

The Eurovision Song Contest: The Celebration of Queer Identity and Belonging

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Srce veliko kakor svet [A heart as big as the world]

Nasmeh in iskrica v očeh [A smile and a sparkle in his eyes]

In beseda, ki poznaš jo tudi ti [And a word you know too]

These were the opening lyrics of the Slovenian entry 'Sestre' (English: 'Sisters') in the 2002 Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) (Eurovision World, 2002). I do not speak Slovenian, yet as a 14-year-old teenager growing up in post-Soviet Lithuania, I was mesmerised by the Slovenian drag trio. There was a sense of pride and confusion, and the beginning of questioning my (sexual) identity. From this moment on, the ESC became part of my identity-building. I was not alone, but soon I came to realise that the ESC is a celebration of queer identities – the 'gay Olympics' (Baker, 2017).

ESC, first held in 1956, is an annual international song competition that has become a major cultural event in Europe, Australia and beyond. While the contest has traditionally been associated with heteronormative expressions of identity, in recent years there has been an increasing representation of queer performers and performances at the contest. The ESC is a platform that enables queer politics not only through gay and trans visibility and camp aesthetics but also through its transnational fan cultures (Baker, 2017). As such, it enables queer folk to experience a sense of belonging and a feeling of community. This has synergies with Maffesoli's (1996) notion of neo-tribalism, whereby people from different walks of life come together for a shared purpose, passion, or emotion (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018). Academic literature has explored the notion of queer politics and the ESC (e.g., Baker, 2019; Hartal & Sasson-Levy, 2022; Lemish, 2004); yet there is limited research on what effect ESC has on queer identity-building.

This presentation (and indeed the research project itself) will be guided by my lived experience in the form of autoethnography and will be supported by interviews with queer-identifying Eurovision fans. This presentation will frame the queer identity-building through a neo-tribalism lens.