



“I MEAN, WHO ISN’T GAY?”:
AN EXPLORATION OF QUEER PERFORMATIVITY
IN THE TV SERIES *WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS*

Emilie Buckley

ABSTRACT

This article aims to apply Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theories on performativity to evaluate examples of queer performativity in the FX original series, *What We Do in the Shadows*. The series uses symbolism to code characters as queer, as well as modern-day performative acts such as fashion choices, chosen family, preservation, and antiques, and attending pride parades. The article uses visual imagery and a corpus of fifty scripts from the series to conduct a content analysis. Taking a mixed methodological approach, the article explores the impact of queer performativity on its fanbase’s creation of memes and fan fiction.

Keywords: queerness, performativity, TV series, vampires, Gothic.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2024.6.2678

1. INTRODUCTION

Vampires, often portrayed with their iconic thirst for blood, immortality, and aversion to sunlight, have long served as a compelling metaphor for queerness, challenging societal norms and defying heteronormativity. Queer coding can be witnessed across vampire media and has become more overt as social acceptance of the queer community has grown. Sociologist David Halperin defines queer as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant,” specifically defying heteronormativity or the straight gaze (Halperin 1995, 62). The straight gaze is the assumption that heterosexuality is the default way of being. Vampires lie outside of the confines of societal expectations, much like the queer community. Foucault, cited in the classic text *Skin Shows*, writes that “the soul is the prison of the body,” also claiming that a soul is born out of “methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint,” equating the regulation of bodies with the production of normative identities. In this context, queerness emerges as a rebellion against these regulatory forces, particularly in the Gothic tradition (Halberstam 1995, 2). By existing outside the bounds of societal control, queer bodies and desires in Gothic horror challenge

the very mechanisms of punishment and constraint that Foucault describes, positioning queer figures as transgressive, subversive, and defiant of heteronormative structures. Through this lens, *What We Do in the Shadows* explores how queer identity is linked to monstrosity, offering a critique of the ways bodies and desires are policed and disciplined in heteronormative society.

The queerness of vampire characters was once subtle or used as a metaphor, but this theme is no longer a subtext within modern-day media. Supernatural genres, where societal ideals and limitations do not bind characters, have historically offered safe spaces for queer characters, depicting non-normative sexualities and identities. Gothic studies provide a lens through which the figure of the vampire is understood as inherently transgressive, subverting societal norms surrounding sexuality, gender, and power. Scholars in this field have long recognized vampirism as a metaphor for queerness, reflecting anxieties around non-normative desires, as seen in seminal works like Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Stoker's *Dracula*. Vampires specifically have challenged norms and conventions and provide a lens to examine queer performativity, and the series' textual and visual symbolism provide evidence of this.

This article aims to explore examples of queer performativity in supernatural television in the 21st Century, focusing on FX series, *What We Do in the Shadows*. Episodes show them navigating both human and vampiric government, relationships both sexual and platonic, and the mundane such as household duties. *What We Do in the Shadows* defies heteronormativity and offers complex characters whose sexual fluidity is an underlying current within the series. Executive producer, co-showrunner, and writer Paul Simms states in an interview with *The Advocate*, "All of our characters are completely pansexual" (Reynolds 2020). This openness about sexual orientation and presentation as a non-issue sets it apart. The series plays off the straight gaze, satirizing stereotypes of both the queer community as well as vampires. This article will evaluate examples of queer performativity, drawing from examples from the series as well as offer a textual analysis of the show's scripts. This article explores examples of queer performativity in the 21st-century supernatural television series *What We Do in the Shadows*, using content and visual cultural analysis to examine how the show subverts the straight gaze, challenges heteronormativity, and contributes to the discourse on queer identity and expression.

What We Do in the Shadows draws heavily on the Gothic tradition of using vampirism to explore queerness. However, where earlier vampire media, examined through queer Gothic studies, often relied on subtext and metaphor, the series makes queer identities and relationships explicit. This shift aligns with the evolution of queer representation in media, reflecting more contemporary understandings of sexual fluidity and identity that go beyond the confines of the straight gaze. Vampires have exuded sexuality and implied queerness from their earliest iterations in the 19th century, a topic that has been

researched within gothic studies for some time. Criticism of Gothic horror media takes issue with the othering of supernatural creatures, stating that monsters are people “on the margins of humanity” and “must serve a purpose or perish” (Nixon 2023). In the 21st century, queerness in vampires was no longer just implied and became prominent in television and film, reflecting evolving societal attitudes toward sexuality and gender. These contemporary depictions not only acknowledge queerness but embrace it as a core part of the vampire identity, moving beyond earlier metaphors and subtext. In contrast to early vampire literature, which used vampirism as a veiled allegory for queerness, modern narratives explore queer relationships and identities openly, intertwining these themes with vampirism.

As society evolved in its views regarding the LGBTQ+ community, so did media representations. *The Lair* (2007–2009), produced by the queer network here!, was one of the first shows to center on a gay vampire narrative. Set in a gay nightclub, the series featured overt portrayals of queer sexuality and relationships, with its storyline about vampires being persecuted by law enforcement paralleling real-world experiences of discrimination faced by queer spaces. *True Blood* (2008–2014) took the metaphor of “coming out of the coffin” and ran with it, presenting a world where vampires live openly among humans, heavily relying on the straight gaze as vampires and humans attempt to coexist. The series embraced queer identities through its vampire characters, such as Eric Northman and Russell Edgington, and addressed issues of discrimination and acceptance. The show’s portrayal of vampires as a marginalized group facing prejudice mirrored real-world LGBTQ+ struggles, making it a significant contribution to queer vampire media.

A recent example, *The Interview with the Vampire* series, premiered on AMC in 2022 and is a reimagining of Anne Rice’s 1976 novel, which included a queer subtext. This adaptation brings queer themes to the forefront, with a more explicit portrayal of the relationship between Louis de Pointe du Lac and Lestat de Lioncourt. Their relationship is central to the narrative, highlighting queer desire and intimacy in a way that was more subtly depicted in earlier versions. The series explores the complexities of queer identity in the context of power, control, and desire while also emphasizing the deep emotional and romantic bond between the two characters. This modern retelling pushes the boundaries of queer representation in vampire media, aligning vampirism with queer experiences of otherness and the struggle for acceptance (Taylor 2023).

What We Do in the Shadows (2019–present) offers a comedic take on queer vampires, featuring characters like Nandor and Guillermo, whose homoerotic relationship dynamics challenge traditional norms. Additionally, husband and wife, Laszlo and Nadja explore non-monogamous relationships, reflecting fluid sexual identities within the vampire community. The series weaves queerness into its humor and narrative, presenting it as an inherent part of the characters’ identities. These contemporary depictions of queer vampires emphasize a shift from subtextual metaphors to open, explicit

representations of queerness. Vampirism remains a powerful vehicle for exploring transgressive identities and relationships, but the focus has evolved to explore themes of acceptance, visibility, and the breaking of societal norms in the modern era, mirroring the journey of the queer community.

Little academic work exists surrounding the television series *What We Do in the Shadows*, despite it receiving twenty-one Emmy nominations and one win. The FX series is based on the 2014 mockumentary film of the same name, which has been written about for its approach to masculinity and domesticity. *What We Do in the Shadows* the series significantly expounds upon these themes while also delving into questions surrounding heteronormativity through the straight gaze. Bojan Žikić explores the series for its depiction of vampires as a “cultural other” in their work *The Vampire as a Model of Cultural Otherness in the Television Series “What We Do in the Shadows,”* setting the characters as outsiders in a human world (Žikić 2022, 1). Gaps in research exist in queer visual cultural analysis as described by Kent Chang in the chapter *The Queer Gap in Cultural Analytics* how queerness has been overlooked by this methodology (Chang 2023, 105). Each episode of the series is rich in symbolism regarding vampires and queer identity, making it an appropriate case study for these methodologies. Scholars Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick write at length about gender and sexuality, including performativity, but do not provide specific examples of queer performative acts. The authors instead focus on the theoretical framework and leave the instances of performativity within queer communities and their application within vampire media, specifically the series, *What We Do in the Shadows*.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Philosopher and gender studies scholar Judith Butler first defined gender performativity in her 1990 text, *Gender Trouble*, it was later expanded upon in the works *Bodies That Matter* and *Excitable Speech*. Butler’s work posits that gender is not an inherent quality, but rather a socially constructed performance; gender is something done with repetition (Butler 1990, 177). While the text does not explicitly mention queer performativity, Butler is a Distinguished Scholar and former Maxine Elliot Chair in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California Berkeley who has greatly influenced queer studies. The book, *Butler Matters: Judith Butler’s Impact on Feminist and Queer Studies* (2005) outlines the importance of their work in these fields, making them essential to the analysis within this article. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the winner of the Guggenheim Fellowship for literary criticism and author of five books within the queer studies field, builds upon Butler’s work with performativity. Both Butler and Sedgwick, through their respective works, exemplify how queer individuals challenge and subvert heteronormativity. Queer performativity is derived from interactions with the outside world. Sedgwick describes it as a “strategy for the production of meaning

and being” (Sedgwick 2003, 61). Author Chris Brickell writes that “sexuality takes its meaning from its social, cultural, and historical contexts.” The author elaborates on the constructs of sexuality and how it is formed through chosen and biological family dynamics, educational settings, and religious institutions (Brickell 2014, 5). These works provide a holistic overview of queer performativity, which can then be applied to classic archetypes of supernatural characters.

Butler and Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theories of performativity have been applied to the study of monsters and the monstrous, ranging from Gothic horror literature to present-day video games. Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote at length about Gothic horror and sexuality in her books *The Epistemology and the Closet* and *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1993). Butler is cited extensively in Gothic criticism with their equation of queer to being an outsider serving as a framework for many texts such as *Queer Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* and *Queer Gothic* by George Haggerty. Haggerty goes as far as to state that Gothic studies set the stage for queer studies as a discipline (2006, 68; Haefele-Thomas 2023, 1). Butler’s outsider positioning of queer individuals transcends media. In the article, *Wendigo, Vampires and Lovecraft: Intertextual Monstrosity and Cultural Otherness in Video Games*, author Andre Cowan explores how supernatural video game enemies lie outside the hegemonic norm in their role as non-player characters (Cowan 2023). The depiction of the monstrous as a societal outsider can be seen in media through visuals, performance, and scripted language.

Content analysis and visual cultural analysis can be used to assess the subversion of norms and audience reception of queer relationships and representation in supernatural television series. These methodologies have been employed in art, literature, and mass media research and will be used in this article to assess queer performativity through the FX series, *What We Do in the Shadows* due to its intricate set design and dialogue-rich script (Krippendorff 2019). Queer performativity can be observed through visual cultural analysis by studying how the evaluation of media products for the role that they play in shaping values, beliefs, ideologies, and social practices (Morra and Smith 2010, para 2). Pioneered within the discipline of art history, visual cultural analysis has been recently applied to the study of race, ethnic, and gender-identified cultures in Lisa Nakamura’s *Digitizing Race* (2007, 5). This article will utilize content and visual cultural analysis to assess *What We Do in the Shadows* for queer performativity through its use of symbols, themes, and cultural impact among the queer community.

3. ANALYSIS

The mockumentary horror comedy television series *What We Do in The Shadows*, created by Jermaine Clement (*Flight of the Conchords*) and produced by Taika Waititi (*Our Flag Means Death*), debuted on the FX network on March 27th, 2019 (Waititi 2019). The series follows four vampires, Laszlo Cravensworth, Nadja of Antipaxos, Nandor the Relentless,

and energy vampire Colin Robinson, along with their human familiar Guillermo de la Cruz as they navigate both human and vampire society in Staten Island, New York. The mockumentary aspect of the series plays upon the straight gaze, placing the vampires under a lens to be viewed by a heteronormative society. Over the series' five-season run (as of November 2023), the characters explore complex interpersonal relationships, vampire politics, and themes of both immortality and death. Queerness is an underlying current within the show and is observable within the show's dialogue as well as visuals. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1986 book, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, the author uses queerness as a metaphor for the oppressed (60). *What We Do in the Shadows* rejects heteronormativity, and queerness is expressed freely, not as a metaphor for repression. For the vampires in the show, pansexuality is implied, there's an absence of coming out narratives, and all lead characters exhibit queer performativity.

The show's only coming out reference involves familiar Guillermo, who longs to be a vampire and, quite literally, lives in a closet. In the episode "The Pine Barrens," Guillermo comes out to his family and is met with a response of "We don't give a shit about you being gay; we've known that forever" (Newacheck 2022). In an article written for *Esquire*, actor Harvey Guillén reflects on being asked about Guillermo's sexuality early on in the series, "I suppose now the answer is that he was hiding in the shadows all along" (Guillén, 2022). Guillermo, who began as Nandor's familiar 10 years prior to the pilot episode has a classic "will they, won't they" relationship with Nandor, longing to be turned into a vampire (Waititi 2019). Eager to please his master, Guillermo lives in servitude, cleaning the home, grooming Nandor, and disposing of the bodies of his victims. While Nandor is neglectful of Guillermo, at times during the series when Guillermo shows dissatisfaction with his lot or decides to walk away, Nandor demonstrates acts of affection such as creating artwork, giving gifts such as new pillows, or holding Guillermo while he flies above the city. The relationship between the two characters is reminiscent of the queer-coded age-gap relationships of 19th-century Gothic literature such as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which played off male same-sex relationships of their era.

Nandor's relationships with both men and women are referenced throughout the series. In "The Lamp" Nandor uses a djinn from a magic lamp to find his true love. He tells the camera that he had thirty-seven wives and "some of my wives were girl wives, and some of them were guy wives" (Gorskaya 2022). This explanation is made as an aside when explaining how he intends to find a wife and not for laughs. The casual nature of his remark differentiates the character as well as the show from much of vampire media, that often makes sexual orientation either the plotline or symbolic of inner turmoil. While queer vampire fiction is prevalent, what sets *What We Do in the Shadows* apart is that romance is not a focus, it's simply another attribute of the character. While not explicitly shown on screen, Nandor and Laszlo's sexual relationship is mentioned in several

episodes throughout the series. When asked by wife Nadja, "Nandor's got long dark hair and an accent, have you slept with him?", the camera zooms in to Laszlo as he shares a sly smile (Newacheck 2020b). Laszlo's sexual conquests are frequently mentioned and embraced by his wife Nadja with whom he shares an open relationship. Upon finding the collection of vampire pornography in which he starred, Laszlo shares them with Nadja, including gay sex scenes such as "Vampire Tricked in Steam Room". Rather than act disapprovingly, Nadja tells the documentary crew, "There is nothing more devastating than finding out your husband has made porn and it's so bloody boring" (Woliner 2019). Nadja's own pansexuality plays out more similarly to traditional queer vampire narratives, transforming a college-aged virgin into a vampire as a means of empowering her (Clement 2019).

The performative act of queer relationships is elevated within the show as it rejects heteronormativity. Despite this, certain characters still struggle with the otherness of being a vampire, drawing comparisons to the internalized oppression felt by some queer individuals. The episode "Wellness Center" begins with the housemates acknowledging Nandor's Ascension Day, the anniversary of when he became Supreme Viceroy for Al Qolnidar in the 13th century. In a bout of depression over his immortality, Nandor finds himself in a cult of vampires determined to live as humans through vigorous dance and exercise, extracting their fangs nightly, and preparing human food before being rescued (Gorskaya 2021). It is difficult to watch the episode and not be reminded of the campy cult classic *But I'm a Cheerleader*, the 1999 film that takes a satirical look at conversion therapy camps. Wrestling with one's immortality serves as a metaphor for coming to terms with one's queerness. This is not a universal experience among the queer community, but for many, it's a performative act and part of the self-discovery process.

Queer performativity is present throughout the entirety of the series, *What We Do in the Shadows* and can be seen in queer symbolism and fashion, belonging to a chosen family, home preservation and antiques, and participation in pride parades. The following section delves into the history and societal implications of queer performative acts in relation to their depiction in the series. Borrowing from Butler's gender performativity and Kosofsky Sedgwick's queer performativity, this article draws from popular culture to illustrate how identities are shaped by the outside world. The following sections aim to explore how the series reflects and contributes to the overall discourse on queer identity and expression.

Queer fashion, appearance, and dress has a strong history, whether to serve as a symbol of oppression, discreet tool of identification in otherwise unsafe spaces, or to overtly laud one's selfhood. Within the 19th and 20th century, flowers, monocles, and lavender were used as clandestine symbols to identify other queer individuals, with queer icon Oscar Wilde sporting a carnation at the opening night of his play, *Lady Windermere's Fan* ("Secret Symbols and Signals" n.d.). Today, the rainbow is the most

common and capitalized upon example of queer iconography, with corporations profiting from rainbow merchandise every June, flags adorning queer-friendly establishments, and bracelets and pins denoting members of the queer community and their allies.

Oscar Wilde, who stood trial in 1895 for “gross indecency”, is seen as an icon of gay men’s fashion in the latter part of the 19th Century (Janes 2016, 120). Wilde’s flamboyant style, often dressed in photographs in velvet, furs, and capes and other attire thought to be effeminate for the time (“Photos” n.d.). More modern-day men’s fashion varies from leather men, bears, and “Castro clones” a style that emerged out of American cowboy blue-collar dress (Levi’s, mustaches, T-shirts, and short hair) as a way to assert strength and virility (Reddy-Best 2020, Section 9.3). Queer style is extremely diverse, with some members of the community choosing to opt out of queer aesthetics all together, yet for many, fashion is embraced as a symbol of belonging key themes in Butler and Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work.

Costumes in *What We Do in the Shadows* draw from a vast number of influences and time periods, including 15th century Persia, the Victorian era, and queer clubwear. The character’s fashion is used to code them as mortals or vampires and in turn, conform to or subvert heteronormativity. Emmy award winning costume designer Laura Montgomery shares how the vampire’s long lifespan allowed her to borrow from different time periods that reflect the times that the characters lived through. Admittedly inspired by queer fashion of RuPaul’s Drag Race, the designer shares how binge watching the drag competition during COVID-19 lockdown provided inspiration for vampire nightclub attire.

Montgomery reflects on how Guillermo’s fashion choices grow more sophisticated as he gains esteem with the vampires, donning waistcoats and jackets after being promoted to vampire bodyguard (Williams 2021). Similarly, Guillermo’s fashion choices align with growing comfort with his sexuality. In the episode “Pine Barrons”, Guillermo wears a Versace Jeans Couture shirt as he comes out to his family, compared to his typical uniform of dress slacks and patterned sweaters. The change in attire is noticed by aggressively heterosexual cousin Miguel who mocks the Versace shirt, “You know they make that in menswear right?” before ultimately accepting Guillermo at the end of the episode (Newacheck 2022). This change in clothing choice reflects Guillermo’s new openness about his identity on-screen through the performative act of fashion.

Laszlo’s fashion decisions also reflect his sexuality and are straight-coded when he attempts to pass as human at various points across the series. In the episode, “On the Run”, a past enemy attempts to hunt Laszlo down and he goes into disguise as “regular human bartender”, Jackie Daytona, in Clairton, Pennsylvania. In addition to the change in attire, Laszlo drives a large pickup truck and takes on an interest in sports (Gorskaya 2020). Fashion is used as queer performativity here as Laszlo hides his vampire identity for safety, much like how queer individuals conform to heteronormative clothing

expectations prior to coming out in fear of their sexual orientation being exposed (Peoples 2018). In his typical vampire attire, Laszlo favors late 19th century dandy fashion, reminiscent of Oscar Wilde, with capes, waistcoats, ascots, and luxurious fabrics, while in other scenes he favors flamboyant sequin jackets and colorful hair streaks.

Facing discrimination and adversity from all sectors of society, the queer community has often found solace in “chosen family,” a small community often born out of necessity. Defined by Queer Queries, a lexicon assembled by students at Mills College, chosen family is a “group of people to whom you are emotionally close and consider ‘family’ even though you are not biologically or legally related” (“Chosen Family” n.d.). Queer individuals run the risk of being exiled from their biological families, face discrimination by society at large, or lack the means to start a biological family of their own should they desire. In a 2020 survey by the Center for American Progress of 1,528 LGBTQ+ individuals, it was found that 1 in 3 LGBTQ individuals and 2 in 3 transgender individuals experienced some form of discrimination in the last year (“Discrimination and Experiences Among LGBTQ People in the US: 2020 Survey Results—Center for American Progress” n.d.). The performative act of creating a chosen family provides not only community but also safety.

In an article for *Esquire*, actor Harvey Guillén describes his experience coming out, writing, “Those kids may not have accepted me, but the people who mattered the most always did” (Guillén 2022). Vampires share a similar narrative as they are forced to go into hiding from their families of origin and homelands. Nadja describes the experience of being displaced from one’s home in the episode, “Local News,” “Vampires must always be prepared to skip towns at a moment’s notice. I have been chased out of five, maybe six villages over the course of my vampiric life” (Gorskaya 2023a). The housemates, all from drastically different backgrounds came together in the 19th century in Staten Island after being ordered to take over the “New World” by Baron Afanas (Waititi 2019). Guillermo joins the vampires of the household ten years prior to the pilot episode and frequently expresses his desire to become one of them after idolizing Antonio Banderas in *Interview with The Vampire* as a child. His feelings of otherness around humans (heteronormativity) can be observed in his interactions with his birth family as he renounces his Van Helsing blood as a means to live with his vampiric chosen family. After his vampirization by his friend Derek, Guillermo has a heart-to-heart with his mother, where he expresses his need to leave his old life. Unaware of the transition, Guillermo’s mother gifts him a cross, which instantaneously singes his skin (Gorskaya 2023a). This scene in the episode “Local News” mirrors the daunting conversations that queer individuals are faced with as they choose between old and new lives.

Beyond the confines of the home, queer performativity exists at the community level within urban gay enclaves known as gay villages, gay neighborhoods, or gayborhoods. Examples of queer-friendly areas within the United States include the Castro District in San Francisco, Chelsea in New York City, and Capitol Hill in Seattle (Vondran

2023). Gayborhoods use of historic markers and sense of pride in ownership have preserved the original charm of these areas, shielding them from urban renewal projects that would otherwise tear down and rebuild rather than restore original structures (Hess and Bitterman 2020). Queer performativity extends to homes and even the material objects held within them. In the book *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture*, author Will Fellows addresses the tendency for gay men to be drawn to home restoration, antiques, and interior design, stating, “Rather than dismissing these realities as the stuff of stereotype, I see them as the stuff of archetype, significant truths worthy of exploration” (Fellows 2005, 24). Fellow’s book uses twenty-nine case studies of gay men or gay couples who have been involved in home restoration across the United States. It can be concluded from Fellow’s work that this hobby is a form of queer performativity, as defined by Butler and Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Preservation as a performative act can be seen in vampire media and a collection of antiques within an older home is a common trope. Symbolisms of immortality and a connection to a mortal life that has spanned centuries, as well as antiques, connote agelessness and a sense of camp. In the show *What We Do in The Shadows*, material cultural studies can be used to assess how the show’s imagery, the vampire’s home, and belongings are indicative of their queerness. The opening sequence of the show integrates artwork of the of the show’s vampires inspired by works from the 16th to 19th century, such as one of Nadja inspired by Henri Regnault’s 1870 painting, *Salome* (Waititi 2019). Within the home, Nandor’s bedroom contains fringe-trimmed Victorian lamps, gold leafed Persian artwork, and a chaise lounge strewn with luxurious fabrics and pillows.

Other rooms of the home, notably the mansion’s “fancy room”, an ornately decorated sitting room, contain remnants of the past, including Persian rugs, brocade curtains, stained glass, a suit of armor, candelabra, model ship, 19th century German lute, and more fringed Victorian lamps (Fig. 1). In the episode, “Freddie”, Guillermo introduces Nandor to his boyfriend Freddie, a junior associate at an auction house in London and art buff. In this episode Guillermo officially comes out to Nandor by introducing Freddie as his boyfriend, who then remarks, “Your home is beautiful, this tapestry is this Turkish? Around the 15th century?” (Stipson 2022). Nandor is instantly smitten by Freddie, who provides him with a business card and expresses interest in his antique possessions. This episode is noteworthy for both Nandor and Guillermo being engaged in queer relationships, and while the character's sexuality is previously alluded to in the series, it is the first time they are shown with same-sex partners. The home serves as a setting for the relationships, as Nandor and Freddie lounge nude under an animal skin in the fancy room, as well as a source of material connection for the two in shared appreciation of Nandor’s collection of treasures.



Fig 1. The mansion's "fancy room" in *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019–2023) © FX Productions and Disney Platform Distribution. Source: Lezotte, S., 2020. "Cinematographer DJ Stipsen Lights the Dark in What We Do in the Shadows," Sony Cine, 3 December 2020. Available at: <https://sonycine.com/articles/cinematographer-dj-stipsen-lights-the-dark-in--what-we-do-in-the-shadows-/> [Accessed 22 November 2024]

The series' cinematographer, DJ Stipson, who was nominated for his work on the show, describes the house as being almost another character. Stipson describes what sets the vampire's home apart in stating, "the house is ... part of the Gothic feel, unlike the neighbor's house, which is ugly" (Lezotte 2020). The queerness of the Gothic mansion is highlighted in contrast to neighbor and Laszlo's friend Sean Rinaldi's Staten Island home. Exuding stereotypical heterosexual male energy, complete with a love of sports and *Oceans 12*, the interior Sean's home includes a "man cave" complete with a shrine to the film, recliners, and unremarkable décor which are shown in the episode "Brain Scramblies" (Newacheck 2020a). The juxtaposition of the two homes in "Brain Scramblies" emphasizes the otherness of the vampires and their surroundings. Attending a Superbowl party at Sean's house, the vampires are profoundly out of place as they sit in front of beige-painted living room walls adorned with a plastic football garland. This otherness reflects the outsider status that many queer individuals hold when in aggressively heteronormative settings.

Despite being othered by a heteronormative world, queer individuals have found ways to celebrate and band together. Lyndsey Benharris writes of the beginnings of queer theory in the United States in the *Research Anthology on Inclusivity and Equity for the LGBTQ+ Community*. Benharris cites the post-WWII period as the beginning of the study of queer theory, stating that it's deeply connected to "race, racism, and oppression with the increasing and often simultaneous policing and legislating of both racial and sexual boundaries" (Benharris 2021, 2). LGBTQ+ activism, a form of performativity, is entrenched in the identities of many queer individuals. While LGBTQ+ affiliation groups

grew underground following the post-war period, the first organized Pride demonstrations began in 1970 following the Stonewall Uprising in 1969; today, parades and festivals in the Western world are a blend of community, politics, and even commercialization (MacFarland Bruce 2016, 134). Allowing queer individuals to perform their sexual identity through celebration and joining with like-minded people.

While queerness has come to be expected in vampire media, whether through allusion or explicit actions, *What We Do in The Shadows* the season five episode, “Pride Parade,” to outright celebrates how unapologetically queer the characters are. Neighbor Sean Rinaldi is running for comptroller of Staten Island and proposes that the household aid him in organizing a pride parade to support his campaign. Sean’s wife Charmaine lovingly refers to the vampires and Guillermo as “literally the gayest things on the block” upon asking for their assistance. Laszlo excitedly responds, “I know why you’re here; you want us to grand marshal your gay parade? That’s one thumbs up. You want to start your gay parade on our front yard? That’s two thumbs up” (Gorskaya 2023b). This episode exhibits pride parades as a rite of passage for members of the queer community, with Guillermo, who came out to his family in season four, stating that he has never attended before. At the end of the episode, Guillermo is shown on a parade float, looking either uncertain about being the center of attention or amused, holding a sign that states “Gay Guy” (Fig. 2). Being newly out, this opportunity for performativity serves as an affirming moment for Guillermo as well as the vampires who enthusiastically ride or march alongside parade floats or participate on stage during Sean’s pride event. The characters are shown as authentically queer and fully embraced by the community of Staten Island.



Fig 2. Guillermo participates in a pride parade holding a sign that reads “Gay Guy.”

Screenshot from *What We Do in the Shadows*, Season 5, Episode 3, “Pride Parade.” Produced by FX Productions. © FX Productions and Disney Platform Distribution, 20 July 2023.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has endeavored to explore queer performativity in the FX series *What We Do in the Shadows* using content and visual cultural analysis. Through an exploration of the show's textual content and visuals, it identifies several key areas of queer performativity, including fashion, chosen family, home preservation, antiques, and participation in pride parades. These elements collectively resist heteronormative structures and reflect a more fluid understanding of sexuality and identity, positioning the show as a prime example of queer coding in vampire media.

One of the central concepts explored in this article is the straight gaze—the presumption that heterosexuality is the normative framework through which society views relationships, identities, and desires. *What We Do in the Shadows* deftly subverts the straight gaze, both in how it presents its characters and in its narrative choices. For example, queer relationships are not sensationalized or positioned as exceptional but instead are integrated seamlessly into the characters' daily lives. The absence of traditional coming-out narratives for the vampires, who fluidly engage in both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships, highlights how the show critiques and ultimately rejects the straight gaze.

By placing queer characters at the forefront without framing them as outsiders in need of societal acceptance, the show destabilizes the assumptions of heterosexuality as the default. Instead, it presents queerness as a natural part of the vampire characters' existence. This contrasts sharply with earlier vampire media, where queer coding often operated through subtext and where the straight gaze dictated the limits of how queerness could be expressed. This article expands on work within Gothic studies where vampires are positioned as the “other.” The vampires in *What We Do in the Shadows* are free from the normative constraints of the straight gaze, allowing the show to embrace queerness openly and without apology.

Furthermore, the series uses humor and satire to expose the absurdity of heteronormative expectations, as seen in moments where vampires are forced to navigate human society, often to comedic effect. The juxtaposition of the vampires' queerness against aggressively heterosexual settings (such as Sean's “man cave” or a Superbowl party) makes explicit how out-of-place rigid norms are in a world where fluidity is celebrated. This critique of the straight gaze is not only humorous but also a powerful commentary on how heteronormativity polices bodies and desires in everyday life.

What We Do in the Shadows challenges the straight gaze by embracing queerness as a fundamental part of its characters and narrative structure. Through its satirical approach, the show critiques and subverts heteronormativity, offering a space where queer performativity flourishes without the constraints of traditional societal expectations. This satirical yet celebratory take on queerness places the show within a larger cultural shift,

where queer identities are no longer relegated to the margins but are central to the exploration of identity, performance, and power in popular media.

WORKS CITED

- Benharris, Lyndsey. 2021. "The LGBTQ+ Movement Towards Equity: Historical Perspectives and Social Justice Implications." In *Research Anthology on Inclusivity and Equity for the LGBTQ+ Community*. IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-3674-5>.
- Brickell, Chris. 2014. "Sex, Symbolic Interactionism, and Social Constructionism." In *Selves, Symbols, and Sexualities: An Interactionist Anthology*, edited by Staci Newmahr, Thomas S. Weinberg. Sage.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Chang, Kent K. 2023. "Chapter 7: The Queer Gap in Cultural Analytics." In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein. University of Minnesota Press.
- "Chosen Family." n.d. *Queer Queries: Connecting and Complicating Queer Theory, Stories, and Understandings*. Accessed October 25, 2023. <https://complicatingqueertheory.wordpress.com/queer-families/chosen-family/>.
- Clement, Jermain, dir. 2019. "City Council." *What We Do in The Shadows*. FX. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8479420/>.
- Cowen, André. 2023. "Wendigo, Vampires and Lovecraft: Intertextual Monstrosity and Cultural Otherness in Video Games." *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 16 (1): 115–31. https://doi.org/10.1386/jafp_00092_1.
- "Discrimination and Experiences Among LGBTQ People in the US: 2020 Survey Results—Center for American Progress." n.d. The Center for American Progress. Accessed October 25, 2023. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/discrimination-experiences-among-lgbtq-people-us-2020-survey-results/>.
- Fellows, Will. 2005. *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture*. 1st ed. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Gorskaya, Yana, dir. 2020. "On the Run." *What We Do in the Shadows*.
- Gorskaya, Yana, dir. 2021. "The Wellness Center." *What We Do in the Shadows*.
- Gorskaya, Yana, dir. 2022. "The Lamp." *What We Do in the Shadows*.
- Gorskaya, Yana, dir. 2023a. "Local News." *What We Do in the Shadows*.
- Gorskaya, Yana, dir. 2023b. "Pride Parade." *What We Do in the Shadows*.
- Guillen, Harvey. 2022. "Harvey Guillén, Star of 'What We Do in the Shadows' on His Coming Out Journey." *Esquire*. August 17, 2022. <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a40907282/harvey-guillen-what-we-do-in-the-shadows-coming-out/>.
- Haefele-Thomas, Ardel. 2023. *Queer Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*. Edinburgh University Press Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474494397>.

- Haggerty, George E. 2006. *Queer Gothic*. University of Illinois Press.
- Halberstam, Judith. 1995. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Duke University Press.
- Halperin, David M. 1995. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford University Press.
- Hess, Daniel Baldwin, and Alex Bitterman. 2020. "Who Are the People in Your Gayborhood? Understanding Population Change and Cultural Shifts in LGBTQ+ Neighborhoods." *The Life and Afterlife of Gay Neighborhoods*, November, 3–39. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66073-4_1.
- Janes, Dominic. 2016. *Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature, 1750-1900*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Krippendorff, Klaus. 2019. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 4th edition. Sage.
- Lezotte, Suzanne. 2020. "Cinematographer DJ Stipsen Lights the Dark in 'What We Do in the Shadows.'" Sony Cine. December 3, 2020. <https://sonycine.com/articles/cinematographer-dj-stipsen-lights-the-dark-in--what-we-do-in-the-shadows/>.
- McFarland Bruce, Katherine. 2016. *Pride Parades: How a Parade Changed the World*. New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/9781479817788>.
- Morra, Joanne, and Marquard Smith. 2010. "Visual Studies/Visual Culture/Visual Culture Studies." In *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*. Vol. 3. Wiley Online Library.
- Nakamura, Lisa. 2007. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Newacheck, Kyle, dir. 2020a. "Brain Scramblies." *What We Do in the Shadows*.
- Newacheck, Kyle, dir. 2020b. "Witches." *What We Do in The Shadows*. FX. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11583046/>.
- Newacheck, Kyle, dir. 2022. "The Pine Barrens." *What We Do in The Shadows*. FX.
- Nixon, Jaynelle. 2023. "Watching Monsters: The Horror of Racialized Monsters, Disabled Monsters, and Gender Nonconforming Monsters in Embodied Gothic Horror Films." PhD Dissertation. State University of New York at Buffalo. Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2774230907/abstract/>.
- Peoples, Landon. 2018. "The Clothes We Couldn't Wear Until We Came Out." *Refinery 29*. May 25, 2018. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/05/200131/gay-men-clothing-fashion-lgbtq-experience>.
- "Photos." n.d. *Oscar Wilde* (blog). Accessed October 25, 2023. <http://www.cmgww.com/historic/wilde/photos/>.
- Reddy-Best, Kelly. 2020. *Dress, Appearance, and Diversity in US Society*. University of Iowa Press.
- Reynolds, Daniel. 2020. "How 'What We Do in the Shadows' Became Cable's Queerest Comedy." *The Advocate*. April 15, 2020. <https://www.advocate.com/television/2020/4/15/how-what-we-do-shadows-became-cables-queerest-comedy>.
- "Secret Symbols and Signals." n.d. LGBT+ Cultural Heritage. Accessed October 25, 2023. <https://www.lgbt-culturalheritage.com/secret-symbols>.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1986. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. Routledge.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press.
- Stipson, DJ, dir. 2022. "Freddie." *What We Do in The Shadows*. FX. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt18071582/>.
- Taylor, Alan, dir. 2023. "Interview With the Vampire." *Interview With the Vampire*. AMC.

- Vondran, Courtney. 2023. "100+ Gayborhoods, Gay Villages, and Gaycation Destinations in the USA— Courtney The Explorer." March 2, 2023. <https://courtneytheexplorer.com/gayborhoods-usa/>, <https://courtneytheexplorer.com/gayborhoods-usa/>.
- Waititi, Taika, dir. 2019. "Pilot." *What We Do in The Shadows*. FX.
- Williams, Spencer. 2021. "Deliciously Macabre: The Costumes of What We Do In The Shadows." *The Art of Costume*. September 16, 2021. <https://theartofcostume.com/2021/09/16/deliciously-macabre-the-costumes-of-what-we-do-in-the-shadows/>.
- Woliner, Jason, dir. 2019. "The Orgy." *What We Do in The Shadows*. FX.
- Žikić, Bojan. 2022. "The Vampire as a Model of Cultural Otherness in the Television Series 'What We Do in the Shadows.'" *Etnoantropološki Problemi* 17 (1). <https://doi.org/10.21301/eap.v17i1.1>.