



The Politics of Queer Emotion: Exploring Identity Politics of the LGBTQ+ Community Coming Out in *Love, Simon*

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Abstract. This essay explores the emotional dynamics within the film *Love, Simon* (Berlanti, 2018) ^[1], focusing on the coming-out journey of LGBTQ+ adolescents. Drawing from Sara Ahmed's cultural politics of emotion, it delves into the intersections of emotions, identity, and societal norms in the narrative. The study reviews existing literature on coming out and LGBTQ+ identity development, emphasizing the significance of this process and the challenges it presents in contemporary society. *Love, Simon* serves as a compelling case study, revealing how the film portrays the awakening of LGBTQ+ teenagers' consciousness and their resistance against heteronormative power dynamics. The analysis of queer feelings highlights the discomfort, empowerment, and transformation experienced by the protagonist, Simon Spier, as he navigates societal expectations. Additionally, this study examines the role of fear in Simon's journey, illustrating how it shapes his self-identity and relationships. The film's portrayal of fear aligns with Ahmed's insights into this complex emotion.

Keywords: film and media studies, LGBTQ+, queer cinema, emotion, identity, case study.

1 Introduction

This study embarks on an exploration of the emotional politics depicted in the film *Love, Simon* shedding light on the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ adolescents during their journey of coming out. The analysis delves into the intricate dynamics of emotions and their political implications, with a specific focus on how feelings, identity, and societal norms intersect and intertwine within the movie's narrative.

To set the stage, *Love, Simon* (Berlanti, 2018) ^[1], adapted from the novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Albertalli, offers a cinematic portrayal of Simon Spier, a young teenager grappling with his sexuality and contemplating the act of coming out. Simon Spier, a high school student with a big secret: he's gay. Afraid to come out, he starts an anonymous online relationship with another closeted classmate. When their emails are discovered, Simon must navigate the challenges of coming out while unraveling the mystery of his online crush. Beyond its surface plot, the film resonates with

broader themes that find relevance in contemporary American society, where discussions surrounding the rights and social acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community have gained significant traction.

In the realm of existing literature, numerous scholars have explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals as they navigate the path to self-acceptance and public disclosure. For instance, Michael Lovelock (2019) [2] shed light on how LGBTQ+ teenagers construct and express their identities on digital platforms like YouTube, while Rusi Jaspal illuminated the psychological toll of concealing one's true self during their coming-out process (Jaspal, 2022) [3]. Moreover, Isabella Francis even analyzes how LGBTQ+ consumers are incorporated into the mainstream ideology (Francis, 2021) [4]. Despite these valuable contributions, there remains uncharted territory concerning the nuanced intersection of emotional politics and LGBTQ+ subjectivity within the context of narrative films such as *Love, Simon*.

This study endeavors to bridge this gap by delving into the emotional politics and the subjectivity of LGBTQ+ individuals as depicted in the film. It draws upon Sara Ahmed's influential concept of cultural politics of emotion to dissect the multifaceted layers of emotions woven throughout the narrative. Specifically, this analysis will scrutinize how the film employs emotions as a tool for identity formation, all the while navigating themes of queer feelings, fear, secrecy, authenticity, and societal expectations.

In the subsequent sections, this essay will engage in a comprehensive analysis of *Love, Simon* dissecting the emotional intricacies that propel the narrative and exploring the ways in which emotions become politically charged in the context of LGBTQ+ coming out. Through this exploration, it seeks to gain deeper insights into the emotional landscape of LGBTQ+ individuals, ultimately shedding light on the profound implications of emotional politics in their quest for acceptance and self-discovery.

2 Literature Review

Coming out is a multifaceted and intricate process that involves the disclosure of one's sexual orientation or gender identity, as well as issues of self-acceptance (Morgan, 2012) [5]. Coming out is the process in which an individual reveals their sexual orientation or gender identity to others, often to gain greater acceptance and support (Coleman, 1982) [6]. This can be a difficult and ongoing endeavor with significant ramifications for an individual's mental health and interpersonal relationships (Coleman) [6]. Despite the growing acceptance in societal attitudes, LGBTQ+ teenagers continue to grapple with significant challenges when navigating the process of coming out in today's society. Over the past three decades, researchers have been proposing models of sexual identity development to gain a better understanding of how sexual identities are formed (Morgan, 2012) [5]. The Six-Stage Identity Model proposed by Vivienne Cass (Cass, 1979) [7] is a widely recognized framework for comprehending the development of sexual minority identities, particularly in the context of the coming-out process. Cass divided the formation of LGBT identity into six stages, including identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity

synthesis. An exploration of these stages affords us insights into the hurdles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly teenagers, during their coming-out journey and the external pressures they encounter (Cass, 1979) ^[7].

The process of coming out is an ongoing odyssey that plays a fundamental role in one's overall health and well-being, as well as relationships and sense of self (Jaspal, 2019) ^[8]. Consequently, choosing to disclose one's sexual orientation is typically an individual choice, influenced by a plethora of factors such as family acceptance, cultural values, and societal standards (Dembroff, 2019) ^[9]. It is important to note that teenagers who identify themselves as a member of the LGBTQ+ group have diverse attitudes toward coming out: Some may be eagerly embrace the opportunity to share their authentic selves with friends and family in the quest for acceptance and support, while others may approach this revelation with trepidation due to potential negative reactions (Savin-Williams, 2011) ^[10]. Levine (2013) ^[11] pointed out that LGBTQ+ adolescents who choose to reveal their sexual orientation during adolescence may experience serious consequences, including the risk of harassment and discrimination. For many LGBTQ+ youths, the act of coming out represents a pivotal step in embracing their true identity and forging a sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community (Dembroff & Saint-Croix, 2019) ^[9].

Furthermore, coming out often necessitates challenging societal norms and expectations. While societal attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community seem to be improving nowadays, many still hold negative views of it. This can manifest in bullying, discrimination, and rejection, all of which can be challenging for LGBTQ+ teenagers (Love-lock, 2019) ^[2]. This is due to the fact that the act of coming out disrupts established social norms rooted in heterosexual discourse (Dhaenens, 2013) ^[12], and one's sexual identity tends to become apparent only when one deviates from these norms (Morgan, 2012) ^[5]. Additionally, traditional cultural and religious beliefs can exert a substantial influence on societal attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community, making it more challenging for LGBTQ+ teenagers to come out and gain acceptance (Morgan, 2012) ^[5]. The coming-out process is inherently intricate, shaped by a complex interplay of personal beliefs, societal attitudes, and cultural norms (Dhaenens, 2013) ^[12].

This article, specifically, will use the movie *Love, Simon* by Greg Berlanti as a case study to explore the challenges that LGBTQ+ teenagers face during the coming out process. Furthermore, it delves into how this film reflects the oppression and subjectivity experienced by the homosexual community. Through a detailed analysis of the movie, we can gain a deeper understanding of how *Love, Simon* portrays the hurdles faced by LGBTQ+ teenagers when coming out and how the film leverages emotional dynamics to depict the complexities of this journey.

3 Methodology

This study draws upon the concept of “cultural politics of emotion” proposed by Ahmed (Ahmed, 2014) ^[13] to explore the intricate landscape of emotional experience, particularly focusing on their relationship with the power dynamics that mold cultural and social norms. Ahmed's work delves deep into the intricate web of social construction

and lived experience that emotions like love, fear, and hate are entangled in, shedding light on how these sentiments are profoundly influenced by societal power structures. She posits that these emotions are not static entities but rather fluid, susceptible to the cultural and environmental contexts in which they manifest. In the context of LGBTQ+ teenagers coming out experiences, the discursive norms created by heterosexuality became a dominant force in their oppression (Dhaenens, 2013) ^[12]. For LGBTQ+ adolescents, the act of coming out emerges as a pivotal act of resistance against the prevailing heterosexual discourse, as stated by Dhaenens.

Both the “cultural politics of emotions” and *Love, Simon* intricately explore the multifaceted dimensions of emotions, identity, and societal norms. This synergy makes the film a pertinent framework for a profound analysis of its themes and characters, enabling us to vividly envision the emotional journey of LGBTQ+ teenagers as they navigate the tumultuous terrain of coming out through the lens of the “cultural politics of emotion.”

The primary objective here is to apply this concept to the analysis of *Love, Simon* on the coming out experiences of LGBTQ+ teenagers. Specifically, this analysis seeks to unveil how the cultural politics of emotion informs the challenges and tribulations that teenagers encounter during this pivotal phase of their lives. To achieve this objective, the analysis will focus on how the movie (*Love, Simon*) addresses the awakening of consciousness among LGBTQ+ teenagers and how this newfound awareness is intrinsically linked to the prevailing power dynamics in society.

Furthermore, this analysis will scrutinize how *Love, Simon* illustrates the dynamic between the marginalized (LGBTQ+ teenagers) and the hegemonic (heteronormative society) within the context of coming out experiences. The application of the cultural politics of emotion is eminently suitable for this study, as it provides an illuminating perspective on the power dynamics that shape cultural and social norms, and, most significantly, how these dynamics reverberate through the lives of LGBTQ+ teenagers when they embark on their coming out journeys.

4 Analysis of Queer Feelings

In Sara Ahmed's exploration of queer feelings in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, she sheds light on how societal norms shape and influence the emotional experiences of individuals living within marginalized identities. In a parallel vein, the film *Love, Simon* directed by Greg Berlanti, offers a poignant lens through which to examine the manifestation and transformation of queer feelings. By analyzing key aspects of Ahmed's concept in relation to the film's narrative, we can uncover profound insights into the emotional odyssey of the protagonist, Simon Spier.

Pollitt and her research team have discovered that gender, sexual orientation, and racial ethnic background all provided significant frameworks for how young sexual minority people interpreted and were affected by heteronormativity (Pollitt et al., 2021) ^[14]. Heteronormativity can be understood not as the assertion that heterosexuality is normal, but rather that the heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman is upheld as the ideal (Ahmed, 2014) ^[13]. This societal construct dictates a rigid "script"

that dictates all interpersonal interactions, limiting the scope of acceptable relationships and identities, and this idealization perpetuates the normalization of heterosexual relationships while simultaneously marginalizing any other expressions of love and identity.

By contrast, queerness challenges and disrupts the established heteronormative script. It encompasses the diversity of individuals or behaviors that deviates from the established "ideal" of heterosexual relationships (Van Der Toorn et al., 2020) [15]. According to Ahmed, queerness signifies an ongoing and unwavering rejection of conforming to the heteronormative narrative imposed by society. Queer identities and actions materialize when individuals refuse to adhere to prescribed norms, thereby reclaiming their agency and embodying a form of resistance against the suffocating constraints of heteronormativity.

Queer feelings, according to Ahmed, stem from the oppressive nature of emotions experienced within the suffocating confines of heteronormative discourse. Heteronormativity constructs and perpetuates a dominant narrative that idealizes heterosexual relationships, casting all others as deviations. In *Love*, Simon Simon's emotional turmoil mirrors this paradigm. His feelings of discomfort arise from his attempts to conform to the societal mold, despite his profound realization that his own identity doesn't conform to this norm. Simon's discomfort poignantly underscores Ahmed's assertion that emotions are intricately intertwined with the spaces and roles that society prescribes.

Ahmed's concept of queer feelings emphasizes how heteronormativity functions as a script for an ideal life. In the movie, this script is readily evident through the portrayal of Simon's family and his school environment. Simon's family represents the quintessential heteronormative structure, reinforcing the ideal of heterosexual relationships. The school scenes further accentuate the pervasive influence of heteronormativity, where traditional gender roles and social hierarchies prevail. In this milieu, Simon's queer feelings are provocatively triggered by his unceasing struggle to navigate this prescribed script and authentically discover himself within its constraints.

Ahmed's exploration of queer pleasure and its subversion of the heteronormative order finds resonance in Simon's personal odyssey. The film portrays the fear associated with revealing one's queer identity. This fear is grounded in the discomfort experienced by the heteronormative majority when confronted with queer pleasure. Simon's initial reluctance to unveil his true self exemplifies how queer feelings, even when they involve moments of happiness, can provoke potential backlash due to societal unease.

Simon's journey within the film mirrors the evolution of his queer emotions. His initial feelings of fear and shame starkly echo Ahmed's emphasis on discomfort within heteronormative spaces. However, as Simon begins to disclose his identity, a sense of relief emerges. This transformation aligns with Ahmed's view that embracing one's queer feelings can lead to a sense of empowerment and authenticity. The film's optimistic portrayal of the coming-out process illustrates Ahmed's notion of the potential political implications of queer pleasure.

While *Love, Simon* presents a heartwarming depiction of Simon's coming-out journey, it is imperative to acknowledge the divergence between the film's idealized narrative and the realities of coming out for many LGBTQ+ individuals. The film may downplay the internal struggles and external challenges that often accompany the coming-

out process. This discrepancy highlights the significant role narrative constructs play in shaping emotions within artistic and media representations.

By analyzing *Love, Simon* through the lens of Sara Ahmed's concept of queer feelings, this study gains a multifaceted understanding of the emotional intricacies portrayed in the film. Simon's journey aligns with Ahmed's ideas about discomfort, non-normativity, and the potential for transformation. The film serves as a source of validation and empowerment for LGBTQ+ individuals by showcasing a hopeful narrative of coming out. However, it is essential to remember that real-life experiences can significantly differ from cinematic depictions. This analysis underscores the power of storytelling in reshaping emotions, sparking dialogue, and fostering empathy, while also encouraging a nuanced perspective on the complexities of queer feelings in reality.

5 Analysis of Fear

It's worth noting that fear is a prominent and nuanced emotion in the film. As explored by Ahmed, fear finds vivid expression in *Love, Simon* aligning with her conceptualization of this complex emotion. Ahmed's distinction between fear and anxiety is particularly enlightening, emphasizing that fear is anchored to a specific "object" that triggers it (Ahmed, 2014) ^[13]. This object-oriented perspective thrusts individuals into an uncomfortable intensity while simultaneously directing their consciousness toward potential harm or future injury. This nuanced comprehension of fear serves as our lens for scrutinizing its portrayal in the movie. To elucidate further, it becomes evident that fear is the prevailing emotion in *Love, Simon*. Within the film's context, this "object" of fear takes shape as the societal construct of heteronormality ingrained in the past society. Simon grapples with the palpable fear triggered by this deeply entrenched norm, as it poses a perceived threat to his authentic self and his pursuit of genuine connection and love. As exploring the film's narrative through this lens, this study gains a richer understanding of how fear shapes Simon's journey and the overarching themes of *Love, Simon*.

In *Love, Simon* fear permeates the core of Simon's experience, skillfully depicted by the film as it translates Ahmed's concepts into relatable instances. At the beginning of the movie, Simon reflects on the idea that everyone harbors a secret, something they're not sharing with others. This sets the tone for Simon's own fear and his struggle to reveal his true self to others. Simon's reluctance to reveal his true sexual orientation mirrors the apprehension of potential harm or injury that Ahmed outlines. In the movie, Simon's initial correspondence with the mysterious "Blue" through email serves as a platform for both characters to express their thoughts and feelings without revealing their true identities. The anonymity creates a sense of safety that helps them open up about their fears and desires.

Simon's hesitation to come out stems from a broader social context that enforces heteronormative expectations, a concept that strongly aligns with Ahmed's assertion that fear is intertwined with cultural norms. One of the most intense fear-driven moments occurs when Simon's emails with Blue are discovered by another student, Martin. Martin threatens to reveal Simon's secret unless Simon helps him pursue a romantic

interest. Simon's fear of being outed against his will adds tension to the story. The film amplifies how fear can be used as a tool of oppression, as Simon grapples with the societal pressure to conform, thereby exemplifying the embodiment of fear in the face of social norms. The looming fear of rejection or marginalization due to his identity forms a profound connection between the movie's portrayal and Ahmed's conceptual framework. As Simon contemplates coming out, he wrestles with the fear of how his friendships might change, concerned about the potential impact on his close-knit group of friends and his family. One of the most emotionally charged scenes in the movie is Simon's disclosure of his true self to his parents, where Simon's palpable fear is evident as he struggles to find the right words and anticipates their reaction.

In *Love, Simon* fear emerges as a potent force, inciting an internal struggle that profoundly impacts self-identity. Simon's desire to conform to heteronormative behaviors is a manifestation of this fear-induced turmoil. Furthermore, fear's presence in the film acts as a powerful catalyst for the evolution of self-identity. Throughout the film, there are scenes where Simon wrestles with his own fear of coming out, envisioning various worst-case scenarios involving his friends and family. These instances vividly depict the internalized fear he battles. Simon's journey of self-discovery and the revelation of his true identity mirror Ahmed's assertion that fear extends beyond the present moment, initiating an ongoing internal conflict. It encapsulates the profound transformation of his relationships and his own self-perception. This resonates Ahmed's insightful exploration of fear as an emotion projecting individuals into an uncertain future, triggering a continuous struggle within oneself. In *Love, Simon* fear becomes the driving force behind Simon's quest for self-acceptance and authenticity, emerging as a central theme that resonates deeply with Ahmed's analysis of this complex emotion.

In sum, *Love, Simon* offers a rich canvas to examine the emotion of fear as outlined by Sara Ahmed. While the film doesn't directly address the politics of fear as discussed in the book, it does touch on themes related to fear, authenticity, societal norms, and power dynamics in the context of coming out as an LGBTQ+ teenager. These themes intersect with some of the ideas presented in Ahmed's work, highlighting the complex ways in which emotions and social dynamics are interwoven. Fear, projected into the future and evoking intense apprehension, finds a profound resonance in Simon's journey of self-discovery and coming out. Through the film's lens, this study witnesses how fear can drive individuals' actions, shape their relationships, and ultimately forge their paths toward authenticity and acceptance.

6 Conclusion

The analysis of *Love, Simon* through the lens of Sara Ahmed's concepts of queer feelings and fear has provided us with valuable insights into the emotional politics at play in the life of the protagonist, Simon Spier. Through Simon's journey, this study has navigated the intricate terrain of coming out as an LGBTQ+ teenager, exploring the intersections of identity, societal norms, and emotional struggles. This exploration has mentioned the broader societal issues related to LGBTQ+ acceptance and the obstacles individuals encounter while striving for authenticity. *Love, Simon* serves as a poignant

reminder of the ongoing struggle against heteronormative pressures and the fear that can hold individuals back from embracing their true selves.

Furthermore, this analysis underscores the transformative potential of storytelling in reshaping emotions and fostering empathy. While the film's optimistic portrayal of coming out may not fully capture the complexities and hardships that many LGBTQ+ individuals face in reality, but it serves as an important narrative that contributes to the ongoing conversation about acceptance and inclusivity.

However, it's essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The analysis is confined to the scope of one film, whereas the real-life experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals are diverse and multifaceted. Additionally, while the emotional landscape of coming out is explored through Ahmed's theories, other perspectives and theories may offer alternative insights into the same subject matter. Future research in this area should consider expanding on the emotional politics of LGBTQ+ individuals in various cultural contexts, while also recognizing the intersectionality of identities such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Moreover, examining the impact of media representation on societal attitudes and policies toward the LGBTQ+ community could provide a deeper understanding of the role of storytelling in instigating social change.

Love, Simon has allowed us to delve into the emotional complexities of the coming-out experience and has provided a valuable lens through which to scrutinize the broader issues of LGBTQ+ acceptance and societal norms. While there remains much work to be done in understanding the diverse experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, this analysis serves as a foundational step towards a more inclusive and empathetic society.

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