

Representation of LGBT Struggle in the Film Bohemian Rhapsody

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.61796/icossh.v2i2.460>



Sections Info

Article history:

Submitted: August 25, 2025

Final Revised: September 07, 2025

Accepted: September 14, 2025

Published: September 26, 2025

Keywords:

Representation

Freddie Mercury

LGBT

Queen

Bohemian Rhapsody

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to examine the representation of Freddie Mercury's struggle to embrace and defend his LGBT identity as depicted in the film *Bohemian Rhapsody*, highlighting how cinema can serve as a medium for addressing issues of sexuality and identity. **Method:** Employing a qualitative approach, the research utilizes John Fiske's semiotic theory of "television codes," which operates at the levels of reality, representation, and ideology, to analyze key scenes. Data were collected through in-depth viewing of the film and systematic documentation of scenes that illustrate Mercury's negotiation of his bisexual identity. **Results:** The findings indicate that the film portrays Mercury's personal journey as both an internal and external struggle, reflecting broader societal tensions surrounding LGBT identity. Through narrative structure, character interactions, and symbolic cinematic codes, *Bohemian Rhapsody* presents Mercury's challenges and resilience in asserting his identity. **Novelty:** This study contributes to film and cultural studies by applying semiotic analysis to demonstrate how mainstream cinema represents LGBT struggles, offering new insights into the intersection of identity, media representation, and social discourse.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of gender representation in the media, especially in film, is increasingly interesting to research. Movies are examples of communication media that use symbols, signs, and icons. This can be seen from the way they represent reality as a symbol that contains the message they want to convey. Film is one of the tools to convey a message to the public [1]. The delivery of messages through film to communicators can be seen from the perspective of the narrative being used [2]. Film as a moving image as well as a form of representation of social reality, is produced using various kinds of symbols and signs that are visual and used to convey messages [3]. As the times develop, technological advances have greatly influenced human life, especially the development of the media. Without realizing it, there are so many media that are now a basic human need in keeping up with the times. The media that is currently being favored by the public is film. In the field of communication, movies are a crucial part of the system that individuals and groups use to send and receive messages [4], [5]. In addition, the film also provides insight by explaining issues so that the audience can understand them. The film managed to reach a wide range of social groups, leading experts to speculate that the film may have an impact on the audience [6]. In this study, the film *Bohemian Rhapsody* will be the object of this study.

The film *Bohemian Rhapsody* tells the journey of the famous British band Queen [7]. *Bohemian Rhapsody* chronicles the journey of Queen and vocalist Freddie Mercury from their initial success, personal conflicts, to their legendary performance at the 1985

Live Aid concert. The film attracted attention not only because of its musical ability, but also because of the way it touched on important issues such as sexual orientation and gender identity. In addition, the various achievements of this film also add to the reason why this film is interesting to research. Some of the achievements of the *Bohemian Rhapsody* film include "Golden Globe Award for Best Film: Drama 2019". For his role as Freddie Mercury in the film, Rami Malek also received many awards. Some examples are the "Golden Globe Award for Best Actor: Drama 2019" and the "Academy Award for Best Actor 2019", which are awarded by *the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences* to an actor who has shown stunning performances during his career in the world of cinema. The film *Bohemian Rhapsody* also tells the story of Freddie Mercury, the lead vocalist of the Queen Band, in accepting his identity as LGBT.

Through John Fiske's semiotic theory, Freddie Mercury's struggle in *the film Bohemian Rhapsody* is seen on three levels. The reality level features Freddie's expressions, dialogues, and gestures that depict his confusion and search for identity as a bisexual. The level of representation uses cinematic techniques such as close-ups, warm lighting, and background music to reinforce the emotions and inner conflicts she experiences. Meanwhile, the ideological level shows the clash between Freddie's personal identity and heteronormative social norms, as well as criticizing the stigma against LGBT in society.

The LGBT community faced many problems and discrimination during the Queen's era, which lasted from the 1970s to the 1980s. Despite some progress in LGBT rights, many individuals still have to hide their identities due to repressive social and legal stigma. The struggle of LGBT people has existed since the 1970s. LGBT is present not only as a trend, but also as an issue that sells for some countries that are tolerant for all groups. They seem to be competing to legalize it officially through laws in each country. So at this time there are several countries that legalize LGBT [8].

The purpose of Andi Farhan Aljauzy Rivai's 2021 research, "*Narcissistic Representation in the Film Bohemian Rhapsody (Semiotic Analysis)*," is to study the types of narcissism found in films and understand their meaning through some of its scenes. This study investigated how Freddie Mercury's character was portrayed in the context of narcissism using semiotic analysis [9]. Although the main focus of the study was narcissism, semiotic analysis provides insight into the representation of narcissism in the film "*Bohemian Rhapsody*". However, the semiotic analysis used can provide a useful framework for this research. By paying attention to how visual signs and codes, as well as narratives, are used to depict gender identity and sexual orientation in film, researchers can adapt these semiotic analysis techniques to investigate gender representation in film.

A study conducted in 2022 titled "*Bisexual Narrative Analysis in the Film Bohemian Rhapsody*", written by Matthew Thiery Hidayat, Lukman Hakim, and Judhi Hari Wibowo, examined how bisexuality is shown in the film "*Bohemian Rhapsody*" and applied the narrative method of David Bordwell. The study found the moral message signals in the film and how the narrative portrays Freddie Mercury's bisexual identity [10]. The study used a narrative approach to analyze bisexual representation in the film

"*Bohemian Rhapsody*". This narrative analysis can make an important contribution to this research by showing how film narratives can be used to portray gender identity and sexual orientation. Researchers can adapt this narrative approach to explore how stories and characters in film shape gender perceptions, as well as how gender-related moral messages are conveyed through film narratives.

The study "*Men's Friendship in Bohemian Rhapsody*" written by Riikka Savela in 2020 used the theory of homosociality and bromance to study male friendships in film. This study analyzes how the male characters portrayed in the film interact with the idea of male friendship in popular culture [11]. The research provides additional perspectives on how relationships between male characters can reflect social dynamics and gender norms. By understanding these ideas, researchers will be able to better analyze how the film "*Bohemian Rhapsody*" portrays relationships between male characters and how this impacts the general understanding of gender.

Research by Syifa Afati Amatillah in 2020 entitled "*Representation of Freddie Mercury as Rockstar in the Film Bohemian Rhapsody*" uses Roland Barthes' semiotic method to analyze the meaning of denotations, connotations, myths, and ideologies contained in films. Data collection techniques are carried out by observation and documentation studies [12].

A study by Muhiddin entitled "*Between Rejection and Acceptance: An Exploration of Young People's Attitudes and Perceptions of LGBTQ+ in Indonesia*" in 2023 published in the *Gadjah Mada Journal of Psychology* and discusses young people's perceptions of LGBTQ+ in Indonesia, including attitudes of rejection and acceptance. The research uses a qualitative method with thematic analysis [13].

From the previous research, no one studied the representation of Freddie Mercury's struggle in fighting for his identity as a bisexual. This study can fill this gap by providing a more in-depth analysis of Freddie Mercury's struggles in the film, which seeks to assert that he was an LGBT supporter. Based on the gap research, the formulation of the research problem is "How is Freddie Mercury's bisexual identity represented in the film *Bohemian Rhapsody*". This study investigated how film represents gender identity related to using the semiotic theory developed by John Fiske. This theory consists of three levels: reality, representation, and ideology. Each level can be used to analyze moving images such as film and television.

This research is important because it provides an understanding of how Freddie Mercury was able to maintain his identity as a bisexual in the midst of many fans and media who criticized his decision. The study collected data by watching the film thoroughly, recording important scenes depicting Freddie Mercury's struggle to maintain his identity as a bisexual. Qualitative methods and content analysis approaches are used in this study. This method allowed researchers to represent Freddie Mercury's struggle in fighting for his LGBT identity in the film "*Bohemian Rhapsody*".

The theory of semiotics created by John Fiske was used in this study. According to this theory, semiotics is a field of science that investigates the meaning and signs of a sign system and looks at how the communicated signs are perceived to have meaning by

the science of meaning [14]. John Fiske explained in Fauziah 2018 that in his theory of "television code", also known as "television coding", the codes used and appearing in television broadcasts are interconnected, generating meaning. Reality, representation, and belief systems are the three levels of the social code of TV shows. This theory is used to analyze the meaning and signs in the film "*Bohemian Rhapsody*" that there is gender representation in the film scenes [15].

To achieve this goal, a qualitative approach is used that uses a semiotic analysis approach. This approach was chosen with the aim of describing and explaining the scene containing Freddie Mercury's struggle to fight for his identity as a bisexual in the movie "*Bohemian Rhapsody*".

RESEARCH METHOD

Content analysis is a qualitative research method. Cresswell stated that qualitative research relies heavily on the views of informants or participants. Examples of this type of research include: asking broad and general questions, asking questions of a general nature, gathering information that mostly contains words or texts from participants, describing and analyzing themes that appear in the text, and asking in a subjective and non-objective way (asking for the opinion of others). Based on Holsti's opinion conveyed by Wahyu Sitasari in 2022, content analysis is an approach used to draw conclusions in a structured, unbiased, and general manner in recognizing various characteristics inherent in a message. This method was chosen because it allowed researchers to better understand how Freddie Mercury fought for his identity as Bisexual. The patterns of meaning found in the collected data can be identified, analyzed, and interpreted through content analysis. Semiotic theory, developed by John Fiske, was used in this study. The TV code consists of three levels, according to this theory., namely: [16]

1. Reality Level

Factors such as the appearance of clothing, conversation, movement, environment, behavior, expression, sound, documents written in the language of images, interview transcripts, and others are often associated with events encoded in the language of images (television) [15].

2. Representation level

Code engineers such as lighting, camera, editing, music, and sound must be considered when depicting electronically coded reality. In addition, it is in written form, which includes words, sentences, graphs, or proportions that are acceptable to the public. By actualizing characters, stories, conflicts, dialogues, and settings, the code is transmitted to representational [15].

3. Level Ideology

According to Ardiandha in Pohan & Syahril 2023, there are many codes of representation related to society, such as race, class, materialism, patriarchy, individualism, and capitalism [15].

The data was collected through the process of watching the movie "Bohemian Rhapsody" in depth. Researchers noted that there are a total of 97 scenes in this film, and 8 of them represent Freddie Mercury's struggle in fighting for his identity as Bisexual.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Overall, the film Bohemian Rhapsody not only depicts the journey and process of the band Queen in achieving success, but also shows how Freddie Mercury, the lead vocalist of the band Queen, maintains and upholds his sexual identity as a bisexual.

Scene Analysis 1



Figure 1.

Deskripsi scenes

Scene 27 of 97

Minutes: 28.53 – 29.10

Freddie Mercury began to be attracted to a man who worked as a truck driver, this marked the beginning of Freddie's weird sexuality, where he was attracted to the same sex.

Reality Level

Behaviour

In the scene, it is clear that Freddie Mercury shows an attraction behavior to the man, this can be seen when Freddie looks at the man and does not even take his eyes off to follow where the man is going.

Express

Freddie's interest in truck drivers is shown through his curious facial expressions and body language that shows doubt and interest. It reflects a real emotional experience for someone who is exploring his or her sexual identity.

Representation Level

Camera

The visual composition in this scene uses a *close-up* technique of Freddie's face to highlight his expressions and body gestures, which cinematically confirms the pivotal moment when he begins to show same-sex attraction.

Scene 2 analysis



Figure 2.

Deskripsi scenes

Scene 33 of 97

Minutes: 36.07 - 37.22

Paul Prenter, the manager of the band Queen began to show his interest in Freddie Mercury, where Prenter approached and kissed Freddie on the lips, from this Freddie began to get carried away and became Prenter's partner.

Reality Level

Behaviour

Paul Prenter looked Freddie in the eye and kissed Freddie which indicated he was attracted to Freddie Mercury

Express

Freddie's expression in the scene is nervous when he is approached by Paul Prenter.

Representation Level

Light

The lighting in this scene uses *low-key lighting* with minimal light intensity, creating a dim atmosphere that supports dramatic nuances. This technique emphasizes contrast and shadows, resulting in a more profound visual effect and building tension in the scene. The combination of dim lighting and lack of light sources directly directs the audience's attention to the character's movements, especially when Prenter slowly approaches Freddie, thus reinforcing the emotional intensity in the scene.

Camera

The shooting in this scene emphasizes Prenter's movements as he approaches and kisses Freddie, with a composition that sharpens the expression of doubt on Freddie's face. The use of close-up shots and medium shots helps capture emotional details in depth, reinforcing the tension in the interactions of the two characters.

Scene 3 analysis



Figure 3.

Deskripsi scenes

Scene 48 of 97

Minutes: 53.40 – 54.26

Mary Austin, Freddie's fiancée, begins to question Freddie's sexuality by saying "*something has been wrong for a while now*" to Freddie. Until Freddie began to realize that he was Bisexual by saying "*I think I'm Bisexual*".

Reality Level

Conversation

Mary Austin who asked "*something has been wrong for a while now*" which means "*something has been wrong all along*" and was answered by Freddie "*I think I'm Bisexual*" made Freddie realize that something was wrong with his sexuality

Express

Freddie's confused and doubtful facial expression reflects a real internal conflict, while Mary shows genuine concern. Their body language amplifies the emotions felt in this scene.

Representation Level

Camera

The use of *close-ups* on Freddie and Mary's faces helps the audience capture their emotions more clearly, highlighting the tension and honesty in the conversation.

Music

The lowering of the background music in this scene is an application of *audio ducking*, a technique used to muffle background noise to highlight the main dialogue. This approach ensures that the conversation between Freddie and Mary remains clearly heard, allowing the audience to capture every emotional nuance and meaning conveyed without distraction from the rest of the audio elements.

Light

The use of warm lighting with low light intensity in this scene serves to create an intimate atmosphere and strengthen the emotional closeness between the characters. This lighting technique utilizes warm color temperatures, such as *amber* or *soft yellow*, to add a personal and deep impression to the moment displayed.

Scene 4 analysis



Figure 4.

Deskripsi scenes

Scene 53 of 97

Minutes: 1.04.08 – 1.05.23

Freddie Mercury began to be attracted to a waiter, Jim Hutton.

Reality Level

Conversation

Freddie expresses his feelings to Jim Hutton by saying "*I like you*" which means I like you, and being replied "*I like you too*" by Jim which means I like you too.

Behaviour

Freddie's attraction to Jim can be seen in the way he looks at Jim, his facial expressions, or gentle gestures. It reflects the emotional and interpersonal attraction that is often present in similar situations in real life.

Representation Level

Camera

Close-up shots of Freddie's expression as he looks at Jim can show his interest more intensely, helping the audience understand the underlying emotions of this interaction.

Light

The use of *warm lighting* can create an intimate atmosphere that marks the beginning of their relationship, emphasizing meaningful personal moments.

Scene 5 analysis



Figure 5.

Deskripsi scenes:

Scene 63 of 97

Minutes: 1.15.09

Showing the newspaper media questioning Freddie Mercury's close relationship with his male friends.

Reality Level

Documents cited in picture language

It is clearly seen in the scene that shows a newspaper with a picture of Freddie Mercury looking intimate with his male friend with the words "*Queen's Men*" which implies that the three men are not "*full men*". Plus there is a "*whats Freddie hiding*" writing that questions that Freddie is hiding.

Representation Level

Camera

Sharp shots of headlines with "*Queen's Men*" and "*Whats Freddie Hiding*" written on the newspaper are used to draw the audience's direct attention to the issue in the spotlight, creating a sense of tension.

Scene 6 analysis



Figure 6.

Deskripsi scenes

Scene 91 of 97

Minutes: 1.50.24 – 1.52.47

Freddie met Jim Hutton because he felt lonely and invited him to attend the Live Aid concert.

Level Realistic

Behaviour

The behavior of Freddie and Jim who looked friendly in the scene was marked by Freddie holding Jim's hand gently.

Conversation

Freddie who said "*Jim is my friend*" which in Indonesian means "Jim is my friend" while holding Jim's hand gave the meaning that there was a relationship that was more than just a friend between the two.

Representation Level

Camera

Close-up camera angles are taken of Freddie and Jim's hands to tell the audience that there is a message conveyed in this scene. In addition, the angle of the *close-up* shot on Freddie's face while talking to Jim helps to show his vulnerability. Jim is shown through *medium shots* or *close-ups* to highlight the calm but sincere response.

Light

The use of *warm lighting* is used to create an intimate atmosphere, marking the importance of this moment for both characters.

Scene 7 analysis



Figure 7.

Deskripsi scenes

Scene 86 of 97

Minutes 1.46.08 – 1.49.11

Freddie Mercury had a dialogue with the band members Queen to tell him that he was HIV positive.

Reality Level

Conversation

Freddie honestly said that he was HIV positive, while the band members responded with shocked expressions and emotional silence.

Express

Freddie's face shows a sense of determination mixed with sadness, while the band members show concern and a sense of loss.

Milieu

The setting in the rehearsal room gives an intimate feel, away from the public, confirming that this is a very important personal confession.

Representation Level

Camera

The use of close-ups on Freddie's face emphasizes the honesty and weight of the confession, while the medium shot of the band members shows their emotional reactions.

Light

Natural lighting with soft tones creates a dramatic atmosphere, emphasizing emotional moments and full of silence.

Music

The lack of background music reinforces the emotional tension, making the conversation the center of the audience's attention.

Scene 8 analysis



Figure 8.

Deskripsi scenes

Scene 97 of 97

Minutes 1.54.30 – 2.08.37

The film scene features Queen's performance at the 1985 Live Aid charity concert. Freddie Mercury performed energetically in front of tens of thousands of spectators, playing the piano, singing, and interacting with the crowd that filled Wembley stadium. The camera also highlights the interaction between the band members, who appear compact and passionate.

Reality Level

Behavior & Expression

Freddie appeared full of enthusiasm, even though he was personally facing a serious illness. Her energetic body gestures, loud voice, and interaction with the audience show a strong determination to keep giving her best.

Voice

Queen's songs that were performed were full of appreciation reflecting Freddie's spirit even though he was in a vulnerable condition.

Representation Level

Camera

Close-ups of Freddie's expression while singing confirm the sincerity and power of his performance. A wide shot of a stadium full of spectators represents the large-scale Live Aid concert as a historic moment.

Light

The natural daytime lighting brings an authentic impression, confirming that this is a real and historic moment.

Music

The songs performed, such as *We Are the Champions*, are positioned as symbols of strength, hope, and togetherness, as if to represent Freddie's personal condition that struggles but still inspires

Discussion

Researchers will discuss the results of key scenes that have been taken from the film *Bohemian Rhapsody* which features a pro-LGBT scene performed by a Freddie Mercury. Researchers have collected 8 scenes from a total of 97 scenes in the film *Bohemian Rhapsody*. The level of ideology in *code of television* initiated by John Fiske will be included in the discussion of this article.

Scene Analysis Using John Fiske's Semiotic Theory

1. Freddie's Interest in Truck Drivers

On a reality level, this scene shows Freddie's gestures and facial expressions that show his interest in a truck driver. At the level of representation, the cinematography and camera angles direct the viewer's attention to Freddie's gaze, which indicates the exploration of his sexual identity. At the ideological level, this scene affirms the resistance to the heteronormative norms that dominated the 1970s–1980s. Freddie's attraction to the

same sex is presented as a critique of a culture that suppresses non-heterosexual sexual expression, while also challenging social constructs that limit freedom of identity.

2. Freddie Mercury Who Looks Nervous

The level of reality in this scene shows Freddie's nervousness when receiving attention from other men. At the level of representation, the dim lighting and intermittent dialogue reflect his emotional vulnerability. On an ideological level, the relationship between Freddie and Paul Prenter shows how LGBT identity is often seen as taboo. This scene ideologically reveals the reality of discrimination that forces many individuals to hide their sexual orientation in order to be accepted by society.

3. Mary Austin and Freddie's Confusion

Mary Austin, who felt that there was "something strange" about Freddie, reflected the voice of heteronormative society on a reality level. At the level of representation, the delivery of dialogue and Mary's facial expressions show her confusion. On an ideological level, the conversation between Mary Austin and Freddie illustrates the clash of values between heteronormative norms and personal identity. This scene criticizes the cultural pressures that make LGBT individuals experience identity crises and difficulty accepting themselves [12].

4. Representation of Same-Sex Relationships

The reality level features Freddie's relationships with other men as part of his personal life. At the level of representation, the cinematography highlights their intimacy and affection in a way that is not exaggerated but still significant. On an ideological level, Freddie's attraction to Jim Hutton shows the film's attempt to normalize same-sex relationships. Ideologically, this scene rejects the notion that love is only valid when it occurs in heterosexual relationships [10].

5. Public Reaction and Queen Fans

The level of reality shows how people react to news about Freddie's sexual orientation. At the level of representation, the media is portrayed as an instrument that reinforces dominant ideologies, highlighting the tension between public expectations and individual identity. At the ideological level, media reports that question Freddie's sexual orientation show how the media has become a tool of social control. This scene criticizes the role of the media in reinforcing stigma and maintaining discriminatory majority norms [13].

6. The Action of Holding Hands

On a reality level, the act of holding hands is a simple gesture that shows emotional closeness. At the level of representation, this scene is given a special focus to highlight the courage in expressing love. At the ideological level, the act of holding hands of a same-sex partner becomes a symbol of courage to challenge the norms of the majority. This scene confirms that identity and love should not be limited by social stigma or narrow moral views [10].

7. Konser Live Aid

The Live Aid concert scene represents music as a means of global solidarity and the power of unity. This concert is not only an entertainment event, but also a

humanitarian action that emphasizes the importance of social care. Freddie Mercury's courage to perform as he is in front of millions of audiences, even though he was facing identity and health conflicts, became a symbol of self-acceptance and resistance to the social stigma against LGBT people. In addition, Queen's cohesiveness on stage shows the value of togetherness and unity, emphasizing that music is able to transcend the boundaries of norms, discrimination, and ideological barriers, while also serving as a tool for social change that voices courage and hope.

8. **Freddie's confession is HIV positive**

This scene represents the courage of an individual to admit his health condition despite the risk of social stigma. Freddie, who revealed his HIV status to his best friend and bandmate, showed the value of honesty, self-acceptance, and the importance of social support in the face of discrimination. In the 1980s, HIV/ AIDS was still considered a taboo disease synonymous with moral stigma, so Freddie's confession became a symbol of resistance to societal judgment. This scene confirms that solidarity and acceptance from those closest to you can be a strength in the fight against stigma and disease.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This study demonstrates that *Bohemian Rhapsody* portrays Freddie Mercury's struggle to affirm his bisexual identity within the constraints of heteronormative social norms, with John Fiske's semiotic framework revealing implicit meanings across the levels of reality, representation, and ideology. **Implication:** The findings underscore the role of mainstream cinema as a powerful medium for shaping public discourse on LGBT issues, highlighting how symbolic representations in film can foster awareness, empathy, and dialogue about marginalized identities. **Limitation :** However, the study is limited by its focus on a single film and its interpretive approach, which may not capture the diversity of LGBT representation across different cinematic contexts or reflect varying audience perceptions. **Future Research :** Further studies should examine comparative representations of LGBT identities in multiple films and cultural contexts, incorporate audience reception analysis, and explore the intersection of cinematic representation with evolving social and political discourses on gender and sexuality.

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