote and the examples before summarise the contradictoriness of the Orbán regime. While the government is spreading nationalistic narratives, according to the participants, they are simultaneously “actively destroying” the Hungarian culture by dividing the media and cultural sphere and making the citizens turn away from Hungarian media. Thus, some participants wonder whether these laws that are restricting media in multiple ways are going to end up erasing what is left of traditional media consumption, as described by one participant: “because people will want to watch what they want to watch, and if they can't get it from Hungarian sources they will just turn to international sources”. This participant also reports that the decrease of viewership, for example, in TV is already substantial. According to them, the Child Protection Law fails especially because young people in Hungary are so fluid with their sexuality and gender even when that has never been visible in Hungarian media. They think that where the erasure of queer people from Hungarian media is going to lead is to a further division in the media sphere, because the new generation will want more representation than it is currently being catered for them in Hungarian platforms. One participant concludes: “this will just mean that they turn away from Hungarian content. So culturally it's hurting us”.

5.2.4 Discussion

This chapter has discussed the routes and obstacles of Hungarian queer media. The main challenges of the queer creators seem to be issues with proper funding and distribution rather than direct governmental interferences against their work. All the participants have been able to create and produce queer content during the Orbán regime, while only two of the participants have faced any direct interference of the government for their work. Some participants describe how there has been more alternative opportunities for queer visibility recently. These cases could be seen as an indicator of the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation's role as a tool to stay in power by creating an inner enemy and dividing the country rather than the laws being actively and primarily used as an obstruction for queer representation and discrimination against the LGBTQ+. There still remains queer representation to be seen, found, and produced in independent media under the Orbán regime, as reported by the participants. Yet, queer representation faces many obstacles.

The role of state-owned media is often highlighted in studies about anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-gender policies (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Mihelj et al., 2023). Accordingly, most of the obstacles the creators of this study are facing take place in the context of state-owned broadcasting media where, for example, the Child Protection Law directly affects the screening hours and advertising with queer themes, making it hard to distribute and find audiences for queer products. This has led to deploying new routes for distribution, such as international digital platforms, since these platforms do not need to apply to Hungarian laws. The new digitalised platforms of internet and social media have a different role to broadcasting media in societies where media restrictions are taking place, often offering a less strict and a less homophobic space for queer people (Binnie, 2016; Onanuga, 2022; Mihelj et al., 2023). This is despite the possibility for digital platforms to spread misinformation, they have democratized media production and distribution globally, allowing more diverse voices to be heard (Dembe, 2024). Platforms such as streaming have both allowed a platform for creative work and to personally connect to the media for the participants. International streaming is simultaneously offering visibility while making the queer audience to turn away from Hungarian content, further enhancing queer invisibility in their local context. It is also to be noted that while democratizing, most big streaming services and social media platforms are heavily Anglo-American owned and rely and reflect on the local policies in said context.

Workarounds for queer visibility can also be seen in switches of the medium. Like Van de Peer (2017) illustrates, under oppression and governmental restrictions in funding, documentaries can become a platform for silenced voices due to the lower cost of production. Switches from feature film to documentary were mentioned in the experiences of these creators. Independent stakeholders are also mentioned in having an important role in queer visibility, similarly to examples from China. Through independent media representations and independent funding, the participants are able to negotiate visibility for their community. The downside of this is that independency is hindering mainstream attention which fuels the division of the media sphere.

Similarly to the examples of queer filmmaking from China in chapter 2.3 and for example from Kenya (Green-Simms, 2022), the importance of international film festivals is highlighted in funding, distributing and consuming queer media by the participants of this study. Both queer and queer-non-specific film festivals are mentioned as places of queer representation in the interviews. According to Heath (2018) queer film festivals serve not only as platforms for showcasing queer cinema, but also as a vital space where marginalized individuals can gather, connect, and build community. They provide a distinctive physical environment that fosters both queer artistic expression and communal belonging (Heath, 2018). The intersection of international film festivals and local queer censorship is ambiguous. As Osimbo and Ochieng' (2024) explain about Kenyan films, local queer films, made by local people about the local experience are also meant to bring representation for the local audiences. But when the state restricts screening of queer films, they are often shown for audiences abroad, remaining invisible for the people they represent (Osimbo and Ochieng', 2024). Meaning while international film festivals can offer a route to funding and audience, both crucial in filmmaking, they can simultaneously play into the division of the cultural sphere and erasure of the queer experience in the local context.

With that being said, the importance of local community is highlighted in the experiences of Hungarian queer creators. Engaging with and sharing the stories of other queer individuals through mediated storytelling can serve as a powerful means for people to feel a sense of connection to a larger community or purpose (Coon, 2018). The role of community is also displayed in the queer creators' examples about queer media creation. Queer community helps the participants to produce and to showcase their works. Other queer people and allies

are mentioned as one of the main reasons the participants are able to continue with their creative works. The importance of stakeholders with interest in queer issues is emphasized, which displays the role of diversity in production (see chapter 2.2).

By understanding these participants' personal connection to the Hungarian media sphere and how they experience the queer representation themselves also offers insightful view for the opportunities presented at them; seeing queer representation could also enhance agency, meaning the feeling of possibilities open for the creators. And while these cases are examples that there are routes for queer representation in Hungarian cultural sphere, it has taken a form of in/visibility. This means that queers are visible but remain hidden from the public in queer-specific spaces. As discussed in chapter 2, this dynamic can work in an ambiguous way; it can protect queer people from further hostility, or it can erase their existence from the public eye and make the society less understanding about the community.

Like in the Russian example from Strukov (2023) it is clear that the government plays a part in limiting queer visibility in Hungary, however, alongside the government policies communities, (transnational) organisations and (transnational) media institutions are also part of the process of queer in/visibility. As in other contexts where queer visibility is restricted (see chapter 2.3), new forms of media creation and consumption are taking place in Hungary. This is a demonstration of agency in restrictive environment that highlights the dual nature of any censorship policy: while they aim to regulate content, they can unintentionally create alternative means to expression and belonging.

5.3 Resisting through visibility, resisting invisibility

The Hungarian queer creators have to practice their profession and find creative expression and agency under unclear legislation and challenged production processes, as explored in the previous chapters. The creators struggle to find both personal and professional connection to Hungarian media. This chapter further discusses how these creators experience the concept of representation and its role in finding identity and community under uncertain circumstances. This chapter also illustrates how the queer creators describe their own role in bringing queer visibility to the Hungarian media sphere. Finally, this chapter

explores the worries and dreams these creators have for their professional lives and what motivates them to resist the challenges.

5.3.1 The need for representation and to represent

In the interviews the participants talk about the significance of representations and feeling connected to media. All participants state that representation of queer people is important. One participant says that for media or creative work it is important to have diversity in representation because when media becomes majority-led—whatever the majority there is—it becomes plain boring, because “who the hell wants to watch [--] the same stories all over again? And it’s very predictable.” They add that this will make the majority of society oblivious to the fact where the rest of the society is and “that’s really dangerous”. Other participants describe similar reasons for representation; through representation people can understand each other better and add variety to the stories people read and see. According to some participants this is the reason why it is important to get mainstream attention to queer stories, so that the rest of the society could understand who queer people are and what they are fighting for. One participant says that this is compromised within the Orbán regime where “the culture is blocked”:

[T]here are fantastic books and movies and documentaries, or drawings, anything, that maybe won't get published and maybe won't reach adult people or the younger generation that they can be inspired, that they can be a better version of themselves, that, they can build on and they can learn about the world. [--] Now, they kind of taking away the chance to learn about the world and to see the world in a much more colourful way, in a much more modern way. They take away all the chances of think about the world, think about the gender, think about the sexuality. And we should think about these things because we always have thought about gender. That's why women have [--] voting rights now, because we always as humanity grow. And and as our society get better and better by asking questions and try to rethink things. But they [are] taking away the chance, for that.

Here the participant reasons, that the current media sphere in Hungary is taking away the chance for people to learn about the diversity of the world. They also state that variety in stories and representation can play a part in enforcing critical thinking which can help social

justice efforts. In addition to learning about the world and adding variety in stories, participants reason that representation and visibility can offer people a chance to feel connected. One participant reflects the importance of representation as “ the primary reason for to exist; so that we can relate to something and work through our own struggles or our own identity”. Some relatable characters, for example in film, can create cherished memories or be inspiring while also being entertaining, according to one participant.

Representation can also work the other way around; when there is no representation, there can be feelings of disconnection and alienation. The lack of representation is experienced by one participant as follows:

So these are the things that frustrate me a lot because then I don't feel seen. I feel like I don't fit anywhere. And at this point, like, I'm comfortable enough with my own identity that I just roll my eyes or whatever, but, i-it took a lot of time for me to even figure out my own identity. Like what it means for me to be [queer] because I saw no right representation.

This example shows how frustrating it can be to not be represented in society and in media. And while the participant is now comfortable with their own identity, the feeling of exclusion and struggle of coming to terms with themselves can be seen in their experience about not being able to connect to the media. Other participants also describe being young and lost without any representation of queerness. One participant says that though they still have been able to discover their identity—through some struggles—the difference to this day is that there were no big billboards from government all over the city saying that queer people belong to a community that is “dangerous for children”. Another participant says that they would rather have no representation of queer people than have bad and stereotypical representation. These notions describe that it is also important how something is represented, not just that it is represented.

One participant describes the complexity of representation. They describe that although representation is important, sometimes the representation—and more so society's reactions to representation of queer people—is hindering them. They state that they are jealous of people who can live in a society where you don't have to have a negative conversation every time a queer character pops up on a screen:

Like some people take offense [--] if I'm being represented. So as if somehow me being represented is affecting [them] in a negative way. Which, you know... Okay? I feel so sorry for you. It must be hard. You know?

The quote above describes how at the same time queer people can feel the need to be represented and connected, but the visibility of them can create strain between them and those who do not understand or do not want to accept queerness just as it is. This is why sometimes queer people can also want to be in/visible; visible for some people and invisible for others, so that they can avoid difficult conversations and negative reactions to their identities being represented. Apart from this description of the downside of representation, participants describe queer representation as something that helps to find, understand, and belong to a culture and community; it helps queer people to feel validated, safe, and free – and most importantly, as one participant stated, it helps queer people to stay alive.

When talking about their personal motivations to create queer representations, participants' responses vary. For one participant, personally creating queer content is described as something that was not necessarily the intention behind the process but rather a natural part of their creation process as a queer person. For others representing queer people is an important part of their profession, as one participant explains: "I still felt like...like so little representation exists. So as a [queer] person I felt like, I can talk about this, so why shouldn't I?" For some, being a queer creator goes hand in hand with activism:

And when I joined to the university, I've already known that I want to be an activist filmmaker because already then, I was an activist and LGBTQ [--] And, I knew that feeling that, giving visibility to this subject or this topic, it can to strengthen our community and movement. [--] it was more important for me to make these kind of community films and videos for the LGBTQ community.

In this answer the participant refers to activism and work to be part of community-building and a project of bringing visibility for their own community through their work, which they find as an important part of their profession. One participant says that because they are from a small town and did not have any queer representation, they had a lot of emotional baggage and creative work has functioned as a therapy for them. These cases show how creative work can help to build a sense of belonging not only through seeing representation but

through creation and giving representation to others, but it can also merely be a part of storytelling that happens naturally when the creator is queer.

Some participants feel that it is important for them to represent queer people in the current Hungarian environment. One participant describes this:

[T]hey [young people] are living in a country where the laws and where the politics are really openly homophobic, and these messages are out on the street from, from the text of their parents. And, and, and these people shouldn't be left alone. These, these people need communication. These people need culture. And, these people have to see that our community has still power and we still have strength. [- -] by knowing these things, by being familiar with these things, are making the community.

This answer explains how creating more queer culture and media products could help the younger generation to feel less alone. All the participants highlight that it is especially crucial for the younger generations to have representation, because even though they can find queer representations from transnational platforms, the lack of Hungarian representation added to the homophobic communication from the state media—as participants fear—could be harmful for them.

One participant believes that as an artist they do not have much power to change the system because they feel that the issue is with state and not the individuals' problem. Thus, they say that the most valuable asset for them is the way they do things in their own community and how they represent themselves as a queer creator. For them this means, for example, educating other professionals about queer themes if they are not familiar with them and staying as authentic as they can: "I think if you do the maximum in that, in that little local bubble that you have, then you can truly influence the people around you." They also state that for queer creators it is important to push back when facing opposition and keep doing queer related work but in a sustainable way that does not burn them out in the process. This answer shows that for this creator the main aim to create is not to make big social change, but it is important for them to be able to impact their own bubble, since bigger efforts for change could burn them out.

5.3.2 Feelings about the situation on the media field

The queer creators are resisting (and) being resisted. Thus far they all want to continue creative work with LGBTQ+ themes, even if they would need to do social and professional adjustments. Four of them have on-going projects, while one of them has struggled to create for a while. All the participants report having to rely on multiple positions as creative workers. For some this is due to the lack of opportunities and the governmental restrictions, for some this is due to the general precarity and project-orientated nature of the media sphere. For some participants, even though they have experience, degree and a dream in a creative field, their creative work has taken the form of a passion project where they invest their own money alongside having a “real job”. In these cases, this means a job on a completely different field or in the media, but just as a rank-and-file worker. Having another job has helped them to not make as many compromises with their creative work, which they describe they would have to do if they were doing creative work full time. Another participant also refuses to do professional compromises and says that it is hard to find job positions because most of them are in state owned media, and for the participant that is not a choice. These are all examples of resistance and motivation to continue to create more queer visibility, even if it meant making compromises.

When talking about their current situations and futures on the media field, the participants talk about the difficulty to work towards their professional aspirations in Hungary. One participant describes their professional situation:

What I really want to do, is just make a nice comedy with gay people in it, but not about being political, it's just like... like the point of it would be being funny, not educating or whatever. [--] They're just people, living lives and not trying to prove a point. So, this is what I dream to do. I will not be able to do that in Hungary.

This quote shows how the participant's creative agency is being restricted and they are not able to fulfil their dream in their country. Another participant says that because they have not been able to work for a while now and because of that, they have thought about moving to another field or even another country. As it is, the situation in Hungary has led to most of the participants considering moving away from their home country. The participants feel the situation is complicated, since they feel strongly connected to their home and they find joy

in their friends, communities, partners, and/or in their day-to-day lives. They describe having relatively happy and free lives in their own bubbles. But when it comes to their professional lives, all of them feel that they are not fully able to do what they want in Hungary. The struggles of queer belonging in Hungary are echoed in one participant's description:

It's like, it could be so good. And every week or at least two weeks we think about where we should move. So how do you, how do you... how do you build on that? [--] You feel a bit betrayed, if that's the right word. And... and... just... just insecure. Just insecure.

This participant who has considered moving away from Hungary assumes that even if they would move away, it is not given that they would have any more, if any, job opportunities in other places of the world. Another participant who has also thought about moving away says that the lack of opportunities abroad for Hungarian queer creators is due to, for example, the difficulty to apply one's creative skills learned in certain setting and through certain methods to another country's culture. They describe that a big part of creative work is one's own culture and language, which could hinder finding a creative outlet in another country. Then again, one participant says that if they were to lose their current job they would go to work for a multinational company, because international companies would be more open towards queer people. One participant is optimistic and states that they are staying in Hungary no matter what because they want to show to the people that you can be a proud queer and a proud Hungarian. The participant adds to this stating that for them it is professionally and personally easier to stay in Hungary than for some other marginalised people, because although they are queer, they still have other privileges. Another participant describes this unequal situation saying that not everyone has a choice to leave the country due to language barriers and economic situations. They explain that the people who have that choice must leave their home, community, and family behind or they can stay as a political statement and try to make a change.

When asked about their hopes and worries for the future, participants were mostly worried for the future generations, not so much for themselves and for their professional careers:

So, so mostly I'm worried, I guess for me, like whatever... like I'm used to it - it's going to be fine or I find a way. But [--] I can't imagine what it's like now for even younger filmmakers or, young people who want

to study film and then they see that they hit these, these walls of, like, maybe you should say this, or maybe you should not talk about this topic like that can be really devastating as you're trying to figure out your own, your own voice, your own style. [--] Like it's just, this is this is so important.

This participant is worried for the future creators, who might have to face harsher restrictions with their creative work. This highlights the importance of creative freedom that is now at risk in Hungary. Other participants are also worried that the restrictions for queer visibility might get stricter in the future:

We always think that this is the worst that can happen. [--] And then a new problem appears, and there's a new law appears. I really have a fear that they will make the LGBTQ anti-laws much stricter. And, for example, this Child Protection Law stricter and it will be much harder to publish a book or to show a movie in a cinema to people. I'm very sure that they are working on that. I really have a fear that they will continue this: 'LGBTQ people are paedophiles' -way of thinking and way of communication and they will try to spread it more.

This answer shows that the participant is afraid that the laws restricting queer visibility are going to get stricter and is worried how that might affect the cultural sphere—and thus their creative work—in the future. They are also anticipating that the government is going to push the anti-LGBTQ+ narrative even further. All the participants state being used to the fact that new anti-LGBTQ+ laws have been introduced at regular intervals during the Orbán regime, which indicates that in the future there might be more regulations of queer visibility. This has led to most of them being afraid of things only getting worse:

Realistically, it will not change. It will get worse, actually. And if anything goes as it does at this point and in the direction it does, it's going to be... Like, if you can, you will leave. If you're stuck, you will go back to your closet and try not to bother people. This is what I think is the way we're going at this point.

This participant does not have faith for better future, moreover they think it will get worse to the point where they think queer people have to leave the country or go back to their closets, which would mean a complete erasure and invisibility of queer people in the society. Some of the participants still hope that the Hungarian society that is described not being

homophobic would be able to resist the government enough. Some of the participants dream that the Orbán regime collapses, some are afraid that it never will.

The participants are resisting their country. So, instead of their government they lean into their community, allies, and transnational solutions that give them glimpses of hope that their projects and stories would get to be seen and their voices would be heard. And while their agency and visibility are restricted by their government, there is still agency in resisting:

We still have to lean on the power that our community have and that our ally has. And these can change things for the better. When [--] this storybook [*Meseország mindenkié*] was attacked by the law and by the government in a big way. But thousands and thousands and thousands of people bought this book and showing that; no, you shouldn't attack this book and I will stand by the LGBTQ community. And, and mostly allies bought this book for their children.

This answer shows the faith for the people and the Hungarian society that has previously shown to gather together to protect queer representation that the government has tried to make invisible. The example again emphasizes the importance of allies who can help a marginalised group in the resistance against oppressive measures, in this case the Hungarian government. In order to have allies, the marginalised group needs visibility and ability to communicate and represent their experiences for the rest of the society. To be able do so they need to keep resisting, as one participant states: “we have to trust in ourselves; so what we are – it is real. And it is true in the future as well. So, we need to fight constantly.” Ultimately, these queer creators need to keep adjusting, resisting, and fighting for wanting nothing more than for them and their community to be (visible).

5.3.3 Discussion

This chapter has illustrated the experiences of the resistance of the Hungarian queer creators. All the participants experience resistance against themselves yet all of them are also resisting back. In places where queer visibility is restricted, even the will to create queer representation can be seen as an act of resistance (Green-Simms, 2022). This also highlights the importance to look at the context where queer media is produced among the imaginary it is representing. Engaging with and sharing the stories of other queer individuals

through media can be a powerful way for people to feel a sense of connection to a larger community or collective experience (Coon, 2018). This description can be seen in the experiences of the queer creators of this study. All the creators describe nuanced and deep emotions revolving around the importance of visibility, especially for one's identity and feeling of belonging. The cases also show how creating queer representation can be an active act of resistance against oppression. Through media, some creators feel that they can foster change in the society. This also means that their creative work and lived lives have inherently become a constant act of resistance which is a common phenomenon under oppressive regimes (Sládková, 2014). This is not necessarily the preferred situation, since some of the creators would align more with creating non-political content.

The queer creators resist the government also by making adjustments and compromises in some parts of their lives in order to uphold their creative freedom and bring out the stories they want to bring. These adjustments are for example financial sacrifices. Somewhat passive description of resisting is staying in/visible. All of the participants describe some experiences of living in a "bubble" which has secured them a safe environment to live and to work in. Most of them describe that the general atmosphere of media culture in Budapest is a liberal bubble, where it is easy to be open about one's identity and remain authentic in general. This would be compromised if the laws were to get any stricter or implemented more harshly. Stepping outside of media sphere, according to one participant, would mean not being able to be openly queer in professional setting. This bubble is an example of in/visibility, where the creators can have a safe and enjoyable lives within that bubble, whilst leaving the bubble would mean societal and professional harm. Some examples of resistance are thoughts and intentions to leave Hungary. Although it seems to be the last choice for them and until then they try to make the best out of the situation they have.

Some descriptions of future worries on the media field included mostly the fear of the restrictions on media and queer representation getting stricter. These worries are based on the anti-gender movement gaining dominance not only in Hungary but beyond. This is not a false fear, since the global anti-gender movement seems to only gain dominance, like can be seen in examples from the political climate in the U.S. and from what is happening now in Hungary, with the ban on Pride. And if the Hungarian regulations follow the example of Russia, which the participants are afraid that they do, harsher restrictions on queer media can be anticipated. Accordingly, one of the participants asked me during the interviews to

use Hungary as an example on how the political discourse and switches in media can happen subtly but can be destructive for the local culture.

Like the queer media studies in Russia, these examples from Hungary show that queer existence is not only about violence, stigmatisation, and censorship but also about resistance and solidarity (Strukov, 2023). To be oppressed and to have agency are not two opposing entities. There can be agency among restriction. Sometimes because of the restriction, agency takes place, as in some examples of this study. Restricted queer visibility has created alternative routes for representation and increased social justice efforts to protect the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, according to the participants of this study. Choice to use creative expression and the ability to regulate one's visibility are also crucial acts of (queer) resistance and (queer) agency (Levitanius, 2022). Accordingly, Rádai (2023) advocates for resisting the oppressive measures of the Orbán regime through cultural products, arguing that they may be more effective than direct political protest.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis I have answered the question of how Hungarian queer creators are negotiating in/visibility under the Orbán regime by illustrating the challenges they face and the routes they find for creative expression, agency, and queer in/visibility under the restricted environment. I argue that the Orbán regime's anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, which includes The Child Protection Law that regulates queer representation from minors, has impacted the media sphere and restricted the professional agency and creative freedom of those who handle queer themes with their work. Additionally, the anti-LGBTQ+ policies and anti-gender narratives presented by the state have contributed to the alienation of queer (creators) making it in/visible. This chapter concludes the results of my study which were further discussed in the previous chapter.

I have approached the issue of restricted queer visibility through a queer-feminist lens. The theoretical framework of this thesis gives understanding to the nuanced ways invisibility and visibility impact queer lives. In this thesis I have also shed light to the political situation in Hungary to contextualize the dynamics affecting the working conditions of Hungarian queer creators. With this study I connect the dots between anti-gender movement, restricted queer agency, and queer representation in Hungary and hence contribute to the research field of this intersection, that has thus far not been thoroughly covered.

To understand the role of queer creator at the intersection of queer representation and governmental anti-LGBTQ+ policies in Hungary, I have conducted five in-depth interviews with five Hungarian queer creators. I have used reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the experiences of these creators. From the researched data I gathered three main themes as results of this study: *regulations and restrictions (of creative expression)*, *routes for agency and queer in/visibility* and *resisting by visibility, resisting invisibility*. I have carried the negotiations of in/visibility as well as the concepts of agency, representation, and creative expression through all these themes.

The main results of my study illustrate the complex and nuanced struggles of Hungarian queer creators. The governmental legislation against LGBTQ+ community is perceived by the creators as contradictory, ambiguous, and hard to follow. The Child Protection Law and the way it is communicated by state media equates queer people with paedophiles which has made the queer creators feel alienated in their home country. These experiences have caused the queer creators to be more aware of the possible consequences of creating queer content. The creators explain how the laws have created an atmosphere where people, including themselves, have started to rely on self-censorship. These accounts show how the Orbán regime, while not directly using censorship on all queer representation, is subtly affecting the media environment by fostering fear on creators whose identities and ideas would go against their ideals with an excuse of protecting children.

It is a crucial part of creative freedom and agency as well as professional stability being able to participate in one's creative outlet. This agency is challenged in the Hungarian media sphere, which can be seen in the experiences of the participants of this study. Moreover, the restrictions of queer creation can be seen as indicators of restriction of the freedom of expression, which is a Universal Human Right that the state of Hungary has also committed

to protect (The Fundamental Law of Hungary, article IX). While restricted, the queer creators have found alternative routes for agency and queer visibility. When talking about the issues of queer media, the creators describe there being multiple layers with what is effecting the creation of queer content. Only two of them have faced direct interference by the state and most of them have ongoing projects. Nevertheless, they all have similar experiences of the struggle of being able to produce queer content. All creators have experienced issues with funding their creative projects which has led to relying on different forms of creation as well as finding funding from abroad or from independent stakeholders. The importance of queer community is described as an essential part of queer production since it can help in funding projects but also offers a space for community-building through creation. Creators have also experienced struggles to distribute their work due to the governmental regulation on queer content as well as due to some stakeholders being unwilling to participate in queer distribution. To tackle this, the creators have relied, for example, on foreign film festivals and digitalised platforms.

In this thesis I have chosen to include the experiences of viewing queer media, since the queer creator is never just a creator, but they are also a consumer of media. In this role as consumers the creators also experience media differently than an average consumer. When outlining queer representation in the Hungarian media sphere, the queer creators describe the division between mainstream media and independent media. Mainstream media is experienced by the queer creators as having no queer representation, except for the governmental communication with anti-LGBTQ+ narrative. Queer creators describe finding closer connection to the Western media or independent Hungarian media. The creators all depict this being destructive for the Hungarian culture. These accounts are an indicator of how the Orbán regime that publicly declares to protect Hungarian culture is actually enforcing division on the media and cultural sphere. This dynamic described by the participants aligns with the studies on the logic behind anti-gender movement, where LGBTQ+ community is used as scapegoats for political dominance.

To resist the oppression by their government these queer creators feel that it is important to create representation and visibility for queer people. While sometimes being cautious about their work, all the creators have ambition and aim to create content even if it would go against the government policies. The creators report doing compromises on other parts of their lives rather than with the content they (want to) create. For example, instead of altering their

stories they have more so made financial sacrifices, which can be seen as an act of resistance. The queer creators feel that through creative work they can help the community and bring public acceptance for their identities under the regime that tries to erase them. The creators also call for queer allies to help their cause by consuming LGBTQ+ content. This resistance is affected by the environment which has caused professional worries for the creators. Some of them have considered changing their field of work, some have considered moving away from the country. Still, all of them continue to work on producing queer media in hopes that the government does not adopt even stricter rules that would affect their visibility. As it is these creators have to rely on the routes they have found and avoid the obstacles that are on their way.

In/visibility, the entanglement of visible and invisible, has been negotiated in the results of this study in multi-layered ways. In/visibility can be seen in the descriptions of the division of the media sphere, where on hand queer representation can be made and found in independent outlets and on the other hand queer representation is almost impossible to produce and see in mainstream media. The transnational solutions, described by the creators, offer spaces for queer media visibility while enforcing invisibility in local context. These solutions are such as consuming media from abroad, seeking distribution solutions from foreign film festivals and considering moving away from Hungary. The atmosphere of fear has decreased the sense of belonging in Hungary for the LGBTQ+ community, whilst the queer community and the queer allies are offering safe bubbles to work and live in. These examples of in/visibility showcase to ambiguity of queer visibility.

As such, this thesis offers a unique insight for the struggles of Hungarian queer media. I have introduced sites of resistance, which are often dismissed when looking countries where oppressive measures on LGBTQ+ are used. In this study I have also critiqued the Western visibility paradigm that often claims that visibility automatically leads to empowerment. Previous studies from non-Western contexts highlight that sometimes visibility can foster more discrimination against queer people (.e.g. Persson, 2015; Mihelj et al., 2023). While recognizing the ambiguity of visibility, I acknowledge that recognition and belonging are tightly connected to being visible. Rather than merely highlighting the importance of visibility, I advocate for understanding the complexities of each situation to provide queer people with more agency, belonging, and creative freedom everywhere in the world.

This study has focused on the lived experiences of queer creators and their strategies for navigating oppressive environment and as such it offers insight for industrial practises of queer creation. For this reason, I consider this thesis to contribute not only to academic field but to those stakeholders interested in securing queer creation, such as (queer) film festivals. With this thesis I want to stress the importance of international support and funding for (Hungarian) queer creators, noting that the lack of queer representation in Hungary has a significant impact not only on individual creators but also on the broader cultural landscape. I suggest that understanding and supporting these creators is essential in preventing the erasure of queer identities and ensuring a thriving, diverse Hungarian culture where belonging and freedom of expression can be experienced by everyone.

To further understand the issue of queer creation, I suggest that future studies should be conducted in different contexts globally as well as locally in Hungary. My thesis has explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ media from a perspective of five queer creators. These experiences have been interpreted and analysed by me, a foreigner. I suggest that future studies with larger cohorts and with different methods would offer additional perspectives to the issue. For example, a more intersectional approach for a boarder cohort could distinguish the different experiences of different gender and sexual minorities, including those who do not identify as queer or LGBTQ+ but as straight, cis or something beyond all the mentioned. Additionally, this approach with could also consider other marginalised groups, such as ethnic and religious minorities, as well as those living outside of the capital area (in Hungary and beyond). This study has also treated media as a homogenous object. Future studies could also differentiate the effects of visibility across various types of media and explore how these representations impact different demographics. Moreover, I suggest that research on the Child Protection Law, or similar laws, should be conducted with the focus on minors. This would help to understand how these laws that aim to protect children affect especially them, who first and foremost are denied queer representation and access to LGBTQ+ information.

To conclude, this study argues that in the ever more visible world, it is important to understand what is left invisible. Increasing number of countries are living under authoritarian regimes, where democracy and individual freedom is compromised. New laws regulating the visibility of queer people, and other minorities, are emerging while anti-gender discourses slither to the media and the political sphere. Cases like the U.S. stand as an

example of countries who praise themselves for their freedom but are progressively limiting freedom – of those who they do not consider fitting. During these times, it is crucial to look at those whose freedom and visibility are restricted so that our shared realities would not leave anyone’s story out. At least I want to believe—like the authors of *Meseország mindenkié*— that A Fairytale *is* for Everyone.

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APPENDIX

1.1 invitation for interview

Looking for people to interview for my master's thesis about anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Hungary

Hi,

I am looking for people to interview for my master's thesis about anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Hungary. Here's a little summary of me and my research:

I am Sanni Majamaa, 6th year student at the master's programme in Gender Studies at Tampere University, Finland. I am currently doing an internship at FinnAgora, Budapest, where I am organising Finn Filmnapok. I have done my bachelor's thesis about the representation of homosexuality in cinema.

I am doing my master's thesis about the "anti-LGBTQ+ law" (Hungarian Child Protection Law), focusing on issues of (media) representation. I view representation as the ability (or inability) to tell and see stories about oneself. Especially for marginalized people, such as queer* people, being represented can be seen as a crucial part of identity, belonging and thus wellbeing. This is compromised with anti-LGBTQ+ laws. I'm going to study the effects of said laws and policies in regards of the Hungarian film/tv/media industry. My goal is to know how these laws have changed or challenged production processes and how do the Hungarian filmmakers, queer movie goers or queer people in general feel about the laws and being represented in Hungarian media and society; how has it changed over the years and how do they see their future within these ongoing dynamics.

I am looking for queer (or anyone who is interested in queer issues) filmmakers, film distributors or anyone who works in media AND/OR queer media consumers to interview. If this is something you could take part in, or if you know anyone who could, please contact me: xxx.xxx@xxx.xx. We can discuss the interview process or my research in more detail if you have any questions or concerns. All interviews will be anonymous.

*QUEER = in this context being used as a synonym for LGBTQIA+ and as an umbrella term to describe gender/sexual/romantic orientations or identities that fall outside of societal norms. In the interview we can discuss with terms that best suit you or without any specific labels.

Thank you for your time!

With kind regards,
Sanni Majamaa

1.2 interview intro

According to study ethics at first, I'm asking you to sign a consent form which confirms that you have given consent to this interview and are allowing me to record it and save the recording.

I am doing my master's thesis about the anti-LGBTQ+ law (Hungarian Child Protection Law), focusing on issues of (media) representation. I view representation as the ability (or inability) to tell and see stories about oneself. Especially for marginalized people, such as queer* people, being represented can be seen as a crucial part of identity, belonging and thus wellbeing. This is compromised with anti-LGBTQ+ laws. I'm going to study the effects of said laws and policies in regards of the Hungarian film/tv/media industry. My goal is to know how these laws have changed or challenged production processes and how do the Hungarian film makers, queer movie goers or queer people in general feel about the laws and being represented in Hungarian media and society; how has it changed over the years and how do they see their future within these ongoing dynamics.

I want this to be as safe and relaxed as possible, if at any point you feel uneasy and want to quit the interview or have a break feel free to do so. If I'm not being clear or use wrong terms you can correct me or ask me questions. I also want to be clear that I myself am part of the LGBT-community, but at the same time I look at this subject as an outsider coming from Finland. Regarding the questions, there are no wrong answers, everything you have to say is a right answer regarding this research. And if there's a question you don't want to give an answer to, or if you want to remove some of your answers, it's perfectly okay.

1.3 notes for the interview questions

- Background; name, age, profession?
- Describe your relation to **(1)** Hungary **(2)** film/media/art industry **(3)** lgbt+ community
 - *Were you born here, you still live here?*
 - *FORMAT: why?*
 - *Film/media/art industry CREATOR or CONSUMER or both?*
- In your own words, tell me about the anti-LGBTQ+ laws / The Child Protection Law in Hungary
- In your words, how does the anti-LGBTQ+ laws affect the film/art/media industry or does it? (if yes)
 - *Has it affected your **(1)** personal life **(2)** work, art or the ability to create?*
 - *Would you want to tell queer stories?*
 - *Are there any specific things you need to consider when it comes to for example funding or distributing or showcasing your works?*
 - *How does funding queer movies work in Hungary? Would you be able to get funded by government?*
 - *Is being funded by government the only way to get mainstream attention? Is it important to get mainstream attention?*
 - *How do you feel about state funded media?*
 - *How does it make you feel?*
- Do you feel that it is preventing you to do something?
- Do you know people who it has affected? How could it affect?
- Are you actively, with your work or on your free time, doing something that would go against the law?
 - *What aspires you to work against the anti-LGBTQ+ law?*
- What kind of movies/projects/art/media are government funding?
- Is there something else you want to tell about the industry; (issues or achievements?)
- End goals or bigger narrative or political background behind the law?
- Personal feelings?
- Describe how you think Hungarian art and media are portraying queer people?
- Has it changed? Or how do you wish it could change?
- Do you personally feel connected or represented in Hungarian media/art?
 - *If not, why do you think that is? Do you feel more connected to media from somewhere else? Why? Describe the media you feel the most connected to.*
 - *If yes, can you describe that? Give examples of Hungarian media you feel connected to.*
- Why do you think it's important OR NOT important to feel connected or represented in media and art?
- Do you think the representation matches reality?
- How would you describe the reality of queer people in Hungary / What is your personal experience as queer person in Hungary?
 - *Is there difference between lgbt minorities?*
- Has it changed recently and how?
 - *Can you compare Budapest to other parts of Hungary?*
- How do you wish it could change? Do you think you can be part of the change?
- Are there things you see as potential threats? Or is there something that makes you believe in better future?
- Do you want to add something? Or remove some of your answers?

List of tables

Table 1. Themes around experienced negotiations of in/visibility and their subthemes.....40

