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# How do contemporary music artists use Queer Coding as a medium of communication with their audience?

A dissertation having for case studies music artists Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson.

I, Kay Fontaine, certify that this is an original piece of work. I have acknowledged all sources and citations. No section of this essay has been plagiarised.

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## **Introduction**

This essay will talk about the queer coding and queer references given, accidentally or purposefully by Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson – a pair nicknamed ‘*Larry Stylinson*’ by their fandom.

This dissertation will reference to the themes of queer codes, ‘camp’, queer theories, closeting as well as queer bating in the music industry. I have previously mentioned these topics, as much in previous essays as in my personal and academical practices, therefore this dissertation’s subject would be seen as a continuity of all projects I have initiated so far.

As a Fashion Imaging and Illustration student, I create characters and their environment in the purpose of promoting an idea, a concept or a fashion brand. When it is the time to invent new characters, the intention is to be as diverse as possible, to include any potential client. This means I often come across multiple subcultures whilst doing research on what personalities I could develop next. In my opinion, it is vital to understand the meaning and the impact of what I could make a character wear or look like as it will be strongly related to how their personality will be perceived in the media. Their perception will, thus, be directly related to how the fashion brand will be perceived by the public. The characters promoted in the campaign should intentionally show what the fashion brand stands for.

Concerning the choice of the study cases, Styles and Tomlinson seemed to be the most adequate examples of modern queer coding. This idea that they are a couple, supported by events and other codes, have been around for years which might hint that this theory could not be just fictional. A consequent number of actions happened in the last decade; therefore, this essay will not cover each element that were seen or could have been seen as evidence of this assumption.

This piece of writing will, however, be listing the most interesting elements that are interpreted as queer codes by their community and why they are seen that way. There is a parallel between how the fandom perceive their queer codes and how a fashion brand's clientele perceives their campaign. This is why I thought this subject and this relationship with the fans will be interesting to analyse.

The case study will be divided into two different parts, that cannot be precepted without the other. The first one will be decrypting the signs of a potential queerness given by Harry Styles, nowadays successful singer, songwriter, and actor. He is more explicit and has to be louder because of his broader and more mainstream audience. The second part, complementary of the first one, will be analysing the more subtle coding given by Louis Tomlinson, successful singer and songwriter initially part of the same famous boyband *One Direction*. Louis is much closer to his community and has a special relationship with them, the way he communicates is, then, more 'intimate'.

It is notable to indicate that no evidence regarding *Public Relation stunts* will be discussed in depth. As a reminder, a *PR stunt* – also known as *publicity stunts* – is a fictive relationship developed as true in celebrity press to ensure the artist mentioned is capturing attention, promoting their new project or is staying relevant. It might, in addition, be to closet queer artists using a stereotypical, same ethnicity, heterosexual relationship. Neither proves of “*babygate*” will be evoked and showed in this dissertation. This term refers, amongst the fandom, to the potential fake paternity of Louis Tomlinson as a mean of a stunt; to attempt to shut down rumours of a relationship between the bandmates. These become too distant from our original subject which is Fashion.

## **Methodology**

Concerning the methodology I applied, I chose the methods that I expected to be the most adequate regarding my primary research and my case study subjects. These will be Performance and Visual analyses.

Performance would be described by Avron Levine White as the association between the musician and their music, as the songs are being produced and consumed at the same time (White, 1987). The performances that were taken as examples in this body of research are videos and photographs of live shows. Most of the audience knowing about what happened during these events finds out about it from recorded footage going on social media, as they were not physically present during the live concerts. This means that these performances were perceived a specific way during the show and, after the recorded footage had been seen over and over again, small details were analysed and the whole perception of the event changed. Marita Sturken talks about this phenomenon in their book *The Vietnam War, the Aids Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997) saying:

*“What we remember is highly selective and how we retrieve it says as much about desire and denial as it does about remembrance”.*

In regard to my topic, there are mainly two advantages for the use of this method. To study the recordings of live events allows me to show a key aspect of queer coding: the audience. How the spectators react can clearly be seen or heard in chosen footage. It is primordial to show the relationship between the performers and their fandoms as it is how queer codes works. There cannot be any coding if there is no appropriate audience receiving it. Which means what information and how it is given is as important as by whom and how it is perceived.

The second advantage of this technique would be that there is a certain – restricted - form of freedom for the artists to momentarily be able to do what they want. They are little to no media

control whilst a gig is taking place, everything happens live and the music artist is free to show - by their behaviours, actions or dress - a bit more than they are usually allowed to. The viewers have paid their tickets, the reputation of the artist is engaged (which means money for the managements and/or label) so the show must go on. The musician displaying a bit too much of their queerness can only take its repercussions.

The disadvantage of this method lays in the quality of the media produced. As the videos are often taken by fans from the pitch, they are shaky, blurry or cutting out important elements. Other times, the big screen is recorded by fans sitting further away in the venue. This means that the camera person deals with what is shown and can purposefully choose to not record things. The vagaries of live shows influence the performer and thus how the audience will react. Different countries and communities where the concerts are taking place will have different reactions. A show can be fully queer coded and another one, have no interactions involving queerness, which is something that, besides, does not affect how queer coded the songs are.

Analysing pictures will be my second method used. Stuart Hall would agree that there are multiple ways of interpreting a photograph. In their book *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices* (1997), they write about how representation can only be seen within a specific context of a “circuit of culture”. Hall also explains the importance of the relation between two parts which could be attributed, in this dissertation, to the importance of how queer codes are given and received from musicians to their fandom.

*“Speaker and hearer or writer and reader are active participants in a process which – since they often exchange roles – is always double-sided, always interactive.”* (Hall, 1997).

Barrett, author of *Criticizing photographs: an introduction to understanding images*, describes interpretation:

*“To interpret an image is to make sense of it. To interpret is to see something as representing something, or expressing something, or being about something, or being a response to something, [...]” (Barrett, 2006).*

Thus, my essay will focus on mentioning the common way that some elements of photographs can be perceived in a defined queer way by fandoms.

The advantage of this method would be that the quality is present, allowing us to dive into the details of a moment in time, which is something that would not be possible otherwise. On the disadvantage side, as the pictures are shared over and over on the internet, the person that originally photographed the proof, can be lost. And as previously mentioned, the photographs taken can have multiple meaning or be interpreted in different way following the personal opinion of the one attributing a meaning to it.

In the matter of other methods considered, Discourse Analysis could have been undertaken to analyse the songs in details or the speech held by Styles and Tomlinson during written or recorded interviews. Focus Groups and Interviews could have been done on fans that are believers of this so called, theory. I refrained from doing so as I thought that queerness was more shown using Visual and Performance analyses.

## **Theoretical Context**

Beforehand, we will begin by establishing the definition of Queer Coding. In the early XVI<sup>th</sup> century, the term “Queer” initially meant “odd”, “peculiar” or “abnormal” and was a derogative term used by persecutors to offend their victims. In 1894, the phrase was first used to specifically describe those looking for a same-sex relationship. After being used as a word of discrimination and violence, it is around the 1970s that the slang was first connotated with positive expression, due to gay activists’ reclaims and actions that took place for decades earlier on. It is in the early 1990s that the term official lost its offensiveness and was appropriated by the community to be transformed into an expression of pride.

Nowadays this word has lost any pejorative connotation, upon educated and up-to-date people, and is used as a label of sexual or romantic attraction. Most commonly, it is employed as a general, umbrella term to talk about any human-beings belonging to the LGBTQ+ community; for attraction orientations or gender label purposes, that is not regarded as the norm of today’s cisgendered heteronormative society.

Concerning “coding”, this would be described as the ensemble of codes constituting an already-established system of, in our case, visual and verbal signs. Thus, I would define contemporary society’s “queer coding” as a term which defines the encoded “adds-ons” or specificities that media-portrayed personalities (or characters) have been gifted or have been purposefully choosing to show to the public, to hint a possible queer identity.

Before going deeper into mentioning how contemporary artists potentially communicate about their romantic or sexual relationship through codes, it is needed to dive through the history of queer coding. Jessica Kellgren-Fozard, a content creator who has done a university dissertation which theme was “The History of Queer Coding”, focusing on Cinema, defines the term as:



*“A process by which characters in a piece of fictional media present as queer, without then saying they are, showing that they are, or being referred to as such.”* (Kellgren-Fozard, 2020).

Historically, these clues previously mentioned, indicating queerness, were suggested through the demonstration of socially unacceptable manners for their given gender, per instance a masculine-portrayed woman or a femininely portrayed man. This is what constituted a base of clichés of what a non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgendered individuals are expected to display nowadays to be considered queer by the general public.

The genesis of queer coding can be found in the United States of America, during the early years of Hollywood cinema. Religious and conservative groups objectives, added with the ideas of the government in place at the time, were that any form of media could influence the average citizen’s mind into thinking and behaving in an “unconventional” way. It is, notably, the accentuation of “vices” portrayed by old-fashioned, XX<sup>th</sup> century, traditionalist USA’s unaccepted conducts, that were targeted.

It is to control the population and minimise the urge of wrong intentions that measures were taken by the *Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America* (MPPDA). “The Motion Picture Code” (1934-1968), also known as “The Hays Code” - on account of the president of the MPPDA group at the time, William H Hays - was the code created to face this situation.

In their interview for the *Australian Centre of Moving Image* (ACMI), the curator Chelsey O’Brien talks about the prohibitions of the aberrances not tolerated by the community during this period. These were any forms of blasphemous language, any appearances of violence, realistic nor graphic, any sexual connotations such as nudity or sex before marriage and including homosexuality. It is reported that even mentions of crime, costume, dance, religion,

national sentiment and morality had the tendency to violate the code. And so was the references of pure love or realistic love (Maria Lewis, 2021).

As no form of queerness could be seen after the Hays Code took place, a system was invented to say discretely what could not be said aloud.

*“Not being allowed to say ‘this character is gay’ forced filmmakers to use a non-explicit visual shorthand that allowed the audience to clue into what was going on, but not get their film banned. This led to painfully stereotypical characterisations, that we could argue still bleed into today’s media.”* (Kellgren-Fozard, 2020).

It seems important to note that the protagonists using these coding elements cannot be stated or even considered as queer by a general, non-alerted public. The previous statement remained true only until the 1980s. The first ever gay pride was held on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1970, exactly a year after the Stonewall Uprising, a series of riots held by queer activists to claim equal rights for the community. Year after year, the LGBTQ+ march gained popularity in the eye of the public and soon, queer coded characters were directly associated to real-life queer people.

From 1963, The Motion Picture Code slowly became less and less severe, until it completely disappeared into becoming the “PG” - *parental guidance suggested* – we know nowadays, a label for films and series. Even after its abolition, queer coding somehow remained, stronger than before as a larger part of the audience was, since the rebellions, understanding what the “peculiar traits” of an old-fashioned queer coded character meant.

During the golden era of The Hays Code, queer coding happened to be an answer to bypass the censorship of conservative groups. The only way to have a diversity of characters to be shown on the big screen, was for them to be written in a specific way, which, in its essence, is not necessarily positive or negative thing.

The problem that Hollywood queer coding have brought to light is that what was first the wish of giving visibility to a marginalised part of the population, transformed into clichés which stereotyped queers. That is, in a common manner, queer coded characters portrayed as unpleasant to satisfy a homophobic audience and keep the general accepted idea that “gay equals evil”.

Nonetheless, this system of encoding personalities has not always only been used by film director for that purpose. On everyday basis, queer coding was used by the LGBTQ+ community to safely engage with new people, without taking the risk of being physically hurt, sent to court for “sexual perversion” or being condemned to death. This is why, even after the categorisation of queer personalities in media, it kept its credibility.

As an example of queer code, in its literal sense, we have *Polari*. This secret language was invented and primarily used in the first half of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. This “anti-language” was used by marginalized groups, particularly by gay men. (Baker, 2019)

On the other hand, something as peculiar as posture, was seen as an important detail. First seen upon the Sapphic part of the community, its use was extended to the whole queer community. It was turned into humour by becoming the following statement: “Queers cannot sit properly!” This came from the societal obligation of women to sit in an “adequate way”. This had the purpose to be an element of demonstration of their virgin status, in the 1300s, or to silently mentioning their class status, in the years and centuries that followed. The “queer sitting ideology” would thus be taken from the urge to sit in an unconventional way as a sign of manifestation against the norms as well as prioritising what feels comfortable to do.

*“There is a politics to posture, and it can be an act of gender rebellion for a woman to sit improperly.” (Brehas, 2020).*

All these components of coding somehow remained and were, for most, modernised and fully reappropriated by the queer community just like the word queer initially was. However, contemporary gay clichés are now gender-neutral and inclusive of any sort of gender expressions and affirmation that are not part of the binary. In the 2020s, the expressions of “Sapphic” and “Achillean” rose up in that aim, to cover any human-beings part of the LGBT+ community. Taken from the Greek Myths of Sappho and Achille, these designations refer to, respectfully, female to female or non-binary to female (lesbian-like) and male to male or non-binary to male (gay-like) love and relationships.

Extravagant personalities, which traditionally queer coded Hollywood cinema characters have taken their persona from, have been perceived by society as unusual and distinctive since the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, around the Revolutionary period (from 1789 to 1794). In “*Queer Style*”, Geczy develops the theory that contemporary signs of queer manners and dress came from the style of the *Macaroni*. It is also suggested that men showing traits of effeminacy have been labelled as queer or homosexual for the past two centuries. Following the description of what this branch of menswear was at the time, we can determine that there is a parallel between modern queerness and the profligacy of the times prior. Per instance, this can be noticed with the interpretation of their choice of garment, giving the idea of a sassy and extravagant personality.

*“The macaroni’s appearance was anything but polite. [...] Wigs were trussed into gigantic, extravagant showpieces. [...]”* (Geczy, 2013).

The importance of the Macaroni style is held within its use as an example to show how fashion in general, but mainly queer codes in our case, are circulatory disappearing and reappearing as a trend.

*“Macaroni fashion is a signal case study in the history of male gay fashion and of queer fashion in general. In many respects, it contains the imprint of the patterns it would follow until the present.”* (Geczy, 2013).

As the author of *“Queer Styles”* explains, this current was the predecessor of more modern queer styles and movements that followed, such as *“Camp”*. Its attributes of exaggeration, playfulness, derision and the will of provoking shock upon other member of society makes it synonym of what the camp aesthetic stands for.

*“Camp”* is probably the most know fashion style directly linked to a queer aesthetic, if such notion exists. Perhaps it is because it refers to others fashion trends, having for main component exaggeration, regarded as being part of the LGBT+ community. It was first described in *“Notes on ‘Camp’”* by Susan Sontag as being defined by its love of the peculiar and dramatization.

*“The peculiar relation between Camp and homosexuality has to be explained. While it’s not true the Camp taste is homosexual taste, there is no doubt of a peculiar affinity and overlap. [...] So, not all homosexuals have Camp taste. But homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard – and the most articulate audience – of Camp.”* (Sontag, 1964).

Therefore, what was previously associated with queerness in popular culture became clichés used as queer codes by the Hollywood film industry to bypass The Hays Code; or used by a queer public within society as a medium of communication.

Coding was reused or updated and transformed into modern clichés such as *“Queer people only drink iced coffee, wear doc martens, have broken wrists, all walk fast, etc.”* These are commonly accepted and laughed about in nowadays LGBT+ community because most would know, whilst being frequently true, these statements cannot be taken for absolute truth for each person.

As previously talked about, with the raise of the awareness of the LGBT+ community came the awareness of queer codes by the overall public. Industries and companies were, thus, abled to create a precise data base manifesting what an average queer person would be like personality-wise and how they would communicate in between themselves within the community. This became problematic as it gave the keys to cisgendered-heterosexual-individuals to present a character in a queer way, only to attract them to consume their programme, whilst showing no related content. This brought to light *queerbaiting*, the behaviour of lying to an audience by wrongly portraying or not giving a promised inclusivity.

*“Queerbaiting: Where characters depict an obviously queer relationship without acknowledging its incredible queerness. [...] This is just capitalising on marginalized audiences without running any of the risks that comes with true representation.”*

(Kellgren-Fozard, 2020).

Of course, queer coding can be interpreted differently upon the knowledge the person receiving the code has, or the time period in which they live in. The science is not always a fact but more of a general intuition. Simultaneously, someone who is purposefully giving sign of queerness but is unable to come out, because they are forced to be closeted per instance, is wrongly seen as queerbaiting. So are individuals that chose to be themselves, regardless of the case if their gender expression transgresses the gender norms still up to date in the society. Queerbaiting is directly related to displaying queer codes. Queer coding does not have to be intentional to be read as such but someone using signals directly taken from the LGBT+ community, even unaware of their queer signals, will be categorised as queerbaiting. In spite of this is, queer coding is more and more known by the new generation. Then it is sensible to point out the recurrence of sign of queerness being played with by anyone seeking attention of the media and of a marginalised part of society.

To fully understand the meanings of queer coding, it was needed to dive into its origin. Traditional Hollywood cinema queer coding is not, however, the type of queer coding that I will mainly mention in this dissertation. We will be noting how, nowadays, these contemporary queer signs are directly related to fashion. This includes body modification such as tattoos, the wear of accessories such as rings or garments worn by queer-noted protagonists. Whilst some new signs are being invented to imply a non-heterosexual relationship, older ones are being reappropriated into modern use. This queer-coded system naturally moved from the cinema industry to others.

## Case Studies

As I previously mentioned, I will be reviewing two different ways of showing queer coding. The first process could be untitled as the *historic* one. As a tribute to the past, Styles and Tomlinson are showing its importance by referencing queer facts and codes previously used by the elderly. The second would be the *created* one, involving the elements of coding newly invented by the protagonists. This is in direct response to the fandom, per instance to projects carried on by fans, or to communicate to the fans specifically in the way that other fields (such as the media or their label and management) will not take notice of, as it requires too much of an effort to understand. In view of the fact that Harry and Louis are repeatedly considered by the upper majority of their fandom as being a couple, their coded queerness are always intertwined. We will start with Harry Styles.



Figure 1: (left) *Oscar Wilde is posing with his usual green carnation.* (1890s)

Figure 2: (right) *Harry Styles posing for press at the premiere of My Policeman.* (2022)



Our first point will be about an *historic* code. On the left we can see an historic black and white photograph featuring Oscar Wilde wearing gentleman clothing with a green carnation placed on his upper left chest. Wilde started to wear this rare flower after a theatre representation in 1894 and was soon followed by his close gentleman *friends* who used it as a way to secretly signal their homosexuality. This might be considered as one of the most noticeable and powerful elements of queer coding. Created before the Hays code, by a gay man, to communicate queerness only to potential partners, this code successfully maintained itself to arrive in nowadays queer culture, more than a century later, still hinted to by public personalities from film and music industries.

Harry can be seen the right, photographed in an all-green Gucci outfit, at the premiere of *My Policeman*, an Amazon Prime exclusive directed by Michael Grandage. On his left upper chest stands a big fabric ornament, pinned onto his suit jacket, curiously resembling the green carnation depicted in the past. The combination of the particular placement, colour and context suggests that this was purposefully intended by our protagonist to refer the Wilde style. In this film set in the 1950s, Styles plays the role of Tom, a British policeman in a same-sex relationship with Patrick, behind his wife's back.



Figure 3: *Harry wearing a Dorothy costume for HARRYWEEN. (2021) | Gucci's Instagram*

For Halloween season 2021, Harry and his crew organised a Halloween party gig in Madison Square Garden, where all were invited to disguise themselves. He chose to dress as Dorothy Gale, main character of The Oz Books, written by Frank Baum. Once again in an all-Gucci outfit, he wears a blue checked and red dots patterned dress and bow with red tights and sparkly red boots, faking a pair of flat ballerinas.

This disguise would be another tribute of Styles to queer culture. The World of Oz is considered to be part of it, not only because of its queer depicted characters and their relationships to

another but also for two specific sentences. In the fifth book of *The Oz Series*, a character named Polychrome says:

*“You have some queer friends, Dorothy.”*

To what Dorothy answers:

*“The queerness doesn’t matter, as long as they’re friends!”.*

Since then, to be called “*A Friend Of Dorothy*” is slang to describe someone’s queerness. A humorous realisation, knowing a cap was sold - as a unique merchandise piece - at the exact moment, with “*Harry is my friend*” embroidered on.

For the second edition of *Harryween*, in 2022, Harry dressed as Danny Zuko, one of the main characters of the movie *Grease* (1978) directed by Randal Kleiser. This film happened to be known as Louis’ favourite, his dearest song being “*Hopelessly Devoted To You*”, the only song that Harry happened to sing on stage from the track list of the film.



Figure 4: (left) Harry wearing the “But Daddy I Love Him” t-shirt. (2020)

Figure 5: (middle) Harry wearing the “I’d love to fellate George Harrison” t-shirt. (2019)

Figure 6: (right) Harry wearing the “Safe-Sex” Keith Haring t-shirt. (2020)

Moving onto Harry's everyday t-shirt collection. On the first picture, Styles is seen getting ready for the upcoming photoshoot. This frame was taken from the behind-the-scenes video of Vogue's December 2020 cover-realisation. Before changing to the Gucci blue dress everyone as heard of, he wore a white t-shirt with a simple red inscription: "*BUT DADDY I LOVE HIM*". As a male, wearing this t-shirt is clearly hinting queerness. Which is something that was intended by the designers as the tag of this top says, "*this shirt makes you look gay*". It is sold by a LGBTQ+ organisation, *3rdclass*, also selling other eye-catching distinctively queer shirts. This shot appears on screen less than two second, an indicator that it is not necessarily meant to be seen by anyone.

The second image shows Harry looking down holding his t-shirts, somehow showing the audience his red top with the black writing "*I'D LOVE TO FELLATE GEORGE HARRISSON*". This photograph was originally presented in the deluxe, limited edition of his second album, *Fine Line*. The inconvenient accessibility for the mainstream audience to have access to this photograph demonstrate that, for clearly announced queerness displays, Styles focuses on communicating it to a specific well-known audience of his, dedicated fans.

The last instance is as well accurate for our last element of this sequence. On the right Harry Styles is seen wearing a white tee with a design created by the openly gay pop-art artist Keith Haring. This "*Safe-Sex*" t-shirt promotes a secure behaviour against the propagation of sexually transmitted diseases and depicts striking graphic content between two male figures. This picture is taken from a promoting interview with an overseas television channel. As Harry's jacket was covering the design, the t-shirt was barely recognisable. Between two questions, one of the interviewers mentioned it and asked Harry to show the design of his top. Harry was surprised, confused at first, seemingly unaware of what he chose to wear, and looked down. Realising what was the illustration shown, he blushed, stuttered and laughed off this delicate moment with the exclamation "*You've got good eyes!*".

Due to the fact that Styles is known to “look queer” but considered to not have done his public coming-out yet, he is often accused, by media and a common unnoticed audience, to be queerbaiting. This statement has the tendency to be agreed false by his fandom, the previous examples would be some of the elements exempting doubts of the general crowd. Queerbaiting means displaying queer codes only to appear queer on media. In other words, this means that references to a queer system would be displayed only when they can clearly be visible. This been said, there would make no sense to show codes when there is little to no attention to it, as for the three scenarios listed above. The exemption would be if, supporting queer artists and manifesting queerness is part of one’s personality and own aesthetic.



Figure 7: *Harry wearing the “peace ring”. (2020)*



As *created* queer code, the most indisputable one would be “*The Peace Ring*”, seen above. This metal ring, most likely to be made out of silver, have two parallel lines at the extremities and letters forming the word “PEACE” inscribed in the centre. Closely related to Louis’ 28 *finger tattoo*, this ring has been constantly worn by Styles for the past decade. The date of its first appearance added up to the theories of a hidden wedding between Styles and Tomlinson in late September of the same year would indicate that this would be a promised ring. Many rings have been recurrently seen on these fingers. This one seems to be the only ring that constantly stays on the major finger of his right hand, since 2013, apart from a few exemptions. This piece of jewellery is particularly important in our study as it became a system of a secret dialog between Harry and the fandom. A consequent number of fans have noticed a form of pattern and correlations between the moments where Harry is publicly seen wearing the ring and the mention of possible stunts. The presence of the peace ring would mean “I am myself, everything will be alright, it is a peaceful time.” Whereas the absence of it would be the equivalent of “Careful, be prepared, something quite unpleasant is going to happen.” This system of coding has been discovered and understood by fans for the past five years. This method helped predicting numerous staged photoshoots, rumours, articles and other elements, generally coming from the media, that would be “evidence” of Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson’s heterosexuality.

The peace ring was the element that made a considerable number of fans changing their opinion of the actual relationship between Harry and Louis. It followed the first few items of dress that contributed to the belief of them being strongly attached to each other. An example of that would be the “Leeds bracelet”, obtained at the Leeds festival 2012 edition - that happened to be the last time they were officially publicly seen together - worn by Harry until it tore apart, almost seven months after the event happened. It also inspired the fandom to understand other elements of dress such as the blue banana, which was Harry’s participation to a fan’s project

where a banana of the colour representing your favourite member of One Direction had to be worn, blue representing Louis. Some would say that Styles' known obsession for blue, that later on became an obsession for a specific shade curiously called "Louis Blue", came from this piece of fabric.

Whilst performing, Styles forgets any subtlety and is peculiarly open on displaying as much queerness as he can. His performances outside of his own are undeniably "*camp*" as he wears a coat with a million of pink feathers or participates to The Met Gala. On tour, he is known to wave LGBTQ+ flags that are thrown on stage and use them to help fans come out to their families with the usual: "*When this flag goes above my head, you're officially out.*" The clearest act of queerness would be after reading a fan's sign saying, "*I am gay and I love you.*" To which he answers distinctly over the microphone:

*"I love you as well. And I mean, we're all a little bit gay, aren't we? We're all a little bit gay."* (Harry, 2018).

A few years earlier, this exact sentence could have been pronounced by Louis Tomlinson himself. To thoroughly understand the system of communication he has put in place with his fans in the recent years, it is needed to travel back to the time of his debuts.

In 2010s, being discovered on *The X Factor* seventh season, Tomlinson was put with other soloist contestants to form a group. Despite not being given any solos to perform with the band, he was among the most popular one being loud and proud whilst acting, playing, joking around, and overall reacting in an unquestionable extravagant and feminine way. This previous statement is based on the analysis of behaviours he showed during video diaries, interviews and performances paired with the fact that Tomlinson seemed to be plentifully conscious of his own colourfulness. Having manners that were stereotypically considered to be seen amongst gay men, he seemed to enjoy the role of the "effeminate one" during the first two years of the

band. Whilst being asked to describe himself in one word, during an interview in 2011, he described himself as “*flamboyant*”. This word is synonym of queerness as directly associated with the *camp* aesthetic, part of queer culture like explained earlier on. Some might believe in a coincidence on that point, a young Louis would prove them he knows what “*camp*” is as he comically referred to the catchphrase “*How very dare you?*” of Derek, a considered *camp* gay man from *Catherine Tate’s Show* (2004-2006).

As the years past, he appeared more and more restricted, self-conscious of his behaviour and sayings whilst seeming to slowly lose his confidence. Multiple theories with substantial proofs would explain the reason why this exotic personality was shut down into being what it is nowadays; hidden. The will of their management to not potentially lose a targeted young female audience, if members of the boyband happened to be queer, would be the reason that cannot be discussed in depth in this essay.

Little meaningful queer codes were displayed during the era previously mentioned, as Tomlinson was happily showing his colourful personality. Notably being the opposite of Harry, coming from a subtle into developing a camp aesthetic, Louis had to leave his openness to a more ingenious approach concerning his self-expression. It is around 2013 that he slowly began to use other systems to communicate his queerness, addressed only to those that would be dedicated enough to recognize it.





Figure 8: (left) *Louis' triangle ankle tattoo.* (2013)

Figure 9: (right) *"SILENCE=DEATH" AIDS protest pin.* (1980s)

In the end of that same year, a triangle tattoo appeared on the outside part of his right ankle. Small, discrete, few people noticed its presence at first and nobody would ever have if it was not for the choice of Louis to not wear socks. Resourced persons would know that commonly tattooed designs are meaningful, especially one with such an important historical background. Something Tomlinson demonstrated to be fully aware of as of 2015, he had tattooed the dagger of Harry's rose, the arrow of his heart, the compass of his boat, the rope of his anchor and many more traditional couple matching tattoos. He went as far as tattooing their own, aged 24, as he decided that having the "*Oops*" of Harry's "*Hi*" - reported to be the first words they ever said to each other - was not enough as "28" was tattooed on his left middle and ring fingers. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of September 2013, our subjects were believed, based on tweets from their relatives and receipts from fans on site, to have been engaged or married. As they both constantly refer to it, regardless of knowing what meaning fans attributes to this number, this became a form of coding in which any random photograph could hold a deeper meaning.

Any equilateral triangle tattooed on someone's body would refer to LGBTQ+ history. Pointing upwards is a reference to the LGBTQ+ right movement that started in the 1970s and developed,

as the AIDS epidemic grew up, in the 1980s. On pins from this period, the celebrated pink triangle can be seen, paired with its unforgettable slogan “*SILENCE=DEATH*”. This echoes another motto of their protestation against the unresponsive behaviour of the government, “*NEVER AGAIN*”.



Figure 10: (left) *Miss You (Music Video)*. (2017) | YouTube.

Figure 11: (right) *Nazi Prisoners in line in their uniforms*. (1930s)

This itself is paying tribute to the tragic past of LGBTQ+ people, principally the male homosexual population that was faced with mass death during Nazism as individuals labelled as gay would be forced to wear pink triangles facing downwards and sent to concentration camps. An historical picture of prisoners can be seen on the right aside of a frame taken from the last seconds of *Miss You*'s official music video, a single from Tomlinson's first solo album *Walls*. Framed by YouTube's pop-ups - Louis' profile picture alongside previous and last videos - only a couple seconds of this wide angle can be seen before the end of the video. Rumoured to have been filmed in a gay bar, two pink triangles can distinctively be seen in the background, catching the viewer's eyes with the light. As it has been reappropriated and proudly repurposed, this sign integrated the community and is still used nowadays as an

equivalent of a subtle rainbow flag. Subtlety had left Louis' side however, as the fans noticed a familiar name seemingly written in white by a drunk person, in the bottom left corner; "Styles".



Figure 12: *Just Like You* (Lyric Video). (2017) | YouTube.

Nowadays, this is the way Tomlinson and Styles have found to communicate their queerness, to hint it through music and express themselves only to devoted fans. Whether it be from songs written through different points of view about the same love story, kissing their matching shoulder heart tattoos when they are performing their queerest song or not suing each other for visual assets clearly copied from the other's music videos, details of their queerness are hidden everywhere. For precise case, we have *Just Like You*, a single of Louis', released before his first solo album, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2017 after being announced on *National Coming Out* day. Its lyric video has a collage aesthetic in which the background is made out of teared-up newspapers and the foreground, out of rotoscoped elements or cut-out words. Two elements are particularly important on the frame seen above. Whilst letter-by-letter cut-outs are not used for

the other lyrics' aesthetic, the pronoun in the centre of the screen is cut in half, somehow composed of a "he" that had to be transformed into a "she". Aside of this, a cut-out picture of an eye, green, curiously resembling Style's iris. Following these, the scenario of a Harry related narrative could not be ignored by fans.

Overall, the constant abusive referencing of another, in any context, pushed their fandom to analyse every element, into understanding a story that could not have been directly told. This is what has established the system of communication they both have put in place and still use nowadays as fans have been acknowledging it since early on in their careers.



Figure 13: *Louis' "AIMH" or "Always In My Heart" tweet. (2 October 2011)*

An example of this would be the tweet seen above, nicknamed the "AIMH tweet". Written by Tomlinson himself, this was somehow the last crystal-clear act of devotion to his bandmate before being closeted as they officially entered the music industry. The importance, here, lays in the reaction of the fandom following this meaningful sentence. Short after its publication, it had already been retweeted millions of times until breaking the record of *The World's Most Retweeted Tweet*. As of today, and after twelve years after its first appearance, it has been



retweeted 2,651,948 times, liked 1,551,069 times and holds 172,103 comments. Due to this, it still holds the sixth place in the list, the fourth one if cash or prize giveaways tweets are excluded.



Figure 14: *Fans photographed during one of Louis' concerts, waving LGBTQ+ flags. (2022)*

Figure 15: *"Rainbow lights" fan project photographed during one of Louis' concerts. (2022)*

The support of fans receiving these queer codes have transformed and reached the venues the pair play in, as crowds of rainbow lights fan led projects emerged for *Love Of My Life* from *Harry's House* (2022) or *Only The Brave* from *Walls* (2020). Often accompanied by LGBTQ+ flags with the inscription "*Only for the Brave*" from Louis' song, which became a recognized LGBTQ+ anthem with its lyrics interpreted to be referring to Queer History.

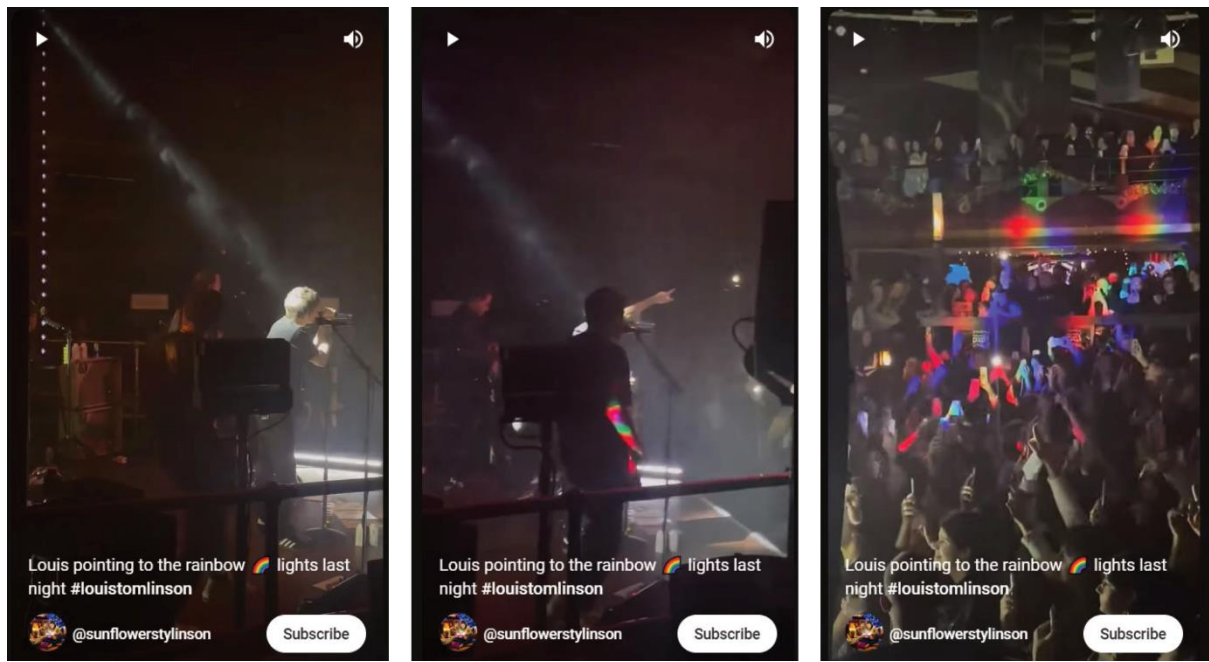


Figure 16: *Louis pointing at the rainbow lights whilst performing.* (13 December 2022) | YouTube Shorts.

Frequently, another element of coding will be created - accessible with less examination – to be used as a form of thank you to his community, for having the will to understand the system they put in place. In the last performance of Tomlinson’s current tour, *Faith In The Future World Tour 2023*, *Louis* was seen pointing out at rainbow lights over the crowd. These, although, are not coming from the fans but the stage itself as the lights were part of the set. Just as other music artists, Louis is the one deciding on the set design he wants to adopt whilst performing and purposefully chose to display rainbow lights. This gesture to highlight with his body the effort he put into answering his fandom’s appreciation could be seen as the beginning of a time in which queer coding will stop being a necessity.

## Conclusion

Following the evidence shown in this case study, it is undeniable that both the mediated and personal characters of Louis Tomlinson and Harry Styles have a defined queer aesthetic. Through the years, each and every small hint became a consequent proof, as they were added to all the clues that were given the months and years before. Connected altogether, any minor detail made perfect sense to emphasize a story that was seemingly trying to be told. Numerous indicators might have been missed out or unnoticed by most, but it was the only way they found to communicate and bypass the censorship they were facing, potentially coming from their management or label. This narrative could be compared with how filmmakers were bypassing *The Hays Code* in the past, which contributed to the creation of first queer coding systems.

Nevertheless, it is left to be established if every and each element of queer coding ever displayed by the both of them were consciously thought about or unconsciously generated. Concerning codes that we established earlier on as being *historic* ones, because paying tribute to the past of queer people and their culture, doubts could remain about their actual knowledge of the formerly. On the other hand, at this level of celebrity, it is needed to keep in mind that the odds of using a specific symbol without any in depth research on its context, whether it be included as an item of dress or body modification, is low.

Regarding the *created* coding, it has been set up by a recurrent habit of referring to each other whereas the public media constantly refer to the enemies' narrative to talk about their relationship. It would be an extremely difficult task to condense every single element that were once associated with the pair of Harry and Louis, that have happened over the past 13 years, into the word limit imposed for this dissertation. Whilst having fashion as a focus point, my decision was to mention the most important codes that has been displayed by the duo, to show their queerness, to refer to their past and present flamboyant self-expressions or hint an

attraction towards another. This meant to put aside in their common behaviours towards another whilst being in the same band or asked about each other, that constitute most proves of their queerness and potential relationship. This would be added to the behaviours their relatives have whilst being around them as well as the analyses of the songs they wrote, together and to each other whether it be as a group or solo artists.

From all of this we can perceive a sort of generalised homophobia and queerphobia as, if all the actions cited previously were involving a man and a woman - preferably white, cisgender and heterosexual - the question of them forming a couple will not even be asked but communicated as an unquestionable statement. There is a form of hidden rule or expectation from society that music artists as successful as they are "*cannot be queer*". This results in ignoring the fact that there are more evidence going towards Louis Tomlinson's and Harry Styles' queerness than straightness or disregarding the reality that none of them have ever decided to publicly put a label over their sexuality; which, against most beliefs, does not mean they categorise themselves as being straight.

This is why, in my opinion, a disappearance of queer codes will be observed in the future, as it has always been tightly associated with the idea that showing and being proud one's queerness is shameful. Contemporary music artists such as our study cases are the ones to introduce these former methods of communication to new generations. As everyone's open-mindedness will increase, within the music industry and within society, coding will fade away; but none will forget its history.



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