The media construction of LGBT+ characters in Hollywood blockbuster movies. The use of *pinkwashing* and *queerbaiting*

La construcción mediática del colectivo LGTB+ en el cine *blockbuster* de Hollywood. El uso del *pinkwashing* y el *queerbaiting*

Juan-José Sánchez-Soriano. University of Murcia. Spain.
juanjose.sanchez4@um.es
[CV] 🆔 🍀
Leonarda García-Jiménez. University of Murcia. Spain. Colorado State University. EE.UU.
leonardagj@um.es
[CV] 🆔 🍀

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ABSTRACT
Introduction: *Pinkwashing* and *queerbaiting* are marketing strategies used by major Hollywood film producers to be perceived as tolerant industries regarding sexual diversity and thus to attract LGBT+ audiences. Its objective is to clean up its image in the face of negative actions, such as the complaints that the GLAAD association has been making in its annual reports since 2013 due to the lack of sexual diversity in blockbuster-type feature films. **Methodology:** The films that make up the sample are: *Black Panther*, *Jurassic World: The Fallen Kingdom*, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, *Thor: Ragnarok*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. For its study a critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been used. **Results:** These feature films, in which any explicit mention of sexual diversity was eliminated despite having been promoted as "gay friendly", had a very limited participation of LGBT+ characters, who were presented in a stereotypical way and as an antithesis of the straight hero/heroin. **Discussion and conclusions:** Despite advertising the inclusion of LGBT+ characters during the promotional campaign, these feature films are framed in heteronormative logic and eliminate explicit references to sexual diversity to avoid possible economic losses.

RESUMEN

Introducción: El *pinkwashing* y *queerbaiting* son estrategias de marketing utilizadas por las grandes productoras de cine de Hollywood para ser percibidas como industrias tolerantes con respecto a la diversidad sexual y así atraer a audiencias LGTB+. Su objetivo es limpiar su imagen ante acciones negativas, como las denuncias que desde 2013 viene haciendo la asociación GLAAD en sus informes anuales debido a la falta de diversidad sexual en los largometrajes tipo *blockbuster*. **Metodología:** Las películas que conforman la muestra son: *Black Panther*, *Jurassic World: El reino caído*, *Star Wars: Los últimos Jedi*, *Thor: Ragnarok* y *La bella y la bestia*. Para su estudio se ha utilizado un análisis crítico del discurso (ACD). **Resultados:** Estos largometrajes, en los que se eliminó cualquier mención explícita a la diversidad sexual a pesar de haber sido promocionados como "gay friendly", contaron con una participación muy reducida de personajes LGTB+, quienes fueron presentados mayoritariamente de manera estereotipada y como antítesis del héroe/heroína heterosexual. **Discusión y conclusiones:** A pesar de publicitar la inclusión de personajes LGTB+ durante la campaña de promoción, estos largometrajes se enmarcan en la lógica heteronormativa y eliminan referencias explícitas a la diversidad sexual para evitar las posibles pérdidas económicas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *pinkwashing*; *queerbating*; cine; LGTBI; Hollywood; análisis crítico del discurso.

CONTENTS

Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

1. **Introduction**

In the face of criticism for the low presence or traditionally stereotypical representations of the LGBT+ group (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transsexuals, and more identities, such as Intersex or Queer, among others), in recent years there has been a tendency to promote the inclusion of characters or plots of the collective in feature films created by major Hollywood production companies (Walt Disney Pictures, Warner Bros or Sony Pictures, among others) as a way of creating a positive and tolerant vision towards minority rights. This apparent concern and inclusion of positive approaches to various sexual orientations have taken place in some of the most important recently released blockbusters. The concept of a blockbuster is currently understood as a type of Hollywood cinema, mainly, made and produced with a huge budget, characterized by appealing to emotion and the *spectacularization* through the use of special effects. It is a cinema aimed at a majority audience and with which it is expected to raise a large amount of money at the box office of world cinemas. It is, therefore, a cinema located within the logic of the commercial industry (Rubio-Alcover, 2007).

However, the annual report of the GLAAD association (Gays & Lesbians Alliance Against Defamation) on the representation of diverse sexual orientations in Hollywood cinema published in 2018, indicates that in 2017 the representation of LGBT+ characters in blockbuster cinema in Hollywood dropped to all-time lows. In this way, of the 109 that were released by major Hollywood studios that year, only 12.8% (14 movies) had LGBT+ plots or representations. This makes 2017 the year with the lowest representation since the beginning of these analyzes by the association. On the other hand, of these 14 representations, only 7 characters appeared on the screen for more than five minutes in total. The study also found that 57% of LGBT+ characters did not share Hollywood's traditional white Caucasian traits (GLAAD, 2018). Therefore, this research starts from the need to deepen and analyze the disconnection between the promotion of Hollywood studios of inclusion of LGBT+ elements and, at the same time, the quantitative decrease in the number of representations.

On the other hand, this blockbuster cinema from Hollywood has a wide hegemony in world cinemas, since 80% of the total feature films that are projected on our screens come from its production companies (Pardo, 2011). In this way, if historical currents and theories such as cultural studies have analyzed the enormous importance and influence of audiovisual elements and their representations in society, the research is justified in the same way for knowing, in a new way, the state of this current cinema with a large budget and aimed at a large audience, and what and how are the discourses created about social minorities, in this case, the LGBT+ community.

Therefore, and starting from the previous premise, the first objective of this research is to critically know what the LGBT+ community's discursive construction is like in today's Hollywood blockbusters. The second objective is to analyze whether the major production companies have used the techniques of *pinkwashing* and *queerbaiting* to show a false progressive vision of themselves that could benefit them socially, but without de facto including real approaches to sexual diversity that provoke protests from the conservative audience with the consequent economic losses.

1.1. *Pinkwashing* and *queerbaiting* as techniques for maintaining cinematic heteronormativity

The concept of *pinkwashing* has been treated from various disciplines, such as economics or communication, but it has been the political sciences, with authors such as Spade (2015), who have analyzed it most widely. This analysis has focused mainly on the case of Israel and its maneuvers to project a favorable and friendly image towards the LGBT+ community through legislative, political, and social measures. These measures have been aimed at counteracting the criticism and negative image due to the war maintained with Palestine, thereby trying to project an image of themselves as progressives, which would potentially help them improve their international relations with the rest of the states and nations, and the power to attract a greater number of tourists from the community to their country (Puar, 2013).

Similarly, *pinkwashing*, understood as the use of marketing techniques to obtain benefits (political, social or economic, among others), despite being a less studied field, is used not only by states but by other institutions, products, people or film production companies, to show an image of openness towards the LGBT+ community to distract attention from those negative aspects for which they have traditionally been criticized: Israel's wars with other countries or the maintenance of stereotyped representations about gender and sexual orientation in the case of Hollywood.

Pinkwashing is also related to other concepts such as *purplewashing*, based on the set of strategies taken to adopt the appearance of support for the feminist movement. This term, popularized by authors such as Vasallo (2013), is also used by film production companies, as in the case of the recent blockbuster *Captain Marvel* (Marvel Studios, 2019), about one of the first female superheroes

to star in a feature film, which has been promoted and released making it coincide with the feminist demands of March 8th, 2019.

On the other hand, *queerbaiting*, a term popularized by *fandom* and fan phenomena, is closely related to *pinkwashing* and is based on the techniques used in the wide range of cultural products: books, video games, movies or fiction series, among others, to suggest a possible LGBT+ plot without this finally happening, which maintains the mostly heterosexual representation in its characters (Brennan, 2018). This technique intends to attract potential viewers of the community without causing rejection from the most conservative audience. The reason why the LGBT+ audience or, in general, the audience sensitized towards issues of sexual diversity is attracted by these homoerotic subtexts (symbolism, gestures, or jokes, among others) is the lack of sufficient real positive representation and not stereotyped in feature films and cultural elements, as the GLAAD report (2018) shows.

Therefore, both terms, *pinkwashing* and *queerbaiting*, are understood as a form of abuse (Brennan, 2018) about the representations and identities of the LGBT+ community itself. Blockbuster cinema in Hollywood uses these techniques to improve its image at the social level and increase its benefits within the capitalist system, but as we will see in this research, *pinkwashing* and *queerbaiting* help maintain hegemonic heteronormativity within audiovisual products and hide sexual diversities.

1.2. Critical discourse analysis and its role in denouncing unequal constructions and representations

Critical discourse analysis (or CDA) is both a theoretical perspective and a method of analysis. It is a perspective focused on the analysis of those discourses that are based on the production and/or reproduction of the abuse of power and discrimination in society. Its focus is on the social processes of symbolic circulation, studying the exercise of social power practiced by elites, institutions, or groups to maintain social inequality (Pardo-Abril, 2007). Its purpose is, on the one hand, a fight against inequality that produces a liberation of the oppressed against those who, based on their position of power, legitimize injustices and, on the other hand, raise awareness about it.

The importance of discourses lies in their ability to build, maintain or change social structures, and these can come from various sources: politics, audiovisual media, law, or education, among others (Van Dijk, 2002). These discourses, as historically situated social practices, are embedded in macro and micro structures (Stecher, 2009) and are capable of signifying areas of the experience from different positions, for example, from patriarchal discourses or feminist discourses (Fairclough, 2008).

One of the elements that maintains the relationship between discourse and society is found in cinema and television, elements of enormous power in the socialization of individuals and societies. In these discourses, it is possible to infer how minorities, such as the LGBT+ community, are spoken about or represented. In this way, a negative cinematographic discourse about this group affects how stereotypes and prejudices about them, and specifically social representations, are maintained and formed, promoting attitudes such as homophobia.

The CDA as a technique is considered diverse, heterogeneous, and multidisciplinary (Stecher, 2009), without one same method that can be applied equally to all approaches in the humanities and social sciences, but is a critical perspective and a methodology that is adapted to the different circumstances and objects of study (Van Dijk, 2003). This is because both discourses and social structures are both multidisciplinary. In the case of the LGBT+ community, the CDA has been used mainly to analyze discourses from laws and public policies (Echevarría and Martín-Maturana, 2015) and from political

(Stakic, 2011) and religious discourses. Therefore, there would be a significant gap in the CDA analysis of the construction of LGBT+ characters and plots within the current blockbuster cinema in Hollywood.

Thus, discourses, based on the CDA, are influenced by groups that have control over mental models (Van Dijk, 2003), that is, models from which we learn our knowledge of the world, such as television or socialization through educational or family institutions, and that are expressed through manifestations such as stereotypical representations or sociocultural phenomena of concealment (Pardo-Abril, 2007). Therefore, rather than in its linguistic component, the CDA focuses on the relationship between discourse, ideology, power, and society, and specifically on how these help the production and reproduction of social domination (Van Dijk, 2002), with the ethical objective of deciphering and denouncing these inequalities to subvert and deconstruct them.

1.3. LGBT+ group and representation in Hollywood cinema: a brief historical overview

Hollywood cinema has traditionally been governed by a puritanical and conservative morality and practically from the beginning it has counted on censorship that "avoided hurting the sensitivity of the viewers" (Black in Durán-Manso, 2016, p. 60). If this censorship originally tried to eliminate violent scenes or those with explicit sexual content, it soon began to delve into moral issues and specific laws were created for it in the early years of the 20th century, such as the so-called Hays Code, which had the support and pressure from the Catholic Church, in which homosexuality was considered a sexual perversion and could not be directly mentioned (Durán-Manso, 2014).

Still, some films, such as the first one to suggest the characters' homosexuality, Rowland Brown's *Hell's Highway*, which had its premiere in 1932, managed to introduce brief subtle and never explicit scenes about a minor character in a prison setting. Until the end of the 1960s, this censorship limited and made the inclusion of LGBT+ representations invisible. From then on, and in the following decades after the elimination of the Hays Code, the Hollywood model continued to focus on a patriarchal scheme and representations of homosexuality were produced very briefly, using subtle and always stereotyped elements, based on mockery or humor, using the well-known figure of the "sissy" (González, 2008); in denouncing the homosexual condition, turning these characters into villains or mentally unstable; or in the tragic lives of these people, such as in the feature film *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, in which a character commits suicide, tormented by his sexuality. Besides, all these images were based on a heteropatriarchal system, which rewarded heterosexuality by promoting a negative image of the LGBT+ community, an image that permeated the audience and at the same time represented the conservative society of the time (Durán-Manso, 2016).

This stereotypical representation based on the punishment of those sexualities other than heterosexual and that used homosexuals as an object of mockery (Melero, 2014), continued in Hollywood cinema until the eighties, despite the progressive increase in these times of feature films with LGBT+ characters and plots, coinciding with the growing social movements for homosexual rights in recent decades. You have to wait until the nineties, with films like *Philadelphia*, by Jonathan Demme, about a male couple in which one of them discovers being a carrier of HIV, for Hollywood to bet on large budgets and recognized actors to play LGBT+ characters. Even so, self-censorship continued to be maintained, such as the fact of hardly showing affective or sexual scenes between male characters and the spread of stereotypes, such as associating homosexuality with AIDS. It did not happen in the same way in those feature films created by minority producers or in the films of the so-called *New Queer Cinema*, far from the great commercial circuit and that, on the contrary, tried at that time to challenge the existing heteronormativity in Hollywood (Smith, 2006).

In the 2000s and 2010s, films like Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* about two homosexual cowboys in a rural and homophobic context that gained enormous popularity and recognition in the Oscars, along with others like *Moonlight* (2017) by Barry Jenkins, about a young African-American homosexual doomed to social marginality, opened the door to Hollywood LGBT+ representations that eliminated the comic element of the characters and had the support of the public and critics. Another example is *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), about the life of Freddie Mercury, with a nomination for Best Picture and starring a homosexual character. Therefore, there is an increase in recognition through prizes for these feature films with LGBT+ narratives. However, they all continue to maintain stereotypes such as the tragic ending, the life tormented by sexuality, or that of the lesbian with features of toxic masculinity, as in the case of the movie *Monster* (2003), by Patty Jenkins, about a lesbian murderer.

Thus, in recent years, despite the inclusion of deeper plots and new themes on LGBT+ characters and the elimination of any law that restricts freedom of expression, there is still self-censorship in Hollywood that can prevent economic and critical losses in openly conservative countries or sectors of society, causing low LGBT+ representation. Besides, non-positive representations continue to be maintained and based on the stereotypes established in the socio-cultural imagery about homosexuality (GLAAD, 2018), such as the mannered gay, the lesbian with hegemonic masculinity traits (Kaplan, Rosenmann, and Shuhendler, 2017) or the tragic ending of the characters.

2. Methodology

Based on the reviewed scientific literature, this research starts from the following hypotheses:

H1: The big Hollywood studios use the techniques of *pinkwashing* and *queerbaiting* to enhance a progressive image of themselves, but this advertising does not correspond to a real, positive and normalized construction of LGBT+ characters in current feature films.

H2: The few representations are also stereotyped and very simplified, which reinforces heteronormativity.

To test the hypotheses, feature films that met the following requirements were selected:
   a) that its premiere had taken place during the years 2017 and 2018 to know the current panorama.
   b) that they came from the major film production companies of the Hollywood commercial circuit (The Walt Disney Company, Universal Pictures or Sony Pictures, among others).
   c) that fall within the blockbuster cinema category, that is, films aimed at a majority audience (Marzal-Felici and Soler-Campillo, 2018) and with a large budget in their production and advertising, for this, all films should have a minimum budget of 150 million dollars.
   d) that during the pre-release phase of the film, the inclusion of LGBT+ characters had been promoted.

Finally, the sample was made up of the following five feature films, in which summary we have also included the role of the LGBT+ character:
   – *Black Panther* (Marvel Studios, 2018): a film that tells the story of T'Challa, an African prince who returns to Wakanda, a socially and technologically advanced country, to be proclaimed King with the help of soldier Okoye, a secondary and queer character.
   – *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (Universal Pictures, 2018): Sequel to Jurassic World, chronicles the threat to dinosaurs left alive on Isla Nublar and the ethical dilemmas faced by characters about whether to dock these animals to extinction or save them, as the main

characters Claire Dearing and Owen Grady claim, helped by the lesbian assistant and secondary character Zia Rodríguez.

- *Beauty and the Beast* (Walt Disney Pictures, 2017): Adaptation of the Disney classic, develops the love story between Belle, a young dreamer, and Beast, a young man who is cursed. LeFou is the gay servant in love with his lord, Gaston, anti-hero and enemy of Belle and Beast.
- *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Lucasfilm, 2017): film from the Star Wars saga that is about the vicissitudes of the resistance, led by General Leia Organa, and where the salvific mission of Captain Poe Dameron takes center stage. He has important differences with Vice Admiral Holdo, a secondary and bisexual character.
- *Thor: Ragnarok* (Marvel Studios, 2017): Tells the story of superhero Thor and his mission to save the planet Asgard from destruction by evil forces. Valkyrie, bisexual woman and secondary character, although at the beginning hinders this mission, she will finally be reconverted by Thor and will join the good cause.

The methodology is based, firstly, on an analysis of the promotion before the premiere of the films through interviews, statements by the cast, crew, and producer, and the social and commercial repercussions of these statements, and secondly, in critical discourse analysis. As we have already stated, the CDA is analytical research on the discourse that primarily studies how the abuse of social power, domination, and inequality are practiced, reproduced, and occasionally opposed, by texts and speech in the social and political context (Van Dijk in García-Jiménez, Rodrigo-Alsina, and Pineda, 2015).

Critical discourse analysis starts from a social problem; in the case of our study, the element subject to criticism and discussion is the stereotyped media construction of sexual diversity or, directly, its absence from the blockbuster cinematographic imagery. In general, LGBT+ sexual minorities do not participate in the discourse construction and are presented based on (and against) the traits of heterosexual cultural majorities.

To do this, we have articulated our analysis on two levels, which are:

1. Macro-level: dominant discourse, understood as systems of ideas, that the film articulates regarding the LGBT+ minority based on the analysis of the present and absent elements. It is necessary that at this level we pay attention to the topics, to which are the general ideas that articulate the cinematographic discourse on sexual diversity. These are the topics that give the discourses global coherence. According to Van Dijk (2003, p.152), the topics represent the subject of what the discourse "is about" since in general terms they include the most important information of a discourse and explain the coherence of texts and conversations. The topics are "semantic macrostructures" derived from (micro) structures of meaning or particular propositions expressed in the text (García-Jiménez *et al.,* 2015).

2. Micro-level: more specific aspects of the analyzed content. Specifically, we have focused on the following issues:
    a. Lexicalization of the characters: it is analyzed how the LGBT+ characters are constructed, what is the relationship between the LGBT+ characters and the heterosexual characters, which are the stereotypes, if the strategy of the *us* (in-group heterosexual) against *them* (out-group homosexual), and the construction of sexuality (present/absent).
    b. Propositional structures: It is based on the assignment of roles to certain actors and subjects (Johnson, Sonnett, Dolan, Reppen, and Johnson, 2010, p. 248; Pineda, García-Jiménez, and Rodrigo-Alsina, 2016). The propositional framing assigns roles

to actors and can establish a dichotomous relationship between *us* and *them* (Johnson, Sonnett, Dolan, Reppen, and Johnson, 2010, p. 252). An interesting aspect of propositional structures is the semantic roles of propositional arguments, such as agent, patient, object, etc. If a social group is shown as the agent responsible for negative acts, this propositional framing is added to the negative portrait of that group. Thus, the agency is understood as the thematic role of the subject executing the action. This issue is related to the concept of conceptual polarization, highlighting positive aspects of *us* against negative aspects of *them*.

c. Focus: privileged point of view in the discourse. It is related to the idea of the foreground or background information, propositions, or parts of propositions (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 263). Focus can privilege one point of view in the discourse while concealing another.

3. Results

3.1. Results of the analysis of the interviews and promotional elements before the premiere of the blockbuster

In the five feature films analyzed, a common pattern is repeated: advertising about the inclusion of stories and/or LGBT+ characters during the promotion of the blockbuster (a strategy we have called *pinkwashing*), but a subsequent elimination in the final montage of those scenes that made explicit reference to it (a practice called *queerbaiting*) (see Table 1. Media construction of sexual diversity (SD) in blockbuster cinema in Hollywood (2017-2018)).

In the case of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), before its release, the film's director, Bill Condon, stated that the homosexuality of one of the characters in the film, LeFou, would have a secondary plot and a happy ending for it (Attitude, 2017; BBC News, 2017). The director noted that "in the end, the character has his reward, but I do not want to reveal anything" (BBC News, 2017) and that he intended to open new paths to LGBT+ visibility (Attitude, 2017). The film's production company, The Walt Disney Company, proudly assured that the inclusion of this character fulfilled the "first exclusively gay moment" in the history of the company's films (BBC News, 2017). Besides, international media such as Attitude stated that:

By depicting same-sex attraction in this short but explicitly gay scene, the studio is sending a

message that this is normal and natural, and this is a message that will be heard in every

country in the world, including countries where it is still socially unacceptable or even illegal

to be gay. (2017)

Despite this, with the announcement of the inclusion of this character, homophobic comments appeared on social networks such as Twitter, such as "I suppose I am not going to take the children to see this movie" and "Let children be children", accusing the production company of "confusing children" and of "ruining a perfect love story" (Attitude, 2017). Also, countries like Malaysia decided to censor and remove four and a half minutes of scenes from LeFou's character. The country's authorities considered that "it is an inappropriate scene since many children will go to see the film" (Attitude, 2017). In Malaysia, LGBT+ representation in the media is only possible if these characters "repent" or are shown with a negative image (Attitude, 2017). Along with this, countries that traditionally have not protected the rights of the LGBT+ community, such as Russia, which has

"homosexual anti-propaganda" laws, decided to force minors under the age of 16 to watch this film accompanied by an adult (Attitude, 2017).

On the other hand, in the state of Alabama (United States), the owner of the cinemas Henagar Drive-In decided not to screen the film in his cinemas considering that it would not be a suitable film "if we cannot take our 11-year-old granddaughter and an 8-year-old grandson because it compromises what is taught in the Bible" (Redondo, 2017).

In this same sense, the character of Zia Rodríguez in *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* was identified as a lesbian during a scene that was eliminated in the final version shown in theaters. The same actress justified the elimination of that brief scene to "save time" (Caviaro, 2018). In the case of Valkyrie in *Thor: Ragnarok,* it was presented as "the first gay character in a Marvel production" (De Miguel, 2017). However, this scene was also removed from the film. The actress in charge of playing Valkyrie in the feature film, Tessa Thompson, stated that "yes, Val is bisexual in the comic, and I stayed true to that representation. But there is no explicit reference to her sexuality in *Thor: Ragnarok*" (García-Tuesday, 2017). The producers of the film indicated as a reason for the elimination of Valkyrie's bisexuality that "it could distract the audience from the true plot" (Ayuso and Belinchón, 2018).

All these patterns are repeated in the rest of the analyzed feature films, as in the characters of Okoye and Ayo, who play two openly queer warriors in the comics on which the feature film, *Black Panther*, is based. During a version shown on a pre-release screening of the film, a flirting scene could be observed between these two women. This was removed from the final version that hit theaters, to which Joe Robert Cole, co-writer on the film, added: "I just know it was not something important in terms of the story. Nor did we want to extend ourselves with that" (Cinemanía, 2018; Moreno, 2018). Regarding the removal of the plot from the film, the creators of *Black Panther* comics stated that:

> Even with the progress that has been made, some marginalized groups are told that they have
>
> to wait, that it is not yet their time, that other things must be done first. We are also told that
>
> perhaps we ask for too much and that we should be grateful for the progress that has been
>
> made. (Cinemania, 2018)

Finally, in the case of the character of Amilyn Holdo, she was presented as bisexual during a novel before the premiere of *The Last Jedi* (Europapress, 2017) and was confirmed as the first LGBT+ character in a movie from the *Star Wars* saga (Moreno, 2017), but there was no explicit mention of it at any time during the feature film. Only implicitly at one point in the film can her possible crush on Princess Leia be read into.

Regarding the global context of the production of these feature films, most of them had nominations for internationally recognized awards. This is the case of *Black Panther*, nominated for seven statuettes, including Best Picture and Best Original Score at the 2019 Oscars. For its part, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* was nominated for Best Original Score, Best Sound Mixing, Best Sound Editing, and Best Visual Effects at the 2018 Oscars, and Best Sound and Best Special Visual Effects at the 2018 BAFTA Awards. *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) also got two nominations for Best Production Design and Best Costume Design both at the Oscars and at the BAFTA Awards in 2018. *Thor: Ragnarok*, meanwhile, got various nominations in competitions such as the *Critics' Choice Awards* or the *Empire Awards*.

3.2. Results at the macro level: discourses on LGBT+ groups

The results show three discourses as organizing ideas regarding sexual diversity (SD) in feature films:

1) Sexual diversity as a parody:

In this discourse, sexual diversity appears constructed as a parody, with a clear comic vision and, sometimes, even as a game. We find it in the movie *Beauty and the Beast* in which sexual diversity is shown implicitly (never explicitly) (see table 1) and in which LeFou is an effeminate and jester character who articulates this vision of LGBT+, as recent research on the same character also confirms (Contreras-Pulido, Guzmán-Franco, and Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2020). This representation supports the discourse of a comic SD to the detriment of a real possibility of emotional declaration (Peña-Zerpa, 2013), nullifying any option that the LGBT+ plot can go beyond humor and lead to a sexual or love relationship between characters.

2) Sexual diversity as affliction and tragedy:

This discourse associates sexual diversity with tragedy and trauma, as opposed to heterosexuality associated with victory, good luck, and psychological stability and strength. It is the discourse built from Valkyrie, from the movie *Thor: Ragnarok*, presented as a rude and continually drunk character, as we will see in the microanalysis, due to the murder of her partner in a battle in the past: "We are going to die, so let's drink". Even though Thor is an action film marked by violence, only the LGBT+ character is tormented and tries to overcome the pain of the past and the death of her girlfriend through alcohol, a tragedy context that, as we have seen in section 1.3., reproduces one of the classic stereotypes with which sexual minorities have been associated (Melero, 2014).

This discourse would also be present in the movie *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, where Vice Admiral Holdo is built using one of the classic stereotypes of LGBT+ characters in cinema, the tragic ending (Melero, 2014). This time, the character, after failing in her leadership role, sacrifices herself and dies to save all the resistance that is escaping to another planet to survive.

3) Absent sexual diversity:

There are 2 films in which, as we have seen in section 3.1 and is shown in Table 1, any explicit or implicit mention of sexual diversity has been removed. In this way, *Black Panther* and *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* pose a discourse in which social reality is and can only be heterosexual, there is no room for other sexual orientations, which are not even suggested.

3.3. Results at the micro-level: the construction of LGBT+ characters, their contexts, and perspectives

3.3.1. Lexicalization

In general, the sexuality of straight characters can be said to be openly displayed (such as Owen and Claire in *Jurassic World*; Belle and Beast; Finn and Rose in *Star Wars*; or Jane and Thor in *Thor*), while that of LGBT+ groups is explicitly absent in all the films and implicitly absent in up to 2 of the 5 analyzed feature films (see table 1). Only implicitly does sexual diversity appear in *Beauty and the Beast*, *Thor*, and *Star Wars*. The greater visibility of heterosexuality normalizes and legitimizes this orientation while relegating to the margins of society or directly denying LGBT+ identities.

This issue that we are pointing out is reflected in LeFou's character, in *Beauty and the Beast*, where despite the symbolism and elements (affective, sexual, gestures, etc.) that allow us to identify him as a homosexual character ("Who needs her when you've got us?"-in a conversation with Gaston), there is never any mention or statement about it. It is possible then to speak of the appearance of the stereotype of the omitted homosexual (Peña-Zerpa, 2013), that is, latent homosexuality that is not explicitly manifested during the film. We also find here the classic Hollywood cinema stereotype of the repressed gay (Peña-Zerpa, 2013). Likewise, the controversial homosexual scene in *Beauty and the Beast*, questioned by conservative sectors that accused it of being harmful to children and praised by the production company considering it groundbreaking and novel in film history, occurs for a total of four seconds in which, during a royal dance in the palace, LeFou performs a change of partner and dances with the male character who in a previous scene had appeared in a comical way dressed as a woman.

This latent homosexuality also appears in the character of Holdo in *Star Wars*, which is hinted at adoration and possible infatuation towards Princess Leia: "It was you who taught me", while both squeeze hands with each other moved and with teary eyes.

LGBT characters are built from stereotyping and, while men are parodied with features of the social imaginary about femininity, women are attributed features of hypermasculinity, classic stereotypes with which minority sexual identities have historically been constructed (Peña-Zerpa, 2013). This is the case of LeFou in *Beauty and the Beast*, who represents the homosexual character secretly in love with his heterosexual lord, and who must suffer in silence for his unrequited love while watching how his love interest pretends and has relationships with other people. LeFou appears as an effeminate homosexual (Peña-Zerpa, 2013), comedian and jester of Gaston (the anti-hero), with gesticulations, gestures, expressions, and ways of acting characteristic and typical of the femininity of classic Hollywood cinema (Kaplan, 1998), parodying the role of a weak damsel who tries to conquer the masculine man in the film. In *Beauty and the Beast* also appears a stereotyping of transsexuality and cross-dressing for humorous and cartoonish purposes. This occurs during the scene in which a character on Gaston's side is dressed as a woman as a form of humiliation, to which he responds with parodic gestures of feminine mannerism while a character comments: "Beautiful, go, be free!"

On the other hand, the female characters are shown with the traditional cinematography stereotypes associated with masculinity (García-Toca and Nader-Carreta, 2009), representing them with the stereotype established in the socio-cultural imagery of "masculine lesbian" (González de Garay, 2013). These characters are represented with hypermasculinization traits, typical of the traditional male characters of Hollywood cinema, such as having great aggressiveness, dexterity, and physical strength, a rough, serious, and grumpy character, and with difficulties for feeling empathy or expressing feelings, all traits of hegemonic masculinity (Kaplan *et al.,* 2017). The female characters always have an attack attitude, in the case of Valkyrie, with a dagger that she shows at every opportunity to defend herself, shooting or throwing glass bottles at others. Although in the first part of the feature film Valkyrie is moved by her own interests, for survival, and money, and is shown with difficulty to show feelings ("I do not help anyone"), in the second part, once she has been converted by the superhero Thor to the justice cause, the character's purpose is revenge for the murder of her partner: "If I'm gonna die, well, it might as well be driving my sword through the heart of that murderous hag". While in the case of Zia in *Jurassic World*, a former marine and with a great tendency to irascibility, she is represented with discussions and constant reproaches to her coworkers: "Don't let your mom buy your clothes", "Relax, it's easier for you to die riding a horse than in an airplane" or "Franklin, shit, get on the plane". Likewise, Okoye, in *Black Panther*, is

dressed in a sensual outfit and a wig with long curly hair to infiltrate and go unnoticed in a nightclub, while the following conversation occurs:

- − "This will be quick so I can get this ridiculous thing off my head.
- − It looks good on you; move it from side to side.
- − What?! It is a disgrace".

Also, the female characters are shown with an authoritative personality, as in the case of the warriors Okoye and Ayo in *Black Panther*: "As a king, your duty is...", "You will not say anything about this day", "Serve your country", or that of Vice Admiral Holdo, in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*: "Stay at your station and follow my orders".

These hypermasculinization cliches, typical of the male warriors and fighters of classic cinema, are also openly manifested in the dialogues of the other characters: in the case of Zia, another character reproaches her: "You don't have to insult me every time someone pisses you off" and another defines her as: "What a rude girl!" Meanwhile, for Valkyrie, another character refers to her as: "Angry Girl".

On the other hand, the discourse of homosexuality as affliction and tragedy (macro level) is articulated at this micro-level based on the character of Valkyrie in *Thor*. Her rude, angry, and constantly drunk personality is based on her tragic past and is because during a battle her female partner was killed. During the film, they refer to these events with euphemisms such as "the cost was enormous". However, despite the absence of sexual affectivity, which is only explicitly shown in deleted scenes from the film, this character is paradoxically sexualized and others refer to her as "beautiful, strong, and brave".

Besides, within the features found of *pinkwashing,* in which the sexuality of the characters is mentioned during the promotion but hidden in the feature film, there is a clear union of this technique with another related to whitening applied to the ethnic and racial characteristics of the characters, within the context of what is known as *whitewashing*. In this way, four of the six LGBT+ characters analyzed also belong to non-Caucasian population groups, as is the case of Zia in *Star Wars* (Asian), Okoye and Ayo in *Black Panther* (African-American), and Valkyrie in *Thor* (Latin).

In short, in the lexicalization of LGBT+ characters, no affective elements are shown nor is there any repercussion on the part of these or others, so these films are based on hidden homosexuality, understandable by viewers only in some of these feature films, but never explicit, while the rest of heterosexual characters openly have moments of complicity and affection (caresses, kisses, etc.). Therefore, a hidden homosexuality turned into *them*, about which it is not possible to talk, against visible, normalized heterosexuality, that articulates the plot: the *us*. This issue is developed below.

3.3.2. Propositional structures and focus

In general, the actions carried out by LGBT+ characters are comic, negative, or simply inconsequential, a resource, ultimately, to emphasize the positive actions that move the action forward and that are carried out by heterosexual heroes/heroines. LGBT+ characters are presented as a contrast or antithesis of heterosexuals, forming a clear homosexual *them* against a heterosexual *us*.

This caricature appears in the character of LeFou, in *Beauty and the Beast*, who is represented with all the characteristics of a humorous character (Lorenzo, 2005) at the service of the villain, Gaston, and who has the function of provoking laughter in the viewer. The character shows himself as illiterate: "And his name's G-A-S-T... I believe there's another T... It just occurred to me that I'm

illiterate", and serves as comic relief for the feature film in scenes such as when he used by Gaston to receive boxing punches from another character. LeFou is uneducated, rude ("forget about him, ladies" to some town girls), a liar, coarse, superficial, cowardly, and subdued to Gaston, the anti-hero. In his role as a servant in love with Gaston, LeFou lies and flatters and works together with his master as an antithesis of the main characters Belle and Beast, who are educated, sensitive, true, and brave, and built through positive actions (dialogue, read, fall in love, etc.).

The plots associated with LeFou have a clear secondary character and his role does not favor the progress of the action nor does it have real importance for the story, while the rest of the heterosexual characters, except the villain, show a dramatic arc and are defined by positive images: kindness, courage, bravery, tenderness or kindness, among others. Thus, dichotomously, these heterosexual characters carry out the positive actions that make it possible to have the story's "happy ending" against LeFou, who, by trying to please his partner, is integrated into a propositional framing of comic and negative actions.

These negative propositional framings are also shown in Valkyrie (*Thor* movie), violent and aggressive, in whose presentation the character appears drinking and when she gets off an airplane, she falls through the ramp due to her alcoholic state. Valkyrie is a tormented character, with no sense of ethics or justice and needs Thor, the courageous and emotionally expressing human hero, to save her from her solipsism. While the latter fights to save his people, dialogues, or forgives, Valkyrie drinks, attacks, or cheats and her actions are always violent until she is redeemed by Thor.

This contrast of *us* versus *them* is also a resource used in *Black Panther* and *Star Wars*. In the first, the queer soldier Oyoke shows no compassion, finds it difficult to show her feelings, and is governed by the strict military rules of her country and not by ethics, which contrasts with the main character, King T´Challa, compassionate, human, and in love with Nakía, who has a strong sense of social justice towards the most disadvantaged. In *Star Wars*, Captain Poe Dameron is an emotional and human person, who does not mind breaking the rules to protect his companions, which is emphasized by the role of Vice Admiral Holdo, who is rigid, uncompromising, and is marked by intergalactic military hierarchies.

The negative actions developed by the LGBT+ characters need a final redemption as they must make up for their past mistakes. It happens with Valkyrie, in *Thor*, who finally joins the justice cause; Okoye, in *Black Panther*, who regrets her lack of compassion for King T´Challa; LeFou, in *Beauty and the Beast*, who finally fights for Belle and Beast; Vice Admiral Holdo, in *Star Wars*, who must sacrifice her own life to make up for her mistakes at the head of the resistance; or Zia Rodríguez, in *Jurassic World*, who finally shows her compassion for the girl Maisie. Heterosexual heroes and heroines do not need to be redeemed as their actions are primarily positive.

About the focus, the privileged point of view in the discourse is *heteronormativity*, since LGBT+ characters are defined and characterized by heterosexual protagonists and are subjected to them. This implies that none of the LGBT+ characters are built independently and on an equal footing with heterosexuals.

This privileged point of view is observed in characters like Ayo and Okoye in *Black Panther*, who are subordinated to the rest of the main heterosexual main characters, as reflected in the following sentences: "My prince, we are getting closer" (showing attitudes of submission and reverence) or "Yes, my general", which refers to the hierarchy of military systems. Both characters dedicate their lives entirely to the protection of their king and their people and give up having their independent life development: "I am loyal to the throne, no matter who sits on it". The same characteristics are

repeated in the character of Valkyrie, in the movie about *Thor*, with expressions like: "What can we do?", "-Come on? -After you" or "Your throne", revering the character of Thor (the king). These expressions highlight the lack of initiative of the character, presented with a certain passivity, and, therefore, de-genitalized since it is not the direct and main responsible for the different actions carried out.

Likewise, in the case of LeFou in *Beauty and the Beast*, he is shown as a character subordinated to Gaston, always attached to him, accepting his orders, and faithfully following his movements. Thus, a metaphorical contrast is produced between LeFou's latent homosexuality and his attempt to attract or become like Gaston's character. The latter is characterized and based on the traditional cinematic heterosexual ideal of masculinity (Laguarda, 2006): male, white, muscular, attractive, rogue, rough, virile, self-centered, who always achieves his goals ("You will be my wife, you'll see", in conversation with the character of Belle), and that is the object of desire of the town's women. Hegemonic masculinity that is the ideal to follow in contrast to a parodied and irrelevant homosexuality. This duality is characteristic of the criticism made of hetero-patriarchal society from queer theory (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 2002, 2005, 2010).

Likewise, the only role of the character is to obtain Gaston's approval through servitude and support for his negative behaviors, and some elements suggest an unhealthy emotional dependence. Regarding this, there is a submission and mistreatment of this character towards LeFou shown verbally in different situations: "Do you want to be next? Bring me my horse!" and physically and comically, when LeFou sings that "In a wrestling match nobody bites like Gaston" and a bite is shown in his stomach.

Besides, the character of Gaston denies the evidence about the sexual orientation of his partner: "Ah, LeFou, you are the best, how come no girl has caught you yet?", which implies the existence in the movie of the presumption of heterosexuality of all the characters, a key element of the "obligatory heterosexuality" theory (Rich, 1996). This theory associates institutions such as the media with the assumption and socialization of heterosexuality as a normalized and naturalized orientation, excluding the rest of diverse sexual orientations.

Ultimately, as we have seen, the hypermasculinization of female characters and the feminization of male characters reinforces a hetero-patriarchal perspective (focus), in which the heterosexual majority views the LGBT+ minority based on prejudice and stereotypes.

Table 1. *Media construction of sexual diversity (SD) in blockbuster cinema in Hollywood (2017-2018).*

Characterization	Macro-level	Micro-level						
Movie Character Orientation Gender	*Pinkwashing*	Discourse	*Queerbaiting*	Explicit SD	Implicit SD	*Us versus Them*	Focus: Heteronormativity	Stereotypes	Final redemption
Thor Valkyrie Bisexuality Woman	√	SD as affliction and tragedy	√	X	√	√	√	masculine woman mental instability	√

Beauty and the Beast LeFou Gay Man	√	SD as a parody	√	X	√	√	√	feminine man repressed gay	√
Black Panther Okoye Queer Woman	√	SD absent	√	X	X	√	√	masculine woman	√
Star Wars A. Holdo Bisexuality Woman	√	SD as affliction and tragedy	√	X	√	√	√	masculine woman tragic ending	√
Jurassic World Z. Rodríguez Lesbian Woman	√	SD absent	√	X	X	X	√	masculine woman	√

Source: self-made.

4. Discussion

Based on the objectives proposed in the research, it is possible to infer the use of *pinkwashing* in the recent Hollywood blockbuster feature films analyzed. This technique is used by the production companies during the promotion of the films to advertise that one of the first blockbusters for a majority audience with LGBT+ characters and/or plots has been produced ("the first Marvel film to include a homosexual character"). Besides, this publicity supposes a cleaning of their image when presenting themselves as progressive majors. However, given the danger of possible economic losses due to the boycott of the more conservative audience given the high economic costs of production, there is a subsequent elimination of these plots in the final version of the film. Thus, to attract the LGBT+ audience, the *queerbaiting* technique is used, in which a possible love plot is suggested through homoerotic subtexts (LeFou and Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*) that never occurs explicitly.

Therefore, *pinkwashing* and *queerbaiting* are marketing elements used in blockbusters as an advertising claim and image improvement, without a real, positive, and normalized construction of sexual diversity occurring in these feature films, confirming the first hypothesis raised in the research. In this way, linking with the bibliographic review, these films continue to use, just as from the beginning of film censorship, scenes only interpretable as LGBT+ through subtexts, but not explicitly, and avoid affective and sexual elements.

On the other hand, as the 2018 GLAAD report already announced, the use of a third technique, *whitewashing*, is confirmed. Thus, given the traditional criticism of Hollywood for the low inclusion of non-Caucasian people, a union between LGBT+ and other ethnic groups not common in blockbusters (Asian, African, or Latino) is observed in most of these films, while the protagonists continue to preserve heterosexual and white hegemony. LGBT+ groups are used as token characters, with no real weight in the plot, but which serve to justify the alleged inclusion promoted from the feature film.

Regarding the second hypothesis, the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a technique confirms the existence of various characteristics and elements of inequality in feature films. Firstly, discourses on sexual diversity as comedy, tragedy, or absence reinforce in the collective imaginary

the stereotypes with which the heterosexual hegemonic majority "looks" and defines the LGBT+ minority. Secondly, at the micro-level, we have seen how the stereotyping of characters is based on the same attributes used for decades in classic Hollywood cinema: that of associating to women traits of violence, competitiveness or emotional control characteristic of hegemonic masculinity (Kaplan *et al.,* 2017), as in the case of Valkyrie in *Thor: Ragnarok*; the idea of the mannered homosexual (LeFou in *Beauty and the Beast*), or the tragic ending of characters of the community (Holdo in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*).

Microanalysis has allowed us to delve into the polarization between a heterosexual dominant group, the *us*, compared to a minority group, excluded from representation and that tends to be invisible or shown through subtexts or euphemisms, the LGBT+ group or *them*. Besides, the role of these characters is secondary, and, in most cases, they are used as comic relief and it is the heterosexual characters who, through agentivity, carry out the positive actions and favor the real advancement of the plot. Propositional negative framings are also added to certain analyzed characters, as in the case of LeFou by supporting the criminal actions of the character of Gaston. In the same sense, the focus of the film privileges the heterosexual point of view while hiding or minimizing the rest of the orientations, which are subject to the prevailing heteronormativity, again showing the dichotomy between *us* and *them* and a presumption of heterosexuality in all characters. Thus, the analysis, in addition to following the previous theoretical framework, confirms the two proposed hypotheses.

5. Conclusions

Once the results have been analyzed, it is possible to conclude that the representations included in blockbuster cinema continue to promote a distorted vision that associates negative stereotypes with the LGBT+ community, whose sexuality appears invisible and is not presented on equal terms to heterosexuality. This fact is especially serious if we take into account the massive audiences of this type of film and its important role in socialization and education in children and families, as is the case of Walt Disney's productions. Therefore, this Hollywood cinema has a vitally important challenge ahead for inclusion, pluralism, and democracy: the visibility and normalization of characters from the LGBT+ community. In this sense, serial fiction is presented as a role model for its commitment to normalized sexual diversity in series such as *Orange is the new black* (Netflix: 2013-Present) or *Star Trek: Discovery* (CBS: 2017-Present).

Besides, the presence of the *pinkwashing* and *queerbaiting* techniques used to attract a potential audience favorable to the normalization of sexual diversity is confirmed, without this being a financial loss due to the pressure of the most conservative audiences.

Three fronts are proposed as future lines of research: the analysis of a greater number of feature films to verify the existence of *pinkwashing* and *queerbaiting* techniques associated with heteronormativity; the study of *whitewashing*; and extend the critical discourse analysis to other feature films beyond blockbusters, with special attention to more independent or minority films.

In conclusion, visibility alone is not enough, since a negative and stereotypical symbolic construction does not help the symbolic liberalization and normalization of minorities, on the contrary, it reinforces the hegemonic vision of sexuality. Thus, in light of this article, Hollywood blockbusters continue to promote a status quo based on heteronormativity and inequality, despite the "pink" marketing campaigns promoted by the film industry.

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AUTHORS:

Juan-José Sánchez-Soriano
Juan-José Sánchez-Soriano (Murcia, 1990) is an FPU predoctoral researcher for the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport at the University of Murcia, at the Faculty of Communication and Documentation. Extraordinary End of Degree Award in Audiovisual Communication (University of Murcia). He has several scientific publications at international conferences, magazines, and book chapters in prestigious publishers. Member of the Association of Young Researchers at the University of Murcia (AJIUM by its acronym in Spanish). He has carried out research stays, among others, at the University of Hull (United Kingdom) and the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. He is a member of the research group "Social Communication, Culture and Technology" of the University of Murcia and a member of the "Spanish Association for Communication Research". He has training in new teaching technologies and teaching experience in the Degree in Journalism in the

subject Fundamentals of Communication I. His lines of research are focused on cinematography, serial fiction, cultural studies, audience's reception, and queer studies.

juanjose.sanchez4@um.es
Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4371-0099
Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=V-2mD8QAAAAJ&hl=es

Leonarda García-Jiménez

Leonarda García-Jiménez (Murcia, 1979), Ph.D. in Communication, is a Professor in the area of Journalism at the University of Murcia and an Affiliate Faculty at Colorado State University. She has also taught and researched at the Universidad del Norte (Colombia), the University of Seville and the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain), the University of Lugano (Switzerland), the Autonomous University of Mexico City and the Autonomous University of Zacatecas and Colima (Mexico), and at the University of Colorado Boulder (USA), where she also completed her training with a postdoctoral scholarship (Seneca Foundation, reference code 09395/PD/08). García-Jiménez has published more than 45 researches (books, articles, and book chapters) in her lines of specialization, including communication theories, identity, and interculturality. These works have appeared in impact magazines and editorials SJR, JCR and SPI. Her latest book, *En defensa de la comunicación* (2019), has been published by Tirant Lo Blanch. She has participated in more than 50 specialized congresses in communication, has two six-year research periods (2005-2010 and 2011-2016), has been a principal researcher in the project funded by the European Commission CRICORM, and has been part of 3 R+D+I projects of the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Government of Spain. She currently enjoys a Leonardo BBVA 2019 scholarship with which she develops the project "feminizing communication sciences" to recover the memory of outstanding women researchers of the 20th century.

leonardagj@um.es
Índice H: 11
Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5472-3314
Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=f39SKIkAAAAJ&hl=es