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Building intimate relations

*Queer male fan engagement with representation
in the camp podcast My Dad Wrote a Porno*

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“Labels are for gifts under the tree,
never for those who are sexually free.”

Rocky Flintstone, *It's a Blinking Christmas*

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the unique queer male engagement with the podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and its source material, the erotic novella *Belinda Blinked*. While gay or bisexual males are never present in the fictional story in the book series, queer male fans are amongst the most outspoken in online communities dedicated to the show. The matter of representation of queer males in media is a current one, as representation in popular media relates to higher self-acceptance within members of the community, as well as a larger acceptance of those members by the societies they are included in.

This research interviewed 12 self-identifying queer male fans about their engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, seeking to find how their engagement with the podcast is related to their feelings about the matter of representation in popular media. The research then analyzed the transcripts of those interviews using the Parameters of Engagement, which allowed for a broad overview of the most important aspects that are related to how uniquely queer male fans engage with the podcast and the source material.

This study has found that what sets *My Dad Wrote a Porno* apart from other popular media that includes queer male representation is that the podcast is produced by people who are open-minded and discuss sexuality freely, which gives queer men the feeling of safety in that they will not be judged for their identities. The research has also found that queer male engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is found and sustained by the creation of a safe community between podcast hosts and fans. Additionally, queer male fan engagement seems to suggest that, in the presence of a safe space free of judgment, queer male representation can be not only unneeded, but its absence can also become an asset, as it avoids falling into the traps of stereotyping or oversexualizing gay or bisexual male characters.

Keywords: fan engagement, media representation, queer male representation, gay media representation.

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INTRODUCTION

On 1 December 2022, one of the final episodes of the British podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno* concluded with a surprise to a listener: a man asking to have the hosts on the phone while he proposed to his boyfriend, both big fans of the show. That was the first time – and, unfortunately, the last – when two men interacted in a romantic way on an episode, even though a huge portion of the program’s fanbase is composed of gay men.

My Dad Wrote a Porno is a significant case when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation and fan engagement. The show began in 2015 when Jamie Morton discovered his father had been writing erotic novellas – the *Porno* mentioned in the title – and self-publishing them on Amazon. Morton then invited his friends Alice Levine and James Cooper to a “table read” of such novellas, and each episode of the podcast consists of the trio reading out loud and reacting to the absurdities and bad writing presented by Morton’s father, identified only by his pen name, Rocky Flintstone. After eight years, two sold-out world tours of live shows, and over 430 million downloads¹, the trio decided it was time for the podcast to come to an end, and its last episode aired in December 2022.

One of the hosts of the podcast, Cooper, is openly gay and eventually discusses or references his sexuality on the show; however, when it comes to the books, only queer women (in their majority bisexual) are present. As the story progresses, Cooper, his co-hosts, and engaged fans point out that glaring absence, apparently to no avail: after six books (and countless “extra bits”) read out on the show, no same-sex relationship has been depicted between men. But, nearly to the same degree as they are absent from the books, gay and bisexual men are a staple of the *My Dad Wrote a Porno* fandom: in a post on the Reddit community dedicated to the podcast, a listener shared the results of a comparison engine, proclaiming: “According to this site, a Belinker² is dozens of times as likely as the average redditor³ to be a gay man”⁴. Indeed, according to the website *Subreddit Stats*, a member of the community *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is over 92 times

¹ Source: <<https://www.mydadwroteaporno.com/#intro1>>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

² Fans of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* refer to themselves as “Belinker”, in a reference to the title of the books read in the podcast, called *Belinda Blinked*.

³ On Reddit, users of the platform who post and comment on communities are referred to as “redditors”.

⁴ Source: <<http://redd.it/x7v39n>>. Accessed on 1 May 2023

more likely to engage with the community *Gay Bros* when compared to other Reddit users – and, amongst the ten communities with more overlap, a total of six are of gay interest.⁵

The most telling portion of that statistic is not the number of gay men that listen to the podcast, but how vocal these gay men are about their love for the show. (Those numbers, after all, don't reflect listenership, but active participation in a fan community.) Podcasts are a source of representation for minorities, with Ferreyra (2022) showing that especially podcasts dealing with fictional stories offer a high variety of LGBTQ+ characters and personalities. Why, then, are gay and bisexual men choosing to listen to a podcast focused on a pornographic series that does not represent them? Undoubtedly, there is some representation to be had from James Cooper's presence, but engaging with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is engaging with *Belinda Blinked*, and if the host's sexuality was enough representation, then why did both he and fans keep expecting (or hoping) that Rocky Flintstone would incorporate queer males into the books?

For the purpose of this thesis, I am using the term "queer" in its umbrella conception, "as an all-encompassing word for LGBT and other people who feel a part of this community due to their gender, sex, or expression of sexuality" (Siebler, 2016, p. 1). That is because I am setting out to investigate the section of the *My Dad Wrote a Porno* fandom that is not represented in the *Belinda Blinked* narrative and, while the podcast hosts sometimes discuss the absence of gay or bisexual men, the fact of the matter is that the only male sexuality expressed in the books is heterosexuality.

QUEER MALE ENGAGEMENT WITH REPRESENTATION: WHY IS IT NEEDED?

At the time of writing, it is still illegal to be gay in at least 67 countries; in seven of them, the death penalty can be imposed on men who have sex with other men.⁶ Meanwhile, gay marriage is legal in only 32 countries, and that is counting specific cases like the United States of America and Mexico, where gay marriage is legal in only certain

⁵ Source: <<https://subredditstats.com/subreddit-user-overlaps/mydadwroteaporno>>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

⁶ Source: <https://internap.hrw.org/features/features/lgbt_laws/>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

states or areas.⁷ While gay marriage and rights might seem to be a given in Sweden, it was my own fear of persecution by society that has led me here: in my homeland of Brazil, in 2018, I watched in horror as over 55 million people voted for and elected a right-wing candidate who had publicly spoken several times about how gay people would not exist if their parents had “hit [them] with some leather”⁸ and about how he was “homophobic – and very proud of it”.⁹

Even in places where some rights are secured, legislation that targets the LGBTQ+ community is still being created contemporarily: the American state of Tennessee has approved, in March of 2023, a law restricting drag queen performances, and about a dozen of other states in the U.S. have similar laws in different stages of discussion.¹⁰ While the matter of drag shows might seem innocuous in comparison to places where being gay can quite literally get you killed, the queer community has been outspoken about the danger of letting such legislation slide, arguing that such efforts are the first step in a larger effort to roll back the rights of LGBTQ+ people.¹¹ But how are the display of queer people and their rights related?

On a macro level, representation is an important step in the fight for equality and safety: Billard & Gross (2020) discuss the representation of LGBTQ+ people in relation to their struggles and rights, specifically citing entertainment media as a vehicle to “cultivate our culture’s shared values and ideas” (Chapter 1, n.p.). Intimately, however, the impact of representation is no less important, Pullen (2009) shows when tracing the presence of queer people in media and the audience’s self-acceptance (p. 194). While there is still much to be said about the influence that representation of queer people in media – or its absence – has in society and legislation, this study is more concerned with

⁷ Source: <<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/same-sex-marriage-country-count>>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

⁸ Source: <<https://www.attitude.co.uk/news/world/5-disgusting-anti-gay-rants-by-brazil-president-jair-bolsonaro-ahead-of-potential-reelection-404073/>>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

⁹ Source: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/27/dispatch-sao-paulo-jair-bolsonaro-victory-lgbt-community-fear>>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

¹⁰ Source: <<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/02/politics/tennessee-ban-drag-show-performances-governor/index.html>>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

¹¹ Source: <<https://www.thepinknews.com/2023/03/28/madonna-drag-ban-tennessee-nashville/>>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

that intimate aspect of media representation: the importance it has on queer people every day as we go through our daily lives in societies that may expose, ridicule, and threaten us. This study explores the themes of representation and underrepresentation of queer males in media through a space where queer male fans have created a community, despite seemingly not being included from the beginning in the fictional story that is the object of their engagement.

AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research is based on a qualitative study of fans who self-identify as queer men, investigating what feelings engaging with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* elicit in terms of acceptance and comfort. To do that, we need to go beyond the brief meaning of representation that Hall (1997) gives as “the production of meaning through language” (p. 16), concerning ourselves more with the complex definition of giving “meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things” (p. 19), being aware that the representation of marginalized groups of society is also contested, as he explains, as there is never one true meaning for what things represent.

To find out how fans engage with representation in this complex sense, I needed to hear from these men and investigate their practices within the fandom, trying to understand how this relates to their concerns towards representation in media and to their practices in finding and creating safe spaces for the expression of their sexualities and identities. The main goal is to give voices to those audience members from marginalized groups, understanding how representation can be perceived not only by seeing yourself reflected on a media product, but by a feeling of belonging and freedom to express oneself (Billard and Gross, 2020). Therefore, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno* attract and retain the engagement of male queer fans?
2. How does male queer fans’ engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and *Belinda Blinked* reflect their feelings towards representation in popular fictional media?

After this introduction, the Literature Review chapter will explore the main concepts related to these questions. To understand fan engagement with popular media, I will first discuss the genres in which *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is situated and discussions around representation in them. Afterward, I will explore how fandom studies have been developing, and their contribution to discussions on identity and marginalized communities; finally, the last section will explore matters more closely associated with representation and the LGBTQ+ experience with media.

In the Methods chapter, I will present the research design, composed of qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 self-identified queer male fans of the podcast, living in English-speaking countries. There is also an overview of the coding system, the ethics considerations used for this research, and the framework used for the analysis.

The Analysis chapter is firstly presented through the five Parameters of Engagement proposed by Dahlgren & Hill (2023), relating each of them – Context, Motivations, Modalities, Intensities, and Consequences – to the research questions, before highlighting the most telling observations and conclusions from the interviews conducted. Those are related to the appropriation and queering of the podcast and the books by the LGBTQ+ community, and to the weight and importance that representation in media signifies for the interviewed members of this fandom.

The conclusion then reiterates the findings and their links to existing literature, making clear the importance of this case study and making sure this thesis reflects on the importance of representation offered to queer male fans in this context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter seeks to lay the groundwork in terms of the theories used to approach *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and the queer male fan engagement with the podcast and the source material, the *Belinda Blinked* books. The first step is to understand the genre of the media product, comprised of a unique mix: amateur erotica, or pornography, originated from the source books; reaction media, as the podcast hosts read it and comment it out loud; comedy, which comes from their remarks; and even podcast by itself, defined by scholars such as Llinares et. al. (2018) as a genre in its own right.

Once the literature on those genres is analyzed, this chapter will focus on matters relating to fan engagement, in an attempt to understand fandom, intense engagement, and in special queer engagement as a specific form of relating to media products with unique goals. From there, the third and final section of this chapter will further explore queer engagement with concepts related to it that might help explain the singular form of relationships created between those fans and the media product, such as distance, camp, and representation. The overarching goal of this chapter is to surmise the concepts applied to the analysis of the interviews and the concepts that were brought out by the interviewees, linking concepts that are not always discussed in the same context when approaching representation as engaged by fans.

A NOTE ON *PORNO*

While *My Dad Wrote a Porno* was always envisioned as a comedy podcast, the *Belinda Blinked* books were originally meant to be set in the genre of pornography; however, that reception was not met by the audience. This helps explain why, in this thesis, the podcast and its sourcebooks are not being treated as being firmly set in the pornography genre – and here, the word “pornography” is used considering that the terms “pornography” or “porno” and “erotic” or “erotica” are used as synonyms, usually to describe the *Belinda Blinked* books. It also appears in conversation with guests, who praise the format of the podcast as deconstructing pornography and showing it for how “ridiculous” or “absurd” it is (see the episode *Footnotes: Emma Thompson*).

The consumption of pornographic material has been the focus of many scholars. Some of the concerns raised are about the effect that pornography has on young minds

(Stulhofer et. al., 2021), particularly that of young men (Luder et. al., 2011; Bernstein et. al., 2021; Potter, 1999). In the field of Media Studies, the consumption of pornography has been studied regarding the behavior of both men and women (Bridges et. al., 2016) and the ever-changing landscape of the perception of sex workers (Jones, 2016). But, while those focuses are extremely relevant to society at large, for the scope of this thesis, “pornography” is present as an expression of sexuality, rather than as a theme that positions it in the field of porn studies.

Lindgren (1993) argues that pornography has not yet been satisfactorily described in the scope of Law: “Perhaps defining pornography or obscenity is impossible-or at least not yet accomplished” (p. 1217). Ashton, McDonald & Kirkman (2018), however, arrive at a very useful definition for social scientists to use: “Pornography: material deemed sexual, given the context, that has the primary intention of sexually arousing the consumer, and is produced and distributed with the consent of all persons involved” (n.p.).

While that definition might firmly bring the *Belinda Blinked* books, in their original format, to be considered pornography (at least by design of its producer, writer Rocky Flintstone), it is that same definition that distances *My Dad Wrote a Porno* from the genre, since the podcast is not made with the intent to sexually arouse. The presence of pornography cannot be ignored, either: after all, it is in the title of the podcast and prior knowledge of the pornography genre is an integral part of the experience. But, while pornography is a “starting point” for the creation of *Belinda Blinked*, audiences have not engaged with it nor with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* as such and, this being an audience study into fans, their experiences with the material must be taken into consideration.

INTIMACY IN COMEDY

Comedy, and particularly comedy in podcasts, has been connected for years to the concept of intimacy. Meserko (2015) describes the “intimate” feeling of comedy podcasts as an extension of the physical space where many comedians begin to operate: in his work, he connects the inhabiting of the podcast space as reminiscent of the confines of small theaters where actors and stand-up comedians start their careers.

While the next section of this chapter will deal with intimacy in the genre of podcast and look deeper into the ambiance and space context, here the focus is on the presence of intimacy in comedies, which predates the use of audio media. Brodie (2008)

explores such a relation in stand-up comedy, citing examples from the last century of the comedians' personal lives becoming part of the routine and the joke, thus bringing people in on their intimate lives.

In the case of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, the intimacy is apparent from the title. Not only from the word "Porno", but mainly from "My Dad": from the outset, the podcast invites the listener into a conversation about the host's father. The comedy then, in many instances, arrives from the fact that it is "weird" to think about the sexuality of an older man - a point Gatling, Mills & Lindsay (2017) explore as "senior sexuality" - but also, more personally, because that man is someone's father.

The juxtaposition of something funny to the world with the embarrassment Morton supposedly feels in relation to his father's work situates the podcast in the subgenre of "cringe comedy", in which the audience is invited to participate in the speaker's shame. Marso (2019) relates cringe comedy to social movements, particularly feminism, as the presence of an embarrassing element breaks down barriers for audiences and makes them confront their passive position towards the status quo of our patriarchal society – and, by extension, a heteronormative one.

Schwanebeck (2021), while defining cringe comedy as a specific type of product that elicits laughter by second-hand embarrassment, also defends the genre's potential to be cathartic in times of health and economic crisis; meanwhile, Hye-Knudsen (2018) uses the genre of cringe comedy to introduce another intimacy-building mechanic: the idea that the pleasure of cringe comedy comes from being able to vicariously experience "social worst-case scenarios" (p. 28).

Indeed, even beyond the confinement of "cringe", comedy has been described by audiences as instrumental in dealing with real-life issues and making them more manageable. Within those issues, Mundy & White (2017) cite gender as a huge aspect of comedy, interwoven with the depiction and performance of femininity and masculinity, and discuss the role of sexuality, especially homosexuality, in humor in media. They present a historic view of comedy films and the presence or absence of homosexuality in their text or subtext, coming to the conclusion that, at least up until the start of the 2010s decade, depictions would play into the status quo of the patriarchal society (p. 199).

Interestingly, Mundy & White also discuss how, in comedy, lesbianism is doubly erased by the patriarchal society as it is focused on women and affection towards women. It is important to notice how richer and deeper this discussion goes, both in terms of the

representation of lesbian and bisexual women in media being fetishized and impersonal and how that plays into both a larger number of female queer representation in some media spaces, while simultaneously excluding them from the conversation by placing them in an objectified position (Annati & Ramsey, 2022).

Finally, we turn to comedy in audio media. Again, Mundy & White (2017) discuss comedy on radio, arguing that, because the medium lacks the visual component and is mostly reduced to listening by oneself, it might be perceived as being “in disadvantage” for comedy. Those shortcomings are compensated, they argue, by the intimacy that radio elicits, as the process of imagination and co-creation fosters a closer relationship between listener(s) and host(s) (p. 81). That intimacy elicited by comedy on the radio then continues on to podcast as both a medium and a genre, as we will see in the next section.

THE INTIMATE GENRE OF PODCAST

It is nothing new to define podcast as a genre in its own right. Berry (2018) draws a parallel between blogs being described as a medium separate from news and proposes the same differentiation to podcasts in relation to radio. Llinares et. al. (2018) and Spinelli & Dann (2019), amongst others, have gone further in clarifying that, beyond being a separate medium, podcasting is also a separate genre with its own set of rules and expectations, as defined by Frow (2006), and with subgenres of its own, one of which being comedy podcasts.

Berry (2006) was amongst the first scholars to define intimacy as a key factor in the genre of podcasts. Building on that, Collins (2018) argues that intimacy and the presence of “normal people” as podcast hosts were building blocks for comedy podcasts to be amongst the most successful of the medium.

As Sullivan (2018) explains, viewing podcast hosts as amateurs might no longer be appropriate: as the medium remains of easier access and distribution, the podcast market is saturated with offers from amateur producers, and a strong network becomes more and more relevant in order for a new show to reach an audience. Euritt (2023) expands on that, arguing that “DIY sound and a conversational tone (...) are not so much proof of podcasting’s free and level playing field as much as they are being discussed and valued as an aesthetic that encourages certain ways of building and interacting with podcasting as a medium” (pp. 79-80). In that scenario, one way in which established

media personalities retain intimacy in their podcasts is by the construction of a different persona, a more intimate one, as Berry (2018) shows.

Building intimacy, after all, is not merely a commercial strategy, but a requirement of the podcast genre, and one in which its strongest attributes are found. Swiatek (2018) argues for the intimacy of podcasts as the central element that allows them to bridge distances between listeners and personalities, be it the hosts or interviewees, who might be usually seen from the distance of print media interviews and elaborately produced television talk shows.

This particular and strong sense of intimacy becomes even more relevant when speaking about representation for LGBTQ+ audiences. Siebler (2016), when discussing queer identities in the digital age, explains that the construction of a queer identity is made mainly through conversations and interactions with other members of the community and, in the absence of such members in immediate families and friends, queer people today turn to the internet. With that in mind, podcasts, as a native digital media format, offer a place for those interactions to happen in an intimate setting.

As a closing note for this section, intimacy in podcasts, and in *My Dad Wrote a Porno* in particular, has been explored even further by Euritt & Korfmacher (2022). They list elements that build intimacy in shows of the sort, including the recurring mention of the kitchen table setting, the disgust towards the source material, the personal anecdotes and inside jokes that recall both portions of the book and lived experiences between the three hosts that have been mentioned before. Additionally, Euritt (2023) also brings the parasocial relationships formed between hosts and listeners, the temporal and geographical presence, and mentioning beloved products and media that the audience can relate with. That intimacy might help explain one of the most important aspects of this study: the intense fan engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno*.

CAMP, KITSCH, ABSURD: QUEER COMEDY

Rosenberg (2020) describes camp and kitsch in conjunction, as “an aesthetic style (...) appealing because of its ironic, over-the-top challenging of the norms of ‘good behavior’ and ‘good taste’” (p. 94). That is a good surface definition of the terms, although it clumps both together. Babuscio (1999), on the other hand, distinguishes them,

arguing that kitsch “exploits the voyeurism of its audience, whereas camp encourages an affectionate involvement” (p. 122). Diving deeper, we can find that camp is:

(...) a form of self-defence. Particularly in the past, the fact that gay men could so sharply and brightly make fun of themselves meant that the real awfulness of their situation could be kept at bay - they need not take things too seriously, need not let it get them down. Camp kept, and keeps, a lot of gay men going.
(Dyer, 1999, p. 110)

Dyer’s definition is perfectly linked to queer identities and to their engagement with media, particularly with comedy. Camp, as an aesthetic that heightens comedy with silliness and absurdism, works as a perfect antidote to the reality of oppression, health scares, and violence that is present in everyday life. But the adoption of camp by the queer community goes beyond that: even as rights begin to increase in several areas, the camp aesthetic continues to be embraced, with a prime example being the fandom of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (Mercer & Sarson, 2020).

Kitsch, therefore, could be surmised as a serious form of facing camp aesthetic; however, kitsch has previously been identified as being connected to the fascist movements in Italy and Germany pre- and during World War II (Babuscio, 1999). Considering that, and the fact that the appeal of camp is the levity it brings, it is no surprise that camp is a more accepted and used term in queer studies; that will be the case for this thesis, as well.

The presence of camp in a piece of media has been an attractive factor for queer media audiences in the past, with country music being a researched example (Hussain, 2022). Understanding camp is therefore important to understanding what attracts queer male fans to *Belinda Blinked*, and to understanding its elements that are prime for becoming representative without direct representation.

CULT MEDIA

Cult cinema is a field of studies that investigates the relationship between fans and movies that are considered “so bad, they’re good”. One of the first scholars in the area, Jerslev (2008), describes cult film specifically through the practice between a movie and

its audience. Rather than considering cult as a genre, she positions it as a network structure that involves the deconstruction of the author's original intent.

In other words, Jerslev argues, a cult film cannot be labeled and distributed as cult before it is evaluated – and, most importantly, *appropriated* – by an audience. This thesis borrows the concept of cult (as a specific type of engagement created by an audience) from cinema studies to apply it to the *Belinda Blinked* books.

The deconstruction of the original body of work is not the only defining characteristic of the genre: a true appreciation for elements that are endearing and funny is also present, as well as a communal discussion around the media product. One of the pitfalls of trying to “box” something as being cult is that the defining characteristics themselves are malleable; in the introduction to *The Cult Film Reader* (2008), editors Mathjis & Mendik propose that framework, but are quick to add that cult films do not need to adhere to all of those criteria, but the analysis of such criteria is relevant “in what *makes* a film cult” (p. 1).

Understanding *Belinda Blinked* as a book that was made cult, both by the podcast it spawned and by the fans it garnered, helps position the novels as an illustrative case of queer male fans appropriating and queering a media product. The concept of a cult-like engagement with a media product helps us understand the intensity of that engagement, particularly when dealing with a subset of the fandom that seeks representation in media but decides to engage with a podcast that avoids that exact representation.

DISLIKE FOR A GENRE: ENGAGING WITH *PORNO* WITHOUT PORN

This section draws largely from Jonathan Gray's *Dislike-minded: Media, Audiences, and the Dynamics of Taste* (2021). In that book, Gray explores the understudied field of audience engagement with media products that are personally disliked. Unlike the phenomenon of “haters” or “trolls”, dislike-minded individuals display somewhat of an active disinterest in a certain media that seems to be persuasive and inescapable; examples in the book include the show *Game of Thrones* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Gray's investigation is interesting because it is not focused on the extremes of fandom – not the ardent passion shown by hardcore fans, nor the toxicity and aggressiveness that internet trolls can participate in. Dislike might sound “neutral”, but in

a landscape where those media products seem to be the main topic of conversation, disliking such pieces becomes a new source of integration within a group of “like-minded dislikers”; in its own way, dislike for something creates a new “fan community” bonded together by their disinterest in what seems to be everyone else’s interest.

This thesis is especially focused on dislike directed to the genre of amateur erotic literature. That is the origin of the podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, which deconstructs such a piece of work in *Belinda Blinked* but, more broadly, the genre it is situated in. In other words, fan engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* presupposes a dislike for the genre that *Belinda Blinked* is situated in; similarly, queer male engagement with straight amateur erotica might, as well, be rooted in a dislike for the material. That will be further addressed in the analysis section.

FANDOMS

Fan studies have been a topic of interest for Media Studies scholars. It has generated enough research for Gray et. al. (2007) to divide three waves of fan studies: in the first, fans were studied through the lens of being inserted in a context of mass media and very little power to “fight back”, which bestowed upon fandoms the status of “worthy fighters” as they were being studied. The studies, here, aimed to dismantle the stereotype in mass media of fans as simply obsessed with little critical analysis of the products they consumed. As new media technologies started to emerge in the second half of the 1990s, a second wave of fan studies began. The mass media image of fans started to be more positive and, as such, the research around them turned to comments on the social and cultural context around media, focusing more on the social implications of fandom rather than the personal engagement of the individual fans.

The third wave of fan studies, in which this thesis is situated, comes about as digital media becomes entangled in our daily lives. Those attempt to approach fandoms as not a “separate” group, but as groups that people engage with to varying degrees, due to the present context of digital networks and media consumption. As such, based on Gray et. al.’s (2007) definition, this study seeks to explore “the *intrapersonal* pleasures and motivations among fans” (p. 8) by interviewing them and analyzing their relationship to the podcast; similarly, by investigating the weight of representation and their experiences as LGBTQ+ fans, the goal is for this thesis to elucidate “cultural, and economic

transformations of our time, thereby offering new answers to the question of why we should study fans” (p. 8).

Fandom, as an intense form of engagement, illuminates and feeds back into social practices, habits, cultural preferences, and world views (see Gray et. al., 2007). It can be personally or socially motivated, and it can have impacts and reverberations both on an individual and on a societal level. While fan studies such as this one focus on the individual, the societal level is present in its consequences: Koller (2023) relates football fandom to the political context in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, investigating the mutual influences. Similarly, Chang, Pham & Ferrara (2021) focus on K-Pop fans and their impact on public health messaging during the COVID-19 crisis. Those cases illustrate how fandom is seen in its third wave of studies: rather than something contained to media engagement, the fan activity has reverberations in issues beyond the product that attracts the fandom.

In the introduction to *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change*, scholars Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, and Shresthova (2020) use the case of the musical *Hamilton* to exemplify social activism motivated by, and using, popular media products. Although it is tempting to consider those actions as having been inspired by one artist or one product, it would be perilous to ignore the *engagement* of those fan-turned-political-actors, as it is their unique, personal relationship to media products that propels them to incorporate elements from their object of fandom into their values and, by extension, their activism. That social change sparked by fandom is not a one-way street: in the same book, Duncombe (2020) explains the process of turning activists into fans, rather than the other way around, shining a light on popular culture’s potential for dialogue and for transforming discourse amongst a population.

The cited studies around fan practices and fandom have in common the objective of using selected case studies as examples of how the act of being a fan impacts one personally and the society around them; fan studies, therefore, are a useful framework for understanding the importance that queer representation has for queer communities and individuals. This thesis is positioned in that field of studies, valuing fans’ personal experiences and engagement with the theme, while simultaneously hoping to expand the potential for social change that comes from fan engagement and media representation.

QUEER MALE ENGAGEMENT

It is not uncommon to find queer studies that either focus on diverse members under the LGBTQ+ acronym, aiming for intersectionality, or studies that focus on one of those subcommunities, either by observing the interaction with other forms of oppression such as the patriarchal society – such as Bao’s (2020) work on lesbian culture in China post socialism – or by attempting to further study groups that are underrepresented in both media and academia – see Leetal’s (2022) study on nonbinary audiences and prod-users of fan fiction.

That is not to say gay, bisexual, or queer males are understudied in academia. Seminal works such as Calvin Thomas’s *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory* (2008) have largely contributed to making sure male queer audiences and readings are not discarded from queer theory, even if the author agrees with the attempts to make it not the sole academic focus for the whole community. Gay males are not underrepresented in the media, either; rather, according to GLAAD, gay males are the second most represented members of the LGBTQ+ community in media.¹² That relative abundance of representation (in comparison to other, non-heteronormative sexual orientations and gender expressions) makes the case of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and the engagement from the one community not represented in *Belinda Blinked* all the more illustrative of how fan engagement can help us broaden our understanding of what representation in popular culture means for queer male fans.

Queer fandoms have been organizing around the digital sphere, creating new spaces where they feel safe in expressing their sexuality and gender expression (McInroy et. al., 2021) and using those spaces to enhance their sense of self, create communities with like-minded individuals, fight against systemic oppression, and mentally escape from the difficulties in their realities (Craig & McInroy., 2014).

Additionally, where representation is not present in the original piece of work, queer fans sometimes insert themselves, either through fanfiction, as explored by Jenkins et. al. (2015), or through a reinterpretation of the work, making it queer – or, as it is sometimes referred to in queer theory, “queerizing” the work.

¹² Source: <<https://www.glaad.org/blog/glaads-2021-2022-where-we-are-tv-report-lgbtq-representation-reaches-new-record-highs>>. Accessed on 6 May 2023.

Within the queer community, queer males have been observed to present a unique type of engagement. In fact, engagement with products or personalities that do not directly represent them is not uncommon: from Judy Garland to Madonna and Lady Gaga, the creation of “gay icons” in popular culture was not necessarily connected to the sexual identity or orientation of the producers (Hari, 2002). By studying the case of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, however, this thesis presents this engagement in an even more unique piece of media: one that is concerned with sexuality and that openly displays other marginalized sexualities, but constantly side-stepping that of gay, bisexual, or queer males.

QUEER REPRESENTATION

The importance of representation has been touched upon in previous sections. But to better understand why it is still relevant to talk about this subject, and why a case with a big fandom that is not represented is a suited entrance point, it is important to return to queer theory scholars and their views on media and representation.

Lee (2019) introduces queer representation in popular media by discussing stereotypes and their presence in the cultural subconscious, especially in the later half of the twentieth century; and the pushback from the queer community by climbing the ranks of the media industry and becoming producers themselves to counter such narratives. Applying that logic to the podcasting industry, as seen in previous sections, the facility of producing and distributing material facilitates the work for queer content creators to spread their realities and views across audiences.

In the digital age, the creation of such content comes with its own challenges. As Siebler (2016, pp. 97-122) explains, the interaction between queer people on the internet and their possible audiences becomes very different: there is both the possibility of a new audience to reach and new personalities from which to draw inspiration, while simultaneously the spread of hate is facilitated by the anonymity social media provides.

Challenges for queer representation in the digital age are not limited to content creators. Cohen, Feinstein & Fox (2022) warn of LGBTQ+ youth still being neglected in terms of their mental health, despite the tools that promise to help them; similarly, Shawn (2014) analyzes the lack of representation for queer people in electronic games. The tendency seems to be that, as the amount of content increases, the content specifically

tailored for queer people becomes even more niched and restricted to those communities, creating a paradox: while media representation of LGBTQ+ people has been improving in the last few decades (Gillig & Murphy, 2016), their resonance with a general audience seems to lessen in a more saturated media landscape.

Reading Lee's (2019) thoughts on representation in the last century, it is easy to see why that would be an undesirable outcome: media representation came as an opportunity for queer people to become *less* marginalized and stereotyped, precisely because of the penetration of pop culture in all spheres of society.

That penetration of positive views on LGBTQ+ people, Billard & Gross (2020) explain, has had a positive impact on queer rights in society. Representation that seeks to downplay stereotypes and normalize marginalized groups creates a more favorable public opinion towards those groups, while the opposite is true – but that, of course, is dependent on the idea of an “overall” media that reach most of the population, which is becoming less and less of a reality in the digitized world (Webster, 2014).

However, whereas this scenario might be undesirable for the societal consequences of representation, it might also prove positive for the personal, intimate engagement that representation elicits. Gomillion & Giuliano (2011) conducted their own audience study in which they found that media personalities influence queer people in their journeys of coming out and forging their own identities. On the other end of the spectrum, sadly, Cover (2013) explores how not only the absence of queer representation in media but also the stereotyping of gay males in media perpetuates higher rates of suicide amongst queer youth. He argues that underrepresentation and stereotyping in media are part of a chain reaction that he calls “inequities”, which “operate (...) across a number of different sites from media representation and stereotyping of queer persons to queer community formations and institutional practices” (pp. 333-334), explaining how representation directly influences macro issues that impact a queer person's mental health and quality of life.

Christopher Pullen's *Gay Identity, New Storytelling and the Media* (2009) focuses specifically on fictional stories revolving around gay characters and/or written by gay authors, and their impact on gay audiences and their identities. With a rich exploration of the history of queer storytelling and the current status, Pullen summarizes the possibility that those stories have of “becoming”: of being more relevant than one personal experience, unbound by the identity of the audience, but relatable because of its universal

themes that are experienced beyond common struggles. By “becoming”, a queer narrative has the potential of being universal. In this thesis, the object of study is a “universal” text – *Belinda Blinked*, universal in the sense of the heteronormativity it displays – “becoming” in reverse, by being appropriated and queerized beyond the author’s intentions.

DISTANCE: THE REPRESENTATION IN ABSENCE

John Silk’s (2000) investigation of representation encompasses a unique aspect of it: the engagement with representation outside of its group, for example, citizens of a country the portrayal of immigrants. His focus on media representation of real-life issues, such as newspaper reporting of tragedies in foreign countries, has uncovered a heightened empathy as a result of positive representation.

That empathy and acceptance of the other is part of the reason why the LGBTQ+ community fights for representation; Katelyn Thomson (2021) proposes that, as society accepts queer people more, so do representations of them grow and vice-versa. However, what Silk’s study fails to address is the intersection of representation in distance. It is easy to observe national citizens and immigrants as “polar opposites”; but there is a lack of research in the field of audiences’ consumption of representation *near* to them, but not *of* them – for example, Brazilian immigrants who consume media focused on Spanish-speaking Latino communities in other countries; or, as is the case of this study, queer males consuming media that represents queer females.

Aharoni & Lissitsa (2022) are among the scholars who have contributed to that field, in a study about the representation across different forms of media of European asylum seekers and its reception in Israel. Their findings point to social media and digital networks bringing the discourse of the “others” (asylum seekers) closer to home, while traditional media, especially newspapers, would keep them at a distance, and its consumption was linked to less empathy and connection between the Israelis and those seeking refuge in Europe. That conclusion helps in understanding how new media in the digital context, which are less controlled by the regulations of traditional media, bring a different type of discourse that brings people closer to issues they are not personally experiencing.

In other words, these studies about understanding representation, media positioning, and its consequences support the following possibility: The uniqueness of podcasts as a digital-born format situates that media in a position to raise awareness and empathy towards diverse issues to an audience that would perhaps not be interested or empathetic to it in traditional media.

Price (2022) exemplifies that possibility through a case study of true crime podcasts. The case of *Finding Cleo*, about the disappearance of a Saskatchewan girl in Canada, illustrates that potential and its developments: although producers of the podcast specifically caution indigenous communities about how sensible the show might be for them, the massive consumption of the program has led to changes in the conversation around colonialism in Canada, being incorporated into school curriculums (p. 365).

SUMMARIZING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis acknowledges the importance of the field of porn studies but understands the fan engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* as separate from engagement with pornography. Therefore, as this thesis is firmly situated in the field of fan engagement, it understands the importance of intimacy in the genres of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*: comedy and podcast, with characteristics of camp, cringe, and absurd comedy that resonate with the intimacy offered to fans. The ways in which fans engage with the *Belinda Blinked* books also make this a study in a cult piece of media, characterized by an appropriation based on the dislike for the genre of amateur erotic literature and an appreciation of the aesthetics that are associated with queer male engagement with media.

As a study in fan engagement, this thesis also understands fandoms as spaces where fans come together to discuss and appreciate the object of their engagement, displaying an intense engagement with the material. Fandom studies help understand habits of consumption and the way the engagement reverberates in fans' personal lives and societal contexts. Underlining the subset of queer male fandoms, this chapter has then analyzed the ways in which queer male engagement with media is unique, through its intensity and its appropriation of material that is not always meant to represent them. Finally, the last section of this chapter explored a larger understanding of representation that comes from the feeling of comfort within a media universe, rather than the presence of a character with similar characteristics as the fan who is engaging.

METHODS

The selection of the case of fan engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* was based on Flyvbjerg's (2001) proposition of choosing cases through an information-oriented selection. Queer male fan engagement with a product that is centered around sexuality but does not represent *their* sexuality makes this case an extreme/deviant case, and studying it allows us "to obtain information on unusual cases, which can be especially problematic or especially good in a more closely defined sense" (p. 79). Approaching a case from the perspective of queer males, this study positions itself in the standpoint of queer theory, explored, amongst others, by Butler (1993). This requires an understanding of queer as "the most recent" (p. 223) moment in studies related to sexualities and genders that are overlooked by a heteronormative Western society. As a queer man who is a fan of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, I am not discarding my own implicit bias in this research, which could position this thesis as the work of an "aca-fan" (plural "acafen"), a term that is used to indicate academic researchers who are positioned as studying the media they are fans of. Henry Jenkins (2011) describes the moment when the term was coined:

Many of us were also being accused of being "inauthentic" when speaking as fans, accused of "slumming it" or "going native" when we claimed to be part of the world we were studying, reflecting assumptions about intellectual and cultural capital that separated high culture academics and pop culture fans. We wanted to signal a dual allegiance – to treat our subcultural knowledge as part of what informed the work we were doing as scholars. We were not simply fans and we were not simply academics – we were acafen.
Jenkins, 2011, n.p.

We can see from that context that the works of acafen are concerned with the legitimation of the researcher within their work, in contrast to the disrespect that academics would perceive themselves receiving when studying media that they are fans of. While I deeply respect and admire the work of acafen, the design of this research as a study on fan engagement seeks to emphasize fan experiences other than my own, which is why I do not claim to be an aca-fan in this thesis.

In summation, for this thesis, a concrete social situation was chosen – the case study of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and its fan engagement – to better illustrate the larger issues of LGBTQ+ representation in media and how it influences both societal and

personal perception of their existence and rights. That research seeks to identify the current situation of media representation of queer males, where it is leading, how it benefits (or not) the people involved, and what changes (if any) need to be made for that development to be satisfactory (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 145).

The specific method chosen for that was qualitative semi-structured interviews, as proposed by Bruhn Jensen (2012). Interviewing fans allows me to give voice to them and value their experiences, understanding them as crucial to the reflections on the importance of representation in media.

RECRUITING AND PILOTING

As Reddit was the place where the abundance of vocal queer male fans was first exposed (see introduction), that was also where the recruiting started. I made a post in the style of the podcast, asking for fans who identified as queer males to volunteer through my e-mail or social media contacts (see appendices). That post was also shared on Twitter, where it was kindly retweeted by Rocky Flintstone himself, and on Instagram, where many fans also reached out. In total, I had more than thirty applicants in less than a week – double the range that was expected of between ten and fifteen interviews.

That allowed me to start the process early, conducting four pilot interviews in the first weeks of 2023. Majid et. al. (2017) argues for the importance of piloting and refining the interview guide when conducting semi-structured interviews and, considering that at the beginning of this process, there was enough time and enough people interested in participating, the piloting process could be repeated more times. The first three pilots were crucial in refining the themes that would be investigated, while the fourth pilot interview was conducted with the interview guide nearly finalized, allowing to refine the order of questions for a better flow of the conversation. During the piloting period, I also informally spoke to women and straight men, assessing their feelings towards the themes raised by this research. While their insights and feelings are relevant in their own context, speaking to them allowed me to perceive how queer men's engagement with the podcast and, in particular, the books created a unique relationship that warranted investigation, thus allowing me to define the sampling as being comprised of self-identified queer men who are fans of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*.

All of the interviewees were from English-speaking countries (United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada, and Australia), which is to be expected considering the language of the podcast. Therefore, due to the geographical distance, all interviews were conducted online, through Zoom; they were recorded using the built-in feature, which records the video and audio of the call. The video files were promptly deleted after the interviewees, in an additional effort to preserve the interviewees' anonymity, and only the audio files were used for the transcriptions. The interviews covered three major themes: engagement with the podcast and the books, views of representation in media, and feelings towards representation in the *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and *Belinda Blinked*.

After the established minimum of 10 official (post-piloting) interviews was reached, a lot of the themes were saturated, especially in relation to their consumption habits; however, considering the abundance of volunteers, two more interviews were conducted to ensure more coverage of feelings and viewpoints. Those two additional interviews brought the important participation of one person assigned male at birth who is in the process of reflecting on their own gender identity, which allowed for a better understanding of how the queer experience was broad even in a small subset of this fandom. In total, the overall number of interviews was ideal for having both a saturation of themes while still being able to observe and value people's identities and personal experiences.

REFINING THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

After the piloting, the interview guide for the semi-structured interviews was redrafted, as proposed by Majid et. al. (2017). The initial interview guide considered the five parameters of engagement, with an extensive focus on the genre of pornography. That was the first element that proved to be less relevant for the focus of this study and had a reduced importance in the final interview guide.

After piloting, I was also able to include questions that pertained to people's engagement with the genre of podcast, questioning their taste in media in general and a more focused questioning on the matters of representation. In many ways, as the interview guide evolved, so did the study and its guiding research questions. Please see the appendices for the complete interview guide pre- and after piloting.

PARTICIPANTS

All interviewees were anonymized to preserve their identities. Each one of them was given an alias, based on the list of most popular names for their country and year of birth. There was one exception to those: Cian O'Mahony, a super-fan who has created a website explaining the timeline of events in the *Belinda Blinked* books and later was invited into one of the *Footnotes* episodes of the podcast. Cian graciously volunteered to participate in this research and, due to his unique involvement, anonymizing him without losing the data proved challenging. He then agreed to be identified in this thesis and is the only interviewee who is referred to by his real name; accordingly, he had access to the full transcript of his interview and was allowed to redact any information that he decided to share publicly no longer. Cian, as well as all the other interviewees, will have access to the thesis and a summary of the findings.

As mentioned before, the fact that the podcast is available only in English was reflected in the fact that all volunteers were from English-speaking countries; they all live in countries where *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is equally available as a podcast and where the live tours have visited, meaning their opportunity to engage was equal even in an international context. Furthermore, not having age as a requirement for the sample allowed the research to find generational differences, which will be discussed in the analysis chapter. The following table details each interviewee, their aliases, ages, nationality, and self-identification terms in regard to gender and sexual orientation.

ALIAS	AGE	NATIONALITY	GENDER	SEXUALITY
DAVID	39	British/Australian	Man	Gay
JACOB	21	American	Masculine-presenting, AMAB	Queer
CHRISTOPHER	34	British	Male	Gay
THOMAS	32	British	Cis male	Gay
MICHAEL	24	American	Male	Gay
BRANDON	30	American	Male	Gay

CIAN	36	Irish	Male	Gay
JASON	32	American	Male cisgender	Gay
NICHOLAS	30	American	Cis male	Gay
DANIEL	27	British	Trans man	Bisexual
QUINN	43	Canadian	Non-binary, AMAB	Gay
MATTHEW	33	American	Trans man	Gay/Queer

CODING AND ANALYSING

When I first set out to interview the queer male fans of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, the main goal was to understand what, exactly, attracted and retained their interest in the podcast and the related books. However, I have approached those interviews using Abductive Coding, inspired by Vila-Henninger et. al. (2022), which allowed me to perceive bigger themes that were arising from their comments. Those were related to their engagement with the podcast and its related media, both in a personal and in a social landscape; their sexuality, their identities, and how their choices in entertainment media related to those characteristics; their personal reflections on the theme of representation in popular media; and their views on the matters of the podcast genre as it related to their engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno*.

The transcripts were coded in three steps. The first step was descriptive coding, noticing the core elements of the fans' talks and the repetitions that appeared in them. That was done manually, using Microsoft Word on the computer to mark the words and phrases that seemed more relevant to understanding the broader aspects of the interviews. Those codes were then grouped into analytical codes, in an initial attempt to cluster those terms and sentences into bigger feelings and meanings. That was done by manually color coding, again on Word, and using those colors to group those analytical codes. Finally, the third step was grouping those analytical codes into themes, which was done by creating a mind map on the web platform Miro. That last step was the basis for the analysis, in which those themes – good representation, bad representation, queerness, consumption, fandom, view of the books, view of the podcast, sexuality, and identity – were expanded in the next chapter and linked to relevant literature.

In summation, the methods for this research were chosen based on the uniqueness of the engagement of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, and the understanding that case studies are relevant for social studies due to what they can exemplify and relate to our habits and behaviors in a broader, societal context. With that in mind, the study was made based on structured interviews that would allow fans to be heard, respecting their experiences, and conducting research “from below”, bringing an underrepresented group into the research around their own practices. The interviews were conducted between January and April of 2023, and later analyzed with a qualitative coding on the transcripts. That method has elucidated themes that have arisen and reflect on queer male fan engagement and the matter of representation in popular fictional media.

ANALYZING THE QUEER MALE FAN ENGAGEMENT WITH REPRESENTATION IN *MY DAD WROTE A PORNO*

This chapter will present the findings of this study, utilizing quotes from the interviews and relating them to the theoretical framework presented in the first chapter. Firstly, I will present an overview of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and *Belinda Blinked*, the two main pieces of the transmedia story (Jenkins, 2008) created by Rocky Flintstone, Jamie Morton, Alice Levine, and James Cooper. The analysis then presents the five Parameters of Engagement proposed by Dahlgren & Hill (2023) – Context, Motivations, Modalities, Intensities, and Consequences –, presenting an overview of how queer male fans engage with the podcast and the books. The main themes of representation are then explored through an analysis of what representation matters to those fans, how the absence of representation in the books appeals to them, and the importance of the intimacy and openness the podcast offers. This chapter then ends with a contextualization of what representation means for these fans, and what matters for their engagement.

CONTEXTUALIZING *MY DAD WROTE A PORNO* AND *BELINDA BLINKED*

Especially when talking to fans, the media products *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and *Belinda Blinked* can easily get mixed up. Therefore, and sensing the same might happen with the analysis of those interviews, I will first set up the podcast and the books, attempting to clarify what is mentioned in the upcoming sections.

Belinda Blinked is a series of books written by Rocky Flintstone, which started being self-published on the website Amazon in 2015. The story follows the character Belinda Blumenthal, sales director at Steele's Pots & Pans, starting with her job interview for the company and following her first few months at work. Belinda forms a close friendship with Giselle Maarschalkerweerd de Klotz, the assistant to the company's Managing Director, and Bella Ridley, the receptionist. Together, they are referred to as "the Glee Team". Supporting characters include other employees of Steele's Pots & Pans and their clients, which Belinda attends to.

The books are marketed as erotic literature. In every chapter, Belinda and her co-workers engage in sexual activity either amongst themselves or with their clients; the sex,

although always consensual, is described by fans as “bizarre”, constantly including descriptions that do not make physical sense and terms considered to not be arousing.

As of May 2023, six books in the main series have been published, all of which are named *Belinda Blinked* (1 through 6) and include a long subtitle referring to “the hottest girls in sales” – presumably, Belinda. Flintstone has also published a collection of short stories, *Belinda Blinked – The Naughty Bits*, which includes Christmas tales and additional material that is not included in the main story; *Lockdown 69*, a special story written during the COVID-19 pandemic; *The Belinda Blinked Character Rankings*, a compendium ranking all of the characters in the series; *Sweet Treats*, a dessert cookbook inspired by the series; and *The Rocky Flintstone Bottle of Wine a Day Diet*, a jokingly-written diet book that references the characters.

Rocky Flintstone is the pen name of Jamie Morton’s father, who sent the manuscript to his son shortly before publishing it online. Morton and his friends, Alice Levine and James Cooper, then started the podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, in which each episode is comprised of Morton reading a chapter of the book while Levine and Cooper react to it in a comedic manner, usually pointing out contradictions and expressing disgust at the sexual scenes.

The podcast is composed of six seasons, each of them encompassing one of the books in the main series. In between each episode, a special bonus, referred to as *Footnotes*, included additional material sent to the trio by Rocky, guest fans of the podcast, talks with fans, and other bonus features. There were six special Christmas events (two of which were divided into two-part episodes), *My Dad Wrote a Christmas Porno*, the last of which was recorded at Abbey Road Studios in London by invitation of the studio in celebration of their 90th anniversary. After the end of the podcast was announced, there was a batch of send-off episodes, including a two-part “Finale”, in which Morton read a special story from Rocky Flintstone, and two *Footnotes*: one with the trio calling fans, and the last episode released, in which Flintstone gives his first on-microphone interview to the hosts.

My Dad Wrote a Porno spawned other media products: firstly, a self-titled book, published in 2016, which includes the full text of *Belinda Blinked 1* with annotations by Morton, Levine, and Cooper. Secondly, two series of live shows (*My Dad Wrote a Porno Live* and *My Dad Wrote a Porno Live – Belinda’s 30th Birthday*) that had wide world tours. The first live show revolved around the reading of a “lost chapter” of *Belinda*

Blinked 1 – a chapter Flintstone had written and discarded from the first book –, while *Belinda's 30th Birthday* was a reading of the tale of Belinda's birthday party. Both texts were never read on the podcast. The first tour was recorded as a special event by the American cable channel HBO and can now be watched on the streaming service HBO Max across the world. The tale from the second tour remains unpublished and unavailable for those who did not attend the live shows.

The most recent media product related to *My Dad Wrote a Porno* came just as this study was in its early stages. After the last episode of the podcast revealed Rocky Flintstone's voice, the author launched his own podcast, *Rocky Flintstone Unleashed*, where he continues to explore the universe of *Belinda Blinked* through reading extra material that was not present in the original podcast, staged "interviews" with the fictional characters, and excerpts from the book *The Belinda Blinked Character Rankings*. Flintstone's program started being distributed on 1 January 2023 with daily episodes, amateurly produced by the author himself.

Talking about *My Dad Wrote a Porno* can become confusing due to its dissociability from *Belinda Blinked*. Unlike most pieces of reaction media (Anderson, 2011), the podcast deals with a book that was not previously known to audiences, and therefore fans experience both the podcast and the book at the same time. This research deals with the fan engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and its absence of queer male representation; that absence, however, comes mainly from how much the core of the podcast revolves around *Belinda Blinked*. I have done my best to make it clear which mode of engagement is referred to but, with this being a fan study, it is reflective of the fans' experiences that sometimes both products become entangled. That is a core characteristic of the podcast, as a transmedia story. A transmedia story is defined as:

"the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience." (Jenkins, 2008, p. 21)

In other words, transmedia storytelling occurs when the same fictional universe is developed in different media, including the participation of fans and the enrichment of the experience of engaging with the story. The universe that encompasses the *Belinda*

Blinked books, the *My Dad Wrote a Porno* podcast, the live shows, and the online communities (where the story is expanded by both fans and Rocky Flintstone himself) is configured, therefore, as a transmedia story.

THE PARAMETERS OF ENGAGEMENT

Perhaps one of the best ways to start understanding the uniqueness of queer male fans' engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is to have a conceptualization of how that engagement happens. To do so, I have used the framework proposed by Dahlberg & Hill (2023) as the Parameters of Engagement, in which we can observe five parameters that compose the fans' engagement with a media product. As they describe it,

Our engagement with media involves various relations, bonds and ties, as well as resources (...) The issues and conflicts we find personally relevant and politically compelling are to a great extent a result of the social and cultural resources we have at hand – most of which are media-related in various ways. (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p. 8)

That explanation points to the fact that analyzing engagement through their proposed parameters will consider and respect fan engagement as a unique and personal experience, while still relating it to larger issues, which is one of the main goals of this thesis. Therefore, their model allows for the understanding of engagement as an ever-changing phenomenon that is interconnected and continuously evolving. The following five parameters of engagement investigate the “cognitive and affective modes of engagement” (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p. 24) of the queer male fans of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*.

CONTEXT

The context in which queer male fans consume *My Dad Wrote a Porno* tell us about their habits of listening and, to a broader extent, what they associate the podcast with. Considering that podcast is a media that was born in the digital sphere, engagement with it always happened through the internet, be it through apps such as Spotify, where *My Dad Wrote a Porno* can be accessed, or in the engagement between fans in the Reddit community. Fans have become engaged with the podcast at different points in its 8-year

history; some, like Christopher, started listening when the show only had three episodes out, while others (Thomas, Brandon, Jacob) began listening during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even for listeners like Christopher, the pandemic months in 2020 represent a special point in their history with the show, as it was a point in time when their engagement with the podcast was heightened. Listening to *My Dad Wrote a Porno* during lockdown months represented solace for Thomas, who needed something light-hearted to unwind from working with the National Health Service in the United Kingdom during one of its most trying times. It is telling, then, that podcast consumption in general is considered an intimate and lonely act – in perfect synchrony with these isolating times. Fans would often engage with the podcast using headphones, making the context even more intimate, as the headphones would create a “bubble” of content where only the fan was immersed.

As discussed in the Methods section, I purposely left out any criteria beyond being a “queer male fan” when recruiting interviewees for this study. That has allowed me a wide range of diversity in points of view, but equally important are the few points on which all of those fans agree. The first of these is the lone experience of listening for the first time: while Thomas and Brandon mention listening to the podcast with friends and partners, that is only in relistens; the first contact with new episodes – either as the episodes were being released or as new listeners would be catching up on the back catalogue – was always done by the fans when they were alone, with their headphones.

The second point all interviewees had in common when it came to the context of consumption is alluded to in the previous paragraph: relistens. With 170 episodes, most of them around one-hour long, and spawning eight years of production, it would be reasonable to expect that most listeners of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* would only listen to each episode once. That is not the case with any of the interviewees: all of them have listened to the whole series at least twice and chose select episodes to listen to a few more times, as is the case for Jason.

Many fans also relate their working life to the podcast. Michael explains his first listen-through of all episodes happened between breaks in his laboratory work; Jacob tells me he thinks about the past in terms of the job he’s held and, similarly, can tell me about the progress of his listening of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* relating it to each place of work: when asked if he had read the *Belinda Blinked* books on their own, without the podcast,

he says, “I think I read the first few books after... What job? I don’t know, I measure time by the jobs that I’ve had”. By linking his consumption of the podcast and the books to his experience at work, Jacob shows me how *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is a part of the personal construction of his story.

The context of engagement of the podcast reinforces the intimate engagement that is observed in that type of media. As Euritt (2023) positions it when discussing a female listener of podcasts, intimacy is viewed as “podcasting’s ability to accompany the listener throughout her life and become part of her daily routine” (p. 89). In this context where the listening becomes solitary, the intimacy fosters a para-social relationship with the podcast hosts, as expressed by Nicholas, who compares it to an image he’s seen on the internet of “three girls having a sleepover, giggling or whatever, and there’s an awkward person on the side pretending to be a part of that picture – that’s kind of my relationship with *My Dad Wrote a Porno*”.

That type of intimacy, described by Weldon (2018) as “one-way”, expands to fans’ relationships with other fans. Most of the interviewees who have engaged with online fan communities around *My Dad Wrote a Porno* describe a similar pattern of behavior: watching and sometimes reacting, but rarely adding to the conversation. Or even sharing what they see there in intimate circles: Matthew describes that he comments on the subreddit “sometimes, but not very often. I’ll share with my friends if there’s art of if there was a podcast update, or if there was a crazy fan theory”. In continuing to treat the podcast as a personal matter, reserved to themselves or their inner circles, the interviewed fans reinforce the intimate context in which *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is experienced by them.

MOTIVATIONS

“I needed something funny”, exclaims Thomas, echoing the sentiment of other interviewees who were attracted to *My Dad Wrote a Porno* because of its comedy. But comedy is constantly ranked amongst the most popular genres for podcasts in English-

speaking countries, with 22% of the American¹³ and 30% of the British¹⁴ public choosing it as their favorite. So, what makes this stand out, at least for the queer male public?

Of course, popularity plays a part in it, with a few interviewees such as Michael claiming their choice for *My Dad Wrote a Porno* came from suggestions on apps such as Spotify; others, such as Jason, followed family and friends' recommendations. But that does not account for the retention of interest: after years following Morton, Levine & Cooper, Daniel shared that *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is still the only podcast he listens to: "I actually don't like listening to podcasts, I just don't find them very engaging".

When relistening to the podcast, the motivations are linked to a sense of comfort and freedom, sometimes from having to pay attention while doing something else, as Brandon puts it: "I play a lot of mobile games, where it's almost like a chore... I would often put [the podcast] on and just listen to it... For stuff like that, you can't have something on that's a new show that you actually want to pay attention to". But it could also be related to something deeper.

David and Nicholas both describe *Belinda Blinked* and *Rocky Flintstone* as being very "camp", an aesthetic that, as explored in the Literature Review chapter, is associated with gay men's way of engaging with a society that is unkind to them. Matthew looks for not only the reactivity, but for the comfort that campness brings: "It becomes almost like a meditation podcast for me (...) it really does lower my blood pressure and help me feel much more comforted", he says, recounting a time when he felt uncomfortable for being in the more close-minded American state of Texas, and turned to the podcast for reassurance.

Matthew mentions not feeling comfortable in Texas due to the state's stereotype as a conservative, anti-LGBTQ+ territory. By turning to *My Dad Wrote a Porno* to find the comfort he could not find in his surroundings, Matthew manifests the escape that so many queer people look for in media. Craig et. al. (2015) writes about how escapism through media consumption is a strong motivator for LGBTQ+ communities; Gabbiadini et. al. (2021) also associates the act of escapism with the tendency of binge-consumption of media, which the interviewed fans all admit to doing one point or another. Finally, a recent study on the consumption of media throughout the COVID-19 pandemic also

¹³ Source: <<https://truelist.co/blog/podcast-statistics/>>. Accessed on 6 May 2023.

¹⁴ Source: <<https://cybercrew.uk/blog/podcast-statistics-uk/>>. Accessed on 6 May 2023.

aligns with what the interviewees have voiced about using the podcast as a means for escaping a grim reality, pointing out that:

an increase in the use of nostalgia-inducing media during the COVID-19 lockdown might be associated with the fear of isolation due to the lockdown measures and that people turn to nostalgic media consumption as a coping mechanism and to escape from the current emotionally unpleasant situation” (Wulf, Breuer & Schmitt, 2022, p. 7).

The way queer male fans engaged with *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, especially those who were longtime listeners and tell me about listening to it during the pandemic, corroborates those findings, as do the raising numbers in posts and comments in the Reddit community around that time.

As we see, queer men’s motivations for engaging with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is not directly linked to representation, but still circles around issues that are related to their experiences as part of a marginalized group. Even though the podcast does not fulfill the need for representation of men who are interested in men, it offers other sources of comfort, mainly through the escapism offered by the intimate and camp comedy, which induces nostalgia. “I feel like growing up, a lot of my ideology was escapism”, says Jacob, when explaining what attracts him to engage with media. Thomas claims that the podcast reminds him of his time as a teen: “When I was growing up, between 18 to 24 years, it was that kind of comedy” that he would engage with.

MODALITIES

As I have touched upon, the engagement fans have with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is an intense one that evokes many emotions. But that does not mean the modality of engagement is always as intense: Matthew explains that, in his day-to-day life, he will have the podcast playing “on the background”, using it as white noise to any other activities that might be happening.

That is not unexpected, considering how many times these fans listen to the podcast. Of course, over the course of years of listening, cognitive modalities might appear, and it is important to notice that listening is not the only modality to engage with the podcast: other than reading the books, fans also had the opportunity to watch it live through two world tours.

Jason relates an affective modality of engaging with the live shows, in which he felt so comfortable around unknown fans, he decided to go to both live shows in Los Angeles by himself. “You have to be fairly open-minded to be into *Belinda Blinked* even slightly... It’s so deviant from the get-go”. In the UK, Quinn also went solo and does not regret the choice: “It was hilarious, just amazing... You know, you’re among your own people. They’re obviously open-minded people, for starters, because you can’t be close minded and enjoy *Belinda Blinked* and/or *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, that just doesn’t work”.

However, the idea of the affective environment that a live show can offer was not appealing to all fans. David tells me he chose not to watch *My Dad Wrote a Porno* live after watching the special broadcast on HBO: “I think that one of the bonuses of the podcast is that it’s personal and it feels intimate, whereas the live show... I think it’d be very different... Because it would be a rehearsed, produced show, whereas the podcast feels very off the cuff”. With that comment, David offers a particularly different view on affect; in comparison, for a music artist, a live show offers affect by the environment and the opportunity to interact with other fans. Whereas, for David, it would be the opposite experience: the experience would feel less intimate and, therefore, less authentic.

The modalities of engagement, therefore, circle back to the already explored feelings of intimacy, authenticity, and comfort with the podcast, strengthening the conclusion that engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* elicits, for the queer male audience, a sense of representation that extends beyond seeing queer male characters retracted in the fictional prose of *Belinda Blinked*. That comes both from a cognitive point of view – of seeing queer characters, albeit not male, represented in the story – and from an affective one, as the openness around sexual discourse in the podcast allows them to feel that their own sexualities would not be judged. As mentioned before, the very genre of podcast elicits intimacy from its format: To the context in which it is usually consumed (alone, with headphones), to the para-social relationships that are formed by the fans with hosts, the modalities of engagement tell us the intimacy goes even further in the case of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* due to the deconstruction of pornography that creates conversations that are not meant to arouse but are open when it comes to the topic of sexuality.

INTENSITIES

Although engagement with the podcast spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁵ for the reasons stated above, resorting to media for comfort was nothing new for the queer male fans interviewed for this thesis. Nicholas mentions his consumption of the sitcom *Will & Grace* (1998, creators Max Mutchnick & David Kohan) as a means of finding a “chosen family” in fiction, in contrast to his own family, who was less than supportive of his sexual orientation. Nicholas even chose to go to university in the same building where the comedy show was recorded, in an attempt to feel closer to those characters whom he considered as family. His engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is no less intense: “I was devastated when I found out it was ending, because I was just like, there’s going to be a hole. And I still feel that way”.

Some fans measure their intensity in numbers, with Daniel telling me he has “a silly amount of hours on Spotify”, referring to the statistics released annually by the platform that tells the user the number of hours they have listened to their favorite podcasts. Others measure it by time: Jacob, the youngest interviewee, started listening to the podcast when he was only 17 years old and remains listening four to five years later, while Thomas relates listening to the podcast on repeat since 2015 when it was first released.

Of course, when we talk of intensities, perhaps the most emblematic case is of Cian, who has dedicated his time and labor to creating the website *BelindaBlumenthal.Business*, a webpage dedicated to understanding the timeline of the *Belinda Blinked* books and special excerpts that are read on the podcast. Cian has read the novellas and extra material several times, creating a summary so impressive that it earned him an invitation to join an episode of the podcast, *Footnotes: Understanding the “Timeline”*. Even though he is a longtime podcast listener, *My Dad Wrote a Porno* features in his “top three” personal favorites, and his engagement with the source material even extends to a defense of some of the criticism that hosts Morton, Levine, and Cooper direct at Rocky Flintstone: “[the books] are far more thought out than people give them credit for”.

¹⁵ Source: <<https://subredditstats.com/r/mydadwroteaporno>>. Accessed on: 6 May 2023.

As mentioned in the Methods chapter, the intensity of engagement was originally a part of the study design, as I intended to speak with *producers* like Cian, who dedicate their time to creating parts of the broad universe that is *Belinda Blinked*. However, it was through piloting that I noticed the intensity of engagement was a constant among the queer male fans; and, as touched upon before, it is that intensity that sets that subgroup apart from the other fans of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, especially when it comes to the uniqueness of the fandom, which will be discussed in the following section.

CONSEQUENCES

Amongst the interviewees, Cian was in the minority who had read the books without the podcast: most fans avoided it, being content in engaging with the content exclusively through the hosts' reading of it. That is the case of Matthew and Thomas, who claim that the main appeal of the podcast is not in the books themselves, but in Morton, Levine, and Cooper. Some, like Jason, argue that this was proven by Rocky Flintstone's own spin-off podcast, *Rocky Flintstone Unleashed*, not being as appealing as the original one, even though it comes from the "source" of the story. Jason is correct in the lack of appeal from the podcast: although many of the interviewees had given it a chance, none of them had related being up to date with Rocky's show, nor considered themselves fans of it.

However, despite fans' protests that their interest was higher in the hosts than in the story, their actions might betray those words. There was one constant in the interviews: the fans, in general, did not follow up with Morton, Levine, or Cooper's other work in media (Morton and Cooper are producing a musical together, which was only mentioned in interviews once; Levine is a radio and TV presenter whose other work was mentioned by only two interviewees). Even when fans would flock to Reddit for recommendations of other podcasts to listen to in between the release of seasons of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, those recommendations would not include Alice Levine's other podcast, *British Scandal*, or episodes of podcasts like *Drunk Women Solving Crime*, where Morton was a guest. Rather, the queer male fans of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* tell me that they started listening to *Help I Saxed My Boss*, also situated in the British comedy podcast landscape, or *Beach Too Sandy, Water Too Wet*, presented by two siblings reading reviews of establishments with a mix of comedy and empathy as their trademark.

Remarkably, while the producers of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* have invited several hosts of other podcasts as guests in their show, none of my interviewees has mentioned engaging with those “related” podcasts.

It seems, therefore, that when it comes to engagement with the podcast, fans would extend their podcast habits with similar genres, while not engaging with the people behind it beyond the confinement of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*. Meanwhile, without exception, every interviewee has said they would read the next book in the *Belinda Blinked* saga once it is published, even without the podcast. So, while I have to believe my interviewees when they say that they are more interested in the trio behind *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, I cannot help but notice their larger support of Rocky Flintstone and the *Belinda Blinked* story.

Another consequence of the engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* could be felt in its fandom. I asked fans about their experiences with the subreddit dedicated to the podcast and about their relationships with other fans, and the responses pointed to a unique environment in the world of social media fandoms. “Loads of fandoms are toxic”, Christopher says, “and I think Rocky’s created a world, James, Alice, and James have created this area where it doesn’t matter what you were, who you are. It’s a place where everyone can come and enjoy something that’s been written”.

Christopher attributes this to the silliness of the source material, as does Cian: “If you like the podcast and you have that sense of humor, I think... there’s not much to be divisive about”. But even with seemingly innocent and friendly material, fandoms can become quite divisive and violent online. Brandon relates being a part of the communities dedicated to the Nintendo videogames *Animal Crossing* and *Mario Kart*, and observing that discussions in those subreddits can become heated in a way that is never present in the *My Dad Wrote a Porno* community: “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a fight in the *My Dad Wrote a Porno* subreddit... It’s a severely, like, hippie community. Everyone is just having a good time talking about dad porn”.

To what do the fans attribute this difference in the podcast fandom? One possible explanation is the feeling of being included in the conversation with the three hosts. Brandon explains: “Partially because the podcast is built around a really strong friendship that feels genuine, and I think that just sort of rubs off. Everyone knows that we’re here to just have a good time”. He also offers another theory, one that connects the intimacy of podcasts with the intimacy around sexuality: “I heard this theory that sex can be sort

of a relationship lubricant, so maybe to an extent that extends even to a porn, even if you are not getting off to it. You know, supposedly societies that are very sexually open, there's a lot less conflict in them".

His assumption is backed up by research: Grinde's (2021) study on *Sexual Behavior in Modern Societies* has concluded that openness around sex leads to better social interaction, which would mean fewer conflicts. That leads us to conclude that, by discussing sex in an open and honest way where there are no judgments, *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and *Belinda Blinked* have managed to avoid the toxicity that is inherent to so many fandoms online.

Beyond the repeated and constant listening, the intense engagement, and the connection with the story past the podcast, the overwhelming consequence of engaging with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is clear for the section of the audience I have studied: comfort and fun. While describing the podcast as "silly" and "light-hearted", it is clear the interviewees consider that as its strength – the possibility of having something to rely on that is light and offers solace from real-world problems. That is especially true of the parts in Rocky Flintstone's work that – albeit probably unintentionally – reflect a sexually-liberated utopia, with a strong woman at its forefront. It is that representation that leads the analysis from the discussion of engagement to a discussion of queer male representation in fictional media.

NO REPRESENTATION: WHEN ABSENCE IS ENOUGH

I have previously mentioned Nicholas, whose love for the TV show *Will & Grace* was so intense he chose to go to college to be in the building where the program was recorded. Later in life, his consumption of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* bore some resemblance to those difficult coming-out years, in that the same comfort would be felt. But there was a key difference in that media product: the absence of queer male characters who resembled himself in the *Belinda Blinked* story. For this fan, seeing himself on the screen was of the utmost importance in his teenage years; what had changed in his adulthood?

"When you are younger, or whenever your queer experience is, you do need access to gay characters", said Thomas, adding: "So I think it's important when you are 'finding yourself'". Still, he does believe in the importance of representation, not just for younger people looking to feel better about their places in society, but for himself. The

sentiment is echoed by Quinn, who is currently in a process of self-discovering and questioning gender identities: “Do I personally feel represented now? Not quite”. Quinn continues, justifying why it might be harder to find representation of that stage of life: “As much as I hate to almost dehumanize it, it's that law of numbers, you know, like, if you have 1000 people, there's, what, 20 who are gay, and how many of them are non-binary and, you know... You know, masculine-presenting, but are doing this mashup like what I'm doing. So, it's kind of the law of numbers thing, but I think it's also just... Society is still playing catch up.”

Of course, that is when representation becomes even more important – as Cian says, “I think it's important to normalize queer characters in pop culture, because I am old enough that I remember there being absolutely nothing. And when a queer character or queer show would come around, I can remember there being outrage, ‘it's not suitable’, and... that only makes you feel more abnormal.”

But, for the interviewees, representation for the sake of it can be even worse than no representation at all. Quinn explains: “Sometimes when they try to do representation, where various media formats fail is they try to make it a big hullabaloo... But unfortunately, a lot of the time that gay character, they're either only there for a brief bit, they're a stereotype... For the longest period of time, the only way that you would see a gay male character would have been he's flamboyantly flaming or something like that”. What Quinn describes is the “dehumanizing” feeling that comes from stereotypical images (see Ross & Lester, 2011) which, as I will explore in further sections, impacts the psychological and social engagement of people with underrepresented groups.

So, in one way, *Belinda Blinked* avoids reinforcing stereotypes around queer men by avoiding queer men altogether. While that may not be the best way of representation, it is something that prevents alienating those audiences; as the interviewees pointed out, having a gay male sex scene would have felt “forced” and out of place, and might disconnect them from the material. That is not to say that gay male interaction in the books is completely undesired. Michael tells me that the only time he has ever contacted the hosts of the podcast was when he felt they had ignored the only time Rocky Flintstone confirmed the existence of a male bisexual character in the books.

In the first chapter of *Belinda Blinked 6* (Flintstone, 2022), a state funeral is held for state agent James Spooner and, in a display of the absurdity that is the trademark of the author, the spy has left a will specifying that the line of people following the

procession should be in the order of people he last had sex with. Second in line was a prince – a man! That marked the first confirmation of a bisexual male character, but the hosts read the chapter without mentioning it. That prompted Michael to send them an e-mail regarding that omission. As a researcher, it was interesting to notice that this consequence of engagement had only happened in a matter related to queer male representation: did that mean Michael missed it so much in the plot, and was now excited to have it? He dismisses it: “It was just referencing something that happened with a character that was already dead, so it wasn’t really going to go anywhere”. He also points out that, in the same e-mail, he corrects the hosts on getting a character’s first name wrong and explains away his interaction by saying that he only felt compelled to write to the hosts because that was the only season he heard “in real time”, as the episodes were being released weekly, rather than listening to episodes from years prior.

So, it seems Michael was excited about being in the conversation personally, but not by feeling represented. He is not the only one: “In terms of man-on-man action, I am quite glad that it doesn’t exist, because I do not want that reaction when I’m listening to my favorite podcast”, said Thomas. As one of my first interviewees, Thomas surprised me with that; I went into this research expecting to hear how fans were on tenterhooks expecting a gay sex scene. But the other interviewees would echo that feeling – there was a general consensus that, although they might find it funny to see how Flintstone would handle a male gay relationship, most were glad to not be included. Cian believes that, if the author had included it, it might’ve been either “boring and pedestrian” to avoid hurting anyone’s feelings, or it would be “so over-the-top”, it would be unbelievable – even more so than usual.

Finally, there is one more silver lining that interviewees have identified in the absence of gay male sex in the books. “If there’s shows that are gay themed, and then it’s just super oversexualized... I can sometimes end up rolling my eyes at it”, says Michael, hinting at another common theme for the interviewees: that representation of sexual orientation matters, as long as it is not limited to the sexual aspects of one’s life. Interviewees look for representation in characters that they can relate to in many aspects, not just – or at least, not exclusively – to their sexual orientation.

BELINDA BLUMENTHAL: AN ACCIDENTAL GAY MALE ICON?

In the Christmas special story, *It's a Blinking Christmas*, present in *The Naughty Bits* (Flintstone, 2021), we have the only open discussion about sexual orientation in the *Belinda Blinked* series. That happens after Belinda and The Duchess, in an alternate timeline, have their first sexual encounter:

‘I can’t remember the last time I was touched like that. But I’m confused, does that make me a lesbian?’
‘Oh, Gertrude’, Belinda replied, ‘labels are for gifts under the tree, never for those who are sexually free.’
(Flintstone, 2022, Chapter 6, n.p.)

That is a prime example of how sexual orientations are (not) discussed in the *Belinda Blinked* books: characters will do what they want, when they want, with whoever is willing. “It’s very gay, in that it’s just something to do, everyone’s consenting and it’s just something people do for fun. It’s not... It’s not straight porn”, describes David when asked about how he feels about the way that Rocky Flintstone portrays sex in the books. It might be tempting to argue David is drawing on stereotypes here, but that is one of the advantages of doing a study that focuses on people’s personal experiences: rather than speaking for the community, David speaks for his life story and the way that he relates with the characters.

Not everyone agrees that the characters in *Belinda Blinked* represent them: as Matthew says, “I don’t need to be in every single thing”. He, like a lot of the other interviewees, argues that what attracts him to *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is not that he can see himself, but rather that it does not exclude him. “It inherently feels like an inclusive book series and podcast as well, so I never felt excluded by not being included”, echoes Cian. That is where identification comes from for most fans, from the sexual liberation the characters experience in the story: “It made me happy how kind of casually they were discussing these topics, and no one was judging any of the acts, really”, Nicholas tells me, before telling an inside joke relating to a specific chapter of *Belinda Blinked 5*.

In that sense, Belinda does represent something for those fans that they wish they could see more of in the real world: a strong character who does not justify herself and, more importantly, who is never *expected* to justify anything. Labels are never before or again discussed in the *Belinda Blinked* universe: as Cian points out, certain plot points

allude to the fact that the characters understand that other sexual orientations exist, but they never need to be spoken out, as long as everyone is happy with what they are doing.

“They’re very open about sexuality... The whole female empowerment thing is a very strong component of it”, says Quinn, noticing how the presence of strong female characters adds to the feeling of identification with the podcast, even though Quinn doesn’t identify as female. Matthew also adds that the treatment of characters who don’t adhere to certain gender norms or expectations heightens the sense of belonging with the series, when speaking of The Duchess: “They made her seem like... Probably exaggerated masculine, and I wasn’t sure if it was gonna be, like, ‘surprise!’”, he explains, referring to a possible revelation that The Duchess character might be a trans woman. Thankfully, that is not the case: “But no, I just like that... It’s just a masculine woman. There doesn’t need to be anything more than that”.

Matthew finishes this thought with a feeling that is very dear to all interviewees, and which reflects their relationship with the matter of representation: “A lot of the people who want to include me cannot write me, and they really don’t need to”. Through this absence, the transmedia story created by the books and the podcast nurtures a space for a unique fan engagement, where, although queer male fans are not included in the narrative, they are still able to feel they are not judged and, therefore, sense their own space in an environment of openness and acceptance. Those characteristics lead to a different understanding of representation, which will be the topic of the following section.

UNDERSTANDING REPRESENTATION FOR TODAY’S QUEER MALE AUDIENCE

What becomes clear from my conversations with queer male fans of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is that the usual concept of representation in media does not encompass their feelings and experiences. At the beginning of his seminal work on the matter of representation in the media, Stuart Hall (1997) first attempts to define representation:

One common-sense usage of the term is as follows: ‘Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people.’ You may well ask, ‘Is that all?’ Well, yes and no. Representation *is* an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It *does* involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for

or represent things. But this is a far from simple or straightforward process (...) (Hall, 1997. p. 15)

Stuart Hall, one of the most recognized experts on the matter, struggles to provide a simple, straightforward definition of the term and its usage in media right at the start of the work, precisely because it is a complex concept. Representation is to represent and to bring a piece of the world to people, and it is part of the production of culture, but it is more than that. Add to that sentiment two and a half decades of technological change that has brought societal change, and a definition becomes even more complex.

It is telling that for Jacob, the youngest (21) interviewee, representation in media bears a different weight, while the majority of the interviewees, who are in their thirties, describe how representation used to be a more meaningful aspect for them when they were younger. The obvious inference from those comments is that, as queer men get older, representation becomes less important to them; however, that would ignore the context of generational experiences. Of course, different generations live in different contexts; and, with the quick advance of the digital age, the differences between generations have been heightened (see Gravett and Throckmorton, 2007). That was one of the advantages of having a sample not pre-determined in terms of age: by having most of my interviewees in the Millennial generation, with a couple of older and younger outliers, I could find differences in their experiences according to age.

In the queer male community, we are still experiencing a formational, collective generational trauma: the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. In the aftermath of the worst decades of the AIDS epidemic, the male homosexual experience has been defined by it and, to an extent, still is¹⁶. In recent memory, one case of representation in media of a gay male's experience with AIDS has sparked controversy: the portrayal of the bisexual character Justin Foley, who dies after complications of contracting the HIV virus and never being tested. The fact that this storyline takes place in present-time, with testing for sexually transmittable infections being a common reality, drew controversy and outrage from queer groups.¹⁷

¹⁶ Source: <<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/aids-epidemic-lasting-impact-gay-men/?from=homepage>>. Accessed on 12 May 2023.

¹⁷ Source: <<https://www.them.us/story/13-reasons-why-hiv-aids-backlash>>. Accessed on 11 May 2023.

What the pushback to that narrative from the queer community shows is that with the advancement of the medical treatment of HIV, the LGBTQ+ community expects a similar advance in the media treatment of such a delicate matter. Cian mentions how, in his early years, gay male representation was confined to characters who would invariably die of AIDS. In comparison, less than 30 years later, a character's death from the disease is viewed as a disservice to the community.

That is evident in the opinions of the Millennials interviewed for this study. Quinn and Matthew both use the term "punchline" to express the type of representation they are not interested in seeing, especially when that representation does not give the queer characters other personality traits. So, what is the representation that queer male fans crave, and what representation are they flocking towards?

When asked to define what "representation in media" means, Nicholas strays away from the idea that representation is seeing yourself: "Representation is seeing not yourself, but a symbol or an icon of yourself projected towards you, so that you can kind of imagine yourself as being a part of a certain community or an area". Some interviewees do not hesitate to include the characteristics of *good* representation in their definitions: when I asked Quinn, the response was "the inclusion of characters that aren't the stereotypical normal for the environment (...) and doing so in ways that aren't using them as a punchline or as some kind of stereotype of themselves".

That is where the concept of camp as an aesthetic resonates with queer males: rather than using their experiences and existence as a punchline, camp uses simple exaggeration as a form of humor, avoiding the punchline from being based simply on sexual orientation. As queer communities seek a way for feeling, if not included, at least *not excluded*, they learn to relate to things even if they are not outright represented in them. From the queer male engagement from Quinn's (and the others) with *Belinda Blinked*, we can see that is where the story strongly resonates with that group: by treating people of different expressions, different characteristics, and different backgrounds as normal people, rather than stereotypes. When phrased like that, representation seems like a simple threshold for most media products to cross – and yet, underrepresented communities still are not being represented enough.

CONCLUSION

“Bring it back. I want it back, I don’t care in what way or form... Either a stage show, or a TV show... Do not disappoint me, bring it all back”, pleaded Christopher after I asked for his parting thoughts on our interview. As much as I wish I had any influence on the future of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, that is not my role here: I was simply listening to fans, and in that position, I was glad to do so. It struck me that Christopher would use this space between a fan and a researcher to voice a desire to the producers of the podcast. It was a perfect illustration of a fan trying to get his voice heard, to change the fate of their favored piece of media.

Fans have a history of feeling ignored by media producers and going to great lengths to have their feelings validated. From the massive letter-writing campaign to save the original run of *Star Trek* in the 1960s¹⁸, to the recent release of *Zack Snyder’s Justice League*¹⁹, fans have been vocal in demanding that their experience counts for those in charge of making them.

I hope that this study has allowed them to feel like they were heard. My intention was to understand what attracted queer men to engage with a media product focused on sex that ignored their sexual orientation, and by doing so, to propose a broader understanding of what representation in media is and how people can feel comfortable in media spaces that they are not expected to occupy. The dedicated *Belinkers* who have agreed to participate in this research have helped me find those answers.

Firstly, the matter of seeing yourself represented in media seems to be of the utmost importance for queer men while they are still trying to find themselves, be it through accepting their identity, coming out, or looking for like-minded individuals who can help them navigate their realities in the face of oppression in society. As that section of the audience ages, the quality of that representation becomes more and more important. Interviewees have shared that, once they feel secure in themselves, they would rather avoid any representation that reduces their experiences to a stereotype or to the punchline

¹⁸ Source: <<https://intl.startrek.com/news/living-star-trek-how-two-women-breathed-new-life-into-the-franchise>>. Accessed on 13 May 2023.

¹⁹ Source: <<https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/movies/how-unprecedented-fan-campaign-powered-zack-snyder-s-cut-justice-n1261216>>. Accessed on 12 May 2023.

of a joke; in those cases, it was preferable to engage with media that does not attempt to represent them at all.

The particular case of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* offered to those queer male audiences that respectful absence, but also supplied them with a sense of comfort in the possibility of being open and expressing themselves. Through the fans' ability to relate to the characters in the novellas and with the hosts of the podcast, they felt an embracing community where, although they were not explicitly mentioned, they could feel that their existence and their characteristics would not be questioned or judged.

That safe environment in media extended to the fandom around it: fans related feeling safe in the Reddit community dedicated to *My Dad Wrote a Porno* precisely because knowing how the humor is appealing to like-minded individuals, they would not be ostracized as they would in other media fandoms.

Does this mean that, in the absence of a careful representation, no representation is the best option? Not in all cases: even though the more experienced interviewees reflected that they looked for representation less as they felt more secure in their identities, they also attributed it to the growing number of characters they *can* relate to in media while looking fondly at the new generations who have the opportunity to see them as they grow up.

Additionally, it is important to reinforce that queer male fans of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* are not “settling” for the absence of representation in the *Belinda Blinked* books. They have all mentioned consuming other media that do represent them and linked the intensity of their engagement with the podcast to a feeling that it is never exclusive, and it always feels connected to their personal experiences and preferences.

Therefore, rather than seeing the lack of straightforward representation in *Belinda Blinked* books as a characteristic that queer male fans overlook, my interpretation of these results is that *My Dad Wrote a Porno* offers a more subtle, nuanced feeling of representation for the queer male fans it has attracted and retained.

This thesis positions *My Dad Wrote a Porno* as another example of podcasts' possibilities to transform conversations around social issues, be it through the importance it has for its queer audience or through the societal impact of a broader and better representation in media. In doing so, the study has understood the meaning of representation as complex and ever-changing, as Hall (1997) proposes, which meant showing that representation for the queer male fans of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* comes not

only from seeing characters with the same characteristics as marginalized groups of society but as part of the creation of a media space where these groups can feel safe and secure without the fear of being judged or ostracized.

Answering the research questions proposed in the introduction, we can say that *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and *Belinda Blinked* attract and retain the engagement of male queer fans in the following ways:

1. Queer male audiences show interest in the podcast, at first, because of a perceived appeal in the camp aesthetic of discussing pornography in a humoristic way.
2. Once engaged with the podcast, queer male fans find the hosts and the writer to be open to discussing sexuality openly and without judgement, which makes them feel safe and without fear of being judged.
3. The absence of queer male representation in the story avoids the possibility of stereotyping or oversexualizing queer male identities, making queer male fans feel even safer knowing they will not be exposed to disappointing representations of themselves.

For the second research question, we can say that queer male fans engage with the podcast and the books in ways that reflect their feelings towards representation, as follows:

1. Through embracing the open discussion around sexuality as a sign that the community of fans around the podcast, as well as the producers themselves, are accepting of all gender identities and sexual orientations.
2. By incorporating the podcast into their daily lives in an intimate way, allowing their own identities to be defined by that broad sense of representation that stems from the openness.
3. Creating fan communities (online, with personal friends, and on live shows) that embody this openness by being free of judgement and without any toxicity towards gender identities and sexualities.

In summation, this thesis has explored the ways in which queer male fans engage with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and *Belinda Blinked*, to understand what attracts them to a media product centered around sexuality that does not represent their sexual orientation. The findings have shown that a media product with camp aesthetics has an initial draw to a queer male community, and by being open and unjudging about sexualities, the presence

of representation becomes unnecessary – and, for some fans, even unwanted. That openness and lack of judgement are enough for queer male fans to feel the comfort that many productions that do *attempt* representation end up not achieving; meanwhile, the absence of queer male characters avoids any association with possible “bad” representation, characterized by being stereotyped and oversexualized.

After hearing the fans, their experiences, and their pleas to bring the podcast back to life, I can say that, for them, there will never be another *My Dad Wrote a Porno*. But there are, and there will continue to be, other pieces of media like it: products that fulfill the media's responsibility to ensure that there will always be safe spaces and communities for people who are marginalized and persecuted to find the support and the acceptance some people insist on denying them. And I hope that, if and when the media landscape fails to fulfill that role, the queer male community can still find solace in each other and in the spaces that might not include them, but actively work to not exclude them.

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podcast-listening](https://www.wbur.org/npr/582105045/its-all-in-your-head-the-one-way-intimacy-of-podcast-listening).

APPENDICES

RECRUITMENT POSTER FOR INTERVIEWEES

This is the image used to recruit interviewees, posted on Twitter, Reddit, and Instagram. The design was made by me, based on the cover art for the podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno*.



CONSENT TERM

The consent term was read out before each interview and was considered agreed upon after confirming the first and last name of all the interviewees.

This research seeks to explore the engagement of male queer fans with the podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and its source material, the *Belinda Blinked* books. I will ask questions about your reactions and participation with the podcast and the fandom. The interview should last around 60 minutes. The data will only be used within the confinement of my Master's Thesis in Media and Communication Studies at Lund University.

With your consent, the audio of our interview will be recorded, and I will use portions of the transcribed dialogue to present my findings. The audio file will be labelled and tagged in ways to ensure data privacy. All files will be kept in a secure folder on a local hard drive, not available on any cloud service. I ensure that your identity will remain anonymous and any information that could possibly lead to your identification will be redacted.

Please feel free to say as much or as little as you want. You can decide not to answer questions or stop the interview at any time you want. Do you consent to those terms?

[IF YES, THEN]

Thank you so much! Could you please tell me your first and last name? That information will be redacted afterwards, but I just need it for confirmation in my archives.

INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following is the interview guide that was used for the pilot interviews:

Could you please tell me how do you identify yourself in regards to your gender and sexual orientation?

Part 1 - Engagement

1. Do you remember when you first started listening to the podcast, or how you came to know about it?
 - a. First impressions (about the name, the people)
 - b. Who recommended
 - c. Where did you listen, who with
2. Do you have friends who listen to the podcast with you?
 - a. Online? Offline?
 - b. Were you recommended? Did you recommend?
3. What are your listening habits?
 - a. Listened to it once? Multiple times?
 - b. Right when it came out? Binged? One a day?
 - c. Still listen?
4. Do you engage with other material related to the podcast?
 - a. Read the books?
 - b. Social media?
 - c. Rocky?
 - d. Rocky's podcast?
 - e. Alice's other podcasts?
5. How do you feel about the podcast? What do you like about it, what do you not like about it? Would you change anything? Is it one of your favorites?

Part 2 - Fandom

6. Do you consider yourself a fan of the podcast?
 - a. What type of fan?
 - b. Ever produced anything?
7. Did you ever participate on events related to the podcast?
 - a. Live shows?
 - b. Listening parties?
 - c. Anything else?
8. Was there ever a time when you lost interest?
9. How do you feel being a fan?
10. Are you a fan of other podcasts?
11. What was your relation to podcasts before MDWAP?

Part 3 - Porn and Sexuality

1. What was your knowledge of erotic literature before the podcast?
 - a. Amateur erotic literature?
2. Do you consider MDWAP to be in the "porn" genre?
3. Do you feel consuming MDWAP is different from consuming other pornographic material?

4. Do you feel consuming MDWAP is different from consuming other comedy material?
5. Do you consume any other form of media that mixes pornography or erotica with comedy?
6. How do you feel about the way that sex is portrayed in the books?
7. How do you feel about the way that sexuality is portrayed in the books?
8. In some episodes, both James and some fans talk about the absence of male-on-male sex in the books. How do you feel about that?
9. Did you ever expect to hear about male-on-male sex in the podcast?
10. How does the absence of that part of sexuality affects you as a listener?
11. Do you feel like the podcast is a "safe space" for same-sex oriented male listeners?

Part 4 - Representation

12. Do you consider representation in media to be important? Why?
13. Have you ever consumed any media specifically because you were curious about representation, or heard there was representation that resonated to you?
14. Do you feel like Belinda Blinked is good representation?
15. Do you feel MDWAP is good representation?
16. Do you personally feel represented in either the books or the podcast?
17. Had you ever considered those questions before, or are those new reflections to you?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

EXPLORATORY INTERVIEWS

The process of piloting began in January of 2023. Preliminary results from the piloting already indicated some of the themes that would arise from the conversations, especially the fans' feelings towards representation and its absence in *Belinda Blinked*. The table below shows the interviews which were not considered for the process of coding and analyzing.

#	DATE	DURATION	AGE	NATIONALITY	GENDER	SEXUALITY	REASON
01	27.JAN	00:38:47	32	British	Male	Gay	Pilot interview
02	01.FEB	00:35:30	26	Slovak/British	Male	Gay	Pilot interview
03	01.FEB	00:37:42	31	Canadian	Male	Gay	Pilot interview
04	15.FEB	00:50:37	25	British	Male	Gay	Pilot interview
05	06.MAR	00:21:36	19	Canadian	Female	Did not disclose	Gender
06	11.APR	01:05:35	28	Brazilian	Male	Gay	Friendship

In addition to the pilot interviews, two interviews were discarded due to not fitting into the sample. One of them, number 05, was of a volunteer for the interviews who disclosed that she was a cis woman during the interview; while I was surprised that she would volunteer for this study considering the criteria established in the invitation post, I welcomed her insights, before ultimately deciding that her views, while relevant for a larger context, did not pertain to this study.

The second discarded interview was conducted as a personal exercise. Knowing that I would need to discard it later due to a conflict of interest, I still decided to conduct the interview with a personal friend of mine, a Brazilian who was the person who introduced me to the podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, back in 2019. Thankfully, his interview did not need to be used, as it proved to be evidence of saturation of the themes found within the previous interviewees.

FINAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following is the final interview guide that was used for all of the 12 transcribed and coded interviews.

Are you comfortable in telling me how do you identify in regard to your gender and sexual orientation?

How do you identify in terms of fandom of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* – are you a fan, a super fan, a casual fan, a mega fan... which words would you use to describe yourself?

Part 1 - Podcast Engagement and Spaces

1. Tell me a little bit about how you started listening to *My Dad Wrote a Porno*.
 - a. Did someone recommend it to you?
 - b. Did you binge-listen to it at first, or would you listen slowly?
 - c. What were your first reactions - to the name, to the episodes, to the theme, etc.?
2. Are you a podcast listener?
 - a. Did you listen to other podcasts before, or was *MDWaP* the first?
 - b. Have you listened to other podcasts related to *MDWaP*? (Guest podcasts, spin-off, Alice Levine's other shows, etc.)
 - c. Is *MDWaP* one of your favorites, or is it "just another one" that you listen to?
3. Are you still involved with the podcast now?
 - a. Do you listen to Rocky's spin-off podcast?
 - b. Do you plan to read the future books if they are not featured in any podcast?
 - c. Do you re-listen to the podcast currently, or do you plan to in the future?
 - d. Do you recommend the podcast to friends?
4. How did you listen to the podcast?
 - a. Alone or with friends/partner?
 - b. On the way to work? At home?
 - c. Would you comment about it - in real life or on the internet?
5. How would you describe *My Dad Wrote a Porno*?
6. How would you describe *Belinda Blinked*?
7. Have you gotten involved with the podcast or the producers in social media?
 - a. The producers' Instagram and Twitter accounts?
 - b. Rocky's Twitter?
8. Did you ever get involved with the fan community?
 - a. Twitter, Instagram, or Reddit communities?
 - b. Live shows?
9. Was the podcast in any way present in your everyday life?
 - a. Memes?
 - b. Conversations with friends?
 - c. Involvement in other media - i.e., Alice Levine's other shows, Jamie and James's new musical, guest podcasters in *MDWaP*, etc.

10. (IF NEEDED): Are you connected to other fans of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*?
 - a. Friends?
 - b. Online communities?
11. A lot of queer men are very involved in the *My Dad Wrote a Porno* fandom, even though they are not present in the *Belinda Blinked* books. In your experience, what about the books and the podcast attracted you to become a fan?
12. Do you, in any way, express your gender and sexuality within the fandom?
13. How do you feel is the attitude of the fans towards queer men?
 - a. Can you compare that to other fandoms you are a part of?
14. Do you feel like the fandom of the podcast is a safe space?
 - a. How do you think the podcast hosts, guests and fans have created this space?

Part 2 - Porn and Sexuality

1. Before listening to the podcast, did you have any knowledge or relation to the genre of "amateur erotic literature"?
2. How do you feel about the way that sex is portrayed by Rocky Flintstone in the *Belinda Blinked* books?
3. How do you feel about the way that sex is discussed by Jamie, James and Alice in *My Dad Wrote a Porno*?
4. Have you ever read the books by themselves, without listening to the podcast?
 - a. If so, how was the experience different?
5. In some episodes, James discusses the absence of same-sex male relationships in the books. Do you have any thoughts about this?
 - a. Had you ever considered this absence before James's comments about it?
6. Were you ever expecting there to be same-sex male relationships in *Belinda Blinked*?
7. *My Dad Wrote a Porno* mixes comedy and sexuality. How do you feel about this mixture of genres?
8. Are you a fan of any other books, movies, shows, or podcasts that have this "mix"?
 - a. If so, do you consider *My Dad Wrote a Porno* to be any different? Why?
 - b. If so, do any of these have same-sex male representation?
 - i. If so, how do you feel about that presence in the stories?

Part 3 - Representation

1. Thinking about media in general, do you consider representation to be important? Why?
2. When you are choosing a book, a movie, or a show, is representation a factor in your choice?
 - a. If so, do you have any examples?
3. Do you feel like you are represented in fiction?
 - a. Are you happy with that representation?
4. Are you a fan of anything that you consider has a good representation of sexual diversity?
5. Are you a fan of anything that you feel "was not made for you"? For instance, something that is very representative of the straight male gaze, or stories that involve a different ethnicity than yours?

- a. If so, what has attracted you to those stories?
6. Do you feel represented in the *Belinda Blinked* books?
7. Do you feel represented in the *My Dad Wrote a Porno* podcast?
8. Have your thoughts about representation in the books or in the podcast ever influenced the way you feel about *My Dad Wrote a Porno*?
9. We have covered a few different questions in the interview. What seems like new questions we can ask about *My Dad Wrote a Porno*?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

The following is a transcript of the interview conducted with “Nicholas” to exemplify the process of transcribing and the mood of the conversations in the semi-structured interviews.

Okay, so here's the consent term. This research seeks to explore the engagement of male queer fans with the podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and its source material, the *Belinda Blinked* books. I will ask questions about your reactions and participation with the podcast and the fandom. The interview should last around 60 minutes. The data will only be used within the confinement of my Master's Thesis in Media and Communication Studies at Lund University. With your consent, the audio of our interview will be recorded, and I will use portions of the transcribed dialogue to present my findings. The audio file will be labelled and tagged in ways to ensure data privacy. All files will be kept in a secure folder on a local hard drive, not available on any cloud service. I ensure that your identity will remain anonymous and any information that could possibly lead to your identification will be redacted. You can feel free to say as much or as little as you want, and decide not to answer questions or stop the interview at any time you want. Do you consent to those terms?

Yes.

Perfect, thank you. So, this will be redacted, but could you just confirm your first and last name, please?

[REDACTED]

Okay, and your age?

30.

And your nationality?

American, white.

Okay! So, are you comfortable in telling me how do you identify in terms of gender and sexual orientation?

Yeah. Ahm, cis gay.

And how do you identify as a fan of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*? Are you a casual fan, a super fan... What words would you use to describe yourself?

Ahm... Pretty addicted to it. Listened to it... It's like my comfort podcast.

Take me back to the start, how did you start listening to it?

So... Yeah, I was in undergraduate and I had a coworker at my job who wouldn't stop talking about it, and it just sounded so ridiculous that one day I was like, "I'm gonna give it a go!" and at that point, I think there were three seasons, maybe two, out. And maybe within a week I was caught up, and I just couldn't get enough. And I just kept re-listening.

Nice. Were you a podcast listener before, or was that your first?

It was one of the firsts. Ahm... I don't know if you're familiar with *Attitudes*, formerly known as *Throwing Shade*, by Bryan Safi and Erin Gibson, but that was the other one that I was kind of obsessed with. Still am.

And since then, have you started listening to more podcasts, do you still have the habit?

Yeah. I listen to pretty much exclusively podcasts.

Nice. And now that you've listened to a lot of them, how does *My Dad Wrote a Porno* rank for you?

I was devastated when I found out it was ending, because I was just like, there's gonna be a hole. And I still feel that way. Ahm, I would love for them to come back, although I wish them the best in what they're doing now.

Do you listen to anything else that is related to it? Like, there is a new podcast by Rocky, and there's other podcasts where they are featured... Have you gotten into any of that?

I've tried Rocky's podcast, ahm, I couldn't really get into it. But it was also the first couple of episodes, and I know it's changed since then. I can't think of anything else, though, that I've listened to that they've been in.

And how would you listen to the podcast, when you first started listening to it? You've mentioned that you were listening to it pretty fast, but would you listen to it with someone, or on your way to work, did you have a routine?

So I would usually listen to it on the way to work, walking to work. And then I would listen to it during my breaks, and then I would kind of like bookmark moments on my Notes app on my phone and then go back to my partner and be like, "Oh my God, you need to listen to this, this is so funny". And he did not understand it, he was like, "This isn't my cup of tea, but I'm glad you like it". Ahm, so, yeah, that's kind of my relationship with it.

Would you recommend it to other people, like friends, or...?

Yes, definitely.

How would you try to describe the podcast to them, to get them to listen?

You know, I would basically give the sort of plot points, I'd be like, "So, this dude's dad wrote a porno, ostensibly it was a serious thing, and he shared it with his son, and his son realized how ridiculous it is, and decided to start sharing it on a podcast, but just like, to give you some background of how out-of-touch the father is, it's called *Belinda Blinked*, and that's a sexy name, I guess, that's sort of what we're going with..." And that is where I'd leave it, and I'd be like, "Can I just tell you about some specific moments?"

And you started describing the book, *Belinda Blinked*, but how would you describe them?

Honestly, I've not read the books, so that would be tough. If I were... But like, the story. Okay, I guess I would just describe it as, I don't know if Rocky would agree, but I would describe it as a ridiculous satire of what sex is like, I guess.

Did you ever get involved with the podcast or with the producers on social media?

I followed them on Instagram, but that's the extent of it. I don't have a Twitter.

Okay. What about other fans, have you ever come across other fans online?

Other than on the Reddit, which is where I saw your post for this, not really. But I frequent the posts on the *My Dad Wrote a Porno* reddit.

Tell me a little bit about it, because I'm really bad at Reddit. So what is it like, what do you usually do on the *My Dad Wrote a Porno* subreddit?

Ahm, I really like, so... What first kind of got me on Reddit, I'm fairly new to it as well, I joined Reddit and I was sad that *My Dad Wrote a Porno* was ending, so I was just kind of reading about it, and everyone was kind of, like, "Oh my God, what is gonna happen", like, "Can we stay in touch? Can we start a book club?" whatever, and I didn't follow through with that, but I love that. I love that sense of community, I thought that was really cute, that something so silly and ridiculous could really bring people together in that way. And then the way that I kind of engaged with it personally is that, whenever someone would post something silly, like, ahm, you know, if there was an eyeshadow palette named after moments of the *Belinda Blinked* series, what would the top five colors be named? And then engaging with just kind of that ridiculous rhetoric, right, so... Like, I'm drawing a blank right now. "Adaam's Lazy Black Thong", or something like that. So.

So did you join Reddit because of it, or were you starting up on Reddit and you came across it?

So I downloaded the Reddit app because I was so sick of trying to read something and then the pop-up being like, "Do you wanna do this on the website or the app?" So I joined it, and then I kind of got sucked into the app because I kept getting suggestions for *My Dad Wrote a Porno*. And they were amusing me so much, and the podcast was ending, that I kind of started refreshing it more and more, you know?

Have you joined other subreddits, not related to *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, but are there other fandoms or subreddits for media products that you follow?

No, not really. That's the main media one. There are other groups, right, like dedicated to... I don't know, specific, like, chinchillas. I have a chinchilla as a pet, so I'm like, on chinchilla reddit. But that's really it. As far as media and entertainment goes.

Oh, interesting. Okay. Did you ever go to any of the live shows?

I didn't, and I'm really sad about that.

I don't know if you've noticed that on Reddit, it's kind of where I started seeing it more. There were some posts about, specifically, the amount of gay men that were in the subreddit, and there was one that's... They pulled together data from a website that basically said, if you are on the *My Dad Wrote a Porno* subreddit, you have ten times more chance of being a gay man than in other subreddits. So I was wondering, have you ever come across anything like that in the subreddit, was that something that you ever noticed?

No. No, it doesn't really surprise me, because as a community I feel like it caters to our sense of humor in a lot of ways, but... Yeah, I've never actually noticed me.

In what ways, do you think?

There is something very camp about Rocky, whether he intends it to be that way or not, right? So, yeah, I don't know, it's sort of catered-made in that way, in the sense that it's very campy. It's over the top, it's absurd, it doesn't take itself too seriously, that sort of thing.

Is that what attracted you to the podcast?

It was definitely the absurdity of it that attracted me to it. I've always been someone who, I don't know if you're familiar with, like, Cracked.com. Do you remember that website? It's like, actually, she was a guest star on *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, the woman who played *Matilda*. Ah, yeah, she was a writer for the comedy part of their website. It was basically BuzzFeed before BuzzFeed. But they had, like, a specific sex section, and it was weird sex facts and statistics and articles and stuff. And I would spend so much time just reading those and laughing. And so, when I found *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, it seemed very, like, "Oh, this was made for you".

So this mixture of comedy and sex, that was something you were already familiar with?

Yeah.

Do you consume anything else that is like that?

Ahm... I would say, maybe not as blatantly, but I mean... I grew up on *Will & Grace*, that TV show. I grew up in a very conservative, catholic family, and I was not expected... It wasn't okay for me to be gay, so for me to kind of come to terms with that, I found a chosen family in *Will & Grace*. Ahm... And that show, of course, makes a lot of sex jokes, especially from Jack and Karen. I ended up going to undergrad... This is,

like, how my brain works. You're gonna see this, I'm very obsessed. I get obsessed with things. I ended up going to undergrad at Emerson College, where the set of *Will & Grace* was in the library, at the time. And during all of my down time, I would just sit in front of the set and, like, project my sort of, like, chosen family reality into that set. And so, yeah, like I was saying, when *My Dad Wrote a Porno* was ending, I felt like literally a piece of me was, like, going away. And I was like, how do I hold on to this? So yeah, so as far as comedy and sex and the tangling of the two, I feel like I always sort of sought out that material. Like *Sex Education* on Netflix, right? That TV show, love that show. I mentioned *Throwing Shade*, the podcast, now known as *Attitude*, that's kind of their sense of humor a lot of the time.

Those are very interesting examples you bring up with *Will & Grace* and *Sex Education*, because those have the representation of having gay characters, and that is something that is mentioned in the podcast by James and a few fans, that Rocky never goes there. So, in the *Belinda Blinked* world, we never have same-sex male relationships. Do you have any thoughts about this?

Right, it's... I think it was, ahm, Jamie who said that he would like to "have seen the delicate way in which Rocky would've handled" that topic, and I also would have liked to see that, because of course it would have been offensive, but I think that would be funny in and of itself. Ahm... So I found it disappointing. I do believe, correct me if I'm wrong, but they allude to two male characters as being bisexual at one point, but nothing ever really comes of that. So I'll say it was disappointing, because I think it was kind of an opportunity for humor. I'm not gonna say representation, because I don't think anyone should look to that series for representation, but... Yeah. It's a little disappointing.

But let's talk about representation, then. What is representation for you, just so we get a ground definition on that?

For sure. So, I mean, representation is seeing not yourself, but a symbol or an icon of yourself projected towards you so that you can kind of imagine yourself as being a part of a certain community or an area. That's kind of the baseline I'm starting at when I'm thinking of representation.

And personally, is that important for you?

I mean... Going back to the *Will & Grace* thing, right? There's a reason I've latched on to that. When I was a kid in middle school coming to terms with my sexuality and being told, like, "oh, that's disgusting, you can't think that way", whatever. And then I saw it, like, genuinely embraced in *Will & Grace*... That was significant to me, right? It helped with my own coming to terms with my sexuality. So, yes, it is important. As someone who is comfortable in their sexuality now, it's not something that I necessarily need *per se*, or maybe I just take it for granted at this point, because it's more common, but... Yeah.

Do you feel like now you are represented in media?

More so, but I think that most of the time when there is... There are queer characters, right, especially gay male characters, it's straightwashed, right? It is catering towards a

straight audience. I would absolutely love to see, ahm, queer characters that aren't exclusively defined by their relationship to the closet, right? And I don't think we see that. So, in that way, I don't think Rocky would have approached it as "Hey, this is a heartfelt coming out story", right? It would've been just grotesque, gnarly sex.

In the other hand, basically all of the female characters are at least bisexual. So how do you feel about the way that Rocky handled that in the narrative?

I mean, it's definitely objectification, right? But I feel like everyone is objectified, when we're talking about... Who's the dude that jizzes blue cum?

Jim Sterling.

Right. Belinda is swimming in an ocean of blue semen, right? That's objectification. Do I think there's a greater emphasis on the bodies of women and the sexual exchanges between women? Yes. But do I think that we're talking about an ostensibly heterosexual man? Yes. So it's to be expected. So I don't find it offensive, personally.

It's very interesting with the examples that you've brought up so far because like you said, they're not very representative of catering to a straight audience. But are you a fan of anything that you feel is catered to a straight audience? Like, in general, movies or shows that are made for straight men, but you're still into them?

Yes. Days Gone, the video game. Which was low-key cancelled because, ahm, the main character is like a groff motorcycle dude... At one point, during the wedding scene between him and his fiancée, right, she says "I do, as long as you promise to ride me as much as you ride your bike". Yeah, exactly. Like, that's a grotesque display of toxic masculinity, right? And this woman is purely defined in this game by her relationship to her husband, but I love that game.

What has attracted you to it?

I love, ahm, survival. So that's like a zombie apocalypse survival open world thing. But beyond that, there's a very genuine relationship between the characters, even if somewhat stunted, that I think unfolds throughout. I think... I don't know, it's hard to encapsulate, because I feel there's a beautiful soundtrack, like, Lewis Capaldi has a song there that is stunning and really helps the narrative... Yeah, I don't know. It's a work of art.

How do you feel now, talking about these things - that difference between something that really made you feel accepted, that embraced community or family, against something that you kind of have to set something aside to enjoy, like that? How does that make you feel?

Hmm, that's a good question. I think... It's more like, I think of *Days Gone* and thinks that I don't think are catered to queerness in any capacity, I'm interested in it in sort of a sociological perspective. Like, that line I said where they're getting married, like, first of all that's something Rocky would write. But, uhm... I just remember thinking... So when I was playing that, it was Thanksgiving. It was the last Thanksgiving I had with my now

ex, so it was kind of like, we knew things would be ending soon, and I just remember thinking, like, is that really what love is? And so I just found myself kind of fixated on this game, where he is very stereotypical masculine, he's like, former military, he's now part of a biker gang, the world has ended, she was a botanist, and they meet over her picking flowers, and then of course she's gonna get raped by some fucking marauders or whatever I think it was, and he saves her... So it was a very, like, cis-het, you know, meet-cute-slash-problematic, and I don't know, I just remember thinking that day, like, "Is that really all it is? Is love that easy, is it that formulaic?". So I look at those sorts of stories and there's a part of me that can't relate, because I know that's not something that I'll ever necessarily experience, whereas when I see content like *Will & Grace*, or *Modern Family*, even, right, even though I don't have kids, don't want kids. Like, I could experience that. It's easier for me to kind of digest, it involves less work for me. So I don't need to look at it as an outsider, per se, which of course is a nice feeling of representation.

Do you feel you get involved differently?

I involve with the content differently, yes.

And bringing this to *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and *Belinda Blinked*, how do you feel you get involved with it?

Ahm... So, there's this meme, where there's like a... I think I saw it on Reddit, actually. It's like, "Me listening to podcasts", and there's a billboard of these, like, three girls, and they're having a sleepover and they're giggling or whatever, and there's an awkward person on the side pretending to be a part of that picture. And that's kind of my relationship with *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, right. Like, I'm the weird outsider who wants desperately to be a part of that group, and in some capacity I can fake it and pretend like I am by listening to it. There are moments that I have memorized and, you know, I will say them as they happen when I'm listening to it happening, right. But... I don't know, I kind of went on a tangent, I don't remember what the question was, I'm gonna be honest.

No, that's great, that's great. Honestly, it is. You've answered the question, basically. But why do you think that is, what brings you that feeling of being in the room with them?

So, with the last season... I know there were some complaints about, people were like "oh, you can tell it was ending". Because they weren't as focused on the story, right? There was a lot of gossiping, and there was a lot of just sidebars. But I think that makes it very genuine, I found the last season to be one of the more enjoyable seasons for that reason, actually at first, though, I'm not gonna lie, I had similar feelings. I was like, something feels different about this. But it wasn't until I saw someone say that on Reddit that I was like, wait a second, is that what it was? And I listened back and, that is what it was. They seemed less engaged with the story. But, they seemed more engaged with each other, and I loved that, right? Going back to this idea of chosen family, I was like "oh, this is great, I can feel even more involved with this trio", because they were just kind of shooting the shit.

But it's interesting because that "chosen family", with like, *Will & Grace*... I can see more the points of identification and comfort that that brings. What do you think are those points for *My Dad Wrote a Porno*? Like, what do you identify with?

Do you remember in *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, when early on they got a message saying that her and her boyfriend decided to have sex, that they had built it up to be this big, scary thing, but then the show kind of made them take it less seriously and so then they had sex? I would say... I had kind of a similar relationship to it. Growing up very catholic, very, like, sexually stunted, ahm... It made me happy how kind of casually they were discussing these topics and no one was judging any of the acts, really, except for the hunk and skunk. And I don't know, it was just kind of a nice sort of vibe that I hadn't really seen anywhere else.

And so, when you joined the subreddit, did you have that feeling with the fans, as well? Because with the podcast you have it, with the three presenters.

Yes.

So I'm wondering what was your feeling, being with other fans in that virtual space.

Yeah, I was never put off by anything that I saw on the subreddit. I wouldn't say that I felt as close to, you know, anyone. But then again, we're talking about seeing a post here and there from maybe... Maybe I'll see, you know, the same person post two, three different times, and then I'll never see them again. We're comparing that to listening to a podcast over six years, right. So, could it have in theory evolved to that point? Sure. Did it? No.

When you would post on the subreddit, has it ever happened that in any way you would express or allude to your sexuality?

I want to say yes, but I can't think of any.

No, that's okay. And how do you feel is the attitude of the fans towards... queer men, in your case, but towards different sexualities?

In my experience, it's been indifferent or positive.

Is that... You're not in subreddits for other fandoms, but did you expect that?

Yeah, I didn't expect anything different.

Why?

I mean... I think anyone who is listening to that podcast or knows anything about it, right, is pretty sexually accepting. Yeah, that's the simplest way of saying it.

The way that you feel about representation, has that ever influenced the way that you feel about *My Dad Wrote a Porno*?

Hmm... I don't think so. I can't think of an instance in which I was like, "oh, he was getting a little close there". Or something like that.

When they mention in the podcast that there has never been male gay sex in the books, was that something that you had thought of before? Do you remember?

Yes. It was something that I had thought of before.

Did you expect there to be?

No. Did I kind of hope the whole time that there would be? Yes. But I never expected it.

Would you read the next books on your own, if Rocky releases it?

Yeah. Something I thought about doing is just reading the books now that the podcast is over, but I don't know, I feel like... A big part of my affection for that podcast is the exchanges between James, Jamie and Alice. So I don't know, and I'm a little afraid to ruin the magic, if you will. Like, if I get it and that commentary is not there, is it going to change my opinion about the books?

Had you had all of these thoughts before, was there anything that we've talked about that was a new reflection for you?

I guess the question about representation was just something I'd never really thought about. And so in that sense, it took me by surprise, but... That's really all I can think of.

In relation to the podcast, or in relation to yourself?

No, in relation to the podcast.

Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to add about these?

No, are we at the end of your questions already?

We are, yes!

Oh, wow!

Yeah, we sped through them. Is there anything else that comes to mind?

Not that I can think of.

Okay. I'm gonna stop the recording.

Okay.

FIRST ROUND OF CODING – EXAMPLE

The following is a screen capture of a page of transcript after undergoing the first round of coding.

No, I'm just interested in knowing if fans are aware of it, so...

Yeah, I know that... I don't... **I haven't really interacted with the podcast in, like, social media** or anything. **So** I wouldn't kind of find it, unless it was something that they talked about on the actual podcast itself, or heard from a friend, there wouldn't really be, I guess, a way for me to even know that they were doing this stuff. So, yeah.

I see. So you haven't gotten involved in social media, but have you gotten involved with the story of *Belinda Blinked*? For instance, if Rocky would release the seventh book, would you read it by yourself, or are you just content with the podcast?

Ahm... It's a good question. I am interested in the story, so... **If that was the only option, and it wasn't being released in a podcast format, I think I probably would. Assuming that it was, like, cheap.** Then yeah. [laughs]

What was your listening habit with the podcast - when would you listen to it?

It was kind of **all the time**. I mean, I think I probably started in the very beginning with, like, when I was just **walking to and from lab**, like when I was **commuting** to places. **Ahm...** But then, I... I'm a grad student, and I work at a lab all day. And I feel like after a little bit, I started realizing like, it was also fine if I just listened to it in the lab. **So** once I started doing that, I **feel** like I would kind of have it... **When I was really binging it, I kind of listened to it basically whenever I had time.** Which was sometimes during lab, before, after. Yeah.

So you have friends who have mentioned it... Have you talked to your friends about it, or do you have friends who listen to it?

So, the original ones that I think I first heard talk about it, I think that was the first time I heard about it, **ahm...** I don't actually think I ever talked to them about it, and **also** I'm like not really as much friends with them anymore. But **there have been a few friends since then, over the years, that I have mentioned it to.** There's been a few that I think mentioned it **to**, to be like "oh, you should try listening to it at some point". And I think **there's maybe only been one other friend I can think of who had already listened to it.** **So** then we were able to just chat about it without them having to catch up or anything.

When you would listen to it, would it always be by yourself, then?

Yeah, I don't, I've never... **I've never listened to it with someone else**, other than I think one or two times, I went back, like when I would try to get someone to listen to it. Like, **I maybe listened**

SECOND ROUND OF CODING – EXAMPLE

The following is a screen capture of a page of transcript after undergoing the second round of coding.

No, I'm just interested in knowing if fans are aware of it, so...

Yeah, I know that... I don't... **I haven't really interacted with the podcast in, like, social media** or anything. So I wouldn't kind of find it, unless it was something that they talked about on the actual podcast itself, or heard from a friend, there wouldn't really be, I guess, a way for me to even know that they were doing this stuff. So, yeah.

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What was your listening habit with the podcast - when would you listen to it?

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So, the original ones that I think I first heard talk about it, I think that was the first time I heard about it. ~~ahm~~... I don't actually think I ever talked to them about it, and also I'm like not really as much friends with them anymore. But **there have been a few friends since then, over the years, that I have mentioned it to**. There's been a few that I think mentioned it to, to be like "oh, you should try listening to it at some point". And I think **there's maybe only been one other friend I can think of who had already listened to it**. So then we were able to just chat about it without them having to catch up or anything.

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