"WHEN THEY SAY QUEER, THEY DON'T MEAN YOU": A FOUCAULDIAN-INFORMED THEMATIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF BISEXUAL+ EMERGING ADULTS' USE OF FICTION-BASED PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS DURING SEXUAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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Dedication

To all of us who found ourselves in the pages of books, the stories on the screen, with the click of a mouse, or the roll of a die.

To Moon, Melody, Toshi, Froggy, and Imogen, thank you for trusting me with your stories and for your openness and vulnerability with a total stranger. If you read this, I hope it makes you proud.

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Abstract

Drawing from Foucauldian discourse analysis and narrative inquiry, this poststructural Foucauldian-informed thematic discourse analysis explored the ways bisexual+ emerging adults used fiction-based parasocial relationships during identity construction processes. Through interviews and journal reflections, five bisexual+ emerging adults were interviewed to recount their experiences connecting to media and forming parasocial relationships with fictional characters as they came to understand and construct their sexual identity. Through a dual-layered analysis process rooted in critical thematic analysis, individual participant narratives combined with a metanarrative constellation, the findings reflect the unique experiences of the participants while providing an exploration of cultural influences on identity construction and how parasocial relationships can abate those which have a negative influence, something particularly important given the regression in acceptance of queerness in the United States. Findings supported the conceptual framework which posited parasocial relationships function as both interpersonal and environmental factors for the participants in this study. Key findings include the use of parasocial relationships as sources of affirmation and sources of resistance and subversion as well as their use to build relationships in virtual spaces (fandoms) as well as in real life. With roots in media, communication, and fan studies as well as college student development theory research, this interdisciplinary work calls for further exploration into the role and functionality of media on emerging adults from a variety of perspectives as well as research that focuses on individual communities within the queer community instead of treating them like a monolith.

“WHEN THEY SAY ‘QUEER,’ THEY DON’T MEAN YOU”: A FOUCAULDIAN-INFORMED THEMATIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF BISEXUAL+ EMERGING ADULTS’ USE OF FICTION-BASED PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS DURING SEXUAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As of March 2024, 7.6% of the United States population over the age of 18 identifies as part of the LGBTQIA+ community and of that 59% identify as bisexual or pansexual (J. M. Jones, 2024); however, when looking at adults between the ages of 18 and 25, the *emerging adult* population (Arnett, 2000), it increases to 22.3% identifying as queer and 68.% of them identifying as bisexual (J. M. Jones, 2024). College demographics are changing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022) and we are still adjusting to what a post-COVID institution looks like, if we are even there yet, and if or how the COVID pause (Zhou, 2020) will continue to affect what our student bodies look like. Even before the pandemic began, there were shifts in college attendance trends with some students electing to delay attending school until later in life or forgo higher education altogether before everything was upended in 2020. Still, most of our college-bound students in the United States fall within this emerging adult demographic, particularly at 4-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). As a result, the campuses of our colleges and universities are welcoming more openly queer students than ever before and a greater variance in terms of queer identities, both of which are only expected to grow as younger generations with more fluid approaches to gender and sexuality attend colleges across the United States.

This increase in representation of queer students on campus has outpaced our understanding of the unique experiences queer students bring with them when they join campus communities. Historically, higher education research has adopted somewhat of a schoolyard gate

philosophy, marking clear boundaries between what is considered the collegiate context and what is not (Duran & Jones, 2019). Coming to college is not a *tabula rasa* moment where the slate is wiped clean and they leave their pasts behind but rather it asks students to recontextualize who they are in a new environment, a process informed by the experiences they had growing up. As a result, we cannot continue to view the collegiate environment as what occurs physically on college campuses and in buildings. While we have begun to accept this philosophically, particularly pushed by scholars in the critical tradition, research on factors previously not considered in college student development theory research is crucial to ensuring we are best able to serve our students. One such factor is the role of media and media-based relationships on identity construction. Particularly given the isolation of quarantining and lockdowns between 2020 and 2022, media connected our families, friends, and loved ones, but also a way to form different kinds of relationships from the dyadic to the parasocial, to serve as stand ins for the interpersonal connection we lost during these isolation periods. This dissertation explored one of these relationship types, the parasocial, and how these relationships influence identity construction processes for bisexual emerging adults through Foucauldian-informed narrative inquiry.

Books, Movies, and TV, Oh My!: Fictional Media and Me

If you had told high school Melissa that reading Sophie Gonzales' 2021 young adult novel *Perfect on Paper* and connecting with main character Darcy as a 26-year-old would make her feel more at home and sure of who she is than she had felt in her life…well, she might have not been as surprised as you think. What might have surprised her, however, is that she related to Darcy not just because of her perfectionist tendencies and her status as the designated 'advice

giver' to those around her, but because Darcy's own twisting journey to understanding her bisexuality would mirror future Melissa's own winding sexuality journey.

Fictional characters have always been a source of connection and comfort throughout my life. Whether it was the caterpillar in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969) who made me want to save and be friends with all his real life fuzzy counterparts in my backyard as a small child or feeling like I was visiting with a friend when I went and solved mysteries with Nancy Drew, I felt a kinship with fictional characters in ways that I was never able to with my peers in my school. As a result, they became a large factor in how I constructed my identity, often impacting these processes more so than my friends and classmates. To this day, I still find making connections with characters something that occurs without thought when I engage with different types of media.

Even as I wrote this, I was listening to my favorite narrative podcast, *Not Another D&D Podcast* (Axford et al., 2018–present), and I could not help but reflect on how exploring the fantastical world of Bahumia with one of my favorite characters, Moonshine Cybin, allowed me to find affirmation in my gender identity even as a twentysomething who has felt rather settled in terms of identity construction for years. A unique form of media as a *Dungeons & Dragons* actual play podcast, I remember hearing the creator and player of Moonshine, Emily Axford, articulate a character choice woven through Moonshine's narrative that echoed own relationship with gender norms and expectations about having children, something that is often a driving factor for the parasocial relationships I develop. Hearing Emily talk about her relationship to the character and her clearly state that Moonshine "desperately does not want to be a mother even though she loves family and I would say that's true about me" (Axford et al., 2018) reaffirmed my own identities as a woman who also does not equate my woman-ness with having children.

When I heard this articulated so clearly by the person responsible for creating this character, I realized why I felt such a strong connection to Moonshine because of our shared identities as queer women and expression of those identities we possess.

However, Moonshine was by no means the first character I felt strongly connected to in the media I consumed. Growing up, I was enamored with Katniss Everdeen's strength and tenacity in *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) book series and adored the intelligence and curiosity present in Aloy's narrative in *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games, 2017) and *Horizon Forbidden West* (Guerilla Games, 2022). From both of these characters that I engaged with at very different points in my life, I was exposed to strong female characters whose narratives are not solely focused on gender or sexuality in relation to male characters as female-led media often is (M. L. Allen, 2023a). This connection to strong female characters has been present throughout my life and in various types of media. By watching Kat Stratford's wittiness and unabashed feminism in the film *10 Things I Hate About You* (Junger, 1999) and reading about Arya Stark's bravery and power in George R. R. Martin's (1996) *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, beginning in *A Game of Thrones*, I was able to construct my gender identity in a way that reflected my views on womanness and desire to eschew gender norms and expectations.

Ultimately, Kat, Arya, and other characters I connected with during my young adulthood began to fill the voids I felt in real life. It was because of the Kats and Aryas of the (fictional) world I was able to see women characters who embraced their "woman-ness" in ways outside of typical associations with hyper-femininity and motherhood. Even when my construction of what it meant to be a woman was challenged by my peers, I was able to feel secure in my construction of my gender identity to this day thanks to the relationships I made with the characters I found

connection with and solace in. However, as my gender identity became clearer and more sound, the same could not be said of my sexual identity.

As a bi-oriented aromantic-asexual[1] woman, when I look back at the representation of bisexuality in the media I consumed during my adolescence and young adulthood in the early 2010s, it was rife with biphobia and bi-negative messaging. Whether as explicit and outwardly negative as Kurt telling Blaine on an episode of the television show *Glee* that bisexuality is a “lie gay guys tell in high school to hold hands with girls in the corridor so they can feel normal for a change” (I. Brennan & Stoltz, 2011) or Ari’s ambiguous bisexual coding and subtext within an overall positive portrayal of queerness in Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s (2012) *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe,* it is not surprising when I look back how media like these acted as a barrier for understanding my own bisexuality given their employ of binegative tropes and attitudes. The pervasiveness of their implicit and explicit views on bisexuality have remained with me to this day.

When I revisited Aristotle’s journey ten years later while reading Sáenz’s 2022 follow up, *Aristotle and Dante Dive into the Waters of the World*, what was originally subtle bisexual erasure of bisexuality as an option for Ari turned into explicit biphobia from Dante that was unable to fully divorce itself from the culturally pervasive view of bisexuality as a stepping stone on the way to a truly queer identity. When forced to draw upon media that is so rife with bi-

[1] An oriented aromantic-asexual (“aroace”) identity reflects a multidimensional view of attraction in which sexual and romantic attraction fall under the aroace label while other forms of attraction are better defined by a different sexuality label. Sexuality is a fluid identity and at different points in time, there may be a multitude of identities that describe the experiences of an individual. For me, I view myself as a mixture of bisexual and aromantic-asexual, meaning that my bisexuality is experienced through an aromantic-asexual filter. While I find forms of attraction outside of romantic or sexual (e.g., platonic, aesthetic, alterous) occur regardless of gender, romantic and sexual attraction are largely absent from my day-to-day life. Despite this, I still feel part of the bisexual+ community and shared this multi-labeled identity with my participants during our interviews.

negativity and biphobia or the manipulation of depicting attraction to multiple genders as a phase, I cannot help but look at my own experiences with sympathy for younger Melissa. Why would I want to acknowledge a part of myself that is so often depicted as untrustworthy and greedy in the media I interacted with? Sexuality's hiddenness allowed me to ignore this facet of my identity because I simply could choose to not acknowledge it as I threw myself into my schoolwork and other activities instead of growing my understanding of my sexuality.

Coupled with the lack of queer individuals I knew, the lack of positive depictions of bisexuality in media during my young adulthood made it difficult for me to interact with characters who would allow me to construct my bi-oriented aroace identity in a positive light due to the overwhelming bi-negativity and biphobia in late 2000s and early 2010s media. While I was able to find positive depictions of bisexuality as I moved into my early- to mid-20s in Alex from Casey McQuiston's 2019 novel *Red, White and Royal Blue* and Nick Nelson in Alice Oseman's 2016 webcomic turned graphic novel *Heartstopper*, I found myself wondering what those relationships with these characters would have meant had I been able to form them earlier while I was feeling those first inklings of uncertainty about my then-assumed heterosexuality at a time when queerness was still mired in negativity and associations with deviance. How would my own experience have changed had I been able to interact and form relationships with characters who would have helped me understand and construct my sexuality as I did when constructing my gender identity? What if I could have found *Perfect on Paper*'s Darcy as a young adult? What if I could have read how she so eloquently spoke of how the forced rejection of bisexuality's liminality at the hands of heterosexual and queer monosexual individuals alike negatively influences bisexual individuals' sense of self when she boldly claimed to her school's Queer and Questioning Club that "some people will *never* understand what it's like to be queer

and to *blush* every time you join in on a conversation about it because you feel like you're treading on other people's toes, because when they say 'queer' they don't mean you" (Gonzales, 2021, p. 297). What if I could have had that same confidence in claiming my bisexuality and giving voice to the fears that kept me from truly acknowledging it, even to myself? As a scholar of student development theory and media studies, I cannot help but wonder how changing representation in media regarding queerness could influence how students are able to construct their identities, a realization that drives my dissertation research.

Statement of the Problem

With the increase in representation of marginalized identities in media, the ability to connect with characters who share a particular identity has increased as well but how is that influencing identity construction? Although media is often considered an environmental factor in college student development theory, there has been little investigation into the role it specifically plays and the influence it has on identity creation from this field's perspective. Noting that "research on the intersections between technology and identity offer much promise for future research" (Torres et al., 2009, p. 592), by the late 2000s and early 2010s, college student development scholars had started to explore the internet and media as a site of identity construction (P. G. Brown, 2016; Dalton & Crosby, 2013; Gasser, 2008; Martínez Alemán & Wartman, 2009; Mastrodicasa & Metellus, 2013). More recently, research into technology-mediated identity construction for students with marginalized identities began, including trans college students (Nicolazzo, 2016, 2019; Nicolazzo et al., 2017; Simms et al., 2021), and construction of identities surrounding queerness and disability (Miller, 2017). However, these studies focused on how college students use social media platforms as a facilitator for and

method of connection during their identity creation processes, not how they used media-based relationships and interactions with media personae.

Although a social media interaction might look similar to that of a parasocial one, parasocial relationships could also serve as interpersonal factors of identity creation that is distinct from social media-mediated relationships. A parasocial relationship is a one-directional relationship between an individual and a media persona that provides the same sense of connection as a typical friendship or relationship first explored by Horton and Wohl (1956). The mimicry of a dyadic relationship brings into question if these relationships function solely as an element of media, a wholly environmental factor in college student development processes, or if they are interpersonal as they provide a similar connection as a real-life dyadic relationship. This study situates itself at this point of inquiry: Are parasocial relationships environmental, interpersonal, or a mixture of both? To determine this, a poststructural narrative inquiry drawing from queer theory was employed to determine how these relationships function in the sexual identity construction processes of the participants.

Although not all parasocial relationships are based in technology, the one-sided nature of technology-mediated relationships mirrors that of a parasocial one. In his 2017 article, Miller cited Nicolazzo's work, indicating that her research "has called upon higher education scholars and practitioners to consider virtual spaces as part of the overall campus environment" (p. 512). If these online spaces are now viewed as part of the campus environment, something that is already under-researched in college student development theory (Torres et al., 2009), then there is the ability to view other non-physical interactions, including parasocial ones, as unique environmental factors in college student development research and practice. It just has not yet been studied.

Purpose of the Study

As opposed to investigating the role of this concept in college student development as a whole or even in the queer community at large, I narrowed the focus of my dissertation to that of bisexual+ emerging adults. The queer community has long been treated as a monolith by researchers who often claim their findings can be applied to the LGBTQ+ community as a whole when their sample largely consisted of cisgender gay men. The resulting macro-level conclusions about the queer community does not necessarily acknowledge the nuances between sexual identities and the different experiences they have. The experiences of a gay man are not the same as those of a bisexual woman or an asexual non-binary individual. With this in mind, I have chosen to explore how bisexual emerging adults use media interactions and relationships in their identity construction processes because of the experiences that are unique to bisexual individuals as well as the "hidden-ness" of bisexuality in research and media depictions.

Bisexuality, as well as other identities under the bisexual+ umbrella, challenge both the sexuality and gender binaries upon which western culture resides (Rodríguez, 2016). As a result, there is much stigma surrounding bisexuality from both inside and outside of the queer community. The inherent fluidity of bisexuality's pushback against compulsory monosexuality is often translated into harmful stereotypes about hypersexuality and untrustworthiness (H. J. Johnson, 2016). Additionally, bisexual individuals "experience disapproval not only from the dominant society but from the gay and lesbian community" (Fairyington, 2005, p. 33) due to the challenge it imposes on the cultural expectations of sexuality and gender performance (Butler, 1990/1999). With the stigma placed on bisexuality coming from both queer and heterosexual people, how do bisexual individuals navigate their identity construction when it is so rife with stereotypes and rhetoric that has the potential to negatively influence their sense of identity?

Although parasocial relationship research is well established within the media studies and communications fields (Giles, 2002), there has not been much exploration of the concept from a college student development theory perspective. First explored in a 1956 article by Horton and Wohl, this seminal work describes this phenomenon as “one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development” (p. 215). Drawing upon Horton and Wohl’s view that these interactions are a “simulacrum of conversational give-and-take” (p. 215), Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) found that “a felt reciprocity with a TV performer that comprises a sense of mutual awareness, attention, and adjustment” (p. 4) is a foundational experience within a parasocial interaction for the individual involved. While this interaction is not truly reciprocal, as the individual is not truly interacting with the media persona, and the interaction is in fact illusionary, the interaction with the persona is interpreted as real and functions as a social connection for the duration of media consumption. Given the nature of a parasocial relationship as both environmental and interpersonal, it may have a unique influence on both of these types of factors in identity construction. As a result, the purpose of this dissertation was to explore how bisexual emerging adults utilize parasocial interactions and relationships in their identity construction processes from a college student development theory perspective.

Oftentimes, parasocial relationships are formed from a desire to connect with individuals who mirror the identities of the consumer when they do not have that connection to others from family or friends or they reflect the type of person the consumer hopes to be (Hall, 2019; Hoffner, 1996; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). For individuals who do not have exposure to people in their lives who they share an identity with, particularly if that identity is not the dominant identity in their environment, seeking out these relationships with fictional characters or media

personae can fill that void and allow them to connect with someone who shares their minoritized identity. In the context of college student development theory, this searching for connection to others reflects an interpersonal factor. This is particularly important for sexual identity development due to the influence of external factors on formation.

Because queer individuals seek out media-based relationships during their identity construction and coming out process that “compensate, rather than complement, real-life social relationships” (Bond, 2018, p. 474), the influence representation has on queer individuals’ identity is an important avenue of study to ensure a queer individual is able to develop a positive association with their identity throughout the process of its construction, something that is accelerated during the emerging adult period (Arnett, 2000; Patton et al., 2016). In creating the term *emerging adults*, Arnett (2000) highlighted how our “late teens through the twenties are years of profound change and importance” (p. 469) and it deserved a label distinct from adolescent and adult. College student development research on sexuality mirrors Arnett’s claim, noting “many students begin or accelerate exploration of their sexuality…at a time that coincides with college-going for a large number of undergraduates” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 156). However, this is also a time marked by increased media use, both social media and traditional media as indicated with the emphasis placed on the 18–35 demographic in assessing the success of a TV series based on Nielsen ratings (Webster & Ksiazek, 2013). If media is saturated with negative depictions of a particular group or, like in the case of queer characters, are not afforded the same agency as characters with dominant identities, including agency surrounding sexuality (Bond, 2018) the effects of those depictions and lack of ability to see themselves in the media they consume continues to silence marginalized voices. For queer characters, when this is combined with the continuation of stereotypical and harmful depictions that succumb to damaging tropes

that often lead to their death (Bridges, 2018; Cameron, 2018; Cover & Milne, 2023; Waggoner, 2018), or simply are not present in media at the same rate as heterosexual characters (Deerwater et al., 2023, 2024), it implicitly tells queer viewers they are not as important as heterosexual ones. My study built upon these by exploring how queer individuals use parasocial interactions and relationships as they construct their identity and how, then, these relationships function within college student development as a whole.

Nicolazzo (2016) found in her study on trans student kinship networks, trans students gravitated towards social media and internet communities during their time at college "as a tool through which to locate and maintain the sense of kinship they lacked in physical spaces" (p. 552). Mirroring this, I am studying how bisexual emerging adults integrate media interactions to mimic the connection to and relationships with others present in identity development models. Nicolazzo found these social media connections sometimes trend towards the parasocial when she noted a participant's reflection about media usage as influential despite "never [having] met anyone from the YouTube videos they watched in real life, they felt a sense of kinship and connection with them" (p. 553) that began to fill the role of a traditional dyadic relationship. I investigated what the influence of this kinship and connection is when the relationship is fully one sided.

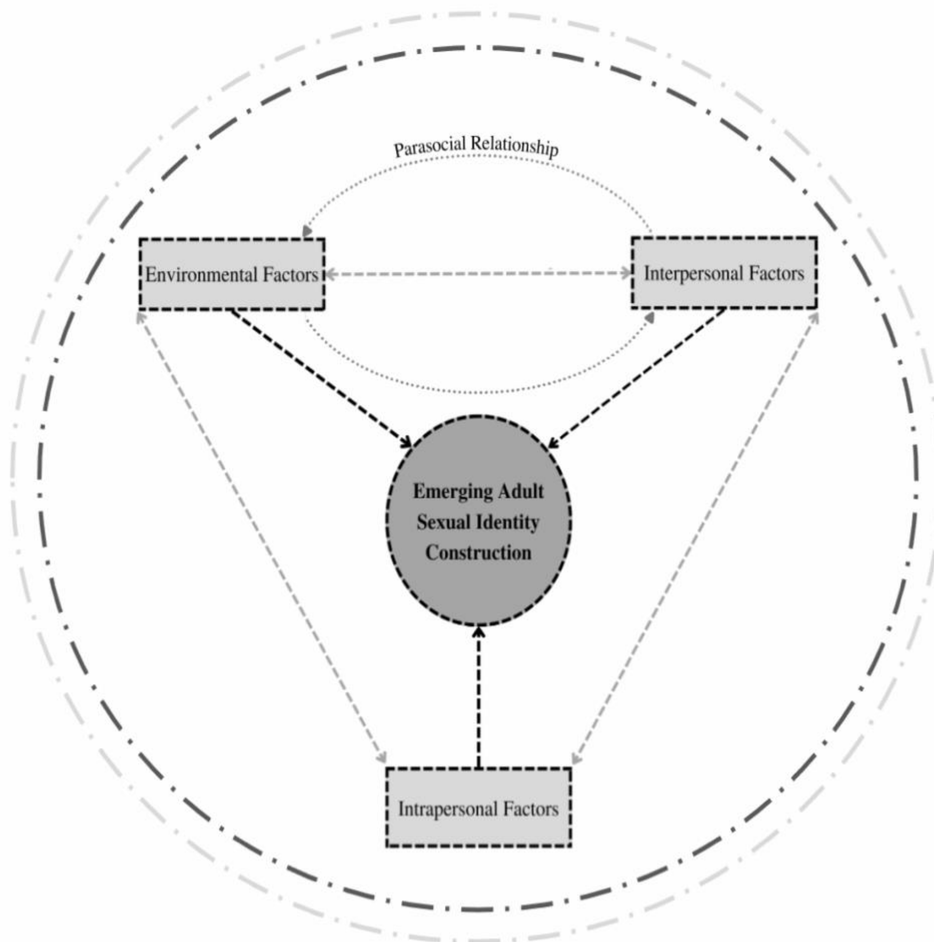
Conceptual Framework

As opposed to situating my study within a specific theoretical framework or applying one of the many theories about sexual identity development in college, the exploratory nature of my research is based in a conceptual framework that visually reflects how I view parasocial relationships within bisexual+ emerging identity construction processes. Because I was interested in seeing what role parasocial interactions and relationships play in participant identity

construction processes, identifying factors that influence identity construction became the center of my conceptual framework (Figure 1). To create this, I pulled from research on broader identity construction (S. R. Jones & Abes, 2013; Torres et al., 2009); sexual identity construction (Dillon et al., 2011; Savin-Williams, 2011); and third wave student development theories (Duran & Jones, 2019; S. R. Jones, 2019; Stewart & Brown, 2019), and identified three major factors that influence identity construction.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Drawing from the determinants of sexual identity development from Dillon et al.'s (2011) unifying model of sexual identity development of biopsychosocial factors, intrapersonal factors, and interpersonal factors, I situate these factors within an ever-expanding and contracting context that accommodates for the totality of interactions a person has. The addition of a cyclical representation of parasocial relationships' connection to environmental and interpersonal factors reflects how they have the possibility to morph and change from one largely serving as one type of factor to another. For instance, if an individual initially interacts with a media source simply because they enjoy it but ultimately creates a parasocial relationship with a character that functions as a dyadic friendship, the shifting nature of this relationship is better characterized by a continuous circle that reflects how it is simultaneously an environmental and interpersonal factor influencing their identity construction. This circular element remains a broken line as the creation of parasocial relationships is directly influenced by the contexts in which an individual exists. As for the other dotted lines in this framework that note movement, this addition of another dotted line for this element reflects how parasocial relationships are responsive to greater culture.

Similarly, the nature of parasocial relationships may serve different purposes over time but they never become solely an environmental factor or an interpersonal factor. A circular representation that intersects with both types of factors depicts continuous motion rather than a straight line that is more static and better reflects how participants in this study explained the ways parasocial relationships functioned as they constructed their identities as bisexual+ emerging adults. While I initially used a straight bi-directional line between environmental and interpersonal factors in early versions of this model, this straight line was far too static given the active nature of parasocial relationship construction and interaction. The ways in which

parasocial relationships function as environmental factors influences how they do so as interpersonal factors, and vice versa, which is something not reflected by a straight line. The straight line remains, however, due to wanting to indicate the greater connection between the three major types of factors that influence sexual identity construction processes. Because, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, parasocial relationships are somewhat unique in their functionality, ensuring that this uniqueness was visible and clearly noted within this framework was the catalyst for moving away from a straight line to the selection of a circle for this study's conceptual framework. Similarly, contextually situating parasocial relationships in a way that is connected to and in between both environmental and interpersonal factors highlights how they occur in a liminal space, between fiction and reality. Given the emphasis on context and culture's influence on identity, intentionally designing a framework with malleable and reactive elements for aspects beyond parasocial relationships was central to the creation of this conceptual framework.

Historically, *context* has had a narrow scope limiting it to the college campus and environment; however, there have been recent calls to revisit what context truly means in student development theory (Duran & Jones, 2019; Nicolazzo, 2016). The use of broken lines reflects the permeability of each of these factors to contextual influences represented by the circle surrounding the conceptual framework. The lighter dashed line reflects the context's ability to expand and contract, noting that context is never fixed or immutable and can grow or lessen to encompass more or less than its initial state. Because students may seek connection and learning in non-university affiliated spaces, college student development theories need to move from viewing the "collegiate context like a container…[and] conceptualize what it is that the student is encountering not only within the these kinds of college gates but within society" (Duran & Jones,

2019, p. 178). With this shift in context, an increased look at how environmental factors play an active role in student development is needed.

Identities, such as sexuality, are socially constructed meaning they "are constructed through interactions with others, both those inside and outside one's social identity group…[and]...the meaning and import of those identities are inherently shaped by systems of power and historical context through which one moves" (Stewart & Brown, 2019, p. 111). Social construction of sexuality is not only a crucial element of how I define sexual identity but a Foucauldian view of sexuality as well; my conceptual framework expands context outside of the campus environment to include that of the internet, as seen in Nicolazzo (2016), and the relational space created as a result of a parasocial interaction. Actively integrating context into my framework acknowledges the need to incorporate a holistic approach to student development theory. We cannot simply isolate a single identity we possess as they are all interconnected and other salient identities require acknowledgement even when focusing on a particular one. I entered my study acknowledging that I cannot control, nor do I want to control, for other identities like race, gender, or class, and those identities influence how we construct our sexualities and what media we engage with. Intentionally incorporating the interconnectedness of identity allowed the sum total of an individual's identities to be present in my study.

This conceptual framework guided the development of my interview questions; as well as my analytical approach as I looked at the language participants use to determine how they talk about their parasocial relationship, and if it is more evocative of an environmental influence or an interpersonal one. My initial belief that it acts as both an environmental and interpersonal factor in different ways and at different times can be seen in my research questions as I aimed to

allow both the exploration of environmental and interpersonal lines of inquiry to develop based on how participants describe this relationship.

Research Questions

My research questions were intentionally broad to accommodate the exploratory nature of my dissertation. Because they were broad, it allowed the unique experiences of each participant to come to the surface and allowed them to explore these relationships and how they influenced their identity construction as well. Additionally, I was interested in how these relationships were used given the often-negative portrayal of queerness, particularly bisexuality and other non-monosexual identities, how they negotiated this during their identity construction processes, and if an overarching narrative about power is created as a result of the experiences across participants. With this in mind, this study was guided by the following research questions.

RQ1: What do participant narratives reveal about how bisexual emerging adults construct their identity through interactions with media characters during their identity construction processes?

RQ2: How do bisexual emerging adults utilize parasocial relationships during identity construction processes?

Research Design

College student development research has become less focused on generalizing across populations, as was the norm in first wave and in some second wave theories, and more so on the ways in which individuals move through spaces and environments to ultimately construct their identities with the rise of third wave thinking that is informed by critical and poststructural considerations (S. R. Jones, 2019; Stewart & Brown, 2019). By exploring emerging adults' interactions and relationships with fictional characters while situated within college student

development theory, this study was designed with hopes to provide insight as to how these relationships helped form their identity as a bisexual+ individual as well to see if they function as an environmental, interpersonal, or a combination of the two, within college student development theory and research.

Given the fluid nature of identity, approaching how bisexual+ emerging adults use parasocial interactions from a poststructural narrative inquiry methodological approach allowed for analysis of how each individual participant used parasocial interactions during their identity construction processes. The lack of and even somewhat intentional eschewing of objectivity within poststructural research leads to approaching my dissertation research through a qualitative methodology. Most scholarship about the concept of parasocial relationships has been done in communication studies, where quantitative research is most widely used (Giles, 2002; Liebers & Schramm, 2019). My research from a college student development theory lens, which uses a qualitative methodology, contributes a deeper look into these interactions as opposed to generalizing across populations. The personal nature of these relationships called for using a qualitative method of inquiry to allow for the creation of a nuanced portrait of participants' journeys to understanding their sexuality that was specific to each participant's unique experiences.

Drawing from Foucauldian notions of power and discourse, a poststructural narrative inquiry allowed for investigation of both the individual participants' experiences with parasocial interactions as factors in the identity construction process but also acknowledged the inherent discursive power present in discussions of both identity and media representation through the creation of a metanarrative. Foucault's research highlighted the connection between power and

knowledge (Foucault, 1980), something that is present in the established theories and models of identity construction.

Because we constantly negotiate power relationships between ourselves, our identities, and greater culture, inquiry into identity creation must acknowledge the presence of discursive power, particularly when focusing on the identity construction processes of individuals with marginalized identities. From a Foucauldian perspective, narratives are both technologies of power in that they "determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject" (Foucault, 1988, p. 18) and the self as they are constructed by the individual who they are about. Narratives are reflective of reality, but they can also construct reality as they emerge in specific power and knowledge structures at a given point in time (Tamboukou, 2015). As a result, Foucauldian-informed thematic discourse analysis was the analytical approach for my study. A rather nascent approach, Foucauldian-informed thematic discourse analysis situates tenets of narrative analysis within Foucauldian views on discourse and power that can help in "revealing the mutability of reality and providing a space in which that which was previously perceived as 'certain' and true may be critically re-examined" (Vaughan, 2018, p. 66), using a mixture of narrative level and discourse level thematic analyses.

Through individual interviews with college students between the ages of 18–24 who identify as part of the bisexual+ community, as well as reflective journal responses, a combination of narrative and discourse level thematic analysis, and Foucauldian discourse analysis techniques were used to explore individual level experiences and to create a discursive metanarrative from the participants' stories (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022; Lawless & Chen, 2019). Interviews were recorded and transcribed and then used in an iterative analysis process that began with familiarization and coding before ultimately generating themes on an individual

and discursive level. This resulted in the creation of individual narrative write ups for each participant to honor their own experiences presented in Chapter 4 as well as the creation of an overarching metanarrative constellation (Garvis, 2015) created across the narratives that reflects structural influences on identity construction and parasocial relationships presented in Chapter 5. Interview questions and journal prompts can be found in Appendices A through F. To increase trustworthiness as well as embrace the co-constructed nature of narratives between participant and researcher, member checking occurred via email by providing a copy of the findings connected to each participant for them to reflect and make any comments on where they disagree. Participants were given the option to complete this via email or via Zoom, whichever they preferred and three responded with their feedback via email. Throughout my research design, ensuring individual participant voices were heard in tandem with the discursive metanarrative allowed me to see how the individual narratives interacted with the metanarrative contextualized within a larger discourse, including within the field of college student development.

Significance of the Study

This study aimed to determine how media-based relationships function within student development theory as a whole. Instead of grounding my dissertation in a specific theoretical framework, this study investigated if parasocial interactions and relationships are wholly environmental, wholly interpersonal, or a mixture or linking factor between the two. Additionally, by focusing my research on bisexual+ students, it addresses the lack of scholarly focus on the experiences of bisexual+ individuals as most models relating to sexual identity construction were created based on the experiences of gay men or lesbian women (e.g., Cass, 1979) or on the queer community as a whole (e.g., D’Augelli, 1994), and not bisexual+

individuals who have different experiences both in and out of the queer community due to their plurisexuality. While there has been research into bisexual-specific identity development, such as T. Brown (2002) and Galupo et al. (2017), inquiry into the bisexual+ experience has not achieved the same status in the college student development field as other identities.

While there is a plethora of research on the role of media on identity development, most of this research comes from a communication or media studies lens. By approaching this from a developmental perspective, this study assessed the potential for parasocial relationships to be a factor that influences and facilitates development of sexual identity. Focusing on the experiences of bisexual+ individuals, a group that faces erasure from both inside and outside of the queer community through marginalization and compulsory binarization, it allowed for the unique experiences of bisexual+ individuals' sexual identity development to come to light in a way that may not happen if a wider expanse of identities had been included to be studied as well. With bisexuality comprising over half of the queer population (J. M. Jones, 2024), knowing the needs of this community and how they are developing their unique expression of their sexuality is important to ensure that those who work with emerging adults during such an important developmental period are aware of the influence of external factors, such as media, on development of identity.

The use of a Foucauldian-informed analytical method centered the constructive and reconstructive nature of narratives, something that is still in its infancy in terms of methodological use. From a Foucauldian perspective, narratives are not simply constructed by the self and reflect how the individual moves through spaces, but they also are constructed by and reflective of the dominant power and knowledge structures at the time of creation. When researching with individuals who have minoritized identities, such as bisexuality+, there is an

inherent need to address how power is interwoven, implicitly and explicitly, through their experiences. By centering the Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge, power is dictated and controlled by those who establish knowledge and knowing. In the context of sexuality, these power/knowledge discourses were established to ensure heterosexuality maintained its dominant status, so addressing power in studies about sexuality, like my own, is important and is not frequently done in a narrative format.

Approaching my study from a queer theory-informed perspective is unique within college student development theory research. While there has been a turn towards the critical and poststructural within the creation of third wave considerations (S. R. Jones, 2019), it has not often been used as a framework within the field. While Abes and Kasch's (2007) call for a queered model of self-authorship was the first study to apply queer theory to college student development, "research and practice about college student sexuality and gender have not grappled with the challenges presented by queer theory" (Denton, 2019, p. 55) but also the possibilities presented as well. This is particularly important because the age range of most college student development research often aligns with emerging adulthood, a time where "many students begin or accelerate exploration of their sexual identities" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 156). Additionally, the decrease in reliance on labels of younger generations (Savin-Williams, 2011) highlights a need for a framework that accommodates this resistance to adopting concrete labels. Both Torres et al. (2009) and Denton (2016, 2019) call for increased poststructural considerations within college student development research, a call my dissertation answered.

Broadly, given the current climate surrounding queer and trans identities in the United States and the rise in book bans in conservative-led states, understanding how interactions with media can create relationships which are affirming can help provide support for pushing back

against these efforts. In the Commonwealth, we are not devoid of these efforts. In 2022, two school board members in Spotsylvania County recommended not just banning, but burning books that had queer representation in them, one of whom became chair of the school board and promptly fired the superintendent who disagreed with him (Migdon, 2022). More recently, the newly hyper-conservative Rockingham County School Board voted to remove 57 books from their library system under the guise of them being sexually explicit (Campbell, 2024). When looking at the list, it is glaringly obvious that *sexually explicit* is code for queer.

While even these two instances are enough to make the situation feel dire (and somewhat helpless), in states like Florida through the work of hate groups like Moms for Liberty (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2024), there are coordinated efforts on multiple levels to not simply ban books with queer characters but eradicate queer and trans identities from existence. From attempts to restrict receiving gender affirming care and the ability for trans youth to play sports, there is a larger cultural and structural force solely focused on removing queerness from the public eye. What these bans fail to acknowledge is how removing depictions of queerness will not keep children from realizing they are queer as it is an inherent part of who they are. It simply prevents them from interacting with representations of who they are to allow them to construct positive associations of their identities, something that parasocial relationships have the ability to do for queer youth in particular when the "compensate, not complement" (Bond, 2018, p. 474).

Conclusion and Overview of the Dissertation

My dissertation research centers on the influence media has on how we construct who we are. Although I fully reject the idea that media *causes* us to adopt an identity, rhetoric often seen woven throughout efforts to restrict access to media with queer and trans characters by conservative legislators and community members, media can help us understand parts of

ourselves that are absent in other facets of our lives. Participants echoed this same refrain in their individual narratives and across the discursive metanarrative outlined in Chapters 4 and 5: the ability to connect with explicitly or implicitly queer characters did not make them queer, but instead allowed them to cultivate a positive association towards their queerness by seeing themselves in the narratives they engaged with. Through researching parasocial relationships and their influence on bisexual+ emerging adult identity construction, I did not simply add to the literature on bisexual individuals, but explored a relationship that is often viewed as lesser and problematic when compared to its real-life dyadic counterparts. Using a Foucauldian-informed approach, I explored narratives on the individual and structural levels which provided me with the ability to see how these relationships function environmentally and/or interpersonally while also respecting the power of our individual experiences, counteracting the historic treatment of queer individuals in research as a monolith.

This chapter provided an overview of my study with brief definitions of important concepts such as bisexuality+, parasocial relationships, and emerging adults that is further built upon in the review of relevant literature in Chapter 2. In Chapter 2, existing research from college student development theory, media studies, and communications studies was explored, focusing on queerness within student development theory, bisexuality+ and its unique position in the sexuality spectrum, and the treatment of bisexuality+ in media. This chapter also outlined the relationship between paradigm, method, methodology, and analysis processes. In Chapter 3, further details of methodology and research design are described including descriptions of poststructural discursive concepts, the process of creating a Foucauldian-informed analytical approach, and data collection processes and procedures. Chapters 4 and 5 are a comprehensive presentation of findings, with Chapter 4 focusing on the individual participant narratives while

Chapter 5 present a metanarrative constellation (Garvis, 2015) that looks across narratives thematically. The final chapter, Chapter 6, consists of a discussion of findings, articulation of implications for scholarship and practices within student affairs spaces, and calls for future research, both within college student development field as well as calls for collaboration between fields.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Drawing from research in college student development theory, media studies, and communications studies, I present an overview of concepts, theories and ideas to contextualize this study, as well as note spaces where this study adds to the body of knowledge. Beginning with overviews of bisexuality and other plurisexual identities and college student development theory and traveling through discussions on sexual identity construction processes, media as sites of identity development, parasocial relationships, bisexuality and other plurisexual identities and media depictions of queerness are discussed. Given the interdisciplinary nature of my research, this chapter reflects a synthesis of knowledge and information across fields and disciplines that serves as the basis for this study's focus: the role of fiction-based parasocial relationships in identity constructions processes for bisexual+ emerging adults.

Bisexuality and Other Plurisexual Identities

Even after it was no longer considered a disorder, historically, bisexuality has faced scrutiny from both queer and heterosexual individuals alike (J. Shaw, 2022). With a 1974 article from *The New York Times* noting the "bisexual life-style appears to be spreading and not necessarily among swingers" (Brody, 1974, n.p.), evoking both a notion of disease as well as contextualizing bisexuality within the context of swinging, creating positive views of bisexuality, even for bisexuals themselves, has been an uphill battle. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, bisexuality was decried as a fad and a trend, but it also evaded clear definition (J. Shaw, 2022). In 1995, two decades after that article from *The New York Times*, bisexuality was once

again thrust into the cultural zeitgeist by a *Newsweek* cover article that noted how bisexuality presents a “rupture in the social structure, conjuring fears of promiscuity, secret lives and instability…[that makes] human relationships—jealousy, fidelity, finances, parental roles, custody–even more complex” (Newsweek Staff, 1995).

However, this same article once again treated bisexuality as a new idea and cultural fad that people adopt rather than part of who they innately are through its title: “Bisexuality: Not Gay. Not Straight. A New Sexual Identity Emerges.” With the turn of the new millennium, views of bisexuality as a trend continued to persist often through depictions of bisexuality in different types of media. Songs like Katy Perry’s 2006 hit *I Kissed a Girl* centered bi-curiosity but not bisexuality while early representation of bisexuality in late 1990s and early 2000s television is best characterized by the biphobic depictions of a bisexual male character Carrie went on a date with in an episode of *Sex and the City* (Bicks & Thomas, 2000). Carrie notes that she’s “not even sure bisexuality exists. I think it's just a layover on the way to Gaytown” and Samantha questions the validity of bisexuality as an identity distinct from gay or lesbian when she mockingly notes “I'm a ‘trisexual.’ I'll try anything once” (Bicks & Thomas, 2000).

However, there have been gains in recent years that do not espouse such clear and intentional biphobia or binegativity, such as *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*’s Rosa Diaz. Most notable for Rosa is simply how well developed and multifaceted her coming out storyline is, particularly a character who came out in where she faced a variety of reactions from those close to her (Cipriano & Holland, 2024). After Stephanie Beatriz, the actress who played Rosa, came out as queer, and later bisexual, during the series’ airing in 2016, Rosa’s narrative in a handful of episodes in the latter half of the series depicts her coming out to different people within her life and her adjusting to being open about her bisexuality. In a fifth season episode, *Game Night*

(Noble et al., 2017), Rosa comes out to her friends and colleagues by openly naming her bisexuality in her classic deadpan manner. In what is "perhaps one of TV's most low-key coming out scenes" (Peacock, 2023, n.p.), Rosa states "there's something I'd like to say. I'm a pretty private person, so this is kind of hard for me but here we go. I'm bisexual. Alright. I will now field one minute and zero seconds of questions pertaining to this," to which her friends and coworkers express unequivocal affirmation. While this episode aired in 2017, Rosa is one of the few major network characters to clearly identify as bisexual and engage in relationships with characters of different genders, highlighting how media has long evaded success in positively depicting this diversity of experiences within the bisexual+ community, something that could be connected to bisexuality's inherent resistance to concrete labels and definitions.

Defining Bisexuality

Part of the difficulty with pinning down bisexuality, as opposed to heterosexuality, is the way it challenges even labeling conventions (Cipriano et al., 2022; Flanders, 2017; Galupo et al., 2017) with some scholars noting that attempts to define bisexuality by behavior alone is not just difficult, but problematic (Bauer & Brennan, 2013; Cipriano et al., 2022). Bisexual is both an individual identity but also an umbrella term that covers other plurisexual identities, such as pansexuality and omnisexuality, but what does it truly mean? Even as a bisexual woman myself, my definition of bisexuality will differ from that of other bisexual women, particularly given the influence of my aromantic-asexuality that filters my experiences that define my bisexuality. However, defining bisexuality as both an individual label and umbrella should be based on the work of the Bay Area Bisexual Network's[2] zine *Anything That Moves* that ran from 1991 to

[2] Bay Area Bisexual Network is now the Bay Area Bi+ and Pan Network, reflecting the shift of the bisexual+ community to be more inclusive of a variety of plurisexual labels. However, given the historic nature of this document the original name under which this zine was published was used.

1999. Claiming “monosexuality is a heterosexist dictate used to oppress homosexuals and to negate the validity of bisexuality” (Bay Area Bisexual Network, 1991, p. 3), the zine functioned as somewhat of a manifesto, pushing back against the widely held assumption that bisexuals will have sex with “anything that moves” (p. 3). While the manifesto highlighted how forcing bisexuals to fit a particular label was constricting, there are shared elements of bisexuality and other plurisexual identities to create the bisexual umbrella (Galupo et al., 2017).

Because bisexuality represents a range of attractions, definitions within research often remain vague and broad to accommodate for all identities that fall under the bisexual umbrella. Research, in a way, asks bisexuality and other plurisexual identities to comply with labeling norms that may not feel quite right in an effort to categorize participants as needed (Flanders, 2017). While it is often assumed the bi- prefix reflects attraction to men and women, bisexuality reflects an attraction to both their gender and other genders (Bay Area Bisexual Network, 1991; Cipriano et al., 2022; Flanders, 2017; Galupo et al., 2017); however, it gets messy when pansexuality often refers to attraction regardless of gender (Flanders et al., 2017; Galupo et al., 2015; Hayfield & Křížová, 2021) or individuals who refer to themselves as queer who are attracted to more than one gender. While these definitions appear similar on a surface level, the unique ways individuals choose to refer to themselves and their identities reflects how they construct a particular identity. Therefore, using a label like the bisexual+ umbrella, bisexual+, or bi+ reflects the vast potentiality of plurisexual identities much like the use of trans* drew upon the Boolean search cue * to reflect infinite possibilities regarding gender (Tompkins, 2014). By adopting this approach, it acknowledges the shared attraction to more than one gender by plurisexual identities but provides the space and ability for individuals to label themselves with a term that feels correct for them.

A term like the bi+ community or bisexual+ umbrella also connotes a sense of community that bisexual individuals often note they struggle to find within the queer community and with heterosexual individuals as well (Gonzales et al., 2021; Maliepaard, 2017; Roberts et al., 2015). Because of stigmas and lack of place within the queer community throughout the late 20th century (Bay Area Bisexual Network, 1991; Stone, 1996), it can be difficult for plurisexual individuals to find community with others. Using a term that creates connection across labels but still acknowledges the historic roots of bisexuality as the first plurisexual label reflects the ability to self-define but also find connection (Flanders, 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2021).

Cultural Views of Bisexuality

Culturally held stereotypes and stigmas about bisexuality have led to a systematic distrust and fear of plurisexual individuals and the erasure of them from various spheres of culture. This anti-bisexual prejudice based in fear is often referred to as biphobia (Ochs, 1996). Binegativity refers to sentiments towards and beliefs that bisexual individuals reflect a lack of morality and trust that makes them question bisexuality's legitimacy and reinforce stereotypes about bisexual+ individuals' sexuality and sexual behaviors (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Dyar & Feinstein, 2018; Mohr & Rochlen, 1999). Those who foster binegativity and biphobia view bisexuality as a phase that individuals will grow out of and assume bisexual individuals to be promiscuous, obsessed with sex, and unfaithful (Brewster & Moradi, 2010). For other queer individuals, there is an assumption that bisexuals attempt to be part of the queer community while also retaining the privileges associated with heterosexuality (Dyar & Feinstein, 2018; Ochs, 1996). For bisexual individuals, even if they are open about their sexuality, the pervasiveness of these tropes highlights "how if these identities are made visible they are often invalidated or erased" (Hayfield, 2020, p. 81). Additionally, these stigmas and stereotypes can prevent someone from

fully acknowledging their identity because of fear of how these culturally held beliefs will make others think of them (Elizabeth, 2013).

Many of these negative views of bisexuals are rooted in the context of the AIDS epidemic that ravaged the queer community in the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, men who engaged in sex with other men as well as women "were painted as stealth assassins" (Newsweek, 1995), who were "catching AIDS in the *kinky* homosexual world and bringing it into the *respectable* heterosexual world" (J. Shaw, 2022, p. 52, emphasis in original). While bisexual men were viewed as dangerous as they bridged the queer and straight worlds during a time when queerness was metaphorically and literally silenced, bisexual women in the 1980s were often excluded from lesbian spaces with accusations of being a "threat to the feminist cause" (J. Shaw, 2022, p. 53) and "dangerously untrustworthy because of their associations with men" (Stone, 1996, p. 101). As noted in the first issue of *Anything that Moves*, "bisexual men have been labeled a high risk group…bisexual women have been ignored" (Rossi, 1991, p. 8).

But, biphobia also exists due to fears of bisexuality's ability to destabilize the gender and sexuality binaries upon which much of United States culture relies. Even in the 1995 *Newsweek* article, they note how bisexuality, "in its ambiguities…calls into question the certainties of both gay and straight identities" (para. 21). The challenging of the status quo bisexuality presents has primed it for both stigma from those inside the queer community but from heterosexuals outside as well because of this challenge to an underlying cultural structure. This creates an inability for bisexual+ individuals to express their sexuality because of their existence within "a double closet where individuals feel their freedom of expression is compromised in both queer and straight settings, and they are reluctant to openly express their sexuality in either" (F. Marks, 2022, p. 37). As a result, attempts to push back against bisexuality as a valid identity are often rooted in

depicting it as unstable and an attention-seeking behavior rather than an innate identity (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013). Ultimately, because bisexuality challenges and fractures the heterosexual-homosexual binary that is so integral to our day to day lives which is “something society is heavily invested in maintaining” (Fairyington, 2005, p. 34), stigmas and stereotypes, such as the hypersexual bisexual and bisexual as an unstable identity, are perpetuated to maintain power distributions in such a way that favors the monosexual community

Bisexuals are Hypersexual. The fear of bisexuality during the AIDS epidemic was largely rooted in one of the major stigmas about bisexuality. Due to the belief that bisexual men were overly focused on and greedy in terms of their relationship to sex, many viewed their engaging in sex with men and women as a careless act to satisfy their hypersexuality as what caused the HIV virus to move outside of the queer community (J. Shaw, 2022). While no longer rooted in the connection to the disease, this unfounded fear-based stigma has continued into modern ideas of the hypersexual bisexual claims that bisexuals “want and/or need more sex, be more voracious in bed, to be less discriminating in their hunt for sexual partners and to be more likely to engage in threesomes and group sex” (Callis, 2013, p. 87). While this has been argued against by bisexuals since at least the 1990s given the subversive title of Bay Area Bisexual Network’s zine, *Anything that Moves*, and the long history of research about bisexual sexuality, bisexuality is not a predictor of engaging in risky sex or being unfaithful to satisfy a greater need for sex. Oftentimes, bisexual women are viewed in this light far more than bisexual men as heterosexual men eroticize bisexual women as a way to fit them into their schemas on female sexuality (Elizabeth, 2013).

The hyper-sexualization of bisexual women in particular is seen in media (Chickerella et al., 2021; H. J. Johnson, 2016) when they “are seemingly everywhere visible in pornography,

reality television, and music videos as spectacles in the service of male sexual pleasure, but denied the political and affective complexity and interiority of our own sexual urges" (Rodríguez, 2016, p. 173). However, these hypersexualized images of women engaging in intimate or sexual acts with other women "pleases and plays to the heterosexual male gaze, titillating male viewers while reassuring them that the participants remain sexually available in the conventional heterosexual marketplace" (Diamond, 2005, p. 105). While these depictions of queer women may at first seem subversive, it highlights the belief about bisexual women that they are acting in a particular way to gain male attention. When used to further the pleasure of men and reinforce the gender binary, bisexuality becomes visible but retreats once the element of hyper-sexualization is no longer needed or wanted. Without the solidarity (knowingly or unknowingly) of queer monosexual people and heterosexual people and the perpetuation of bi-negative stereotypes, bisexual erasure would not be as strong and prevalent as it is today.

Bisexuality is Illegitimate. With bisexuality's challenge to an inherently monosexually-normative culture in the US, it is often on the receiving end of stigmatization and the perpetuation of damaging stereotypes from both inside the queer community as well as from heterosexual individuals as well. Bisexuality's inherent binary-breaking existence has led to stigma and silencing from both queer and heterosexual individuals alike. Despite their statistical presence in the queer community, bisexual individuals face erasure as a way, consciously or unconsciously, to maintain and uphold the reliance on a gender binary as the main determining factor for attraction. Because bisexuality challenges this, it results in a 'too-queer-to-be-straight but too straight-to-be-queer' tension (Thöni et al., 2022) that is unique to non-monosexual individuals in and out of the queer community as bisexuality "was viewed as the apolitical cop-

out for those that were not radical enough to fully commit [to a monosexuality]" (Rodríguez, 2016, p. 169).

Statistics show that over half of the LGBTQ+ population identifies as an identity that falls under the bisexual umbrella, something that increases when disaggregating the data based on age/generation and gender (J. M. Jones, 2024). When looking at the most recent data on queer identification in the United States, almost a third of Gen Z women identify as queer, one fifth of whom identify as bisexual with similar trends are seen in younger Millennials with 12.4% identifying as queer and 9% of whom identify as bisexual. For Gen Z men, they are more likely to identify as bisexual than gay than queer millennial-and-older men (J. M. Jones, 2024). Despite this, bisexuality is often rendered invisible in queer spaces and by heterosexuals because they have "overlapping interests that lead them" (Rodríguez, 2016, p. 171) into erasing bisexuality for their own gain. Termed *epistemic contact*, Yoshino (2000) described three interests as central to bisexual erasure: "the stabilization of exclusive sexual orientation categories, the retention of sex as an important diacritical axis, and the protection of norms of monogamy" (p. 171). By destabilizing gender and sexuality binaries, bisexuality challenges much of what western views and norms on sexuality are based upon. Because of this, bisexuals are "begrudgingly allowed to share letters in the LGBT rainbow [but] we are only tolerated if we use the veneer of queer to omit any references to sexual pleasures that fall outside the gay and narrow" (Rodríguez, 2016, p. 174). This gatekeeping of queerness by other members of the queer community creates a tension between those under the bisexual umbrella and those who identify as a monosexual queer identity that makes queer spaces potentially unwelcoming to bisexual individuals.

As a result, bisexuality "gets coded as an immature phase that one will eventually outgrow, or at worst, as the apolitical option for those too closeted, too backwards, to fully affirm

a gay or lesbian identity” (Rodríguez, 2016, p. 172) indicating how bisexuality is viewed as less queer than other identities or a stopping point on the path to true queer identification as gay or lesbian. Anti-bisexual queer rhetoric often notes the ability of bisexuals to pass as straight as they are able to enjoy the benefits of both heterosexuality, particularly if they are in a relationship with an opposite gender individual, as well as claim membership in the queer community. This cultural need for bisexual+ individuals to ‘prove’ their queerness reinforces the immaturity associated with which bisexual individuals, particularly those who have not engaged in what appears to be a queer relationship (Cipriano et al., 2022, 2023). While for queer individuals, like those who identify as gay or lesbian, the inability to pass as heterosexual automatically assigns them the queer label whereas for bisexual+ individuals, it almost needs to be earned through being in a queer sexual relationship (Cipriano et al., 2023; Hayfield et al., 2014), contributing to both the hypersexualization and bisexual erasure.

Intersections of Race and Sexuality for Bisexual+ People of Color. It is important to acknowledge the need to look at bisexuality from an intersectional lens as the cultural views and discourse about bisexuality is dependent on other identities such as race, class, and gender (Callis, 2013; Elizabeth, 2013; Rodríguez, 2016). Bisexuality in wealthy, white[3] individuals has an almost progressive reading which is strikingly different from the reading of bisexuality in

[3] Drawing from Peréz Huber (2010), I choose to not capitalize “white” to challenge the power embedded within grammatical norms as well as to “acknowledge and reject the grammatical representation of power capitalization brings to the term “white” (p. 93). Conversely, I do capitalize Communities of Color and “racially minoritized groups as a form of linguistic empowerment” (Harris & Patton, 2019, p. 368). While the focus of this research was not on race, acknowledging the ways in which power structures are infused within research and writing norms and actively challenging them aligns with my belief that scholars should approach research and write with social justice and equity woven throughout research design, data collection, and creation of the manuscript. Our experiences cannot be divorced from the plurality of our identities and scholarship should reflect the intersectionality of identities.

other demographics. Although there might be cultural differences between how different demographics understand bisexuality, there is not a carte blanche in terms of sexual expression for white individuals; however, bisexuality does disrupt colonially prescribed sexual norms. White hegemonic discourse on sexuality relies heavily on the binary and simply the act of being bisexual pushes back against this latent colonialism in western culture, something that is particularly evident in the characterization of bisexuals as inherently more sexual than people of other sexualities (Rodríguez, 2016). Because bisexuality is "constructed through raced, classed, and gendered associations regarding normative sexual behavior" (Rodríguez, 2016, pp. 171–172), the lingering impact of sexual morality being dictated by a white, European, upper class, heterosexual, Christian sexual ethic that created distinct gender-based roles for sex, bisexuality's inherent challenge to those norms sets it up to be the focus of negative rhetoric and attacks from those who benefit from the perpetuation of a heteronormative and mononormative view on sexuality (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012).

For bisexual+ People of Color, the cultural resistance and opposition to acknowledging the legitimacy of bisexuality+ is only exacerbated by their racial and ethnic identities as culturally dictated norms of what was considered appropriate in terms of sexuality and sexual expression "was a means of access to the life of the body and the life of the species [and was]…employed as a standard for the disciplines and as a basis of regulation" (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 146). When, as Foucault argues, compliance with norms regarding sexuality became the main way the population was surveilled, the resurgence of associations between a variety of identities, including race, and acceptability of sexual expression became a way to govern behavior and continue to allow those with dominant identities to dictate what was considered socially acceptable by falsely perpetuating Reconstruction-era racist views that

characterized People of Color, and in particular Black men, as deviant, even in the realm of sexual activities that occur in private, that allowed white individuals to "manipulate the sexual fears of their own culture to justify" (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012, p. 107) and used sexual norms to "[maintain] the differences between themselves and people of other races" (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012, p. 107).

While we have (somewhat) moved beyond the egregious use of morality policing to uphold racist and segregationist attitudes in the late 19th and early and mid-20th centuries, there are lingering threads of falsely equating race to any acts that challenge the status quo. For modern-day bisexual+ People of Color, the historic roots of governing race and power through sexuality are still subtly present in our current social climate. Not only are they deviating from norms regarding sexuality by expressing attraction to more than one gender but they are doing all while being forced to navigate the deeply woven racist structures and systems that have been pervasive in American society since the early days of the nation's colonization when "white demographic and social patterns in New England and the Chesapeake were converging in ways that influenced sexual life in the colonies" (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012, p. 14). This act of disruption and the subsequent pushback from the majority on both racial and sexuality based stigmas is exacerbated in bisexual+ individuals who are also part of marginalized groups increases identity-based stigma and discrimination, negatively impacting bisexual individuals' health and wellbeing due to possessing multiple minoritized identities (Flanders et al., 2019; Galupo et al., 2019, Ghabrial, 2019; Ghabrial & Ross, 2018; Ramirez & Galupo, 2019) beyond that from heterosexual individuals due to bisexuality's challenge to monosexual norms leading to its erasure from both within and outside of the queer community.

Mental Health Impacts. With increased exposure to negative stigmas and stereotypes, mental health concerns are increased in individuals under the bisexual+ umbrella (H. J. Johnson, 2016). Bisexual+ individuals not only internalize homophobia and heterosexism but biphobia and binegativity as well (H. J. Johnson, 2016; Pollitt & Roberts, 2021). Although queer individuals of all identities report increased rates of mental health concerns (I. H. Meyer, 2003; Persson & Pfauss, 2015; Ramirez & Galupo, 2019; Ross et al., 2018), this greater prevalence of internalized oppression and self-stigma in bisexual+ individuals places them at greater risk for mental health challenges (McInnis et al., 2022). In particular, bisexual+ women are at increased risk of developing depression and anxiety and given the lack of sense of belonging within the queer community, as well as greater rates of internalized oppression due to the pervasiveness of biphobic rhetoric than lesbian women (McLaren & Castillo, 2021; Ramirez & Galupo, 2019). When gender is expanded beyond women, bisexual+ individuals continue to experience greater rates of depression than heterosexual individuals as well as that of their gay or lesbian peers (Ross et al., 2018). In the contexts of suicidality, bisexual+ women are more likely to report suicidal ideation and histories of attempted suicide than their queer female monosexual counterparts and rates that are five times that of their heterosexual female counterparts (Blosnich et al., 2016; Pompili et al., 2014).

Rejection sensitivity increases for bisexual+ individuals but they are also at greater risk of experiencing it given the negative views of bisexuality from queer and heterosexual individuals alike (Feinstein, 2019). Because of this increased chance of rejection sensitivity (something parasocial relationships do not create), the potential for parasocial relationship development could allow for interpersonal interaction without the fear of ostracism by their real-life peers. Sense of belonging, while an often-used term in higher education research, also affects

experiences based on identity in non-educational spaces. If cultural stigmas and assumptions perpetuate identity denial or hiding of sexuality, an individual's ability to connect with others will be stifled, which in turn decreases sense of belonging and increases the chance of depression (Flanders et al., 2015; Thöni et al., 2022). The ability to find community, particularly community with other queer individuals (Heath & Mulligan, 2008), increases sense of belonging and lowers rates of depression within the bisexual+ community (McLaren & Castillo, 2020a, 2020b). However, if individuals are not able to find that sense of community or sense of belonging, they may search in other areas to find it, such as the digital space or fictional, imaginative space. As a result, understanding how these connections and relationships form and function can provide clarity to the unique ways individuals build community when they are unable to find it in real life.

College Student Development Theory

Despite colleges and universities initial beginnings as solely as academic institutions, a shift away from a focus entirely on classroom learning and instruction to one that addresses the developmental needs of the whole student began in the early 20th century. Although initially focused on vocational guidance and support, student services blossomed into a rich tapestry to provide co-curricular learning opportunities and support during a student's time at college. As the field shifted from providing vocational support in the 1920s and early 1930s and became more multifaceted, the American Council on Education (1949/1994) released the "Student Personnel Point of View" statements in 1937 and 1949, each articulating a need to facilitate the development of the whole student, noting that this was "the central concern of student personnel work and of other agencies of education" (p. 17).

Through the creation of National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and American College Personnel Association, two student affairs organizations, and the statements they released throughout the 20th century on the role of student affairs educators, a shift from clearly articulated ideas about what student development should look like to one that reflects the diversity of how students grow and develop can be traced through the evolution of the field. To do this, however, the need for formal theory emerged as a way to guide these interactions between student services personnel and students "that explain how [students] grow and develop, holistically, with increased complexity, while enrolled in a postsecondary environment" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 6). The types and uses of theory can be used to trace the progression of the field of student development as higher education evolved and changed as well, marking different eras of student development theory. These different eras are often referred to as waves (S. R. Jones, 2019; S. R. Jones & Stewart, 2016).

Waves of Development Theories

The field of college student development theory emerged from psychology studies on lifespan development in the 1960s. As the need for student services on college campuses increased to address learning and growth that occurs on a holistic level, theorists began researching this demographic and their needs in a collegiate environment. Although early theories attempted to broadly describe and trace student development in different domains (e.g., cognitive, psychosocial, moral), later theories reflect a less prescriptive approach to development that accommodates for the fluid nature of identities and troubles the linear notion of growth and development by centering praxis (S. R. Jones, 2019). Labeling these different eras *waves* is intentional because there is not a clear line of demarcation between them; rather, they flow and

intermingle, requiring practitioners to think about the theories themselves, how they were constructed, and what they argue as opposed to a particular date to determine where they fall.

First and Second Wave Student Development Theory. Noted for their connection to positivism, first wave student development theories are closely linked to their psychology-based roots and reflect discrete categories of theoretical domains (S. R. Jones, 2019). Chickering's (1969) theory of psychosocial development ties neatly into Erikson's (1959/1980) life span development theory while Kohlberg's (1969) theory of moral reasoning draws heavily from Piaget's (1932/1977) theory of children's moral development. During this wave we also see the rise of cognitive-structural theories, like Perry's (1968) schemas of intellectual and ethical development. Overall, the main focus of first wave theories and their lasting contribution to the field is the belief that students grow and develop during their time in college based on the experiences they have inside and outside the classroom (S. R. Jones, 2019).

Outside of Chickering's vectors, first wave theories are known for their rather linear progression, that increases in complexity as students wrestle and grapple with meaning making and overcoming moments of dissonance (S. R. Jones, 2019). At their core, first wave theories across theoretical domains share the assumption that development is universal, meaning the same for all students; however, this also means these theories were created based on the experiences of wealthy white male students given the demographics of college attendance at the time (Patton et al., 2016). These theories in particular served as the building blocks upon which college student development theory would grow in later waves, even if the waves challenged the assumptions and assertions present in these theories and application of them to a diverse population of students would be inherently flawed given the homogeneity of the students they were based upon (Patton et al., 2016).

As the college-going population became more diverse as access to higher education expanded, calls for theories that focus on social identities, particularly those that are marginalized, rose from the student affairs field (S. R. Jones, 2019). Although some theories maintained the linear trajectory, during the second wave of student development theory we began to see the incorporation of power, privilege and oppression as factors that influence development. Additionally, social identity theories took shape during the second wave which explored individual facets of a student's identity; however, they were treated as discrete elements of identity rather than ones that overlap and intersect. During this wave, theories on development of identities such as race (e.g., Cross, 1978, 1991; Gallegos & Ferdman, 2012; Helms, 1995), sexuality (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; Dillon et al., 2011; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), and most recently gender (Bilodeau, 2005; Bussey, 2011) along with many others entered the student affairs sphere because of critiques of first wave theories' use of a homogenous population of wealthy, white males as the basis for their theory creation.

Despite this, second wave theory began to see movement away from clear domains of development (e.g., affective, cognitive) in favor of seeing development as a combination of these domains that cannot be so easily separated (S. R. Jones, 2019). This more blended approach to student development theory paved the way for third wave theory to appear and it epitomized by self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001) and the model of multiple dimensions of identity (S. R. Jones & McEwen, 2000) and its reconceptualization (Abes et al., 2007). By approaching development from a far more fluid and relational perspective, these second wave theories in particular began to truly question the idea that development always equaled further progression and laid the foundation for the third wave critique of developmental progression as a concept altogether (S. R. Jones, 2019; Patton et al., 2016).

Third Wave Student Development Theory. Based upon the cracks in the underlying structures historically present in college student development theories made by self-authorship and the (reconceptualized) model of multiple dimensions of identity, third wave theories intentionally look at what assumptions are present and what is missing from both first and second wave theories. As a result, third wave student development research looks less like classical theories and more so an integration of theory into practice in a way that promotes social change and emancipation (S. R. Jones, 2019). In this third wave, particular attention is paid to the structures and systems present in higher education that prevent and disrupt access to and experiences at institutions of education. Third wave considerations often address college student development on both a macro and micro level, focusing on how systems of power, privilege, and inequality manifest themselves in our campus environments, processes, and histories, and how those in turn influence student experiences during the time at college.

In doing this, theorists call out the underlying white cisheteropatriarchy of higher education and college student development theory research. As theories rooted in contexts and logics of whiteness and those that required clear distinct conceptualizations of gender and sexuality continued to be used, third wave theorists noted how this reinforced power and knowledge structures that allowed higher education's roots in perpetuating whiteness, cis-ness, and heterosexism that privileged dominant identities while either forcing compliance to these dominant norms upon students with marginalized identities or viewing them as developing incorrectly. These positivist and constructivist theories are often critiqued by third wave, critical and poststructural scholars for not actively engaging with concepts of power, privilege, and oppression students with marginalized identities must navigate unlike their privileged peers (Abes & Hernández, 2016; Perez, 2019). Theorists argued that not acknowledging how the

systems within higher education themselves were constructed to maintain an environment where white, cisgender, heterosexual individuals are privileged continued to restrict access to higher education because of the pervasiveness of the white cisheteropatriarchy and called for the experiences of minoritized groups to be brought to the forefront of research (S. R. Jones, 2019).

To address this gap and the history of continued marginalization of queer students, trans students, and Students of Color, the view of practice as a liberatory effort is central to third wave thinking in student development theory. Drawing from bell hooks' (1994) call to center emancipation and social transformation in education, third wave theorists do so by noting the importance of a multifaceted understanding of identities and how they intersect as well as thinking about theoretical constructs as opposed to concrete theories to guide their practice (S. R. Jones, 2019). Because students are unique and present different identities and experiences that they cannot divorce themselves from, broad sweeping theories that have historically been used may not apply in our current collegiate contexts. As a result, this current wave of student development theory relies less on theory and more on considerations and theoretical concepts. In the context of sexual identity construction, this shift towards a more contextually dependent and fluid approach to identity is one of many critical and poststructural considerations and theoretical concepts currently being explored and researched.

Sexual Identity Development Research

How the education field has tried to understand the LGBTQ+ community reflects how the general cultural views of queerness have shifted over time (Graves, 2015) and student development theory is not removed from that same progression. While sexual identity theories arose in the second wave of college student development theory research, these theories reflected the dominance of heterosexuality and heteronormativity in their treatment of only queer

identities as something that develops. As the field shifted and fields like queer studies found their way into social sciences research, a more fluid understanding of sexual identity challenged many of the underlying structures and constructs within early sexual identity development theory such as the importance of coming out and compliance with specific identity labels. As a result, we see a shift from concrete theory to a focus on theoretical concepts and considerations rooted in poststructural and critical thought surrounding sexual identity.

Theories. Like theories in other domains in college student development theory, early theories on sexual identity development posited that this process was linear and stage-based. Cass's (1979) model of homosexual identity development was one of the first models to focus on gay and lesbian identity development in a way that did not pathologize queerness. Just as its contemporaries, the theory was stage based and identified important experiences that moved individuals from one stage to the next such as coming out. Cass's theory was built upon in the 1990s by Savin-Williams' (1998) model focused on gay men's development and McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model of lesbian identity development. Many of these theories presupposed heterosexuality as the norm from which development of queer identities diverges, continuing to center heterosexuality even in something that is focused on queer identity development (Denton, 2016). Although queer monosexual identities received attention, how bisexual individuals develop their bisexual identity did not occur during the second wave of student development theory when identity-specific theories were in fashion.

As a result, there are no oft-cited theories of bisexual identity development. Although the reason behind this is unknown, it is most likely due to a combination of the pervasive belief that all queer experiences are the same as well as seeing the rise of research on bisexual identity correspond with the rise of the third wave of theory that focuses more on concepts than distinct

theories. When bisexuality was integrated into theory, it was in models that equated the experiences of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals such as D'Augelli's (1994) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development or into a universal model of sexual identity development (Dillon et al., 2011) that was made to reflect a broad process that all individuals move through regardless of sexuality, queer or straight.

With research historically claiming bisexual individuals are "gay, straight, or lying" (Dodge et al., 2008, p. 182), research, particularly social sciences research, has had a less than positive history with how they have treated bisexuality. Now, this is not to say there has not been research on bisexual identity development in student development or our neighboring field of counseling (Graves, 2015) which one could argue continues to pseudo-pathologize queerness; however, these theories have not been elevated into student development theory courses like Cass's, Fassinger's, and D'Augelli's models. Most recently, Harper and Swanson's (2019) nonsequential task model of bi/pan/polysexual identity development looks specifically at experiences of plurisexual individuals and how they negotiate the cultural discourses surrounding bisexuality that question its legitimacy and queerness as well highlighting the lack of sequential stages or tasks present in how these individuals construct their identities as a result.

Comeau (2012) explored the experiences of bisexual women who identified before engaging in sex with other women to understand how they came to understand their bisexuality, connecting to other queer identities where a large portion of the LGBTQ+ community is able to note their queer attraction before engaging in sex (Floyd & Bakemen, 2006). Just like gay or lesbian individuals who knew they were queer from an early age, the same label-first patterns of identity development can occur for bisexual individuals as well, validating the inherent

queerness of bisexuality despite skepticism from queer and heterosexual individuals alike (Comeau, 2012).

While we are seeing the start of a shift away from teaching student development theory courses based in memorization of theories and theorists and towards a conceptual understanding of development and the nuances exploring student development theory requires (Linley et al., 2022), the lack of historical attention paid to bisexual students within the college student development theory spaces functions as a form of erasure through curricula due in large part to an absence in research. For instance, of the 50 articles published in the *Journal of College Student Development* that match with the search term 'bisexua*' within the William & Mary Libraries database, only two of them are specific to the experiences of bisexual students (Garvey et al., 2018; A. R. King, 2011). This erasure is not only present in college student development research but across social sciences research overall (Monro et al., 2017), reflecting how biphobia and binegativity influence research across disciplines.

Despite the lack of models devoted specifically to bisexual identity construction, within the fields of psychology and counseling, shared experiences have been identified across plurisexual identities. The use of fluid and/or multiple labels, noting distinctions in attractions to different genders, explicitly using non-binary language when talking about attraction, and identity transcending gender and sex were shared amongst bi, pan, and queer identities (Galupo et al., 2017). Even though labels for plurisexual individuals may differ, there are shared experiences as a result of being attracted to more than one gender but there are simultaneously distinct differences between different plurisexual identities. This contradiction highlights how exploration into bisexual+ identity construction is uniquely positioned for poststructural inquiry given their state of existence in a liminal space who are not well served when applying first and

second wave theories due to "limitations of traditional, stage-based models that conflated the development of an individual sense of identity with group identification" (Prieto, 2023, p. 20). While there may not be specific models for bisexual identity development nor are strict models the most helpful way to conceptualize bisexual+ identity construction, exploring these broader concepts and shared experiences within bisexual individuals holistic development can provide insight into how to best support bisexual students during their time at college, something that merges well with third wave theory's focus on considerations and concepts over theories.

Considerations and Theoretical Concepts. As conceptualizations of sexual identity have become more nuanced and fluid, critical and poststructural researchers in college student development theory have voiced their concerns about using strict theories to describe the development of a fluid identity (Denton, 2016). The basis of first and second wave theories in psychology also presents a conundrum in the context of sexual identity development given the treatment of queerness as both deviance and a disease by psychologists throughout the 20th century (De Block & Adriaens, 2013; Denton, 2016). As a result, queerness is seen as far more socially constructed than heterosexuality is. Additionally, many college student development theories center on universal explanations or paths we take as we uncover our ideal selves regardless of sociocultural contexts that may impede exploration. Critical and poststructural approaches to college student development theory challenge the notion of an ideal self in favor of a self that is constantly evolving and changing (Denton, 2016).

Similarly, there have been increased calls for the use of critical and poststructural frameworks in future research in the college student development field (Abes, 2016) and particularly in spaces where gender and sexuality are the focus (Denton, 2016; Robbins & McGowan, 2016). Abes and Kasch (2007) argued that the pervasiveness of compulsory

heteronormativity impacts all aspects of a student’s development but note that queer individuals “[reconstruct] external authority by resisting heteronormativity and destabilizing structures it created” (p. 629) as they develop and shape their worldview based on internally driven but externally-influenced perceptions and ideas.

A poststructural approach to student development theory acknowledges social schemas and scripts are rooted in heteronormativity and queer students use their own development as a way to push back and attempt to deconstruct these norms. Drawing from works by Foucault (1976/1990) and Butler (1993, 1990/1999, 2004), queer theorists would argue that this attempt to deconstruct social norms to allow an individual’s internal understanding of their identities and world view highlights the queer theory view of identity as a way to corrode the concept of identity entirely, particularly for students who do not fall on either end of the heterosexual-homosexual binary, such as bisexual students (Denton, 2019). Because of both my own leanings as a researcher as well as the call for a movement towards poststructural research within the college student development theory field, using poststructural narrative theory (Grosland & Roberts, 2021) as the foundation for my narrative inquiry dissertation fits both myself as a researcher and my research questions as well as contribute to the field in a manner that reflects its shift towards a less prescriptive view of development.

While critical theory closely interrogates the heteronormative and heterosexist structures present in higher education that affect how queer students are able to construct their identities even though those structures persist and poststructuralism calls for self-identification through a tangled social web, both challenge the pervasiveness of heterosexuality and how it is the default for sexual identity within higher education. However, where critical theory has found success in being applied to college student development theory, poststructuralism remains underused as the

lingering hold of earlier theories and their strict structures cannot be reconciled through poststructural inquiry and approaches to application (Denton, 2016, 2019). Despite this, sexual identity development provides a good entry point for poststructural thought into college student development theory research given the poststructural nature of queer and gender studies from which current research on sexual identity construction draws. By acknowledging the socially constructed nature of identity as well as the concepts of fluidity and performance in queer theory, poststructural ideas can be woven into college student development theory research.

Social Construction of Identities. Our identities are socially constructed as they form from our interactions with those who are inside and outside of our social group(s), and they are shaped by the larger cultural forces that establish norms and conventions present in each facet of our identities (Stewart & Brown, 2019). As a result, theories must acknowledge the influence of factors such as environment and context when focused on identity construction. For students with marginalized identities, like queer students, the role to which oppression has influenced and continues to influence how they are able to construct their identities is an integral consideration for understanding what those processes look like.

Additionally, the historic definition of context must reflect the ever-evolving landscape of what the collegiate environment looks like (Duran & Jones, 2019). For higher education, the fluidity of the collegiate context requires us to expand our conceptualization of environment and context into the communities our institutions are part of and even into digital spaces (Nicolazzo, 2016) because students have experiences in these spaces that affect their identity construction processes. In turn, we must account for, acknowledge, and study how these non-institutional contexts influence how students construct their identities. Additionally, college environments are also spaces where queer students can explore their identities, potentially for the first time (Renn,

2015), so we need to have an understanding of how and where students are engaging with our campus environment to explore who they are, even if that is not physically on our campus. From student's use of community spaces, such as LGBTQ+ centers, to experiences in virtual spaces that affirm as well as negatively impact attitudes towards identity, "broadening the focus of context thus allows educators to contextualize the development of students as they navigate inequitable and oppressive structures on college campuses" (Duran & Jones, 2019, p. 184) and will allow us to truly integrate environment and context into third wave student development theory research.

Since the first wave of college student development theory, environment has been at least acknowledged as a factor that influences development. For bisexual individuals, campus environment also has a notable influence on the ability to be out on campus (Garvey et al., 2018). When compared to the 44% of gay and lesbian students in the United Kingdom fully out on campus while at university, only 23% of bisexual students are (Melville et al., 2020). Taking into account the environment's effect on this ability to openly express their sexual identity, looking at environmental factors that influence not just bisexual students' ability to be out but to explore their sexuality would allow practitioners to identify elements of their campus environment and culture that are hostile to bisexual students. To do this however, widening the scope of what is considered the collegiate environment is necessary (Duran & Jones, 2019).

Queer Theory. Along with identities being socially constructed, views of sexuality and sexual identity in third wave theory acknowledge that sexuality is a fluid identity, drawing from tenets of queer theory (Denton, 2016, 2019). Drawing from Michel Foucault's (1976/1990) *History of Sexuality* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1990/2008) *Epistemology of the Closet*, queer theory directly challenges the creation of stable identity categories rooted in the sexuality

binary. Only through the surveillance of sexuality were these discrete categories created and assigned value to police sexuality, ensuring power remained allocated to benefit heterosexual individuals through the continued pathologizing of queer individuals (Foucault, 1976/1991). Thus, the definitions of these labels are mutually dependent on each other but confer different amounts of power with heterosexuality being the most powerful and queer sexualities as less so on the sex hierarchy (G. S. Rubin, 1984/2011).

Heterosexuality cannot have the power-laden meaning it does without a clearly defined homosexuality (Sedgwick, 1990/2008); however, queerness destabilizes and threatens the historically normative treatment of heterosexuality by challenging the assumption that heterosexuality is the only natural and normal sexual identity (Sedgwick, 1990/2008), particularly as more individuals identify among the queer community, particularly within millennial and Gen Z generations (J. M. Jones, 2024). Additionally, drawing from Judith Butler's (1990/1999) concept of gender performance, queer theorists acknowledge the culturally prescribed ways we are expected to not just perform our gender but also our sexuality by complying with binarized notions of both gender and sexuality.

For scholars who engage in queer theory-influenced research, they must wrestle with acknowledging the "complexity and inherent contradictions of studying the unstable concept of identity without further reifying identity categories and the construction of normal-against-queer" (Renn, 2015, p. 146). Given how deeply rooted both the binary-based identity categories and the normal-against-queer tensions are in American culture, this often conflicts with much of how we were socialized to understand gender and sexuality. For student development theory, this means unlearning some of the assumptions about development as well as how norms are used to guide development theories and assess students' development.

Unlearning also requires us to become okay with the lack of theory as it has been historically defined. While third wave theory does not posit explicit theories, there are examples of queer theory-influenced reconceptualizations of pre-existing student development theories. Both the queered model of self-authorship (Abes & Kasch, 2007) and the queered model of multiple dimensions of identity (S. R. Jones et al., 2013) apply queer theory to the constructivist models that intentionally address the underlying heteronormativity within the originals. Additionally, they integrate the social construction of identities through the intentional inclusion of elements of the theories that directly note the presence of cultural norms and expectations as well as cultural factors that influence what we know about gender and sexuality, one such being the cultural factor of media.

Media in Student Development Theory

Although my research centers on fictional media, most research surrounding the use of media in student development theory focuses on how social media and the use of online spaces impact and/or influences how students develop during their time in college. By including online spaces and social media networks within our conceptualizations of our campus context (Duran & Jones, 2019), it brings to light the need to know how those spaces serve as sites of both positive and negative influences on identity construction processes. Given its meteoric rise to popularity, social media has been studied as a factor that influences student development (P. G. Brown, 2016; Mastrodicasa & Metellus, 2013) as it presents a new environment where students connect with others and learn about themselves. Additionally, the use of social media can facilitate interpersonal connections as well students may feel they are unable to make in person (Miller, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016; Simms et al., 2021). These online spaces can often serve as counterspaces for individuals with marginalized identities, particularly if those identities are not

validated by campus culture or students do not feel able to fully express their identity on campus (Miller, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016; Simms et al., 2021).

The influence of fictional media has not been studied to the same extent as social media within college student development theory research. While this has happened in communications and media studies research, interrogation of the functionality of connections to fictional media characters has not made its way into student development theory research. Because of this, I have drawn on theories, concepts, and ideas outside of student development theory and educational research to explore how fictional media influences identity development.

Media as Sites of Identity Development

First introduced by Rudine Sims Bishop to call for increased diversity within children's literature, the 'window, mirrors, and sliding glass door' metaphor describes the ways consumers of media engage and interact with a particular source and reflects the multifaceted nature of our interactions with the media we consume. Although Bishop (1990) situates this metaphor in the context of children's books, it can be applied to analyze our interactions with media and what they teach us about ourselves and others. Media interactions can be windows that provide us the ability to see into experiences both familiar and unfamiliar. These can also function as sliding glass doors in that they allow us to "walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated" (Bishop, 1990, p. ix). However, these interactions also have the ability to serve as mirrors in which we can see ourselves reflected "as part of the larger human experience" (p. ix). As a result, these interactions with media teach us about ourselves and how we are (or are not) valued by society. If media is devoid of depictions of non-dominant identities, it teaches consumers "a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (p. ix).

Because “everyday practices, rituals, and institutional activities-such as television viewing-organize and shape people's sense of culture, as well as reproduce culture” (Fisherkeller, 1997, p. 467), understanding how those same media based rituals influence how we construct our identities can provide insight into how what we learn from different characters ultimately plays a role in who we are. Media does not only provide information about others but allows us to learn about ourselves through identifying with characters who we share commonalities with (Dajches, 2022; Fisherkeller, 1997). While by reading a book or watching television, we can “[learn] about the interrelated power and problems of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and other identities” (Fisherkeller, 1997, pp. 485–486) but we can also define our internal self-concept regardless of age, particularly if we are looking for interpersonal intimacy as well (Rain & Mar, 2021)

If we are able to find a mirror, as Bishop suggests, of ourselves in the media we consume, it can allow us the opportunity to explore who we are and clarify our identities and determine our self-concept (Dajches, 2022). When our identities are then validated by the presence of similar characters in media, the interactions between ourselves and these characters have the potential to serve as a barrier or buffer against negative social repercussions that may arise due to our identities (Derrick et al., 2008). But these also can serve as sites of self-expansion and allow us to close the gap between our actual selves and ideal selves (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016; Higgins, 1987; Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2014). When these interactions are strong enough to begin to mirror the social interactions we have in real life and parallel both the positive and negative psychological consequences of dyadic relationships between two people (Derrick et al., 2008; Gardner & Knowles, 2008) and serve the functional role of an interpersonal relationship (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016), they can be labeled parasocial relationships.

Parasocial Relationships

Because of the nature of media, parasocial interactions are common during periods of active engagement with media (such as watching television or a movie, reading a book, using social media) and we often engage with media personae, both fictional and real-life, as if they were friends (Stever, 2017). It is these parasocial interactions that make us more inclined to continue to engage with certain shows, books, or movies we connect more strongly with while disengaging with others that spark less of a connection (Horton & Wohl, 1956; R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Sometimes, an individual may continue to engage with a particular person or character from the media they consume in a way that is evocative of interpersonal relationships if the parasocial interaction is strong enough (R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

Although parasocial interactions are comprised of the interaction with media, such as between the audience and host of a talk or game show (Horton & Strauss, 1957), these interactions, under the right conditions can create a sense of connectedness more reflective of a relationship than a simple interaction (Giles, 2002; Klimmt et al., 2006). When this interaction is extended, a parasocial relationship forms (Klimmt et al., 2006; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019), which is defined as a "generalized emotional and cognitive involvement with the character that can occur outside the context of any particular media exposure situation" (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019, p. 297).

The defining characteristic distinguishing a parasocial relationship from a parasocial interaction is the "overtime components of the media consumers' connections with media characters" (Sherrick et al, 2022, p. 2); meaning parasocial interactions end once media consumption ends, while a parasocial relationship continues after the end of the engagement with the media persona/subject (Dibble et al., 2016; Sherrick et al., 2022). Parasocial relationships

often function and provide similar socialization experiences for the individual involved and create a bond similar to the connections and bonds between friends (Bond, 2018) and often fills a need for social engagement and companionship an individual may be lacking in real-life (McQuail et al., 1972; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972).

However, parasocial relationships lack the reciprocity that occurs in real-life relationships with friends, creating a distinction between real-life and parasocial relationships (Jarzyna, 2021), even though to the individual they may feel socially satisfied with their parasocial relationship. The way some feel about their relationships with media personae has been found to be similar to how they "know and understand flesh-and-blood friends" (Perse & Rubin, 1989, p. 60), but they require significantly less maintenance, do not depend on mutual following of social and relationship obligations, and can be easily dissolved at any point (Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Klimmt et al., 2006). Despite this flexibility and lack of obligations in parasocial relationships, they still create a beneficial social connection as well as provide a space for consumers, particularly teens and young adults, to explore and construct their various social identities through the connection they make with fictional and non-fictional media personae (Fisherkeller, 1997).

Parasocial relationships "share similarities with real-world relationships, can feel psychologically real, and be perceived as personally meaningful" (Rain & Mar, 2021, p. 2796) and are often used to compensate when interpersonal relationships are difficult to form or if we feel unsafe expressing all aspects of ourselves in dyadic relationships (Bond, 2018). Research on parasocial relationships with media personae increased throughout the COVID-19 pandemic due to an increase in usage of digital spaces as sites of community and connection during quarantines and lockdowns and a need to experience interpersonal interactions through a screen (Bond, 2021,

2022; Hoffner & Bond, 2022; Jarzyna, 2021; Woznicki et al., 2021). This is potentially due to the need for alternative methods of connection to others via social surrogacy.

Social Surrogacy

Sometimes, parasocial relationships are used as surrogates for social connections when they are not experienced in real life (Bond, 2018; Derrick et al., 2008). When there is a lack of social connection, individuals may seek out other methods of relationship making to protect themselves from the effects of isolation (Derrick et al., 2008). Fictional narratives are unique in that not only do they provide the opportunity for a parasocial relationship to develop, it does so in a particular social world (Derrick et al., 2008; Mar & Oatley, 2008) because they transport an individual into a world where that parasocial connection makes them part of a larger social group (Gabriel et al., 2016; Green et al., 2004). While connections are built in parasocial relationships with media personae, those lack the transportation to a social world that is seen in fictionally based parasocial relationships.

Additionally, connection to fictional characters as an act of social surrogacy protects from rejection, isolation, and loneliness while increasing their sense of belonging (Gabriel et al., 2016). Parasocial relationships provide individuals the ability to engage in social interactions in a safe way and "in our imaginations, the one-sided relationships become two sided, and through rehearsing in our imaginative world we learn about and gain better understandings of ourselves" (Madison et al., 2016, p. 271). The importance of understanding relationships formed in the imaginary space is intensified when identity is taken into consideration. Social rejection not only feels different for individuals with marginalized identities, but it also occurs more frequently and harshly because of the risk involved with behaving and performing in specific ways reflecting that marginalized identity (Feinstein, 2019). For queer individuals who face a greater risk of

rejection from others due to their queerness, including from those closest to them, the use of parasocial relationships could be a safe way to not simply connect with others in a general sense but to connect with others who share their identities and queerness (Bond, 2018). Since media can be used to fill our intrinsic psychological need to connect with others and potentially function as an interpersonal relationship in the same manner as traditional dyadic relationships, further research is needed to see what the formation of these relationships looks like and how individuals experience and view their parasocial relationships.

Parasocial Dissolution

Parasocial relationships evoke similar emotional responses to those found in a dyadic relationship. Just as in dyadic friendships, there is often a parasocial breakup when the relationship no longer fills the need it originally did. Sometimes called parasocial dissolution (Barbara & Dion, 2000; Cohen, 2003, 2004), the emotional responses of individuals when they experience this phenomenon is quite reflective of the emotional responses when growing apart from friends in real life. During these parasocial breakups, teens and emerging adults are more likely to have stronger emotional responses than adults (Cohen, 2003). While parasocial breakups occur in ways mirroring friends growing apart, there are times where a parasocial relationship ends because of a series or film ending or being canceled (Krakowiak, 2023). When these relationships are forced into a breakup, "those who have more intense relationships with characters also experience more anguish once series end and their relationships are dissolved or diminished" (Krakowiak, 2023, p. 210). These relationships also can be forced to end when characters are killed or leave the narrative. Particularly when characters are killed, those who have formed parasocial relationships with that character may even go through the five stages of grief (Kubler-Ross, 1969/2014) or feel they have lost a friend or loved one the upon the

dissolution of the parasocial relationship (Cohen, 2004; Daniel & Westerman, 2017; Ferchaud et al., 2022).

The Interactivity of Parasocial Relationships

Although early studies about parasocial interactions and relationships focused on connections to and relationships with media personalities (R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987)—such as news anchors (Levy, 1979, television shopping program hosts (Grant et al., 1991), and comedians (Auter, 1992)—research surrounding these interactions and relationships began to investigate if similar relationships were developed with fictional characters beginning with McQuail et al.'s 1972 study which determined that parasocial relationships with soap opera characters allowed for the development of personal relationships with the characters and a space to reflect upon their own personal identities.

Due to the interactive nature of children's television that explicitly provides space for children to interact with characters, there is quite a large amount of research about fictional parasocial relationships in children (Brunick et al., 2016; Calvert, 2017; Calvert & Richards, 2014; Jennings & Alper, 2016; Richard & Calvert, 2016; Rosaen & Dibble, 2008), but not as much on these relationships with adults (Rain & Mar, 2021). Studies on children's parasocial relationships found parasocial relationships improve children's cognitive and social abilities (Calvert, 2017) and as children age, they form parasocial relationships with more realistic characters (Rosaen & Dibbles, 2016). As children age, they also desire parasocial relationships with characters matching their social and cognitive needs (Calvert, 2017), meaning they desire connections to characters that are similar to who they are as well as connect with characters that reinforce gender stereotypes while "breaking up" with characters that do not align with cultural

norms (Aguiar et al., 2019; Bond & Calvert, 2014). How this relationship differs when these intentional avenues into interaction are not present is not as well known.

Most of the research surrounding parasocial relationships for high school and college aged individuals was conducted with celebrities, YouTubers, and other social media influencers via social media interactions (Blight et al., 2017; Bond, 2016; Gleason et al., 2017). Liebers and Schramm (2019) found that of the total current literature on parasocial relationships, only 25% focused solely on relationships with fictional characters compared to the 47% focused on non-fictional characters. How much of that is specific to emerging adults is unknown. Because of this focus on media personae over fictional characters, there is a lack of knowledge about the role of fictional parasocial relationships and how they function. The permanence of fictional characters is quite different from a media persona which might affect the development and functionality of a parasocial relationship.

Because parasocial relationships occur over time, certain media types are more conducive to creating these relationships than others. Narrative driven media, such as books, television shows, and movies, can provide this long-term exposure. While movies are often viewed entirely in a single instance, studies have shown that when characters reappear in subsequent films, these older characters are more likely to be identified in parasocial relationships (Hall, 2019). Additionally, the increase of fan culture and fandom through social media websites like Tumblr have provided a space to continue character interactions after the initial media has been consumed. Generally, an individual is more likely to form a parasocial relationship with the main character or the character through which they experience the plot (Chatman, 1990; Hall, 2019). When forming parasocial relationships, parasocial relationships most often form with a character that is reflective of who an individual is or wishes to be (Hall, 2019; Hoffner, 1996; Hoffner &

Buchanan, 2005); and cultural norms sometimes play a role in determining how and when individuals form a parasocial relationship (Schmidt & Klimmt, 2011). Similarly, gender plays a major role in the formation of parasocial relationships often due to being able to see ourselves reflected in a character that shares our gender (Hall, 2019); however, cross gender parasocial relationships still occur and most often when the individual identifies as part of the queer community (Bond, 2018).

Research on fictional parasocial relationships heavily skews towards film and television media and is least focused on literature-based parasocial relationships (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Despite this, the factors influencing the development of parasocial relationships, such as attractiveness, are similar across media type even in non-visual media indicating parasocial relationships are able to form from a variety of media sources. Ultimately, connection to the storyline and character(s) allowed for stronger parasocial relationships to develop (Liebers & Schramm, 2017), filling an intrinsic need that was not being addressed in real life (Rain & Mar, 2021; Sherrick et al., 2022).

Parasocial Relationships and Queer Individuals

For queer and questioning individuals, relationships with peers and family provide support during their process of identity formation and discovery of sexuality. However, these individuals may also make coming out a negative experience or make the individual remain in the closet if they feel they will not be accepted by family and/or close friends. For LGBTQ+ individuals who do not feel supported by those around them, parasocial relationships can provide a sense of community and support in their coming out process (Bond, 2011). Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth often report feeling a need to keep their relationships with peers at a distance for fear of a lack of understanding of queerness will lead to incorrect assumptions that platonic

relationships are undergirded with romantic intent (Bond, 2011, 2018). Because of this, LGBTQ+ individuals may feel more comfortable exploring their queer identity in the safer arena of a parasocial relationship than attempting to rely on real-life peer relationships for this facet of their identity formation (Bond, 2018; Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011).

As parasocial relationships serve two functions, developing connections and forming identity (Giles, 2002; McQuail et al., 1972), LGBTQ+ individuals may feel more comfortable relying on these depictions not just for the main functions, but as avenues for information about what it means to be part of the queer community. Emerging adults consider their favorite media personae to be one of the largest sources of information about sex and identity (Bond, 2018) as well as establishing social norms surrounding sexual orientation (Arnett, 1995); and shaping social norms around desire and attitudes towards sexual behaviors (Bond & Drogos, 2014). For queer students, this influence expanded to include viewing these personae as providing the norms and information about school, substance use, and romantic relationships (Bond, 2018). Because of the way LGBTQ+ individuals use parasocial relationships to fill in where real-life relationships fall short or put them at risk if, in an unsupportive environment, it is crucial to understand how they are affecting identity development as these relationships are what is constructing their sense of sexual identity.

With queer youth more likely to report higher rates of loneliness, a parasocial relationship could provide a sense of connection with others that is not experienced in real life (Bond, 2011). This desire for connection can help explain the presence of a higher reported rate of parasocial relationships in LGBTQ+ (Bond, 2018; Bond et al., 2009). Interestingly, queer individuals do not exclusively note parasocial relationships with queer characters, but heterosexual characters as well. This could be due to not needing to fear a platonic relationship being misunderstood as

romantic with a fictional heterosexual character, but also simply due to the lack of queer representation in media (Bond, 2018).

When queer students report a parasocial relationship with a heterosexual character, it is often from a fantasy, dystopian, and/or sci-fi world where the character is not an outsider due to sexuality but due to some other factor and still must overcome societal pressures to conform or face adversity due to an identity that is perceived as deviant by the cultural norms of the fictional setting (Bond, 2018). Creating relationships with characters on the fringes of society that must overcome adversity reflects the journey many LGBTQ+ youth travel during their coming out process and after, so while they do not relate to these characters based on sexuality, they are able to connect the character's experiences to their own (Bond, 2018; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Nylund, 2007).

However, the lack of representation of queer individuals in fictional media makes forming these connections with explicitly queer characters somewhat difficult for LGBTQ+ individuals. Queer youth reported their "favorite media personae to be useful sources of information about their romantic relationships [while] heterosexual adolescents did not" (Bond, 2018, p. 474) despite the overwhelming majority of heterosexual characters in all forms of media. Considering LGBTQ+ individuals rely on fewer depictions of queerness, it is important to ensure these depictions are healthy and accurate as well as empowering for these individuals.

Sexuality, Queerness, and Media

While representation of queer identities in media has increased, there is still a striking contrast between the frequency and portrayal of queer experiences and relationships compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Of the 454 regular characters in primetime, scripted, broadcast programming during the 2023–2024 broadcast year, only 39 (8.6%) were LGBTQ+ (Deerwater

et al., 2024). When expanded to include shows from scripted broadcast, cable, and streaming networks and characters beyond series regulars, there were 468 LGBTQ+ characters, a decrease from 516 characters from the year prior and the 637 queer characters from the 2021–2022 broadcast year (Deerwater et al., 2024). Of the 468 queer characters of the 2023–2024 broadcast year, gay men represented the largest demographic represented (36%) followed by lesbian women (25%) and bisexuals (24%). This decrease in representation was seen across streaming services, broadcast networks, and cable networks. Bisexual representation, in particular, decreased by 36 characters (1%) from the 2022–2023 broadcast year (Deerwater et al., 2024). These totals and percentages include regular characters as well as recurring ones, which is historically where queer characters are found. While the addition of non-regular characters increased the total number of queer characters, the disparities between representation of queer and heterosexual characters is striking as there are over 100 fewer queer characters in television series. This is increasingly concerning when 170 (36%) of the queer regular and recurring characters from this broadcast year will not be returning due to series cancellation (112 characters; 65.9%) or the character dying or leaving the show (58 characters; 34.1%), priming the industry to continue this downward trajectory. Similarly, this reflects the prevalence of tropes, like *bury your gays,* that lessen the importance of queer characters outside of how they benefit leading characters who are often heterosexual even if it means killing the character off (Bridges, 2018; Cameron, 2018; Cover & Milne, 2023; Waggoner, 2018)

Movies had slightly better representation according to GLAAD's *Studio Responsibility Index*[4] (Deerwater et al., 2023) but reflected a decrease when compared to the year prior. 28.5%

[4] Founded in 1985 as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, GLAAD "works to ensure fair, accurate, and inclusive representation and creates national and local programs that advance LGBTQ acceptance" (GLAAD, 2024, para. 1). In the context of media, GLAAD releases yearly reports that provide a look at representation in

of the films released in 2022 by major studios included queer characters (Deerwater et al., 2023), a marked increase from the 20.8% of films released in 2020 (Townsend et al., 2022). However, this most recent *Studio Responsibility Index* report tracked a larger number production companies than before, including smaller arthouse labels, as well as streaming services to reflect the shifts in the movie industry, something the authors acknowledged when explaining this rapid increase in representation. Similarly, this still means just over 75% of films released in 2022 did not have In 2022, 77% of the 100 LGBTQ-inclusive films released passed the Vito Russo Test but that only reflects 22% of films overall (Deerwater et al., 2023). Similar to the Bechdel Test for gender, the Vito Russo test assesses the way in which a character's sexuality is portrayed. To pass, a film must meet three criteria: (a) have at least one character that is identifiably LGBTQ+; (b) the character must not be solely defined by their sexuality; and (c) the character must be connected to the plot in an integral way, meaning their absence would change the film, and not simply serve as a punchline or joke (Deerwater et al., 2023; Townsend et al., 2022). However, "passing the Vito Russo Test is a first step, rather than the finish line," (Deerwater et al., 2023, p. 10), so despite these gains, there are still many depictions of queer characters that rely on harmful stereotypes and serve to further the narratives of heterosexual characters. Like on television, gay men continued to notably outpace representation of other queer identities with only 21 of the 100 LGBTQ+ inclusive films having bisexual representation despite bisexual+ individuals making up half of the LGBTQ+ population (Deerwater et al., 2023).

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various media formats. The two major reports, *Studio Responsibility Index* and *Where We are on TV* provide a yearly look at trends regarding and depictions of queer characters in movies and on television, respectively. The *Studio Responsibility Index* has been published yearly since 2013 while *Where We are on TV* has been published yearly for almost three decades beginning in 1995. Recently, GLAAD released their first report exploring the state of queer representation in video games as well as the habits and views of queer gamers titled *GLAAD Gaming: The State of LGBTQ Inclusion in Video Games* (A. Shaw et al., 2024).

Unlike television and movies, there is little formal analysis and data collection on the state of queer characters in fiction written for high school and college-aged individuals so clear statistics about representation of queerness is not known in literature. Representation of queer characters, including bisexual characters, has increased anecdotally over the past few years (Coletta, 2018; Goldsmith, 2016; Kneen, 2015) in both young adult and new adult fiction. Romance novels, which are often marketed to college aged students as *new adult*, have seen recent successes with bisexual characters as well through the publication and popularity of books like *Red, White, and Royal Blue* (McQuiston, 2019) and *Heartstopper* (Oseman, 2016) that have been well received by readers and even adapted to the screen. Both of these are notable for how they actively eschew tropes not just about queerness but bisexuality with *Heartstopper* receiving critical acclaim for how it treated Nick's bisexuality but also acknowledgement within the academic realm for how its positive depictions of bisexuality could impact identity development processes (M. Allen, 2023b).

With little aggregated data about queerness in books, explorations of how exemplars resist depicting queer characters, particularly bisexual characters, negatively reflects how media can be used to create a positive connection with another queer individual. In *Red, White & Royal Blue* (McQuiston, 2019), readers follow Alex Claremont-Diaz, the biracial First Son of the United States, as he navigates his bisexual awakening after kissing Prince Henry of Wales, the closeted gay British prince. McQuiston (2019) does not shy away from labeling their characters as bisexual and when Alex and Henry's secret relationship is brought into the international spotlight, McQuiston (2019) could have had Alex deny his sexuality or state that it was an experimental phase. Instead, Alex states, "I am the First Son of the United States, and I'm bisexual" (p. 374). He is not gay. He is not ambiguously queer. He is explicitly and clearly

bisexual, an intentional and clear subversion of both bisexual erasure and compulsory binarization (Coletta, 2018).

McQuiston (2019) also subverts the trope that erases past relationships with other genders. Alex and his openly bisexual best friend and ex-girlfriend, Nora, unashamedly talk about their past relationship. McQuiston (2019) does not lessen the importance of this relationship when Alex realizes he is bisexual. However, McQuiston (2019) does comment on compulsory binarization, the cultural expectation for bisexual individuals to change themselves to accommodate the binary (Coletta, 2018), when they write about Alex and Nora:

> For half a second, [Alex] allows himself to think about how much easier things would be if this were the truth: sliding back into comfortable easy harmony with his best friend, leaving greasy fingerprints along [Nora's] waistline outside Jumbo Slice, laughing at her crass jokes. If he could love her like people wanted him to, and she loved him, and there wasn't any more to it than that. (McQuiston, 2019, pp. 309–310)

By attempting to fit bisexuality into the sexuality binary or pushing it to the margins, rendering bisexuality invisible, it "follows (and reinforces) a broader invisibility that is likely to shape most teenagers' lived experience of bisexuality" (Kneen, 2015, p. 363). As a result, it provides individuals who are shaping their identity based on the media they engage with a depiction of sexuality that "reduces the conceivability and plausibility of bisexuality as an explanation for their plural desires" (Kneen, 2015, p. 363). When depictions of bisexuality are not portrayed as valid in media, bisexual or bi-questioning consumers receive the same message about their own experiences and sexuality, as well as preventing them from fully understanding their own sexual identity.

However, there are still successful novels, such as *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012), that depict bisexuality in problematic ways. Despite the success of this novel both in terms of readership and awards (including the Lambda Literary and Stonewall awards), the depiction of bisexuality is problematic as it reinforces harmful stereotypes about bisexuality even with its "compelling bisexual subtext" (Coletta, 2018, p. 94). Coletta (2018) notes two important tropes this book reinforces: "first, that bisexuality is often seen as a transition—someone on their way to being gay or straight; and second, that the resulting romance between Ari and Dante 'completes' this transition in this specific narrative and overwrites Ari's bisexuality" (p. 94), both of which are seen in countless other media depictions of bisexuality. The novel also highlights the tendency for romance and sex to be the identifiers for queerness that become deceptive when sexuality is not explicitly named for bisexual characters who will either be coded as straight or gay, respectively, depending on the gender of their partner (Coletta, 2018).

Although Dante is never explicitly labeled gay, the lack of labeling leads readers to assume that Dante is gay due to his relationship with Ari because of the pervasiveness of the gay-straight binary. For Ari, this lack of naming him bisexual contributes to bisexual erasure and invisibility as he does not consider bisexuality an option and his attraction to both Dante and Ileana are discrete and separate. Because "bisexuality, however, is more readily rendered invisible, and will likely continue to be so as long as monosexuality continues to dominate social consciousness" (Coletta, 2018, p. 96), the lack of explicit representation of bisexual characters allows the erasure of non-monosexual identities to continue and further strengthens the gay-straight binary in what Coletta termed *compulsory binarization*.

Across these three main media sources, there is a history of erasure of queerness from the screen and page. While some formats are more well assessed and tracked than others, the trend of erasing depictions of queerness, including bisexuality, from the page and screen has the potential to negatively affect individual's ability to see themselves in the content they consume and to create connections that may aid them in the construction of their sexual identities. It is important to note much of this lack of representation is rooted in the historical resistance to depictions of queerness across formats and is best epitomized by the implementation of the Production Code Act between 1930 and 1968 that was an extension of both the Red Scare and the Lavender Scare in the United States during the mid-twentieth century.

Historical Resistance to Queer Depictions

The history of queer representation in media is fraught with systematic attempts to prevent queerness from being reflected on a larger scale. While there have been queer characters in media prior to the twentieth century, the efforts of Will H. Hays, between 1927 and 1968 is the clearest example of systemic efforts to prevent queer characters and relationships from being depicted in media. In an attempt to regulate the content depicted in films after a period of scandals and moral objection, the Hays-led Motion Picture Association created a list of "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" for production companies, filmmakers, and screenwriters to abide by in 1927 to "abjure indecency" (Doherty, 2007, p. 37). However, despite his efforts, the lack of oversight and relatively weak strength of the Association to enforce these rules prevented any real changes from taking place given how the document's "singsong, childlike list of bromides and taboos failed to address the real threat and promise of the motion picture medium" (Doherty, 2007, p. 37) leading to the creation and enforcement of a stronger and larger document, the Motion Picture Production Code.

Sometimes referred to as the Hays Code after its architect, the Code "was notable for, among other things, the sometimes remarkable ways it attempted to regulate discourse in American film without baldly stating that certain textual elements were absolutely forbidden" (Lugowski, 1999, p. 9), including discussion about or depictions of sexuality beyond a simple, chaste kiss between a man and a woman. Coming off of a period of cultural stagnation during the peak of the Great Depression in 1933, Hays and other conservatives in Hollywood, who most likely viewed that same time as a period of moral decay when America became more feminized given the number or men out of work which led to the need for women to contribute to household finances in ways not previously seen (Lugowski, 1999; McElvaine, 1984), used the lack of regulation within the film industry to impact traditional values and morals through what they saw as an incredibly power medium: film (Doherty, 2007).

It is impossible to talk about the Hays Code and its efforts to regulate morality on screen in the middle of the twentieth century without acknowledging its connection to Catholic ideology and values especially in the context of its restriction on depicting queerness. Although Hays himself was a devout Presbyterian, the authors of the Code, Martin Quigley and Daniel A. Lord, S. J., and its main enforcer, Joseph Breen, were devout Catholics (Doherty, 2007). The effects of their beliefs on the creation of both the "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" as well as the Hays Code cannot be understated, even if they are implicitly woven through the text, not explicitly stated. In his article on the history of Catholic values in media, Doherty (2006) noted:

> the Code was no mere list of Thou-Shalt-Nots but a homily that sought to yoke Catholic doctrine to Hollywood formula: The guilty are punished, the virtuous are rewarded, the authority of church and state is legitimate, and the bonds of matrimony are sacred. (para. 3)

Any deviation from this narrative, such as expressions of sexuality that do not align with traditional Catholic teachings, but Hays simultaneously buried the connection to the Code's Catholic roots due to the anti-Catholic sentiments in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s (Doherty, 2007).

Although the Don'ts and Be Carefuls list and Hays Code did not explicitly prevent queerness from being depicted on screens by forbidding homosexuality "by, which was not named as such, but instead [viewing it] as a corruption of "sex'" (Noriega, 1990, p. 22), which was explicitly forbidden in the Code. In both the 1927 list and the 1930 Code, it stated "sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden" (Doherty, 1999, p. 363). The Code went further, claiming "impure love, the love which society has always regarded as wrong and which has been banned by divine law… must not be presented as attractive and beautiful" (Doherty, 1999, p. 7).

Without even bringing 'homosexuality' by name into the Code, the traditional Catholic view on queer relationships was implied throughout the Code when referring to sexuality. Hays and the conservative and heavily Catholic administration of the Motion Picture Association were able to restrict what types of relationships were shown on screen by drawing upon the "moral panic about social behavior, induced by the economic collapse in the post-Depression United States" (Maltby, 1993, p. 5). This focus on expression of gender and sexuality stemmed from the "Depression's crisis of masculinity and the family" (Lugowski, 1999, p. 8) and the Association focused on ensuring queer relationships remained taboo in the film industry to prevent further challenges to gender and e-sexual norms by perpetuating the view that queerness was inherently perverse and immoral. As a result, "queer imagery in film, typically in the form of comical representations of gay men, lesbians, and ambiguous sexuality, did not seem so funny anymore"

(Lugowski, 1999, p. 4) because of the “widespread crisis of masculinity and a related crisis of male authority in the family” (McFadden, 1993, p. 119) due to unemployment.

Despite this, the Code was not as strictly enforced prior to 1934 when the Motion Picture Association began to rigidly enforce the code through an intricately woven practice of self-censorship. Production companies fearing expensive rewrites, reshoots, and other post-production changes ultimately began only producing stories that would not be seen as objectionable by the Motion Picture Association, removing the possibility of queer narratives outside of the most subtle of queer coding (Lugowski, 1999). It was not until 1961 was the code revised to “allow limited depictions of homosexual subject matter” (Kohnen, 2016, p. 44) before the Code was replaced with the first iteration of the Motion Pictures Association of America ratings system in 1968. While production companies and filmmakers opted to not explicitly depict queerness within their works, that did not mean movies of the mid-twentieth century were devoid of queerness; however, most queer representation in media at the time came first through queer coded characters (Kohnen, 2016; Lugowski, 1999) and more recently through queerbaiting (J. Brennan, 2018; Fathallah, 2015).

Queerbaiting and Queer Coding

Despite the enactment of the Hays Code, queerness was still present in films during the period of time when it was enforced. As early as Great Depression-era films, “effeminate men and mannish women, in an age that conflated gender performance with sexuality, were Hollywood's representations of queer men and women” (Lugowski, 1999, p. 7). Although an individual’s gender is not evocative of their sexuality, a commonly held belief in the early 20th century believed “gender inversion was part of homosexuality” (Kohnen, 2016, p. 46). Although we might not read these characters as queer today simply because of their gender presentation,

both Noriega (1990) and Lugowski (1999) found in their archival research they were read as queer by some viewers at the time they were released.

These characters, seen even in prominent films like Orson Welles' 1941 landmark film *Citizen Kane*'s more masculine presenting female librarian, were able to avoid the strict quasi-watchdog oversight of the Hays Code because the depictions were not explicitly queer, simply queer coded. Queer coded characters during the enforcement of the Hays Code were often "identified mostly through 'connotation'—gestures, iconography, character typing, plot devices, genre structures—whereas, after a redefinition of this prohibition, 'denotation'—openly gay and lesbian characters and storylines—became more prevalent" (Kohnen, 2016, p. 46), a shift that is explored in Vito Russo's (1981/1987) *The Celluloid Closet*.

When the Hays Code ultimately went by the wayside after a Supreme Court decision in the 1960s, queer characters had the potential to be portrayed in ways that they had previously been denied; however, as this subtextual coding faded into the past, we started to see the punishing of queer characters for their queerness by either killing them or using the characters to queerbait the audience. This use and discarding of queerness erases their queerness from the narrative in a way that is not dissimilar to the *bury your gays* trope in which queer characters are erased "from the narrative entirely if the depiction indeed goes beyond subtext to include acknowledged queer identity" (Bridges, 2018, p. 116). Defined by Fathallah (2015) as "a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility" (p. 491), *queerbaiting* often lures viewers in through teasing queerness to gain viewership of both queer and heterosexual viewers alike, but

ultimately forces characters to comply with heteronormative scripts or results in the death of characters who express their queerness.

Despite this, queer viewers and especially queer woman viewers are "notoriously faithful [and] engage very actively in promoting series via social media, staying on for multiple seasons hoping to see 'their' character achieve success and find love" (Bridges, 2018, p. 121). Because of this loyalty, it makes this consistent and intentional (according to one showrunner) queerbaiting even more distressing. When fictional media is the only outlet or source of connection for a queer individual, the lack of centering of queer stories and having fully fleshed out queer characters who are explicitly queer continues TV and film's history of othering queer individuals but using them for their own gain.

Queer Media Tropes

Tropes, such as *bury your gays* and *sweeps week lesbian kiss*, are actively used by media producers, particularly for female-identified queer characters (Beirne, 2017; Bridges, 2018; Cameron, 2018; Cover & Milne, 2023; Horn, 2017; Waggoner, 2018). When a movie or television show buries its gays, queer characters are (often tragically) murdered to further the plot or increase emotional reaction from the audience and create new conflict for the show to explore. Although not problematic on its own, the frequency with which it happens to queer characters relegates them to a less valuable status by portraying them as less than integral to the plot outside of an emotional catalyst. By doing this, it reinforces and perpetuates the punishment of queer characters for simply being queer, something that began with the establishment of the Hays Code in the 1930s (Bridges, 2018). The *sweeps week lesbian kiss* trope occurs as a way to use queer romance and sex as a vehicle to increase ratings (Horn, 2017), particularly if a show has been *queerbaiting*, or teasing a queer romance without truly acting upon it (Bridges, 2018).

A queer kiss or romance scene will then be strategically placed in episodes to air during sweeps to help increase viewership and odds of renewal (Horn, 2017). This exploitative trope reduces a queer character's importance and main characteristic to their sexuality and by doing so, upholds social norms about queer romance being shocking and used by producers for their own gain (Bridges, 2018; Horn, 2017).

A modern example of both these tropes in media marketed to emerging adults can be found in the climactic kiss between Lexa and Clarke on *The 100*, a primetime broadcast show on the CW (Grillo-Marxuach & White, 2016) where producers used queerbaiting and tropes in tandem. Throughout the second and third seasons, a *will-they/won't they* relationship between Lexa, a lesbian, and Clarke, a bisexual woman was teased, retaining viewership to see how it would resolve. During the Sweeps episode (3x07), Clarke and Lexa have sex but shortly afterward, while still in the afterglow, Lexa is tragically killed in front of Clarke. In her analysis of fan response to this episode, Waggoner (2018) states:

> One minute and seven seconds in the episode after they are shown happy and in bed (post-sex pillow talk), Lexa walks into a stray bullet intended for Clarke (note: she is not jumping into the bullet to save her, just is in the wrong place at the wrong time as she walks into the room). (p. 1883)

The combination of these queerbaiting and harmful tropes allows queer characters to be used and then discarded once they are no longer needed. Reaction to the use of these tropes in Clarke and Lexa's portrayal of queer romance indicates their pervasiveness in visual media like television and film with fan communities speculating that Lexa or Clarke would die after viewing the promo for episode seven (Waggoner, 2018).

Unlike queer men characters, queer women on screen are not as often devoid of sexuality as shows use female sexuality as a way to entice male viewers who are attracted to women; however, these moments of sapphic intimacy have an expiration date as these relationships are not going to turn into long-term ones or are written off as exploration. The season two kiss is unique in that it does not have Clarke backpedal after she and Lexa kiss and claim that it was a mistake but instead have her state that she is not ready to be in a relationship as her boyfriend had just died, revealing her bisexuality in a very normal way. This interaction energized the fanbase and gave the show positive press about their handling and centering of a queer potential relationship where those months of looks and almosts was most likely going to pay off, especially given how positively the showrunner talked about the relationship and how he was engaging with fans and discourse surrounding the pairing, almost assuring them nothing bad would happen. The end of season two high did not last long, however, as Lexa's untimely death occurred not even halfway through the third season, a mere 70 seconds after she and Clarke had sex for the first and only time. As a result, queer fans of *The 100* "witness[ed] punishment of queer characters, and by proxy, of themselves as well" (Bridges, 2018, p. 127).

While there has been increased representation in media over the past few decades (Townsend et al., 2022), there is still a significant amount of queer-coded characters who are never truly depicted as queer. This is particularly important when queer characters are used to queerbaiting queer viewers by giving them just enough representation to keep them interested and engaged but not enough to count as true queer representation. This *us vs. them* dynamic between queer viewers and the majority cis-het male film and TV executives illustrates that these narrative decisions are being made by someone who is not a member of the community consistently being harmed and further reifies a power imbalance between the two. The

executives exploit queer individuals' desire to be seen to increase viewership by dangling the possibility of a queer character but then turn and harm them in some way or force them to remain ambiguously queer. This reflects the baiting aspect of queerbaiting as the executives lure queer viewers in and trap them and then continues this by inching characters closer and closer to being fully queer but stopping before that truly occurs (Bridges, 2018).

Although Lexa's death brought the plight of queer women characters to the surface, "it could not erase the message that the trope sends to the LGBTQ community: gay love and sex are punishable by death, happiness is unattainable and LGBTQ lives do not matter" (Bridges, 2018, p. 122). This is particularly noticeable in shows that tease a woman-loving-woman relationship. Despite increases in representation overall on TV, the "representation of lesbian and bisexual women prove far less rosy" (Bridges, 2018, p. 120). Queer women have been the victim of superfluous deaths and deaths for shock value more than any other demographic at a disproportionate rate given the commonplace nature of tropes such as Dead Lesbian Syndrome (Bridges, 2018) and the fact that many of their deaths occur after a scene of romantic fulfillment. This implicitly tells viewers that queer happiness is unsustainable, and that queer people do not necessarily deserve safe and happy intimate relationships. Bridges (2018) states that this does not mean queer characters cannot be killed, but showrunners need to ask if "there is a more creative way to shock audiences" (p. 122) than killing queer characters because of this history.

When portrayed, bisexual characters are more likely to ascribe to tropes that lessen the significance of their sexuality and development. Bisexual characters are often portrayed as unfaithful, untrustworthy, and/or self-destructive (Deerwater et al., 2023). *House M. D.'s* Remy "Thirteen" Hadley's multiple one-night stands with individuals of multiple genders after her Huntington's Disease diagnosis results in her firing. Only after she enters into a stable,

heterosexual relationship that complies with the sexuality binary is she rehired (M. D. E. Meyer, 2010). M. D. E. Meyer (2010) also notes *Bones'* Angela is a "spirit child, often arguing for the pleasures of everyday life, the joy of sex, and a liberated feminine psyche" (p. 373), reflecting the stereotype of the immature and hedonistic bisexual especially in comparison to Dr. Brennan, the more serious, stable, and adult-like heterosexual female character. By creating this dichotomy where monosexual characters are depicted as stable and mature than bisexual characters, it continues to perpetuate the belief that bisexual individuals are inherently immature and less developed than their monosexual counterparts.

Because media influences queer young and emerging adults "self-realization, coming out, and current identities by providing role models and inspiration" (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 330), exploring when these media interactions become parasocial would provide important insight into how media functions in student development theory as either an environmental factor, interpersonal factor, or a combination of the two. While individuals across sexualities may engage in parasocial relationship making with fictional characters in media, the historic mistreatment of queer characters provides fewer positive depictions for queer emerging adults to bond with. For bisexual individuals, this is even fewer given the lack of bisexual representation overall in media.

An Interdisciplinary Approach: Situating This Dissertation Study

My dissertation study sits at the intersection of media studies and student development theory. While there have been studies on the use of media in education, and even in student affairs teaching as seen in a special *New Directions for Student Services* issue on entertainment media in student affairs programs (Forney & Cawthon, 2004), exploring media as a unique factor has not been often done in college student development theory research. Because of this, I have

drawn from media studies and communication studies research where concepts like parasocial relationships have been studied since the 1950s to set a foundation for my research. The combination of disciplines not only provides a comprehensive exploration of extant literature but also illustrates the interdisciplinary nature of this avenue of inquiry. Without merging multiple disciplines, this dissertation research could not have been crafted with such intentionally.

This chapter provided a look at the history of bisexuality and other plurisexual identities both within and outside of the queer community, followed by an exploration of media depictions of bisexual+ characters, highlighting those that are well done, like Rosa Diaz from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, to instances where bisexual characters are killed at the hand of the 'bury your gays' trope as epitomized by the tragic loss of Lexa on *The 100*. An overview of college student development theory, its history and evolution over time, and the current trends and trajectories of research within this space. After an exploration of theories specifically related to sexual identity construction, the role of media in identity construction served as a bridge between the educational research sources and the media and communication studies literature, drawing from Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) metaphor of 'windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors' to describe the functionality of diverse representation in literature. This literature review concludes with an overview of extant literature from media and communication studies scholars about parasocial relationships, how sexuality and queerness shows up in media spaces, and the historical resistance of media companies to depict queer characters due to larger cultural pressures and views on queerness as deviance.

This blending of fields provides a multifaceted look into a phenomenon that has historically only been researched within communication studies: parasocial relationships. By uniting these disciplines, it supports recent research in the college student development space

that calls for broadening the field so we can better understand our students and their experiences, as well as design programming that fosters development in ways that have not historically been present in the field. The focus on fictional relationships also fills a gap in how the student affairs field looks at media. Most research on student development that centers media does so with social media, not fictional media that students engage with. Additionally, using media within programming in co-curricular spaces tends to be met with assumptions of laziness and passivity on the part of the student affairs educator given the belief that media interactions are not active, relational activities for some students. Understanding how students use media to fill a need not being met on campuses will provide practitioners with information about what students need but are unable to find within our traditional contextualization of higher education, whether because of our own biases as educators, our campus cultures and climates, and, as a more recent development, legislative and political efforts to restrict efforts that work towards equity, diversity, and inclusion in educational spaces, including colleges and universities. My research also provides insight into what role(s) these parasocial relationships serve within a student's identity construction process to better understand if they are seeing these relationships as true relationships or more so as environmental factors.

Lastly, by focusing solely on bisexual+ individuals, attention to a group often ignored in research across disciplines could provide insight into this group of individuals and their unique needs. The discrepancy between the fact that bisexual+ individuals comprise the majority of the queer community but are rarely the sole focus of research, particularly within student development theory, is a symptom of bisexual erasure as it forces us to look at bisexual students as half straight-half queer instead of a whole bisexual+ person. Given the unique needs and circumstances surrounding bisexuality and other plurisexual identities, being able to truly engage

with this under-researched community will provide new insights into bisexual students and their experiences that have shaped who they are today.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY, METHODS, AND RESEARCH DESIGN

At the center of my dissertation is an exploration of individual students' uses of fictionally based parasocial relationships in identity construction processes. Because narrative research "provides a window into meaning making as a fundamental process of human development…[and]…focus on the concept of meaning—how individuals position themselves in their worlds and make sense of themselves through stories" (Josselson & Hammack, 2021, p. 5), using a narrative-based methodology for my dissertation allowed me to focus on the individual stories of the students I interviewed. This chapter presents my positionality and research paradigm before outlining my methodological approach, participant criteria, data collection procedures, and analysis method. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of actions I took to ensure trustworthiness and acknowledge the assumptions, limitations and delimitations applicable to this study.

As opposed to the focus on shared essences in phenomenological research, a narrative approach allowed me to truly focus on the uniqueness of each participant's experiences as opposed to looking across experiences. However, because narratives are co-created between the researcher and participant, acknowledging my own inclinations and connections to my topic is an integral part of qualitative research as a whole, but particularly when researchers are directly connected to the research as is the case in this study. Acknowledging my own connections on an identity-level are central to the decisions I made about method, methodology, and data analysis; as a result, I begin my methods chapter with my researcher as instrument statement, partly to

provide the context of myself within my research but also to emphasize the centrality of researcher reflexivity throughout my research process.

Researcher as Instrument

As a bi-oriented aromantic-asexual woman, it is important to recognize and acknowledge the impact my own identities and perspective have on my analysis. Being bisexual and aromantic-asexual inherently comes into play in my research as identity is not something that I can take off and remove from the interactions I have with participants and my data. It also represents quite a contradiction. Bisexuality often evokes a wider range of possibilities for relationships, but my bisexuality is very much tempered by my aromantic-asexuality, identities that reflect little to no attraction based on romance or sexuality. Growing up, I always felt very connected to the characters in books, television shows, and movies. I found great kinship with characters as I explored worlds and experienced new things through the media I consumed. It was almost as if forming parasocial relationships was easier for me than dyadic ones. Whether I was jumping into solving mysteries with Nancy Drew or flying around Hogwarts with Harry Potter (a series I currently am trying to unpack my feelings toward given the author's rampant transphobia), I cannot deny the role media had in not just feeling connected to others but being able to do things and explore places only found in my imagination. However, it also made me feel so deeply connected to characters that I would feel sad when a series or book finished because it felt like I truly lost a friend.

Having these emotional responses was something I always kept very quiet, fearing what others would think. Would they think I was too odd or too nerdy? Why was it okay for my friends to show their enthusiasm for their latest crush but I felt as if I would be ostracized about my friendships with the characters in books I read or shows I watched? Was it because they were

not romantic? But they felt so real. So much of the angst I felt as a teenager and even as an undergraduate at an institution where I never truly felt I belonged was rooted in how I felt 10 steps behind my peers when it came to socializing. In my mid-20s I would ultimately come to know it was this mixture of aromanticism, asexuality, and bisexuality that made conversations about dating and boys (as heteronormative as that is) somewhat uncomfortable for me. Largely, I feel this was because I did not have the language to talk about what I was feeling given the lack of openly queer people of any identity in my life growing up or the knowledge to see myself as not fundamentally behind my peers; we were simply running different races.

I fully believe that if I had been exposed to better representation of queer characters, I would have had a less windy path to accepting both my bisexuality and aromantic-asexuality, all of which are identities within the queer community that are not as privileged as monosexual, allosexual, and alloromantic identities are. The lack of representation of either bisexuality or asexuality (let alone demisexuality) in the media I consumed—given how voracious a consumer of media, especially a reader, I was and still am—is a bit of a sticking point for me. I find myself often frustrated when I see shows and movies touted as being “good” when they are rife with biphobia or use the coded asexual character, if they even exist, as a vehicle for laughs or perpetuating the “you just haven’t found the right person” narrative. I would be remiss if I did not highlight how my own experiences with media have brought me to pursuing this avenue of research.

When looking at media interactions specifically related to how I constructed my bisexual identity, I eventually began to interact with bisexual characters who did not ascribe to tropes of unfaithfulness and hypersexuality, but it was not easy to do so. I remember one of my analytic memos when I was analyzing *Heartstopper,* a webcomic with a bisexual main character by Alice

Oseman (2016), for a manuscript read that, despite how much I adore this series, I cannot help but feel a distinct sense of yearning for younger Melissa, a melancholic nostalgia for what could have been if media representation had been better (M. Allen, 2023b). What could have happened if I was able to connect my own feelings about not feeling like I fit in with my peers given my unease with heteronormative and allonormative expectations of the late aughts and mid-2010s? Even though I differed from Nick in ways as influential as gender identity and as surface level as my love of school versus his love of sports, I found myself finding the interactions I had reading this webcomic on my phone under the cover of night mirroring that of a friend. Similarly, it was not until I was 27 reading academia-set romance novel *The Love Hypothesis* by Ali Hazelwood (2021) that I read a character in a romance novel who seemed to be on the asexual spectrum. I remember sitting on my couch and needing to stop to process when I read the female main character, Olive, state:

> It's not that I want to not have sex. I just…don't particularly want to have it. There is something weird about my brain, and my body—I don't know what's wrong with me, but I don't seem to be able to experience attraction like other people. Like normal people. I tried to just…to just do it, to get it over with, and the guy I did it with was nice, but the truth is that I just don't feel any…
>
> She closed her eyes. This was difficult to admit.
>
> I don't feel any sexual attraction unless I actually get to trust and like another person, which for some reason never happens. (pp. 267–268)

Reading this passage was simultaneously incredibly validating but also evoked an incredibly deep feeling of melancholy because I could not help but think about how impactful it would have been to read this even a decade earlier.

I focus on my connections to and history with media to introduce my researcher as instrument statement because this is a distinct element of who I am coming through in my research. Yes, my research reflects my background as a student affairs educator with its roots in college student development theory and my views applauding how the field is evolving away from prescriptive theories to conceptual understandings, something which is reflected by my lack of connection to a specific theorist in this study in favor of instead looking at development from a bird's eye view. However, that is a much less nuanced and impactful force on the decisions I made on every level and action in this study from research design to data collection and data analysis.

In a way, pursuing this research has been almost a salve for some of the wounds that linger from feeling as different as I have from my peers, which thankfully has shifted as I have come to learn more about who I am. I moved through the very web-like discourses surrounding sexuality that I explored in my dissertation, and it was not an easy journey, particularly because my bisexuality and aromantic-asexuality did and still often do feel at odds with each other. The tension between these two facets of my identity and what feels like continuously existing in a liminal space connects to why I felt compelled to pursue research that challenges conventional norms of what is considered educational research, adopts a methodologically eclectic approach (Ussher, 1999), and falls within the poststructural paradigm that embraces and celebrates a lack of concreteness and discrete categories, all of which this study was designed to do.

Poststructuralism

An “ahistorical and theoretical” (Crotty, 1998/2015, p. 204) reaction to and critique of structuralism, *poststructuralism* reflects a movement away from truth and objectivity towards acknowledging the interconnectedness of the world and the role of culture as a main factor in the constructions of a multitude of realities. Poststructuralism is closely linked to postmodernism with debate surrounding whether the two are distinct enough to be two completely different movements. Some vehemently see poststructuralism and postmodernism as two distinct movements (Millner, 1991) while others view poststructuralism as “a variety of postmodernism defined by its reaction against structuralism in France” (Blackburn, 1994, p. 295). Truly, this lack of agreement about the relationship between post structuralism and postmodernism depicts poststructuralism’s denial of a single true reality but a multitude of realities that are subjective. The lack of concrete definitions of the relationship between poststructuralism and postmodernism also can be seen when looking at influential figures with the poststructural movement and how they are referred to in research.

Given the importance of 20th century French sociologists and philosophers in poststructuralism, such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, poststructuralism as a paradigm rose to use in the United States after the boom in translations of these individuals works from their original French into English in the 1980s. I acknowledge this tension because sources often present conflicting views depending on the leanings of the author and may even refer to influential figures, like Derrida and Foucault, as both poststructuralists and postmodernists. I choose to use the term *poststructural* because of the emphasis on shifts in language between structuralism and poststructuralism which directly affects analysis of narrative and discourse given the linguistic nature of these two data sources and the importance of the language-based

poststructural concepts of *différance* (Derrida, 1972/1982a) and discourse (Foucault, 1982/2014, 1993).

Language in Poststructuralism

Language within poststructuralism is seen for its ability to produce meaning beyond the semantic, a marked difference between the literal and truth-centered views of language in structural thought. While a structuralist, Ferdinand de Saussure's influence on linguistics and discourse centers on the distinction between *la parole* [the word] from *la langue* [the language], or the actual language and speech acts from "the language system that governs speech events" (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 13) and how the interaction between those two should be analyzed. While not considered poststructural, de Saussure's acknowledgement that language is not neutral or devoid of contextual influence and meaning paved the way for the development of poststructural views on language and speech.

While he viewed *la parole* and *la langue* as two distinct concepts, he also noted that speech receives its meaning from language and language reflects historical meaning which creates limits to understanding (de Saussure, 1916/1959; Ordman, 2016). This shifted analysis of language from a diachronic approach to a synchronic one that acknowledged the relationship between speech and language. For de Saussure, the "meaning and function of language do not rely on its origins or the manner in which it developed, but rather on what is known about the current system of signs and meanings" (Ordman, 2016, p. 19). de Saussure viewed words as signs that consist of both concept (the signified) and a sound (the signifier) that "do not *cause* one another, but are functionally related, each depending on the other" (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 13). With this in mind, he did not claim that sounds had specific meanings as a single sound can be heard across multiple languages and sounds are not inherently linked to concepts.

Meaning ultimately stems from "language as a whole and relies on the contrasting relationships between the elements that make up a language, rather than single words in themselves" (Ordman, 2016, p. 19). These linguistic connections are then built and reified reciprocally as language grows and develops. As a result of this continuously shifting relationship between signifier and signified, we see how:

> a linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas; but the pairing of a certain number of acoustical signs with as many cuts made from the mass thought engenders a system of values. (de Saussure, 1916/1959, pp. 121–122)

This relational view of signifier-signified and focus on difference was built upon and reinterrogated poststructurally by Jacques Derrida and his concept of *différance*.

Derrida and *Différance*. Linguistically, the poststructuralist Derrida strongly critiqued much of what structuralists believed about how language and speech function. Advocating for deconstruction of language (Derrida, 1972/1982a) where hidden meanings and assumptions are uncovered in a challenge to structural logocentrism, Derrida's rebuke of structuralism's clinging to truth and transparency in analysis of speech and language builds upon de Saussure's distinction between *la parole* and *la langue*. The Derridean concept of *différance*. With its intentional misspelling of *différence* [difference], which draws from the French verb *différer* meaning both to differ and to defer, Derrida pushes back against the tradition of viewing spoken language as superior to that of the written word in terms of creating and indicating meaning. Replacing the *e* with an *a* does not change how the word is pronounced: /difəʁɑ̃s(ə)/. This means that any distinction between the two cannot occur simply by hearing the word but through seeing the differences between *différ**e**nce* and *différ**a**nce*, supporting Derrida's rebuke of Husserl's

phonocentrism that privileges spoken word over the written one (West, 2007). Privileging the spoken word as the most useful form of language does not allow for analysis of language as a whole as important information is conveyed through the organization of letters and how they impart difference and signal different meanings.

By elevating written language to the level of its spoken counterpart, it highlights how meaning is not linked to a particular sound or set of sounds but instead through both difference and deference. *Différance* asks us to accept that meaning is never truly and objectively defined given "that an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces" (Derrida, 1972/1982b, p. 28). This deferring of meaning not only creates a lack of stability and dismantles clear structures, but it also brings in the importance of context in determining meaning. Meanings are both deferred by context but also differ based on context.

Because the individual units of sound do not convey explicit meaning, words receive their meaning by how they differ from other words within the same linguistic system. For example, if we were to take the sentence "*I saw a bumblebee, honeybee,* and *yellow jacket out in the garden"* the two elements of *différance* can be illustrated. The words do not have meaning based on their sounds or combinations of letters. Their meaning, for me, is given based on my socially constructed knowledge that each of these are bees and they are grouped together. However, I can further distinguish between them based on how they differ from each other which could include my fear of yellow jackets but not of bumblebees and the recent efforts to save the honeybee. While I can say they are all bees, they each have a distinct meaning based on knowledge beyond simply how they linguistically differ. However, a different individual who is

completely afraid of bees will have a different understanding of what these words mean because language is inherently based in differences (de Saussure, 1916/1959; Derrida, 1972/1982b).

I am also constructing these differences based on an ever-evolving context. If I were to remove *bumblebee* and *honeybee* from the sentence for it to read "*I saw a yellow jacket in the garden,"* it would open the possibility for multiple meanings to arise. Is it a bee or a yellow piece of clothing? This lack of true meaning of what a *yellow jacket* is without further context reflects the deferral aspect of *différance* as claiming to define what a *yellow jacket* is deferred to reflect other meanings surrounding it. Derrida's aphorism "*Il n'y a pas de hors-text"* (Derrida, 1967/2016, p. 158), and its oft-debated translation, reflects the integral link between language, meaning, and context as illustrated in this simple example. Translated to read "there is nothing outside the text," this translation has been rejected by poststructuralists as antithetical to Derridean thought. In the eyes of poststructuralists, the idea of there being nothing outside text reflects Derrida's notion "that which I call a text is practically everything… speech is a text, gesture is a text, reality is a text in this new sense" (Derrida qtd. in Schaschek, 2014, p. 10). If text is everything and everything is also text, then there truly is nothing outside text but because text is all encompassing, a statement I wholly agree with. Context influences not just the meaning of words, but how we know and interpret the world around us, including ourselves. Identity construction processes are influenced by where one is and what they are exposed to. By looking at media as a factor, I can embrace both how identity construction processes differ between individuals based on their unique contexts but also how the culture at large influences those same processes.

Foucault and Discourse. Drawing from Derrida's thesis that the meaning of language is malleable and contextual, Michel Foucault applied that same logic to the discursive construction

of the self and the archaeology of knowledge (Foucault, 1969/2002) that reflects knowledge's socially and discursively constructed nature. Just as Derrida noted that language is meaningless without context, Foucault expanded that to incorporate knowledge as well through its intertwined relationship with discourse. According to Foucault (1969/2002):

> discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined. It is a space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed. (p. 60)

Discourse from a Foucauldian perspective is, in essence, the sum total of language, meaning, and sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts and any interrogation of discourse must encompass these different aspects to truly explore discourse and discursive constructions. One of the products of discourse, then, is the creation of the self (Foucault, 1993). Who we are is not simply informed by our own beliefs but by the larger cultural discourses surrounding identity and the subsequent privileging of some identities over others. If text, and therefore language, is everywhere a la Derrida, Foucault built upon this in the context of discourse as both a creator of and created by power and knowledge, referred to by Foucault as power/knowledge. This power/knowledge transmitted through the manipulation, intentional and unintentional alike, that creates social norms and rules of a particular context.

By creating social norms and rules through discourse, Foucault (1993) brings to light how language and text "defines a person's subjectivity but also exerts influence to subjectify individuals and create docile bodies with the intention of reproducing the prevailing linguistically-mediated discourse" (Ordman, 2016, p. 22). Depending on the power a particular identity or status currently controls, discourse rewards those who do not challenge it but also

punishes those who challenge normative discourses who are often members of marginalized groups (Foucault, 1993) and are then subjected to increased surveillance and efforts to force compliance and regulation by those who are ultimately in charge of constructing what those norms are given their more powerful status (Foucault, 1988). Centering Foucauldian ideas of power, knowledge, and discourse in sexuality, as was a major focus of his work, it highlights the use of power/knowledge about sex to structure power in such a way that continues to center heterosexuality by reifying the discursively constructed norms about what type of sex is discursively appropriate.

In the case of sexuality, Foucault (1976/1990) noted how society had created a discourse of sexuality that afforded influence and power to heterosexual individuals despite the increase in possibility and visibility of different sexualities post-18th century. While we may make decisions that we feel we have complete control and autonomy over, Foucault would rebut that "all individual thought and action is prescribed by subliminal and shared discursive ideas which permeate our life worlds" (Townsend as cited in Ordman, 2016, p. 21). This contradiction between being aware of cultural discourses but also lacking the true ability to fully divest ourselves from them was one of the driving forces behind Foucault's study of sex and sexuality from a discursive lens.

Specifically, Foucault (1969/2002) viewed discourse as ideology created by language because it gives us a systematic way to think of a particular subject. For Foucault (1976/1990), discourse on sexuality is inherently linked to power as "sexuality is originally, historically bourgeois, and that, in its successive shifts and transpositions, it induces specific class effects" (p. 127). Just as power privileges classes with more influence and wealth (which is a result of befitting from that power in the first place), sexuality is a reflection of the same allocation of

power based on socially constructed categorizations but based on sex instead of wealth. While there were efforts to limit discussions of sex, particularly about non-heterosexual sex or sex outside of marriage prior to the 18th century, the “veritable discursive explosion” (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 17) shifted how sexuality and sex was (or was not) discussed.

Approaching sexuality as a discursive construction highlights how the silence surrounding queer sexuality, in particular, “produced more desire and new forms of desire” (C. Taylor, 2017, p. 20). Ultimately, this silencing of sex and sexuality led to discourse “creat[ing] sexualities rather than (or even while) prohibiting them” (p. 20). Foucauldian views on sexuality as a discursive construction is best encapsulated in the power in queer sexuality labels. Without a discourse of sexuality that favors and centers heterosexuality, classifying individuals or social subjects as a non-heterosexual would not reflect the cultural connotations associated with a particular sexuality label.

As these new constructions of sexuality began to breach the discursive surface and culture was forced to “make room for illegitimate sexualities” (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 4), those the discourse was created to favor began to use that power to ensure they took “their infernal mischief elsewhere” (p. 4). While Foucault was not only referring to queerness but sex involving “those Other Victorians” (Marcus, 1966) such as sex workers and women (particularly those who were suffering from hysteria and other sexual disorders), the use of sexuality to construct norms that reinforced sexuality as appropriate within the contexts of heterosexual marriage through the shaping of knowledge and attitudes about what constitutes “perverse pleasure” (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 105) reflects Foucault’s assertion that the discourse surrounding ultimately depicts a preoccupation with sex, not a repression of it. This increase in discourse surrounding sex and expanding the possibility is not reflective of a liberated society. It is instead “a discursive act that

enmeshes us in networks of power that constitute the kinds of subjects that we are and regulate every aspect of our lives” (C. Taylor, 2017, p. 3).

While Foucault argued that discourse’s ability to regulate sociality was through three technologies of power (Foucault 1982/2014, 1993), when discourse regulates sexuality, Foucault also included a technology of the self that “refers to one’s capacity for self-definition and self-regulation which may collude with prevailing discourses…or potentially operate partly in resistance to them” (Ordman, 2016, pp. 22–23). This potential for resistance and the role of parasocial relationships in plurisexual individuals’ resistance to both heteronormativity and norms rooted in privileging monosexuality during their identity construction requires a methodology that permits the interrogation of different levels of discourse and story.

Research Design and Approach

Given poststructuralism’s eschewing of any kind of shared reality and understanding, any study undertaking research from this position requires flexibility throughout the research process beginning with broad level methodological choices through data analysis processes. Unlike the objectivity and generalizability sought in quantitative research, qualitative research’s goal of understanding and depicting human experiences reflects my own desires as a researcher to delve into explorations of how individuals construct their identities. Because of the intertwined nature of the researcher and their research, qualitative research is inherently subjective; however, subjectivity is not always a bad thing. While connections can be drawn across participant accounts, ensuring weight and focus is given to the individual story participants tell is an important part of research about how we learn and grow in our understanding of who we are. When research is focused on people and their experiences, was is the case for this dissertation, a method that automatically accounts and accommodates for the inability to be objective when

exploring the deeply personal experiences brought to the surface on the part of researcher and participant alike in research on identity construction, such as those found in qualitative research, is integral to truly exploring identity development processes.

My desire to explore the experiences of plurisexual students as opposed to queer students as a whole oriented me towards selecting narrative inquiry as the methodology for my dissertation. As opposed to employing a phenomenological approach, my desire to push back against the historic monolithic treatment of queer students in college student development research through a method that focuses on the individual rather than shared essence led me to narrative inquiry. Because telling and listening to stories is a shared experience for humans across cultures (Plummer, 2013/2016), using a methodological approach based in storytelling reflects not just this instinctual drive to learn about others on a cultural level but also my own inclinations as well. Despite my introversion, I love learning about people and their experiences and centering that in my research is a good fit for myself as a researcher as well as my topic of identity construction processes. Researching identity construction needs to begin on the individual level because of the inherently personal nature of this experience.

Narrative inquiry is not particularly interested in only what is shared across participants but also in the unique elements of each participant's story; however, acknowledging the positioning of a single narrative within a broaden cultural scope is an important part of narrative inquiry, particularly from a critical or poststructural perspective, because our experiences occur "always in relation [to others], always in a social context" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2) in a three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Not only do our stories occur in this three-dimensional space, but research and analysis occur in that space as well. As a result, the co-constructed narrative reflects the temporality, sociality, and

place where the experience being narrated occurred but also that of when it is being retold, as well as when the researcher then interprets it.

Narrative inquiry relies on rapport and relationship building between researcher and participant because, ultimately, researchers are tasked with representing the experiences of the participants through their analysis of the narratives and creating a space where participants feel comfortable and safe in sharing their experiences. Narrative researchers often note how they are able to *give voice*[5] (e.g., Byrne, 2017; K. E. Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Marsh, 2009; Nolan et al., 2018) to participants through narrative inquiry, but I push back against this language. In an act of giving voice, it implies that participants do not already have their own voices and require others to tell their stories (Ashby, 2011). Ultimately, the act of giving voice creates an imbalanced power dynamic between participants and researcher(s). Participants already have their own voices but there may be structural forces that keep their voices from rising to the surface and remain muted often due to *epistemic violence*, the intentional silencing of marginalized individuals and/or groups (Dotson, 2011; Spivak, 1988).

In a way, labeling how researchers interact with participant narratives giving voice continues to perpetuate epistemic violence against an oft invisible group by reifying the powerful pseudo-colonial tensions and structuring of power in the researcher-participant relationship in research, including that in the educational sphere (Bendix et al., 2020; Bhattacharya, 2009a, 2009b; Patel, 2016). Through centering the quasi-savior act of a researcher coming in and giving participants their ability to speak, it simultaneously centers the researcher as the main source of

[5] Although this phrase does not appear in narrative inquiry's foundational texts (Clandinin, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), it is frequently present in narrative inquiry studies. Throughout my research, I was unable to identify where it originated.

knowledge and the arbiter of knowledge construction(s). Although I identify as a bisexual woman and, therefore, I am not entering a community I am not a part of, I still bring in more power to the interactions between myself and my participants. With this in mind, I am choosing to move away from this process of giving voice to one that is rooted in amplifying and providing space for their own voices to rise to the surface without reinforcing the idea of an omniscient and omnipotent researcher and centering the co-creation of a rich and detailed narrative.

While narrative inquiry does focus on the individual participant story, we are also able to analyze "practices of power that may be taken for granted by individual speakers…[and] analyze how culturally and historically contingent" (Riessman, 1993, p. 5) the themes and language participants use are to reflect a larger narrative that interrogates power structures. This dual ability of narratives creates an ability to pair analysis of narratives with discourse analytic techniques to explore this larger narrative about the power within the participants' individual narrative. Because of this, narratives function as a form and type of discourse and can be analyzed using discourse analytic techniques as well. Treating narratives as both individual experiences but also reflective of larger cultural systems and structures makes narrative inquiry a good fit for poststructural research that interrogates not just the larger power structures but the individual within those systems and their unique experiences.

A methodological approach that allows for highlighting the individual experiences and stories is crucial to a study about queer identity, particularly in the context of college student development theory. When queerness is centered in student development theory research, there is often a monolithic treatment of and false equivocation of distinct identities in what is truly an extremely diverse community. We can see this in the titles of our field's theories such as Cass' (1979) Model of Homosexual Identity Development and D'Augelli's (1994) Model of Lesbian,

Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development. Although more recent models look at sexuality from a broader perspective (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Dillon et al., 2011; S. R. Jones et al., 2013), the effects of treating the experiences of queer students as the same regardless of their specific label (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, queer, lesbian) and the pervasiveness of painting the experiences of queer students in broad strokes are still felt today in college student development theory with the prominence of gay male experiences in research.

Research Questions

Based on my conceptual framework, I created two research questions to explore:

RQ1: What do participant narratives reveal about how bisexual emerging adults construct their identity through interactions with media characters during their identity construction processes?

RQ2: How do bisexual emerging adults utilize parasocial relationships during identity construction processes?

These two research questions are inherently linked but allow for the use of a dual-layered analytical process that combines findings from individual narratives (micro-level) and the metanarrative findings (macro-level) to be used to create a detailed and expansive retelling of the participants' experiences with parasocial relationships and how the larger contexts they are a part of influence the construction and use of those relationships.

Participants

Narrative inquiry presents a challenge in terms of determining what is an appropriate sample size. While other methodologies have standard participant sizes, narrative sample sizes are far less standard. When establishing participant size in narrative research, participant size needs to be large enough to prevent "thin interpretations" but not so large as to become

“overwhelming to the researcher” (Josselson & Hammack, 2021, p. 21). Ultimately, the participant size should be reflective of the topic of study and the depth of analysis (Wells, 2011). My dissertation is exploratory as there has been very little investigation into parasocial relationships in college student development theory research. Because of its exploratory nature, Wells (2011) suggested at least five participants which allowed for analysis of macro level patterns regarding power, while still honoring each individual story (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017). As such, I ultimately recruited five participants (Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Overview of Participants

Participant	Age*	Location		Racial Identity
		Childhood	College or University	
Moon	22	West	Southwest	Hispanic and white**
Melody	22	Midwest	South	white
Toshi	19	South	South	white
Froggy	18	Midwest and Mid-Atlantic	Mid-Atlantic	white
Imogen	21	South	South	white

** Age at the time of interviews*
***On their demographic form, Moon stated they were biracial (Hispanic and white) while in their interview noted they were biracial, stating “Mexican and white.”*

In narrative inquiry, the creation of criteria for inclusion is the most important decision made regarding participant recruitment. Wells (2011) stated that establishing sample criteria is akin to purposeful sampling as individuals are “selected because they are expected to yield in-

depth information with which to achieve the study's aim" (p. 19). Given the importance of sampling in narrative inquiry, clearly establishing participant criteria is an integral part to narrative research. For my dissertation, participants were required to fit four criteria: (1) identify under the bisexual+ umbrella (Flanders, 2017); (2) be between the ages of 18 and 24; (3) connected with a fictional character during their sexual identity construction process; and (4) attend a college or university in the United States. Participants did not need to be United States citizens as international students were permitted to participate nor was there a restriction based on the states in which participants resided. Recruitment of participants occurred in a variety of ways. My first efforts in participant recruitment centered on intentional contact to campus LGBTQ+ student organizations and my former classmates and other alumni from my master's degree in College Student Personnel Administration who are working at various institutions across the United States via our alumni Facebook group. I then expanded to include the CSPTalk listserv, a listserv composed of student affairs practitioners and faculty around the United States, and general social media postings on Facebook and Tumblr, given the media focus of this social media platform. Lastly, I posted flyers on my institution's campus in academic buildings and student unions. Through these avenues, I provided a shortened version of my recruitment flyer with a link to a Qualtrics form for them to either fill out themselves or share with bisexual+ individuals they know between the ages of 18 and 24. All variations on recruitment materials can be found in Appendix G. The Qualtrics link remained active until early December 2023 and was closed upon.

After completing the consent form (Appendix H) at the beginning of this Qualtrics form, participants completed a demographic form (Appendix I) that allowed them to self-identify their sexual orientation, report their pronouns, and select their pseudonym. They also provided

additional information including location, age, and race. This provided participants the chance to ensure they were referenced and written about in a way that uses the correct terms and a name participants are comfortable with. Additionally, the use of member checking post-data collection by allowing participants to read and, if necessary, correct sections of my dissertations that draw from their narratives allowed participants to determine if they feel their chosen pseudonym makes them feel anonymous or, if they feel they are still easily identifiable, the chance to select a different pseudonym. To ensure participants met the criteria, if responses that did not meet the criteria funneled the unqualified participants to the end-of-survey screen before completing the survey using Skip Logic. Still, I checked participant responses to ensure they met the criteria even if they were able to complete the survey.

Additionally, there is still a bicoastal bias (Howard, 1999) often seen in research across disciplines on LGBTQ+ individuals, their experiences, and their histories despite the increase in non-coastal scholarship centering on queer experiences and histories (e.g., Goodrich & McClellan, 2022; McNamee & Tate, 2022; Sorgen & Rogers, 2020) "scholarship counters stereotypes of queer life as predominantly or quintessentially metropolitan" (Fosl & Vivian, 2019, p. 219). States were grouped into six regions for ease of labeling participant location based upon a modified version of the Bureau of Economic Analysis' division of the United States into economic regions; I combined the Far West and Rocky Mountain regions to become the *West* and merged the Plains and Great Lakes regions to become the *Midwest*. This allowed for specificity given the cultural trends in each of these regions while also continuing to provide anonymity for participants. A breakdown of states by region can be found in Appendix I as a part of my demographic form.

A Note About Bot and Impostor Participants and Participant Selection

Bot and impostor participants are not new phenomena in research, but they have largely been a concern plaguing quantitative research given the technology-mediated environment needed for bot and impostor participants to influence data collection that has been a hallmark of quantitative data collection via online survey platforms (e.g., Bybee et al., 2022; Godinho et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2022; Pozzar et al., 2020; Storozuk et al., 2020). With the rise of technology use in data collection for qualitative research after the necessary flocking to Zoom and other web conferencing-based platforms for data collection as necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of research about how to ensure participants in these studies has left qualitative researchers with unclear guidance about how to best gauge if a prospective participant's interest is genuine or not (Santinele Martino et al., 2024). Particularly for research centered in critical and poststructural paradigms, there is an uneasiness associated with removing potential participants because it is forcing our own conceptualizations of demographics like identity onto others and privileging our interpretations of a particular idea over that of someone else. If we acknowledge that everything in life is socially constructed, this almost feels like gatekeeping. However, we are also required to conduct research that meets a high standard of quality, one factor of which is ensuring participants meet our criteria, placing us in between an epistemological rock and a hard place.

Balancing the "concer[n] about the notion of making people 'prove' they are legit" (Santinele Martino et al., 2024, p. 7) with a need to ensure data can be collected from those who are truly part of the communities being studied presents a unique challenge on how to handle impostor participants. Those who have explored bot and impostor participation in qualitative research note how "the existing literature has focused primarily on online surveys and research

clinical trials with less attention paid to the unique challenges and experiences of facing fraudulent participants in the context of qualitative research methods involving interviews" (Santinele Martino et al., 2024, p. 3). With this in mind, it is important for me to acknowledge how I dealt with this phenomenon in my own data collection process.

Like many early career qualitative researchers, I found that participant recruitment was difficult, requiring me to relinquish a bit of control over the sources I used to find participants (Far, 2018; Kalman, 2019; A. Marks et al., 2017). While in-person data collection via interviews almost acts as a safeguard to attempts where impostor participants try to game the system for their own gain, those checks and balances are not as present when collecting interview data via Zoom, as I did in this study. When I felt my recruitment process was stalled, I used a public social media post on my Tumblr to expand the reach of my participant recruitment in a space I felt would potentially warrant a larger number of interested participants. Despite this account being something I had complete access to and control over during the recruitment and interview process, there is nothing that prevented an individual or individuals from taking the information about this study and disseminating it to other spaces. This can have positive effects and increase the participant pool if not done for nefarious means where impostor participants manipulate the screening criteria process for their own gain, but it can also result in an influx of impostor participants, something made even more likely due to providing financial compensation to participants for their labor. Because this study provided participants who complete all three elements a $25 gift card to a location of their choice, the prospect of financial gain also could have increased the rate of bot or impostor participants completing the demographic questionnaire (Drysdale et al., 2023; Kramer et al., 2014; Santinele Martino et al., 2024; Ridge et al., 2023; Roehl & Harland, 2022).

Although this increased my response rate, I noticed concerns about bot or impostor participants completing the form, a phenomenon that has started to appear in scholarship on participant recruitment (Drysdale et al., 2023; Peach et al., 2023; Ridge et al., 2023; Roehl & Harland, 2022; Santinele Martino, et al., 2024; Woolfall, 2023). While using a social media post that is accessible without any barriers allows for further reach of your recruitment efforts, it also lacks the oversight we have when using recruitment techniques that are directly connected to and governed by the researchers themselves. This required me to intentionally and meticulously assess the validity of the participant responses based on content, linguistics, and digital footprint to eliminate what I began to perceive as impostor participants from the participant pool.

As a result, I eliminated potential bot or impostor participants based on responses and/or interactions that seemed concerning. When reading through responses in the demographic questions (Appendix I), I compared the location information provided by Qualtrics to their responses. I intentionally built safeguards into my demographic information questionnaire, asking for location and institutional affiliation in two different ways on different screens of the survey. For instance, I asked for their institution name on one page of the survey and then asked them to provide the school's location from a set of state-based geographic groupings and if those did not align, the participant was removed from the pool. Additionally, Qualtrics provides IP addresses and location for each response submitted. If there were multiple responses originating from the similar IP address that shared the same network, both were removed from the participant pool simply to be safe. If an IP address-based location did not match the location of the institution they noted they attended or if there was conflicting information about location and institution within demographic responses, I eliminated the response from consideration for participation. For example, if a participant stated on one page that they attended a university in

the southwest based on the geographic location grouping I provided, later answered they attended Chicago State University, but then their IP address-based location was in London, England, I removed them from the participant pool. Although they could have been on study abroad, looking at the sum of the discrepancies supported my decision to remove this participant, and others who similarly noted a geographic location and school name that did not match while their location was in a country outside of the United States.

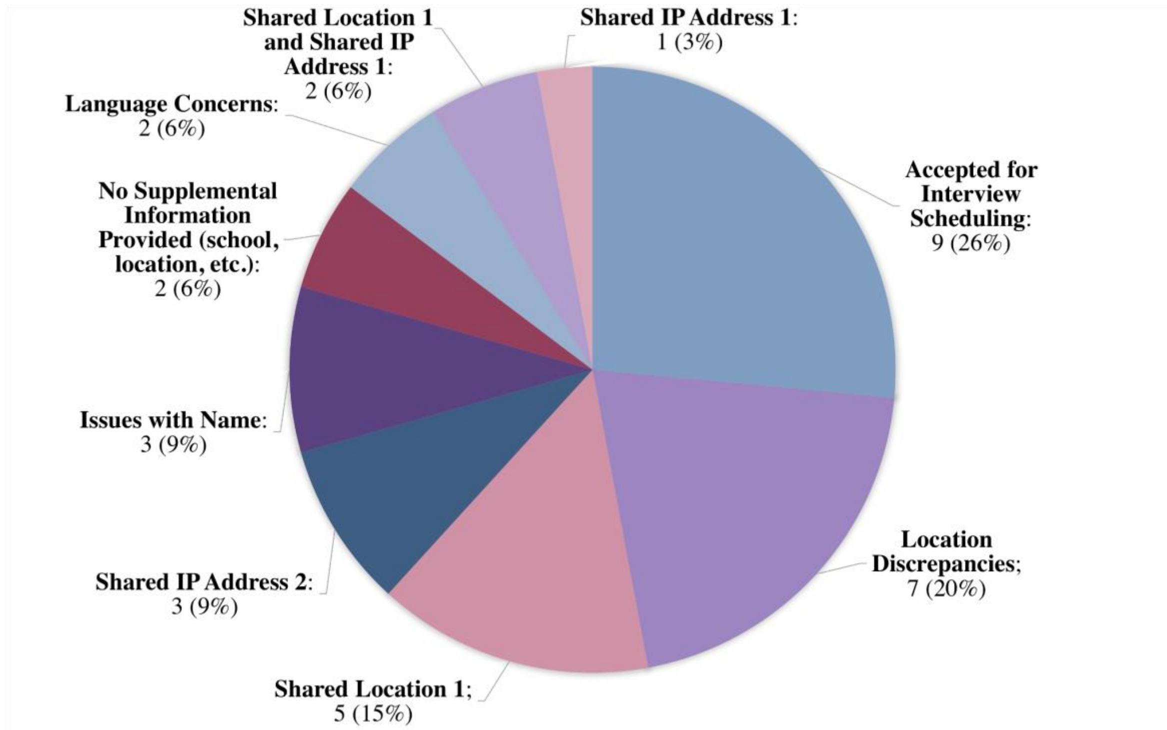
If participants made it through this initial screening, I then contacted them via email to introduce myself but also as a way to have secondary interaction with them to gauge if their interest in this study was genuine or gave me pause about the legitimacy of their interest before sending them the link to Calendly to sign up for an interview. There were some participants I ultimately did not send the scheduling link to based on their response to this introductory email (i.e., the similarity between responses and the speed to which I received these similar responses). For example, I received two responses from different email addresses that had replies using the same language, syntax, and linguistic oddities, as well as sharing the same words spelled incorrectly in the same way. While I acknowledge the English language is not user-friendly, the similarities between responses were such that they felt as if the same person was writing them.

Because of this, before participants were removed under suspicion of being the same person, I again checked the Qualtrics-provided IP address and location coordinates for both entries in question based on the email address. More often than not, I found identical locations coordinates as well as the same network elements of their IP address leading me to believe they were an impostor participant completing the form on two different devices. For example, three different participants had the same network identifiers for their IP address and the same exact location coordinates, ergo they were removed from the pool. Before eliminating, I checked to

ensure they were not noting the same institutional affiliation as this would explain shared network IDs within an IP address. This assessment of legitimacy based on language and digital footprint to determine real participants versus impostor ones has been encouraged in the literature focused on impostor participants in qualitative research (Peach et al., 2023; Ridge et al., 2023; Roehl & Harland, 2022; Santinele Martino et al., 2024; Woolfall, 2023). Although this reduced my participant pool size from 34 to eight (Figure 2), I had much more confidence in my participants and their intentions, and therefore more confidence in my data and study as a whole, than if I had not been as meticulous in my efforts to weed out impostor participants. In Figure 2, the breakdown of how many and why participants were removed. There were two different shared network IP addresses, indicating they were filled out by devices connected to the same WiFi network and there were two shared sets of location coordinates. For some removed participants they shared both a network IP address and location coordinates. For instance, Shared Location 1 and Shared IP Address 1 means they shared the same network IP address as Shared IP Address 1 and the same location coordinates as Shared Location 1.

Figure 2

Participant Selection and Removal Overview (n=36)



Although there were three participants who indicated interest in participating who would have qualified for interview scheduling, it was too late for them to successfully complete the interviews and journal entry before my cutoff date of December 31, 2023 to ensure I had time for data analysis. These individuals are not included in Figure 2.

Terminology Clarification

Emerging Adults vs. College Students. Selecting emerging adults as opposed to a more academically linked descriptor accounts for the fluidity of sexual identity formation. By restricting to college students, it provides clear boundaries that are not necessarily all

encompassing for the population of this study. If 'college students' were to be the population, it would also include students who identify as bisexual who return to school at a later time in their lives. The experiences of these older students are vastly different from those who are part of the historically claimed college-aged population, particularly in the context of epistemological development, due to their age. Defining the participant group as emerging adults acknowledges how "transitions to adulthood are becoming increasingly de-standardized, reflecting more reversible, fragmented and uncertain 'yo-yo transitions' between youth and adulthood" (Molgat, 2007, p. 496). This intentional choice of using emerging adults to refer to the age group I focus on also moves away from language such as college-aged or traditionally college-aged that reinforce and perpetuate age-based norms on college campuses that dictate who is considered a "normal" student. As the demographics of students attending college continue to shift, ensuring that language reflects who I interviewed without reinforcing the ageism present within higher education (Fernández et al., 2018; Montepare & Brown, 2022; Simi & Matusitz, 2016) is central to working to deconstruct socially constructed norms and expectations through research. Although my participants were (historically) traditional college-aged students, I wanted the language I used throughout this study when referring to age (e.g., emerging adults) to reflect my own views on the role of language in establishing norms. Given the importance language in Foucauldian thought, a lack of consistent intentionality regarding would have felt antithetical to this study's paradigmatic and philosophical roots.

Defined by Arnett (2000), emerging adults range from the ages of 18–25 when:

> many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course." (p. 469)

Because this period is marked by volatility and extends beyond traditional undergraduate years, exploring worldview and identity development that occurs during this period of time in years rather than milestone as a whole is more encompassing of the relationships I am hoping to explore. Sexual identity and epistemological development do not stop once students graduate from college and the fluidity of sexuality and gender as posited by queer theory indicate that it can occur even after an individual is no longer an emerging adult. While this is true, my focus on higher education centers my study on how the field defines college-aged individuals. By using Arnett's (2000) definition of *emerging adult* to define who can be a participant, I was able to meet both the needs of my interest and the needs of sources used to create the conceptual framework which focused on undergraduate students. To meet these somewhat conflicting needs, I reduced the age range from 18–25 to 18–24 as a way to acknowledge the ages of undergraduates historically without using ageist language while also trying to ensure participants are not pursuing upper graduate study (e.g., doctoral study, final year of law school, final year of medical school etc.) as they may be at 25 where the environments and experiences are distinctly different from those of undergraduates. Although course of study was not a delimiting factor, students in this age range are most likely in undergraduate programs or early in their master's programs who are more alike developmentally than undergraduates and doctoral students would be. The difference in development between an 18-year-old first year undergraduate student and a 25-year-old first year doctoral student is quite vast. Because of this, making the choice to reduce the age range by a year ensured participants shared some similarities when looking across their stories and exploring the larger metanarrative they tell.

Bisexual+ Umbrella. Historically, bisexual has been a catch-all term for all forms of attraction that are not restricted to one particular sex and/or gender, but it fails to capture the

nuance of the different forms of plurisexual attraction that occurs in the various identities under this umbrella. The bisexual+ umbrella refers to "a range of nonmonosexual identities, behaviors, and forms of attraction" (Flanders, 2017, p. 1). However, using bisexual+ as an umbrella term uses language that is understood and familiar to both the participants and reader. For this study, a definition of potential identities under the bisexual+ umbrella was given to participants as part of the demographic questionnaire with the caveat that self-identifying as a bisexual or another plurisexual identity without needing to justify or explain their identity was the criteria for participation in this study. Additionally, all participants were asked in the first interview to describe how they define their identity label and why they felt most aligned with their chosen label.

By allowing participants to self-identify within a range of terms under the bisexual+ umbrella accommodates for the use of queer theory which decries the use of labels as they do not encompass the spectrum of, in this case, bisexuality+ and the fluidity that is inherently present in sexuality. Additionally, Wagaman (2016) found that self-identification itself is a form of resistance for LGBTQ+ emerging adults against the expectation to comply with social norms that rely on strict and clear categorical labels, echoing the resistance to concrete definitions of labels in poststructural college student development theory research focusing on gender and sexuality identities.

Data Collection

Participants engaged in two interviews with the second occurring no earlier than one week following the first interview. Each of the interviews lasted approximately one hour. As I did not limit participation based on location, all interviews took place via Zoom. Each interview was recorded using the record function in Zoom and then transcribed using the captions

generated by Zoom as a starting point. Following this first interview, participants were given a prompt to journal about their experiences interacting with fictional characters during their identity construction processes. Participants were able to write or audio record their journals based on their preference. Four participants chose to write their journals while one recorded theirs. This audio journal was transcribed for analysis by hand. For this study, I approached data collection as a conversation, something which is a central idea within narrative inquiry. Because narratives are co-constructed, establishing and maintaining rapport with participants is crucial to making sure their re-telling of their experiences contains the detail and depth required for narrative inquiry and analysis. The connections between data sources and research questions can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Alignment of Research Questions and Data Sources

Research Question	Data Sources
RQ1: What do participant narratives reveal about how bisexual emerging adults construct their identity through interactions with media characters during their identity construction processes? **RQ2:** How do bisexual emerging adults utilize parasocial relationships during identity construction processes?	Interview 1 Reflective Journal Entry Interview 2

Interview 1

The first semi-structured interview consisted of questions surrounding opinions and attitudes towards bisexuality, bisexuality within the queer community, the depiction of

bisexuality in media, and attitudes towards common tropes regarding bisexuality often used in media portrayals (e.g., What does being bisexual mean to you?; What has your experience in the LGBTQ+ community been as a bisexual individual?; How do you feel the media portrays bisexuality?). The blank lines included in the interview protocol (Appendix A) questions allowed me to fill in the particular label or labels participants noted they used to describe their sexual identity. Participants also read, watched, or engaged with excerpts from fictional media which have been praised for their depictions of bisexuality (Appendices B, C, and D). Two excerpts from books were selected: (1) *Perfect on Paper* (Gonzales, 2021); and (2) *Imogen, Obviously* (Albertalli, 2023). All participants engaged with the excerpt from Gonzales (2021), while two out of five engaged with Albertalli (2023). This determination was made due to time constraints. A short clip from the second episode of the second season of *Heartstopper* (Oseman & Lyn, 2023) was presented for participants to engage with as well which all participants did. Each of these excerpts was shared through Zoom so participants did not receive a copy of their own to keep in order to comply with copyright and Fair Use guidance. A copy of each book was legally owned as part of my personal library and I have an active Netflix subscription, the platform where *Heartstopper* is distributed worldwide, and the clip streamed from for the purpose of these interviews. Additionally, upon consulting multiple Fair Use evaluators (Appendix J), the educational merit and transformative use, and the use of less than 1% of the source material in each excerpt supports the use of these excerpts as they fall below the percentage, minutes, or word count as outlined by William & Mary (2005) regarding fair use of copyrighted material.

Reflective Journal Entry

The second data source was a journal entry participants completed between the two interviews. Questions guiding this reflective activity were provided but they focused on asking

participants to reflect on the character(s) they connected with during their sexuality construction (Appendix E) resulting in a unique entry for each participant. Participants were permitted to either write or record their journals. These journals were required to be returned to me via email two days before the second interview took place to allow me time to shape the interview questions as well as familiarize myself with the media examples participants discussed. Participants were given a reminder email at five days before to ensure completion if they had not yet returned their reflective response.

Interview 2

The second interview focused on the participant's unique experiences with the character(s) they identified as a connection. Participants were asked to reflect about how their bisexuality has impacted their experiences within a heteronormative culture and how they were able to construct their identity in a positive manner due to media-based parasocial interactions. For each instance of *bisexual* in these questions, I instead used the label the participant uses. Like the first interview, I employed a semi-structured interview approach to allow for participants to have agency in narrating their experiences. For this interview, questions were tweaked, removed, and added depending on the content participants reflected on in their journal. Appendix F present the shared questions for this interview.

Constructing a Foucauldian-Informed Analytic Approach: A Methodological Bricolage

Creating a Foucauldian-informed analysis process is difficult for many reasons. Foucault gave very little guidance about how to best employ his work with some researchers who use Foucauldian-informed processes going as far to note how he was "purposefully unprescriptive in how his work could be used" (Browne, 2015, p. 32). Despite this, Foucault's conceptualization of power and its relationship to knowledge is very often used by both critical and poststructural

researchers given the focus of structural power within these paradigms. Additionally, if "methods can be involved in the production of societal power structures and, ultimately, in the very creation of the objects they aim to investigate" (Schmitz & Hamann, 2022, p. 415), then the existence of a concrete Foucauldian-informed method would be the antithesis of Foucault's own views on power, the academy, and the creation and perpetuation of privileged knowledge.

As I constructed my analytical approach, I acknowledged that, despite this contradiction, I could not completely lean into the methodological anarchy Foucault has left us with by jumping into research that is effectively method-blind; however, this proclivity to avoid research, including a study's research design, that is built on norms and expectations as is present in most existing methodological and analytical approaches, presents a difficult task for researchers, like myself, who tend to find themselves approaching research from a Foucauldian- and other social constructionist-informed positions. Because of this, I embraced the expansive possibilities of a Foucauldian-informed approach that allowed me to blend methods and processes that integrate the fluidity required for applying Foucauldian theories and concepts and simultaneously providing enough structure, all while being flexible and mutable enough to reflect the unique needs of poststructural research. Although initially it felt somewhat of a patchwork approach, creating a Foucauldian-informed analytical approach allowed me to embrace the concept of methodological bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Kincheloe, 2001; Pratt et al., 2022; Yardley, 2019).

Although bricolage can occur in a variety of ways within qualitative research, it centers on the assumption that "every study is subjective because it is influenced by the researcher's personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, as well as by the people in the society being studied" (Ben-Asher, 2022, p. 2). Methodological bricolage refers to "the

combining of analytic moves for the purpose of solving a problem or problems tailored to one's own research project" (Pratt et al., 2022, p. 219) which was employed in my dissertation research due to my research questions being best suited by different approaches. This not only aligned with the need for multiple analytical approaches to accommodate the Foucauldian view of narratives as both creating and being created by larger structural forces, but my own view on the interwoven nature of individual narratives within the sociopolitical culture(s) of the time and place in which they occurred. To do this, however, it required an interrogation of "the parochialism of unidisciplinary approaches" (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 679) often found in even the most flexible of social sciences research. Within college student development theory, scholars like Elisa Abes (2009) note the possibilities created when employing both a theoretical and methodological bricolage that if employed would allow us to "to explore the power structures underlying student development theory," (p. 142) something at the core of my dissertation research.

Because narrative inquiry allows researchers to explore not just how stories "are structured and the ways in which they work, but also who produces them and by what means; the mechanisms by which they are consumed and how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted" (Squire et al., 2013, p. 2), my analytic approach was intentionally designed to reflect this dual functionality of narratives: an individual level analysis and a structural discourse level analysis. Data were analyzed using a Foucauldian approach to narratives that accommodates for the creation of a meta-narrative across participants and reflects the ways power/knowledge is present in their narratives about their identity construction. Power relations are maintained through discourse and narratives reflect those same power relations, so this link between discourse and narrative is central to Foucauldian-informed analysis of narratives and one of the

central choices woven throughout this analytic approach. Souto-Manning (2014) notes that "we cannot ignore the role of discourse in trying to understand complex relationships involving social interactions, structures, systems, and everyday lives" (p. 160); however, we also cannot ignore the individual experiences narratives explore. There must be acknowledgement of them both individually and how they interact and co-construct each other. As a result, acknowledging how we construct our personal narrative within social and institutional contexts was central to the analytic approach designed and implemented that blended analysis of both narratives and a discourse to create the resulting metanarrative constellation[6] (Garvis, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2014).

Unlike other methodologies with prescribed analysis methods and processes, such as Corbin and Strauss's (2014) manual on how to perform grounded theory research or Smith et al.'s (2021) handbook on interpretive phenomenological analysis, even non-poststructural narrative inquiry requires creativity on the part of the researcher to truly design their approach, data analysis process included (Riessman, 1993; Wells, 2011). Although somewhat of an intimidating prospect, I embraced the "near anarchy in the field [that] might be cause for despair or exultation" (Mishler, 1995, p. 88). Despite being almost 30 years after Mishler described narrative research as such, the sentiment remains true as narrative research has become messier as it embraced poststructuralism and its eschewing of concreteness and dictation of norms in any form, including in the creation and design of analysis processes. Although I ultimately enjoyed the ability to construct and craft an analysis process that reflects the unique needs of my

[6] The concept of a metanarrative constellation (Garvis, 2015) is employed in this study to thematically depict the metanarrative created from the participants' individual narratives. This approach to exploring experiences across narratives is presented in detail at the beginning of Chapter 5.

research, I went through a variety of iterations before settling on a dual-layered thematic analysis drawing from Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) and Clarke and Braun's (2013) reflexive thematic analysis defined below.

Applying Foucauldian concepts to narratives is still in its infancy in educational research. Although it has been used in counseling and psychology research, there is still an effort to fully define what processes that are Foucauldian-informed look like, in part due to the eschewing of norms and structures that is central to Foucault's own work. However, there are similarities between studies that use Foucauldian-informed analytical techniques in the use of thematic analysis as well as Foucauldian discourse analytic techniques (e.g., Coopoosamy, 2014; Levitanus, 2020; Vaughan, 2018; Wood, 2021). Any research employing Foucault will acknowledge in its analysis that a "narrative is understood through the structures and forces of discourse, power and history" (Tamboukou, 2013, p. 87) and by analyzing the narrative, the resulting macro-narrative across participants must be explored as well creating a two level analysis process that reflects this dual-layered approach that utilizes two different approaches to thematic analysis: one centered on the individual narrative and the other on the larger discursive meta-narrative as informed by individual narratives.

To create an analytical approach that links the narrative level and structural level analyses, I looked for pre-existing Foucauldian-informed approaches that analyzed narratives as individual sources as well as unique parts of a larger discourse, but I was widely unsuccessful in this effort. While there are methods that integrate Foucauldian thought into narrative analysis, after a period of waffling back and forth, I felt that narrative analysis on its own would not allow me to explore the thematic content of the narratives given its focus on narrative structure. Parry and Varese (2021) created a macro-level Foucauldian narrative analysis but the final step was

phenomenological in nature. Even after changing the final step to reflect an action centered in discourse analysis to critique and explore the power/knowledge constructions and relationships present across the narratives as opposed to simply looking for common experiences, I was still unsatisfied with the result. Because of this, I opted to create an analytical approach that is centered in thematic analysis but allows me to do so on both individual and metanarrative levels that blends reflexive thematic analysis and Foucauldian-discourse analysis processes.

Bridging Thematic Analysis of Narratives and Discourse Analysis

Although the thematic and discourse analysis processes I used are woven together, both informing and being informed by each other in my analysis, I wanted to provide space to honor the stories participants tell on an individual basis both within my analysis as well when reporting my findings. As a result, I first analyzed the data as individual level narratives before moving to analyze the discourse and the resulting meta-narrative. Souto-Manning (2014) stated "individuals make sense of their experiences through narratives, they bring together the micro (personal) and the macro (social or institutional) situations in place" (p. 163). Although narrative-level thematic analysis reflects the micro-level, discourse analytic techniques allow for researchers to explore the potentiality of a macro-level narrative to arise from participant responses that reflects shared experiences with power and socio-cultural forces that impact their lives, including their identity construction. As I thematically analyzed and coded the participants' narratives, themes showed some inherent connection to a larger discourse about, in the case of my research, sexuality and identity construction that shaped participants' retelling of their experiences.

When employing methodological pluralism (Frost & Nolas, 2011; R. L. Shaw & Frost, 2015), what is most important is that each approach to analysis addresses and interprets the data set in a way that cannot be accomplished by a single approach. In the case of my dissertation,

taking a step into discourse analysis allowed me to analyze how participant narratives both influence and are influenced by discourse surrounding plurisexuality and why parasocial relationships function as they do for these participants. Inclusion of discourse analysis also allowed me to subvert "the under-examination of power and oppression" (Grosland & Roberts, 2021, p. 324) seen in traditional narrative inquiry research. Similarly, a discourse analysis-only approach would focus far more on this larger narrative than the individual narrative level thematic analyses. By centering and beginning my analytic process in the analysis of individual narratives, I was able to highlight and focus on how our individual experiences are constructed in a specific time and space as well as honor and elevate the individual voices of plurisexual college students who have often been silenced due to epistemic violence at the hands of research that centers monosexuality as normative.

Critical Thematic Analysis. As someone who identifies within the plurality of labels under the bisexual+ umbrella, woman, I am fundamentally connected to my research, so using analysis methods and processes that intentionally incorporate reflexivity, such as reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Terry et al., 2017), was central to developing my data analysis process for my dissertation. Although Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) thematic analysis process is flexible enough to be applied across different theoretical frameworks, there is no interrogation of power structures within their process as written. However, because I could not, and did not desire to, treat narratives as removed from their contexts, using critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019; G. W. Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Terry & Braun, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016) allowed my analysis to intentionally focus "upon the shared systems of meaning making and cultural resources used" (Terry & Braun, 2012, p. 212) as participants constructed their identities in the

context of parasocial relationships even on the individual level. Although critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019) is heavily based on Clarke and Braun's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis process, it actively acknowledges how sociocultural forces affect and restrict everyday experiences through discourse (Lawless & Chen, 2019).

Whether to call this process thematic discourse analysis (G. W. Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Terry & Hayfield, 2021) versus critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019) is still up for debate with the terms being used interchangeably, creating significant confusion. Despite this disagreement in terminology, this particular thematic analysis approach was rooted in the Foucauldian concept of *power/knowledge* as it wholly supported the notion that "language is productive and produces meanings, but it also gets its meanings from the social practices that it names" (Farvid & Braun, 2006, p. 299). Because critical thematic analysis does not focus as heavily on linguistic features as other types of discourse analysis like that of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), Lawless and Chen (2019) distinguish between their own critical thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. Despite both highlighting how power is embedded in all facets of culture and society, including language, that results in power-laden reproductions of social relations and knowledge, critical thematic analysis is less linguistic-focused than critical discourse analysis and brings in *a priori* codes that reflect a particular framework or theory. Like critical discourse analysis, however, critical thematic analysis allows researchers to begin deconstructing and critiquing the "archaeology of knowledge" (Foucault, 1972/2002) and how language reflects power distributions and allocations that impact our experiences. Critical thematic analysis uses a dual-layered coding process of each narrative that begins with open, inductive coding followed by closed, deductive coding with, in the case my dissertation, a priori codes centered in Foucauldian theory on language, power, and knowledge.

During the process of critical thematic analysis, I focused my attention on the individual narratives as discrete data sets, this analysis process allowed me to honor the individual participants' stories while simultaneously orienting me toward "a macro-level analysis that links everyday discourse to larger ideologies" (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 103). Critical thematic analysis does link to larger discourses and analysis of discursive constructions and actively integrates ways to address larger cultural structures through thematic analysis, I choose to view it as more closely related to its thematic analysis roots given its direct relationship to Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive analysis, often employing a dual-layered coding process as during the coding stage of Braun and Clarke's approach (Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2017; Lawless & Chen, 2019; McIntyre et al., 2015; Terry & Braun, 2011, 2012, 2016). Because I adopted a similar variation of the original approach, I chose to partially adopt the critical thematic analysis label in part to prevent confusion with the Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017) process used for true analysis of the discursive objects in the narratives as well as highlighting it is how our individual stories are still connected to and influenced by forces and ideologies outside of ourselves.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. Given that "language and discourse constitute meaning, and hence, particular discursive resources enable and constrain people's choices for how to be and act in the social world" (Braun et al., 2003, p. 241), analysis of narratives that does not also analyze the metanarrative those individual experiences create does not allow power within the narratives to be interrogated. Looking at language beyond the semantic and into the latent level, discourse analysis allows us to focus on the ways language acts and how meanings are created through relationships between different linguistic elements as opposed to simply the meaning of a particular word or phrase. Although this may result in a plethora of inferences and

meanings, it is ultimately up to the researcher to decide “which meaning is intended, is justifiable, and/or makes the most sense” (Hamilton et al., 2015, p. 7). In this effort, researcher reflexivity is integral in both discourse analysis and critical thematic analysis.

By acknowledging the ways language and discourse “have the power to frame individuals as acceptable (or not) in the practices in which we engage and consequently have the power to give or deny or for someone to gain or lose [status and power]” (Ordman, 2016, p. 45), it ultimately opens up the possibility to explore these larger macro-level constructions of power and knowledge in a qualitative manner when the sample size is significantly smaller than in other approaches that interrogate structures with a larger sample size such as critical quantitative inquiry (e.g., Covarrubias & Vélez, 2013; Garcia et al., 2018; López et al., 2018). Although discourse analysis does not generalize, it does intentionally look and critique the ways in which language dictates: (a) who is allowed to exist and operate in specific spaces and contexts; (b) who benefits from pre-existing, socially constructed distributions of power; and (c) how those with more control of power use it to dictate what and how we know and learn. Because “where there is power, there is resistance and…this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 95), when we investigate discourses of power, like those surrounding sexuality, we can also see discourses of resistance.

Foucauldian discourse analysis, unsurprisingly so, does not have an agreed upon method of what the analysis process should be. The guiding tenet centers on how social discourses both implicitly and explicitly use power to shape individual narratives and thoughts in a way that reflects and even reproduces these very discourses. Willig (2021) provided the most comprehensive guidance for performing Foucauldian discourse analysis can be seen in Table 3 but cautions against using these as discrete stages. As a result, I did not perform these stages in a

prescribed order or sequence in my analysis but rather allowed these to inform my analysis of the narratives and the discourse they reflect and create as I coded and themed the data.

Table 3

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis Process (Willig, 2021)

Stage	Term	Contextualized Description
1	Discursive Construction	The different ways (bi+)sexuality are talked about (explicit, implicit, omissions)
2	Discourses	Identify how the discursive constructions of (bi+)sexuality and fit within the wider social and/or cultural discourses and across participants
3	Action Orientation	What are the consequences of the constructions of (bi+)sexuality? What do they gain from the constructions? How do the constructions function? What are their discursive contexts?
4	Positionings	How do the participants orient themselves and what subject positions are afforded as a result of the constructions (positive and negative)?
5	Practice	What possibilities are created as a result of this discourse surrounding (bi+)sexuality? What possibilities are then closed off?
6	Subjectivity	What can be thought, felt, and experienced in the subject positions? How does the discursive construction of (bi+)sexuality impact how one is able to participate in a given social space given their subject position?

Additionally, throughout the analysis process, I intentionally took reflexive actions to explore and understand how my interactions with participant responses may have influenced my interpretations and they have been noted in Figure 3. Through analytic memoing and reflective journaling before and after analyses, I was able to intentionally explore how my own identities and beliefs might have affected the conclusions and interpretations I drew from the data. My reflexive practices were woven throughout my analysis process as they were an integral part of

my data analysis process. Figure 4 demonstrates how thematic and discourse analysis processes along with my reflexivity practices and processes were woven together to create a macro level Foucauldian-informed thematic discourse analysis approach. Each participant's individual narrative analysis (Figure 3) was used to in creating the overarching narrative constellation (Figure 4).

Figure 3

Bridging Thematic and Discourse Analyses: Narrative-Level Analysis

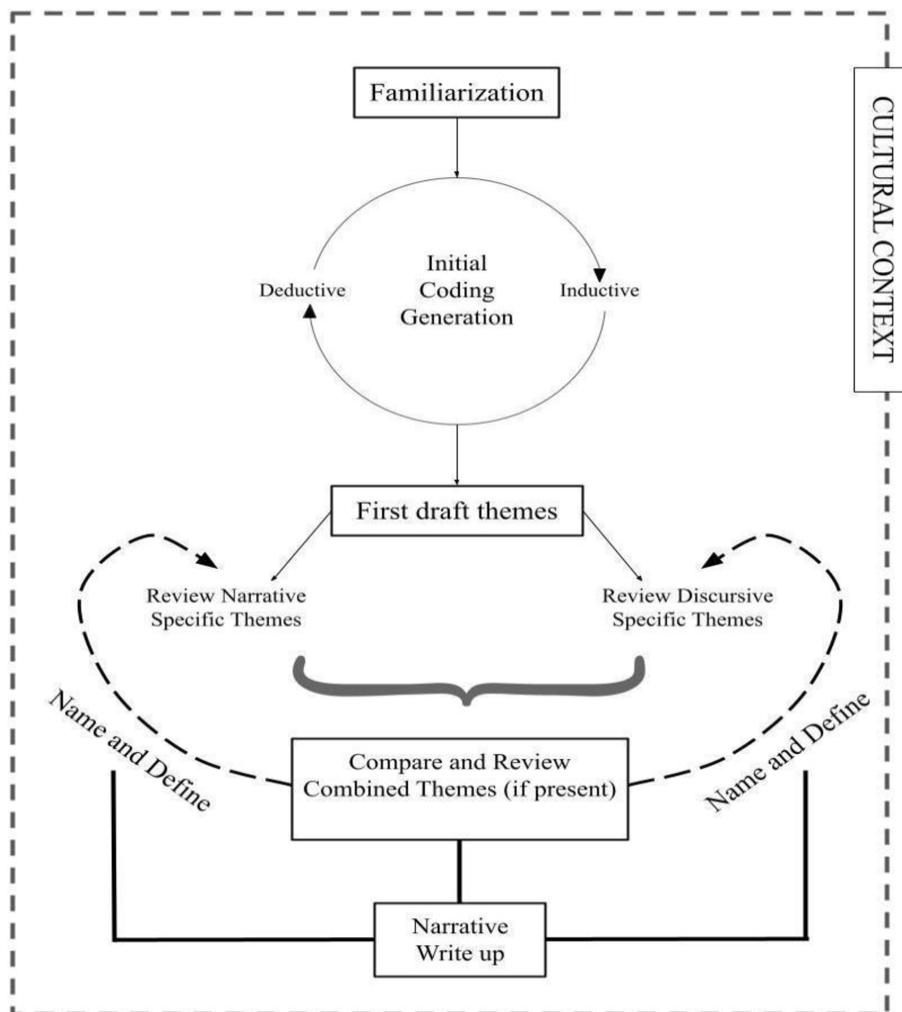
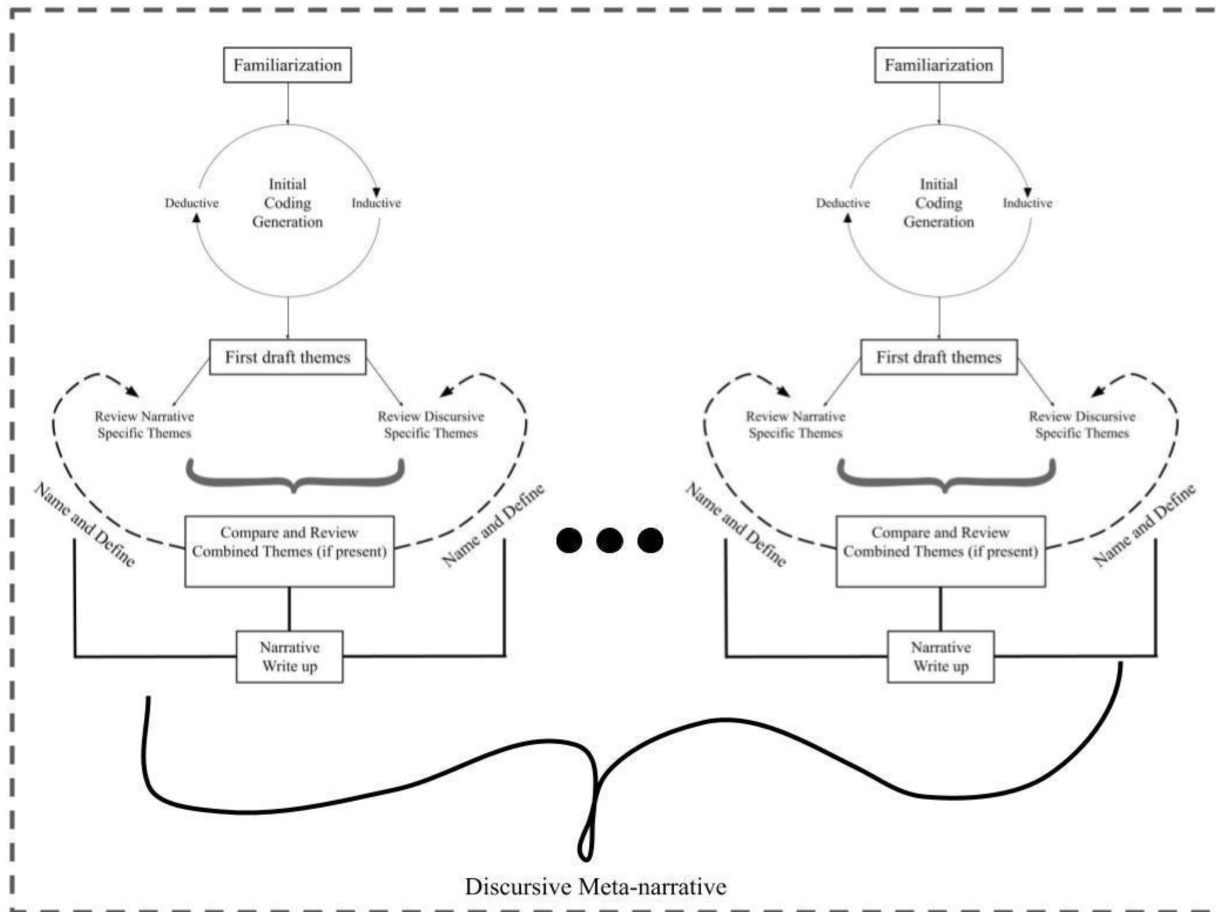


Figure 4

Bridging Thematic and Discourse Analyses: Meta-Narrative Analysis



Data Analysis Process. The ideological and theoretical neutrality of thematic analysis reflects how "the search for, and examination of, patterning across language does not require adherence to any particular theory of language, or explanatory meaning framework for human beings, experiences or practices" (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 120), something that is important when engaging in methodological eclecticism and pluralism (Ussher, 1999) necessary in poststructural research. Because I anticipated a significant amount of data to read through and work with from the start, I preemptively chose to use Nvivo to organize and store my data throughout the analytical process. With thematic analysis, there is no advice about using a

qualitative data analysis software versus physical methods of coding and theming as it is left up to the decision of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and for ease of annotating and coding the data in a single program, NVivo was selected for use in my data analysis. Data was transcribed via Zoom's auto transcript creation via closed captions but then heavily cleaned and corrected as I listened to the recording to ensure the accuracy of the transcript. This choice to transcribe my own data allowed me to work closely with my data but also remove some of the substantial amount of time needed for transcribing from a blank slate.

While Braun and Clarke (2022) provide broad steps that guide reflexive thematic analysis reflect the fluidity and iterative nature of thematic analysis, I wove Foucauldian discourse analysis conventions throughout my analytical approach based on Willig's (2021) approach to Foucauldian discourse analysis, creating an analytic process that allowed me to deeply analyze narratives and individual stories while doing the same of the discourse they create and reflect. Keeping in mind to "not expect a linear progression when doing reflexive [thematic analysis]" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 36), analysis began with familiarization of myself with the data set through a process of (re)reading and (re)listening to participant narratives, making brief notes about any analytic ideas and thoughts that arose during these repeated interactions with the data set. By immersing myself in my data, it allowed me to engage critically with the stories being told and create a dialogue between myself and the data as I move through the analysis process as well as have a very deep knowledge of what the participants said. This was particularly helpful when creating the metanarrative constellation (Garvis, 2015) as I was largely able to construct the initial version of the constellation without needing to refresh my memory of what participants said, ultimately creating a constellation that organically reflected the major themes shared across the participants instead of shoehorning the data in to fit the constellation.

This familiarization was followed by coding which was only able to begin and be done well if enough time was spent familiarizing myself with my data. During the familiarization readings and listening, I took notes about things I noticed which are different from codes in thematic analysis. While familiarization notes reflect what researchers find “interesting, intriguing, or even puzzling about the data” (Terry & Hayfield, 2021, p. 32), codes are “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 3). Through an iterative and continuous coding process, I almost continuously interacted with my data in December 2023 and early January 2024 to develop a full, nuanced understanding of my participants’ narratives both individually and discursively.

Drawing from Lawless and Chen’s (2019) use of a dual-layered coding process, I first coded the data inductively using in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2021 followed by a priori coding based on Foucauldian theories of sexuality as a discourse of power. Because I wanted to ensure participant voice remains present as much as possible, using in vivo coding continued to center their words and voices. In general, in vivo coding is particularly useful when working with marginalized populations as using their own words “enhances and deepens…understanding of their discourses, cultures and worldviews” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 138) and given my participants’ sexual identities, this was particularly salient. This coding occurred before applying existing knowledge based on the theoretical underpinnings of Foucauldian informed research. For the second coding process, I employed a priori or provisional coding (Saldaña, 2021, p. 216) which was focused on the “interrelationships between interview discourses and dominant ideologies” (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 98) defined by Foucauldian thought on sexuality, power, and knowledge using the recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness criteria (Owen, 1984). Additionally,

I was able to explore "what interview discourses might be concealed and/or what might [have been] absent in the interview discourses" (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 98) as part of this coding given I needed to enter my analysis process thinking about what is not present in the narratives along with what is.

Following coding, I used the codes to inform the generation of themes for each narrative. During this step, I collapsed codes if they described similar concepts or experiences and were given the more salient label. Given the nature of *thematic* analysis, much of the time is spent in working with creating themes, but the choices made are both iterative and connected to how the process is going in a particular moment. However, I chose to distinguish between narrative theming and discursive theming throughout the analysis process. Although they are created based on the same data sources, they do reflect different analyses with narrative theming focusing on the individual narratives and journal entry for each participant and discursive theming reflecting how the codes connect to the larger Foucauldian ideas, rooted in Willig's (2021) stages of Foucauldian discourse analysis and highlighting of discursive patterns. Narrative and discursive theming are not completely isolated, though, as both ultimately inform each other and the writing up of findings. Coding of the larger participant narrative followed thematic analysis conventions like clustering (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

For the discursive theming, codes were clustered to specifically note connections to discursive constructions. These themes then continued to be developed and refined. Ultimately upon the completion of reviewing themes, I began to depict the themes' relationships to each other through the creation of a graphical representation of the individual narratives and eventually a discursive metanarrative. Once I was satisfied with the state of the themes, I refined,

defined, and named them. In this stage of analysis, I clearly defined and named themes and subthemes, as seen in Chapters 4 and 5.

The final stage centered on writing up Findings which ultimately occurred in two ways: a write up of the thematic analysis of each participant but also a write up of the larger metanarrative constellation (Garvis, 2015) created through analysis of the discourse. Neither write up occurs removed from the other because the individual narratives are what the discourse analysis is being drawn from and the individual narratives reflect the larger discourse. By giving space for individual voices as well as the larger narrative, it demonstrates how this analysis process was intentionally created to align with my desire to shift how research on LGBTQ+ communities has historically generalized across identities by acknowledging the importance of understanding the larger structural level narrative but also providing space to elevate individual experiences at the same time.

By following this broad outline of stages that were flexible and fluid in nature, a mixture of both narrative level and discourse level thematic analyses are used to answer my research questions in the remaining three chapters of this dissertation. Although discourse analysis and thematic analysis are not discrete analytical efforts but rather ones that occur simultaneously, it reflects how narrative is truly both a reflection of discourse but also creates discourse as well (Souto-Manning, 2014; Wells, 2011). By ensuring that my analytic process was theoretically sound and well documented, I laid the foundation to ensure my research meets the expectations for trustworthiness within qualitative research.

Trustworthiness

Because qualitative research is grounded in exploring the human experience, much of the historical considerations for rigor and quality of research rooted in a quantitative tradition are not

applicable for many reasons to qualitative inquiry. However, there are criteria that align with qualitative underpinnings that serve to similarly ensure research does meet an expectation of quality. Lincoln and Guba (1985) established four criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research: (a) credibility; (b) transferability; (c) dependability; and (d) confirmability; and provided possible ways to demonstrate successfully meeting them in qualitative research. The range of possibilities in qualitative research is incredibly vast and, as a result, trustworthiness can be difficult to conceptualize in practice. For thematic analyses, the process to establish trustworthiness is more fluid than the four discrete categories might suggest (Nowell et al., 2017). Because I am using an analysis process based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis, stage-based criteria for trustworthiness as put forth by Nowell et al. (2017) were the backbone for establishing trustworthiness of my study.

Continued and prolonged engagement with the data is central to establishing trustworthiness in thematic analysis. As researchers read and listen through their data, approaching analysis as "a faithful witness to the accounts in the data, being honest and vigilant about their own perspectives, preexisting thoughts and beliefs, and developing theories" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 6). This is built into reflexive thematic analysis as it begins with taking notes about insights, reactions, and things that stick out while becoming familiar with data before beginning to code. Trustworthiness can also be noted by how researchers store and organize data as well, so ensuring to follow the same process in engaging with data and how they are visually representing it for analysis reflect trustworthiness-oriented data storage.

As I coded the data, I ensured to practice reflexive journaling before, during, and after analysis to make sure I "[kept] track of emerging impressions of what the data mean and how they relate to each other" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 7), as well as any emotional or personal

reactions that occurred. Although credibility is increased with more than one researcher analyzing the data, that was not possible in the context of dissertation research that is undertaken by a single researcher and guided by a faculty mentor. Even though, I was not able to triangulate my data via multiple researchers, I was able to do so through different data sources (Schwandt, 2007/2011). Both interview data and journal data were coded and used to ultimately create the final themes. As a result, I made sure to keep a detailed record of the decisions I make about the coding processes which I included in my journaling. Because I used a mixture of inductive and deductive coding, defining my deductive codes prior to the start of coding also increased trustworthiness.

In the iterative stages involving creation, reviewing, and defining of themes, trustworthiness was most notably centered in my actions. As codes are grouped and sorted into first-draft themes, it was not only a helpful analytic choice to make graphical representations of how themes were created from the coding, but it also increased trustworthiness as well. As those themes were refined and ultimately defined, I kept each iteration of visual representations I made of the data, even those that I ultimately discarded, as well as journaled about what changed, what did not, and my rationale for the decisions I made. Again, this did not supplant my reflexive journaling as I continued to journal about my own interactions with my data and my analysis process which allowed my researcher journal to serve as an artifact of my trustworthiness efforts, including explanations of choices made about how themes evolved over the course of the analysis process.

After themes were defined and named and individual narratives written, I provided participants with a copy of the material findings connected to their data to member check. Member checking is a process drawn straight from Lincoln and Guba (1985) in which

participants can read through findings and make any comments about inconsistencies with their experiences or note content they feel is not reflective of their experience. This was done via email (Appendix L), but I also provided participants with the opportunity to meet via video to talk about any concerns. I wanted to give the possibility for two ways to give this feedback because some participants may feel more empowered to verbally voice their concerns while others may feel more comfortable putting their concerns in writing. I gave participants a week to return corrections to me or I would assume they had no corrections to request. Ultimately, two out of five participants returned comments that were integrated into the final version of their narrative, one responded saying they had no changes to request, and two did not respond. For corrections that either related to material they wished to be edited or was more substantial than grammatical or clarification edits, the impacted sections were provided to the participant for a second member check.

Although none of the corrections shifted the findings or themes, I did not begin construction of the metanarrative constellation prior to either receiving feedback from participants or the deadline passed to ensure that on the off chance they would, I did not incorporate erroneous information into the metanarrative constellations. This intentional choice to return power and agency to the participants not only reflects Foucauldian thought but also is integral to narrative inquiry given the heavy use of participant quotes in the presentation of findings. My dissertation is rooted in narrative inquiry and does not deviate from this tradition of using participant quotes as a major element of findings so ensuring their language was being used correctly was an important illustration of the checks and balances provided by engaging in member checking. By using participant language verbatim, it also served to increase trustworthiness (N. King, 2004). In the same vein, using rich and thick description of context is

an important element of not just thematic analysis but narrative inquiry as well. All of this was present in the document participants member checked.

Despite the combination of different analytical approaches, there are some considerations for trustworthiness that help support my decision to blend analytical approaches by being clear and detailed about the methodological decisions I made throughout the process. As I anticipated, my analytical approach became much clearer as I journaled and made notes about my decisions during the actual analysis. While my analysis process did not change from the proposal stage, keeping track of my decisions acted as an audit trail that described the choices made in the moment to ensure they are reflected accurately in this final version of this chapter (Koch, 1994).

Ethical Considerations

Given the personal nature of sexuality, steps were taken to ensure participants felt comfortable participating and disclosing their experiences during interviews. However, because this inquiry focused on experiences, it received expedited IRB approval in July 2023 (Appendix K). As part of the initial Qualtrics survey to determine if a participant fits the criteria, there was an informed consent form (Appendix H) with a requirement to acknowledge their consent to participate before proceeding to the participant demographic overview questionnaire (Appendix I). In creating the demographic questionnaire, I consulted research about and with queer individuals to determine what types of questions could prove helpful in ensuring I gained information that I could use to attend to the needs of queer individuals and not simply rely on my own experiences as a queer woman.

In queer-centered research, ensuring names and pronoun usage reflects the individual and their identities is an important consideration for researchers to take to ensure participants are not misgendered or potentially deadnamed. In their 2016 article investigating participant-selected

pseudonyms, R. E. S. Allen and Wiles state that there has been discussion surrounding whether "pseudonyms should be chosen and whether they can be selected in a way that acknowledges the shift from 'paternalistic' researcher allocating names to a more nuanced engagement with participants" (p. 5). Although researchers have historically assigned pseudonyms to their participants, the power of names within the queer community is something that must be taken into account. For this study, participants were given complete agency to select their pseudonym with guidance from me to ensure they were distinct enough to provide as much privacy as possible.

Although I did not specifically study non-binary or trans students, there were participants who identified as trans or non-binary. Ensuring trans and non-binary participants have agency over their description and not fear being deadnamed, or the act of referring to a trans individual by the name assigned to them at birth which they no longer use is crucial to ensuring participant safety and well-being (Turton, 2021). Sacrificing complete anonymity to ensure a participant is written about using the correct pronouns and a name that they are comfortable with as well as a name that matches their view of their gender is more important than adhering to traditional and widely used data collection norms as discussed in Creswell and Poth (2018) that center quasi-clerical decisions as tasks of the researcher. Because I did not limit participants in this study to cisgender individuals, I wanted to ensure participants felt their pseudonym was reflective of their gender identity and they had a say in the language being used to reference them in my dissertation.

Due to the sensitive nature of the recordings, steps were taken to ensure they are protected from access by anyone but myself, especially because Zoom automatically saves video recordings where participants are more identifiable. Recordings and transcripts were kept on my

laptop as well as an external flash drive, neither of which were ever used by other individuals. Storing in two places was simply a safety measure in case of computer errors to prevent data loss. All participant recordings and transcripts will be discarded when no longer needed for this research in compliance with the legal statute about the maintenance of data for at least 3 years (Protection of Human Subjects, 2018).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Just as my interpretation and analysis of data cannot be divorced from my views as a researcher, there are inevitably assumptions I brought into my dissertation. Most profoundly, I believe that research about queer students continues to elevate the experiences of monosexual students and view them as similar to those of plurisexual students, establishing monosexuality as the norm within queer spaces and queer research. The experiences of plurisexual individuals are dramatically different from that of monosexual individuals in queer and non-queer spaces and when research continues to perpetuate that narrative by assuming all queer individuals have the same experiences, it continues a history of epistemic violence in research against students who are attracted to more than one gender. Additionally, this research assumes plurisexual college students form and use parasocial relationships during their identity construction processes. Similarly, the assumption that these relationships not just exist but are impactful is woven throughout my research as well.

While there are valid arguments about the usability of poststructural research, I push back against this clinging to concrete method-methodology-analysis synchronicity as the determining factor of what is “good.” A dissertation rooted in poststructural views that uses concepts and ideas of a social constructionist will inherently be viewed by some who focus on generalizability and paradigmatic alignment as the pinnacles of good and useful research as an inherently limited

scholarly endeavor. Additionally, the use of a somewhat self-constructed analysis process would do nothing to assuage their fears and likely intensify them; however, I wonder whether their desire for structure and broad applications of research is a reflection of the "attachment and devotion to method that so often overtakes the discourse in the education and human services fields" (Janesick, 1994, p. 215) and not disagreement with the underpinnings described in this chapter. While my research in this dissertation did not necessarily ascribe to something as time-tested as a phenomenological or ethnographic inquiry, it does center the experiences of a historically silenced group of students even within queer-specific research.

Even with a more homogenous sample like the one recruited for this dissertation study, the findings still provide important and timely insight into the experiences of bisexual+ emerging adults. Additionally, while five participants was the low end of recommended sizes for Foucauldian-informed research (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017; Willig, 2021), a larger sample would have potentially allowed for less homogeneity in terms of identities within the sample. In creating my criteria for participants, I tried to provide myself with boundaries, such as requiring participants to be attending college or university in the United States and providing an age range as opposed to simply a label, knowing that I had already restricted myself in terms of sexual identity and the difficult to define use of a parasocial relationship. These recruitment-based guidelines functioned as delimitations that ensured I was neither too broad nor too specific in terms of who was able to participate. Given my own linguistic abilities, I also restricted participation to students who are fluent in English. Outside of Spanish, I do not have the capacity to translate, and translation would require a different approach and understanding of culture, particularly when exploring discourse, that I do not feel comfortable integrating into my

research. Analysis of translated data also requires more advanced analytical skills than I possess at this point in time.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter provided a detailed overview of the methodological decisions made in creating and implementing this study. Rooted in poststructuralism, the history of the paradigm, its roots in 20th-century French thought, and the slow acceptance of it as a research paradigm set the groundwork for exploring the specific choices I made in selecting and bridging thematic and discourse analyses and the construction of a Foucauldian-informed critical thematic discourse analysis that wove elements of critical thematic analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis to create a novel analytical process. The data collection process was described in detail and challenges regarding participant recruitment were discussed since they provide context as to the final sample size as well as note a somewhat novel challenge and concern qualitative researchers are beginning to grapple with in qualitative research that has historically not been dealt with: impostor participants.

The construction of a new analytical process involved a discussion of the theoretical background and the methodological congruence between two existing analytical approaches: critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019), which is itself a variation of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022), and Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017; Willig, 2021). The challenges associated with employing a new analytical process as well as how important factors like trustworthiness and ethical consideration show up in this approach were explored as well. Finally, discussions of limitations and delimitations serve as a wrap up and will reappear in the final chapter where they are contextualized within the participants in this study. The information presented in this chapter

provides context for the remaining three chapters which present the individual participant narratives (Chapter 4), the metanarrative constellation (Garvis, 2015; Chapter 5), and a discussion of the findings (Chapter 6).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS, PART I: INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES

This chapter presents the individual narratives of the participants experiences with media and media characters as they constructed their identity as guided by the following research questions:

> *RQ1:* What do participant narratives reveal about how bisexual emerging adults construct their identity through interactions with media characters during their identity construction processes?
>
> *RQ2*: How do bisexual emerging adults utilize parasocial relationships during identity construction processes?

Each narrative begins with an overview of who each participant is and how they came to understand their identities before moving into a more in-depth recounting of their experiences with media and media-based characters as they came to understand their sexual and/or romantic identities. The narratives are organized by the themes that were created based on multiple cycles of coding as described in Chapter 3. While there are shared themes across narratives, each narrative is considered its own story, presented on its own as metanarrative themes are discussed in Chapter 5. In crafting these narratives, I relied heavily on quotations from participants to allow their voices to shine through as "the importance of voice is a key characteristic of the narrative genre" (Garvis, 2015, p. 18); however, I provided contextualization for each quote as well, ensuring that the narratives maintain a sense of story and progression as is the norm in presenting findings for narrative research. To increase clarity between participant quotes and my own

contextualization, I have italicized the participants' words in order to "distinguish the two sets of perspectives" (Garvis, 2015, p. 18).

Overview of Participants

A total of five participants were interviewed for this study, all of whom identify as a non-monosexual identity. Table 4 provides an overview of the participants including their pseudonyms, pronouns, identity label for their sexuality, and a corresponding quote for how they define that label.

Table 4

Overview of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender Identity	Identity Label	Definition
Moon	22	non-binary (she/they)	bisexual	"any all genders on any spectrum. Personally for me, I know some people like to differentiate between pan and bi, but I personally just bisexual more and the colors are prettier for the flag."
Melody	22	non-binary (she/they)	panromantic asexual[7]	"Yeah. So for me, the reason I think I finally settled on pansexual-panromantic is because at the end of the day, gender doesn't really matter all that much to me. I have slight preferences, but if you're a super cool person and I kind of vibe with you and your personality, I really don't care what's down there. And definitely now settling more towards ace because I do notice that I tend to, well, before I was dating someone, I tended to have crushes on people that I was already friends with or had an emotional connection to."
Toshi	19	non-binary (any pronouns)	bisexual; asexual-aromantic[8]	"I identify as bi with throw of aro and ace and it's all confusing…If I ever get into a relationship or find a queerplatonic relationship, I don't care about what the package is in, I care about who is in there. So that's how I've been identified as bi is because I don't care what they are. It's who they are."
Froggy	18	non-binary (they/them)	queer	"I usually just tend to say for my sexuality it's queer or if I'm pressed more, I guess pansexual is the easiest way to describe it. I don't really tend to think about things."
Imogen	21	genderqueer; genderqueer woman (she/they)	queer; bisexual	"there were some things in class that I had to read. I can't remember what class it was, but just kind of being in an academic setting and having to read all this. And that's kind of when I discovered the term queer, I mean, I knew what it was, but then I discovered it in terms of relating it to myself. And so I was still comfortable with the term bisexual, but I was leaning more into queer. And that was a period for a year or so where I really, really, really strongly preferred queer."

[7] Asexuality describes "someone who does not experience sexual attraction or an intrinsic desire to have sexual relationships" (Asexual Visibility & Education Network, 2024). A spectrum, the ace community or aspec community as it is often called, reflects a range of experiences regarding sexual attraction from those who experience no sexual attraction to those whose sexual attraction is only in specific contexts.

A Note About Pronouns

Although guidance from the American Psychological Association (APA) regarding use of pronouns in academic writing was updated to be more inclusive of gender-neutral pronouns, noting that "pronoun usage requires specificity and care on the authors part" (APA, 2020, p. 140) as well as encouraging the use of the singular they, there is no guidance about how to approach the use of multiple pronouns. As a researcher, respect and an ethic of care for my participants is central to my scholarship, a facet of which is ensuring pronoun usage in the narrative accurately reflects each participant's pronouns. Because multiple participants use multiple pronouns, I consulted various LGBTQ+ and trans journalist association style books for guidance on using multiple pronouns for my participants in this research. All sources I consulted recommended using pronouns interchangeably throughout but in ways that do not create confusion or uncertainty. The Association of LGBTQ+ Journalists (2023) notes that when writing about individuals who use multiple pronouns, we should "look for ways to incorporate both or all a person's pronouns without confusing the reader; don't automatically default to one unless the person agrees to it" ("pronouns" section).

The Trans Journalist Association (2023) states that "it may be appropriate to explain the usage of multiple pronouns in different ways" ("Gender, Name, and Pronoun Usage" section). For participants who use multiple pronouns, they are used interchangeably throughout their individual narratives. For example, "Moon described her experience as feeling constantly in the

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[8] Asexual-aromantic ("aroace") refers to the combination of asexual and aromantic identities. Similar to asexuality, aromanticism describes an individual who experiences little to no romantic attraction to others. It "also describes someone whose experience of romance is disconnected from normative societal expectations, due to feeling repulsed by romance, or being uninterested in romantic relationships" (Aromantic-Spectrum Union For Recognition, Education, And Advocacy, 2024). When experienced together, an individual may call themselves "aroace" to reflect experiencing both identities simultaneously.

middle, something their bisexuality would go on to compound." Given the lack of guidance from APA about usage of multiple pronouns, this choice ensures participants' narratives reflect who they are and their identities while also ensuring readability and comprehension on the part of the reader.

A Note About Footnotes

APA often recommends against the use of footnotes in scholarly work since they have the propensity to distract the reader and pull their eyes away from the body of the text; however, they note that content footnotes can be used "only if they strengthen the discussion" (APA, 2020, p. 40). Although they also recommend "authors integrate an idea into an article best by presenting important information in the text, not in a footnote" (APA, 2020, p. 40), there are concepts and ideas discussed by participants that are not common knowledge for all readers. Integrating definitions and other important information about these concepts and ideas directly in the narrative takes focus away from what participants are saying and their Ies. Because of this, there are a handful of footnotes in this chapter to provide context and clarity of potentially unfamiliar concepts. Using footnotes ensures uncommon terms (at least within the realm of educational research) are defined in a way that elevates the participant narrative over the definition or brief commentary provided to explain and describe concepts from media, communication, and fan studies disciplines. This allows the reader to gain understanding without disrupting participants' narratives.

Participant Narratives

Moon

"A lot of people say that they have foundational fictional characters that change their life, which sounds like super corny, but no, honestly, when you're young and you're a nerd, or not even a nerd, but there's media that goes into how you shape your morals as an adult."

____

Moon (she/they) is a 22-year-old non-binary master's student at a large, public 4-year institution in the southwestern United States studying college student affairs. She identifies *"as biracial, half Mexican and half white [and] I grew up in, I want to say a matriarchal household. My mom ran everything and she is my Hispanic side."* Moon identifies as bisexual and defines their sexuality as attraction to *"any and all genders on any spectrum. Personally for me, I know some people like to differentiate between pan and bi, but I personally just bisexual more and the colors are prettier for the flag."* Throughout their identity construction process, Moon described their experience, saying "*it was just a lot of pressure. I want to say the word pressure, it was feeling pressurized inside. I was about to explode, but at the same time, I want to keep it all inside."* Although coming out was a way to relieve this pressure, it did bring to light cultural and social pressure that Moon had to contend with as they constructed their bisexual identity. The conversations I had with Moon centered on: (a) identity negotiation and community, (b) searching for (good) media representation, and (c) fandom as community.

Identity Negotiation and Community. Growing up biracial in Southern California, Moon described her experience as feeling constantly in the middle, something their bisexuality would go on to compound. When asked to describe their experiences in the larger queer

community, Moon brought up the inherent whiteness embedded within the queer community and queer spaces, including queer media:

> *A portion of the hardships I experienced was because I'm biracial, I already grew up with like, oh, "I'm too white to be Mexican," or "I'm too Mexican to be white." And I couldn't speak Spanish with my friends, but I grew up culturally Mexican and doing all these Mexican traditions with my family and my grandma would speak Spanish to me, but my mom never taught me. And it's like, great, now I'm in the middle again.*

In addition to identifying as biracial, they note the role of religion in their childhood and growing up Catholic, something that caused tension between them and their mother:

> *So we were raised Catholic, went to church all the time. I went to Catholic– I didn't go to Catholic school, but I went to classes every week and I did my First Communion the whole nine yards. My mom didn't put my brothers in Catholic school. Only me. Why? I don't know. I wish I knew that question. Now I don't identify as religious at all, and my mom is mad at me for that, but hey, what can I say?*

Additionally, she noted that this created "terrible religious guilt growing up" as they began to realize they were not straight and negatively influenced their identity negotiation due to the rhetoric about queerness espoused by the Catholic Church:

> *It was so bad to the point where I was like "I'm going to hell if I do this." And I'm like, I am a teenager, I should not be thinking I'm going to hell if I do this. So definitely the religious guilt was a huge thing.*

Religiosity and the influence of religion followed Moon as they constructed their bisexual identity and she found connection with others who were similarly navigating religion, race, ethnicity and identity in a friend:

And my friend who's going through it with me was also super religious and she had immigrant parents. So then again, on top of the religious aspect, it's like your parents wanting you to be perfect and marry a husband and blah, blah, blah.

Cultural pressure and norms about sexuality, which are further complicated when someone's racial and ethnic identities are marginalized as well, reverberated through Moon's statements in our two interviews. However, a friend who was experiencing similar identity confusion provided a sense of queer community, something Moon noted they had lacked growing up, when she stated, *"I had a friend who was going through a similar situation, so I felt like having her next to me kind of really helped the feelings blossom."*

Looking back, Moon reflected that she *"had queer friends, but we were all in the closet and we didn't know it."* With this, Moon wrestled with their own internalized homophobia even after meeting out queer people particularly due to the lack of contact she had with queer individuals in real life:

So I know a lot of people have internalized homophobia when they were younger, and I definitely was. I had gay men who were my best friends, but queer women or gay women, I was like "I'm not comfortable around that." I had this double standard going on in my head for some reason in high school and middle school. And then it started turning into feelings I've had inside.

When thinking of queer individuals they knew during their earlier years, Moon noted they had even fewer queer women and femme presenting individuals, noting that the only queer women she knew *"was as a super hardcore stereotypical lesbian and it was the lesbian of the school. And there's only one fully out lesbian that everybody knows, and that's it. That was my only representation knowledge of queer women"*

Despite this lack of femme presenting queer representation in real life, Moon noted they *"started feeling different in high school. I would say my junior sophomore year. So I was 16."* But it was not until they were in their first year of their undergraduate studies, *"as soon as [they] got to college,"* that they came out as bisexual:

> *I didn't officially recognize it and really think about it until my freshman year of undergrad, which was 2019, and I was 17, 18. But growing up when I was really little– pre-teens, adolescent– I didn't really have any thoughts about it. It was mostly "I'm attracted to men, male presenting people." So yeah, I would say not until middle of my high school journey, sophomore, junior was when I really started thinking about my identity and my sexual identity.*

Moon stated that coming to college provided her with opportunities to explore her sexuality, calling attention to a *"relationship that [she] formed with a peer in [her] multicultural and gender studies class. Surprise!"* all while *"it was all happening very quickly, like rapid fire. I had not experienced this at all in my life until I came to college, and I was having these thoughts and then boom, boom, boom biphobia."* She noted that this individual *"was [out as] lesbian for a pretty huge portion of her life [and] was very comfortable in her sexuality"* while Moon *"still wasn't."* During this time, she described a relationship with a male partner she was currently in who made her uncertain about if she was truly bisexual:

> *My partner at the time who was a man told me that I was having these thoughts because being "bisexual is a trend." So, I was just having bisexual thoughts because it was a trend and that's what I was hearing from him at the time.*

Moon's uncertainty about their sexuality was compounded by their relationship history where they only had male partners in the past as well as biphobic rhetoric from those around her that

questioned the legitimacy of bisexuality as its own fully formed identity. When recalling their relationship with the peer in their gender studies course, Moon noted *"[they] felt like she was just so really confident in herself and her sexuality and it didn't mesh well."* When asked to further explain what she meant, Moon stated:

> *She had shared that her previous partner was identified as bisexual. So I felt like she had biases coming into this relationship that we were potentially forming. And she made some comments that definitely hurt. Again, saying you can't trust a bisexual girl or bisexual girls will experiment with lesbians and lead them on. That was another thing she would always tell me like, oh, or she would kind of just frame it in a way as if I was a straight person wanting to experiment. In my head that was not the case. Just hearing that again, common stereotypes of bisexual people in and out of the queer community. It's a phase. You're doing it for attention or it's a trend.*

Moon's experiences reflect the persistent biphobia within the greater queer community and how it influences bisexuals and their constructions of their sexuality. While this interaction with an out queer person did expose them to biphobia, Moon noted that this was ultimately a positive experience, and they *"became really close."* However, Moon still had to battle cultural views on bisexuals as inherently hypersexual and not a true queer identity:

> *A lot of people think it's a phase and that's still a joke today. Luckily, it's not perpetuated as often as it used to be, but it's still a common meme in the community about it being a phase or you want to experiment or one thing I hate is people will still say this, but "Oh, you're in college. This is your chance to sleep around with people and get your experience and have gay interactions or gay thoughts or whatever." And it's like, no, no,*

no, don't do that. I mean, if you're comfortable with it, but they just make it seem like, oh, get ready to have sex with everybody kind of thing.

When asked what it feels like to see representation of bisexuality in media that reaffirms common bisexual stereotypes, Moon noted that it made her angry and it was *"kind of like when there's a plus size character who's only personality is that they eat or they're just always have a bag of chips, that makes me so mad. That's not representation."*

Seeing queerness outside of the cultural contexts in which they were raised allowed Moon the freedom to explore and learn about herself, even if there were hurdles she had to overcome and moments where biphobia continued to weave its way into their experiences, especially when combined with their coming out in college and feeling behind their queer peers:

there's the guilt of not growing up feeling any thoughts of being queer. I know a lot of people are like, "Oh, I knew it when I was in blah, blah, blah in second grade or middle school." And it's like I didn't know until I was in college. Am I less valid in that way? Some people do think that, or also the girl I was with during that time, she mentioned that I wasn't real. I wasn't actually bisexual because I had never been in a relationship with another woman. And it's like that's not how it works. But at the time I'm 18 and I'm scared of my own sexuality. And I hear that from a queer person who has been out and proud for multiple years. It's kind of like, "Oh."

Even though this relationship *"ended up in flames because I was newly out,"* Moon reflected on this, as well as her friend from high school, as a positive moment of community within her identity construction journey:

But just her being there for me and helping me go through it really, really helped. And she's still my friend today. We still talk, but just having her there and then again, my

> *friend in high school was still going through her journey. So having two support systems of queer women who are going through the same things as me really helped.*

Despite this, culture clashed with her identity construction. When Moon came out to their mom as bisexual, they were in a hetero-presenting relationship, and they felt their *"mom just forgot about it [being bisexual]. But I'm like, no, mom, I have bi flags all over my apartment."* When she talked about coming out during her first year of college, she noted the relief she felt but also the role distance played in her decision to make that step:

> *And that really helped me embrace it as well without feeling the pangs of guilt of religious guilt, being first generation, wanting to please my parents and being the perfect daughter.*

This quote, in particular, highlights the tension that Moon navigated as they came to understand their bisexuality. Not only was she negotiating her sexuality, but also her other salient identities like ethnicity and religion, all while moving away from a familiar environment:

> *And again, that stereotype [bisexuality is a phase] along with being super religious growing up and not having any queer people in my life, that all was pushing it down and I just didn't want to embrace it until I was in college and on my own. I was like 500 something miles away from my family. And that was the first time I was by myself.*

At the same time, Moon highlighted spaces where she was able to explore her bisexual identity even if there were pressures from family and the greater queer community that made that process more difficult. They noted that social media, specifically Twitter, was a space they felt empowered to openly identify as bisexual. Moon noted that *"social media is a huge outlet for queer teenagers and young adults because if you're growing up in a household with strict*

parents who don't allow that, where also you going to express yourself?" By having this online space where they felt safe to express their bisexuality, it provided community via a digital space:

> *You can kind of display your identities without necessarily giving out your name and your personal identity. So would you have a fan page or you have a blog or something and you have an alter or an alias name that you go by online? I would tweet– openly tweet about being bisexual or being queer, putting it in my bio, following other people, other women who are queer or femme presenting. And that really helped too. Seeing it normalized online.*

Having been *"active on Twitter since [she] got a smartphone in 2014,"* this use of social media is something that persisted through Moon's identity exploration to the present day. She highlighted how using these digital spaces allows for exploration and actions, like putting pronouns in user bios, that attempt to make queerness normalized, noting that this was different from her experiences in middle school and high school when she first began engaging in these spaces. For Moon, it was the combination of friends and these digital spaces that encouraged her to continue to construct her sexuality, even engaging before fully coming out and *"stating my name's Moon and I'm bisexual on Twitter,"* noting it made the process *"a lot less stressful"* and allowing her to release some of the pressure she felt by keeping her sexuality inside.

Even though Moon is openly bisexual, there are still moments they feel the external pressures from both heterosexual and queer people alike affect their ability to fully exist as an openly bisexual person:

> *Even now in student affairs is a very liberal space and I feel welcomed and anywhere I go so far, I still feel embarrassed in my head to share that I'm queer. And it's like why–I wish I could just get rid of that, but that's just from growing up where I grew up.*

While their field is open and accepting and they feel welcome and supported in that space, the lingering effects from their childhood and the cultural expectations connected to sexuality still remain to their experiences in the current day, indicating how intertwined identities are with each other and how it is impossible to treat them, and their construction as occurring on their own as well as how influential external factors are during identity construction.

Searching for (Good) Media Representation. When asked what it was like to reflect on media and its role in identity construction, Moon noted that while difficult, it was *"nostalgic,"* further explaining that:

> *it was nice to reminisce and actually critically think about how I interpreted those characters when I was younger. It kind of offered a whole new view of the character, especially now that I'm older and I have been out and proud for longer and I've associated myself with other queer people. It was just nice to look at the characters again from a new point of view.*

However, Moon also noted that when looking for bisexual representation, it was often difficult to find. Talking about the relationship between Princess Bubblegum and Marceline in *Adventure Time*, Moon described the depiction of bisexuality as *"it's like the bisexuality portion of the identity isn't necessarily singled out. The queer portion is, but the bisexual portion is not."* While Marceline is canonically[9] bisexual, Princess Buttercup is unlabeled but queer and Moon

[9] Although the term canonical is not specific to fan studies, canon has specific connotations in fan spaces that are not present in other uses of the word. Within student development theory, we sometimes refer to the foundational theories as 'canonical theories,' meaning they have achieved such status that they are widely accepted. In fan spaces, canon refers to narrative occurrences and characterization that actually occurred within the media itself (Goodman, 2015) while its counterpart, fanon is "the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the [fan space]" (Hellekson & Busse, 2006, p. 9). Fanon can encompass things like fan edits, fanfiction, and fan art that add or correct the canonical content (Hardin, 2023).

described how the fans often see the romantic relationship between the two characters in the series' canon:

> *A lot of people view it as a lesbian relationship, but it's like canon that Marceline is bisexual, but a lot of people just gloss over that and call it a lesbian relationship or make headcanons about the characters. And I just think that it's a really good example to kind of show how bi people are in media– are portrayed in media.*

When characters were clearly and canonically bisexual, as was the case in an excerpt Moon read and reacted to from *Perfect on Paper* (Gonzales, 2021), she highlighted how biphobia was still a concern for the character who mirrored a relationship similar to the one she is currently in:

> *And there's a lot of jokes in the gay community about bisexual women having straight boyfriends. It's like a meme at this point. And honestly, sometimes it's giving biphobia, it's not funny anymore in my opinion. And because it's perpetuating the fact that you're no longer queer because you're dating, you're in a heterosexual relationship.*

For bisexuals in heterosexual passing relationships, there is a feeling of erasure and a lack of sense of belonging in the queer community because your relationship does not look queer to the outside eye, including those in the queer community themselves. As Moon noted, it makes you feel as if *"you're losing the queerness in yourself because you're choosing to partake in a heterosexual relationship and not being taken seriously by other people in the queer community."*

Moon openly acknowledged they felt a need for increased bisexual representation in media, especially when compared to other queer identities and they *"want to hear that the word bisexual normalized in media"* and characters constructed in a way that reflects the nuances of

bisexual individuals. When talking about how representation sometimes feels as if creators are checking a box to meet diversity quotas when adding bisexual representation, Moon noted that when they *"affirms stereotypes and they highlight the stereotype and kind of push back the identity part…it does more harm than good."*

Fandom as a Community. In our conversations, Moon noted that along with a sense of connection to the character, media-based parasocial relationships also created the possibility of connecting with others through digital spaces dedicated to the media in question through fandoms[10]. The communal nature of fandom also provided a convergence of community spaces: the digital with the personal. When asked how fandom participation influenced their identity construction, Moon stated that:

> *No one else in my life was very– as nerdy as I was, except for my cousin and some friends at school. So I actively sought out communities on social media to rant or talk about opinions about pieces of media and see art that artists post or content from the creators of the media or just discourse about the media in general.*

Through fandom participation, their connections to these characters facilitated connection to other members of the community, many of whom were queer themselves as *"on social media, coming across a queer person is so much more common than real life."*

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[10] Fandom refers to the dedicated spaces where fans of a particular media source can connect and discuss the show, book, movie, or other media source. Defined as "loosely interlinked interpretive communities, mainly comprising women and spanning a wide range of demographics in terms of age, sexuality, economic status, and national, cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds, formed around various popular cultural texts" (Pande, 2018, p. 2), fandoms can be related to a variety of interests from sports to media and even to celebrities. Although fandom has been explored in academic spaces since late 1980s and early 1990s (Goodman, 2015), with the publication of *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* by Henry Jenkins (1992/2013), it grew in focus with the rise of the internet and social media where fandoms are often located as those currently found on platforms like Tumblr, Twitter, and TikTok.

While coming across a queer individual on social media via fandom may have been easier than in real life, the same could not be said for positive depictions of bisexuality, according to Moon. While there was a lack of bisexual specific characters she strongly connected with, she noted that Ahsoka from *Star Wars "is gay and I love that for her."* This act of headcanoning[11] allows for the creation of representation in spaces that it is either: (a) ambiguous; or (b) not accepted by fans. In fandom spaces, Moon engaged in this practice at least partly to create the representation they were looking for but not seeing in fictional media:

> *Even if the characters aren't canon or official labeled bisexual by the creators or whoever made the show or whatever, kind of the assertion of my identity onto these characters kind of helped because especially when you're, people call it a baby queer, but when you're just coming out or you're just thinking about your identity, you don't know. You don't know where to look when it comes to representation. And especially for bisexual people, it's really not all in your face or obvious like other queer identities might be in TV shows and books and whatnot. So I kind of had to make my own, and I think that that really helped because just asserting my label onto a fictional character served as that representation that I was looking for. Or not necessarily specifically looking, but unconsciously I was yearning to see people who experienced the same things as I did in media.*

[11] Headcanoning is "a fan's personal interpretation of a character's identity and backstory, particularly as it runs counter to the official or canonical source material" (Scahill, 2019, p. 121) Noting that headcanons are "part wish fulfillment, part readerly sleuthing, the creation of headcanons reflects "a shared alterity in which a broad range of sexualities and gender identities exist and flourish in the queer imaginary" (p. 121). As a result, the act of headcanoning and other canon-corrective measures like the creation of fanfiction serve as a form of correcting the canonical depiction of characters and pushes back against common media tropes and actions which reduce queer and characters with other marginalized identities to a plot point (e.g., race [Fowler, 2019]; queerness [Jackson, 2023]; and disability [Hemmann, 2020])

Moon then highlighted how fans share these headcanons throughout fan spaces, stating that *"it's mutually agreed upon that the whole fandom thinks that [the character is queer]. So that's even more affirming and people make fan art of the characters with the flags and stuff."* Within these fandom spaces, even if not physically or even directly interacting with each other, there are actions and behaviors that affirm identities that are specific to the space and medium.

When asked if she felt these were spaces that positively influenced her view of her bisexuality, Moon adamantly said they were. While there are moments where fandoms get *"toxic,"* as she described, she recounted largely positive experiences in fan spaces. One statement articulated why she feels fandom spaces are safe for queer people:

> *A lot of queer kids rely on the internet to find that space because they don't have it in their life and social life around them or even at school. So I feel like that's a lot of queer kids, their saving grace is online spaces, so you're in an online space in a fandom for a piece of media you really enjoy. And then additionally, there's the queer aspect that affirms your identity. So it's kind of like two birds with one stone kind of thing. I'm talking about this thing I like with other people from my background, so it's a double whammy for lack of a better term.*

Interactions with characters and parasocial relationships facilitated connections with other people who share similar views, interests, and identities. For someone like Moon, who did not grow up with many visible queer people in their life, these media characters facilitated connecting them to their queerness but also to other queer individuals, even if the positive depictions of their identities had to be created by fans and not seen in canonical representation.

When asked if they sought out media and their respective fandoms that were focused on queerness, Moon answered that she did not but rather *"it's kind of like I sought out the fandom*

but not the queerness of it. And I would say the queer community kind of found me instead of me finding them." For Moon, it was character and story first that drew them into the fandom space but the affirmation within that made them remain:

> *If I see my personality in a character and they remind me of myself, I really attach myself to that character. And I would say that that's when the assertion of my labels or my own identity comes after that. So first I look for personality traits or traits of the character that I just really enjoy. And then I'm like, oh, since I see myself in this character, it makes sense that I would assert my own identities onto this fictional character and find comfort in that. Since bi people don't really have that much, I'm going to be honest, I think that's kind of my process.*

Connecting to the characters based on personality over identity also allowed a strong relationship to develop between Moon and characters they admire, in particular, Ahsoka. Although Moon connected with Ahsoka based on her coding as a Person of Color within a largely white *Star Wars* universe, the headcanon of Ahsoka's queerness which Moon made when they were younger allowed their relationship to grow into one where Moon admires her for both canonical and the headcanon she created:

> *Yeah, definitely. I do look up to them and try to embody parts of their personality that I find to be positive or empowering or respect, I don't want to say respectful, but something I view that I respect. So I think it's cool, kind of adopting mannerisms of a person. And because she was a foundational character and my upbringing as a young adult and a queer person and a woman who, especially being in nerd spaces that are always dominated by white men, especially* Star Wars.

Within Moon's identity construction, media and media-based relationships, like that between her and Ahsoka, were strong and important factors that influenced their conceptualization of their bisexuality and how it interacted with their other identities. When asked what their journey to understand their sexuality would have been like without these character relationships and media representation, Moon stated that *"I honestly would probably still be in the closet,"* showing just how important these were and still are for them during this process. She went on, saying:

> *I can't even imagine myself without it. I would just be a husk of a human without a soul if I didn't go through the socialization and make the friends that I did make through social media and form my own ideas and my own ideology and personality. It's just such a huge part of my life.*

Although Moon found fandom and the ability to headcanon bisexuality and queerness onto characters a way to affirm their bisexuality, they again brought up the lack of canonical bisexual representation both growing up and currently. Even though they enjoy the ability to create queer characters in fandom spaces, they *"want to see more outward and obvious representation. And as not an older queer person, but a more experienced queer person compared to how I was when I was younger, I don't want to take half ass rep anymore."* For Moon, representation that relies on problematic tropes about bisexuality, like instances where bisexual characters *"sleep with people instead of having their own personality,"* continues to perpetuate biphobia both inside and outside of the queer community:

> *It doesn't bother me as much as it used to, but it would just be really uncomfortable to see other queer people bash bisexual people in the community or literally affirm stereotypes when bisexual is the third letter. And LGBTQ plus, it's like it used to be LGB back in the day in the sixties and seventies, it was just LGB, there was no T, there was no*

Q, no plus (+). So it's like bisexuals are out on the front lines protesting back in the day for queer rights. So it's like, why is there hatred in the community? Why am I seeing that in 2023? It's definitely got better.

When exploring their experiences seeing fandom discourse about bisexual characters play out in real time as they reflected about a clip from *Heartstopper* (Oseman & Lyn, 2023) where one of the main characters, Nick, fights with his brother who insists on calling him gay when he is bisexual, Moon noted that they were familiar with this scene because of seeing discourse play our in digital spaces, like Twitter, where there was criticism about Nick's correcting his brother. However, they noted that they have seen a shift in how the community responds to these attempts to invalidate bisexuality as a unique identity through erasure, highlighting the call out culture she witnesses when this occurs:

> *I feel like people will hold you accountable for it. Now, personally, I've seen a lot of callouts on social media whenever people are purposely biphobic, like the example—* Heartstopper*—you showed me, that person literally was like, "Ew, why didn't—" someone on Twitter was like, "Why did he have to say he was bi? Literally, he's just gay." I'm like, someone called them out and it blew up. It got massive attention because it's like that specific label and identity that he stated is really important and crucial to the show and crucial to him as a character. So, it's like, "Why are you saying that?" And majority of people agree with the person that called the other person out.*

Although they also noted *"there's work to be done as in any other community,"* this again highlights the convergence between representation, digital spaces, and identity affirmation that was woven throughout the conversations we had as well as pushes back against larger narratives of biphobia within queer spaces. However, these interactions with media and media characters

had a great deal of influence on how Moon constructed their identity as a bisexual individual, ultimately summarizing this as:

> *A lot of people say that they have foundational fictional characters that change their life, which sounds like super corny, but no, honestly, when you're young and you're a nerd, or not even a nerd, but there's media that goes into how you shape your morals as an adult.*

Melody

And I think that—just general, I guess—seeing that we can exist, that there is space for us to exist in this world, we just have to shape the narrative that we want it to be in order to exist. I think that if I'd had these resources earlier than I did, because again, I found all of these resources in college because that's when I came out and was allowing myself to look at this kind of inclusive literature. I would've been able to find myself a lot sooner.

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Melody (she/they) is a 22-year-old nonbinary graduate student attending a large, public, 4-year institution in the southeastern United States where she is studying for their master's in music. After a period of exploring their identity, they ultimately described their identity as panromantic asexual, noting the convergence of these identities occurring over time:

> *So, for me, the reason I think I finally settled on pansexual/panromantic is because at the end of the day, gender doesn't really matter all that much to me. I have slight preferences, but if you're a super cool person and I kind of vibe with you and your personality, I really don't care what's down there. And definitely now settling more towards ace [rather than demisexual] because I do notice that I tend to, well, before I was dating someone, I tended to have crushes on people that I was already friends with or had an emotional connection to. And I still think that's the reason, but I think that's*

romantic connection. I don't think that's necessarily sexual attraction, which is why I've kind of moved to asexual.

Over the two conversations I had with Melody, she often focused on three major themes: (a) college and the freedom to explore; (b) connections to media; and (c) centering and celebrating queer knowledge.

College and the Freedom to Explore. Early in our interview, Melody noted she *"grew up very fundamentalist Christian, and so in that sense grew up very homophobic, very transphobic."* Despite that, they knew they were queer from a young age, *"since I was in sixth grade."* When asked how they navigated the dissonance between their sexuality and their religious beliefs, Melody stated:

I literally remember it was like a shower thought moment. I was like, "Oh, I like girls, but also I like boys, so I know I'm not gay." But I didn't have any other language to describe myself and I wasn't going to let myself explore that at all because of my religious beliefs.

Although Melody brought up the conflict between the religion she grew up in and her own beliefs, she noted that college, in particular, was a time of growth for her, both in terms of her knowledge of her own identities but also in her acceptance of queerness.

Coming to college was a turning point for Melody in how she viewed herself and the world around her, culminating in her coming out: "*I kind of figured out who I was in my mid-twenties."* Before attending their small, private, 4-year institution in the southeastern United States, Melody grew up in the Midwest and noted that the religious rhetoric they grew up surrounded by enveloped them in homophobic views despite knowing queer individuals:

So I was a theater kid and a band kid. I was bound and determined to be a musical theater major going into college that didn't happen. I ended up doing voice instead,

which I'm really happy where I am. But I definitely found solace in that community, both in theater because I was around, that was probably the most exposure I got to the queer community was in band and theater. So that I think is what got me at least to the point of, "oh, love the sinner, hate the sin" kind of thought because I was definitely in that place where I was like, oh, I can't openly express my homophobic views, or I will be canceled. And obviously the line of thinking should have been, "Oh, just don't be homophobic." But I wasn't at that point in my growth yet.

Melody noted how this rhetoric continued to remain in her mind as she began her collegiate studies. However, being away from this religious community and on her own, Melody's views on queerness began to shift and change. They started to question the feasibility of the *"love the sinner, hate the sin"* when some of the closest friends were queer people. While describing what this journey was like for them, Melody stated:

Being around the community so much really helped me accept myself and discover who I was because I kind of went through that progression of– I came to college and thought I was open-minded, found out that I really wasn't. I was, like, the, "Oh, love the sin, hate the sin" kind of thing. And then recognizing my friends that were queer that I just couldn't feel that way about them, that I was like, "I can't have this attitude about it. I don't think there's anything wrong."

This dissonance in what Melody had learned versus what they were constructing in terms of views on queerness allowed them to acknowledge what they had been feeling themselves since they were a pre-teen. At the same time, Melody was also constructing her gender identity.

I came out my sophomore year in college as panromantic and demisexual, which is now a little bit more ace [asexual] than just demi. I then also came out as non-binary my senior

year in college. And a lot of that was through things like media. And then for me it was also through tabletop role play. So Dungeons & Dragons *and a lot of that.*

In doing this dual identity negotiation of sexuality and gender, having spaces and places to connect was important to Melody both with other individuals, like their *Dungeons & Dragons* group, as well as through connections with media characters. Connecting with other queer individuals allowed them to understand how pervasive the negative messaging about queerness was from their childhood.

Melody continued to highlight the role of peers and interpersonal connections with other queer individuals as playing a role in her identity construction processes even in the current day, highlighting things like *"affinity groups"* at her current institution. Again, they also highlighted their *Dungeons & Dragons* group as a space where they can explore and wrestle with questions about identity and feel connected to other queer individuals: "*We are all queer. And so—it's like the best that I get once a week just to kind of be openly myself, be really silly and goofy, and yeah, that's probably the best outlet that I have."*

Finding those sources of connection with others as they came to construct their panromantic identity allowed Melody to deconstruct the messaging they internalized about queerness because of their interactions with other queer individuals in spaces where they could explore that element of themselves. Similarly, they noted that their sister's coming out inspired them to do the same after realizing, "*Oh, another family member came out and they're still the same person they were. So, I think it's going to be okay for me to come out. And so, I came out a year later my sophomore year."*

While coming out as panromantic asexual and non-binary allowed Melody to connect with friends and express who she is, there were moments when she felt tension between the

environment she grew up in and her newfound openness in terms of their sexuality and gender identity. In particular, Melody recounted coming out to her father:

> *My dad, I finally came out to him, and he was probably the last person I was really concerned about coming out to because he is a mess of a person, for lack of a better word. And he was like, "Okay, well, I appreciate that you told me this, but you're dating [Melody's partner], so none of this is really real to me." And I'm like, "Yeah, but I'm still this, even if I am dating this person." And he just couldn't get past his head. And I did eventually get him because he was like, "Just understand, I'm never going to really see you as queer." And I was like, "Well, I would really appreciate it, and if you want this relationship to continue, I need you to see me as queer." And so, he kind of said yes to appease me, but I don't think that he really does. And so that's kind the diagram of what my identity goes through on a weekly basis.*

Because of this tension, spaces that affirm their identity, like media and friends, are something Melody noted as integral to their identity construction and developing a positive view of their identities.

Connections to Media. When asked about other things that influenced their understanding of their panromantic-asexual identity, Melody noted that they had found connections with characters in media from a young age:

> *I loved to read, I loved fantasy. I loved– I watched a lot of anime as a kid. And I think that was also part of my realization. I don't know that I have a specific character, but I always tended to be a little bit more attracted or at least connected to the female characters.*

Engaging with media and creating relationships with characters provided her a space to explore and learn about herself. While she noted she could not think of specific negative representations of bisexuality in the media she engaged with, she qualified it by saying:

> *I think the reason I can't think of as many bad depictions, it's because I tend to ignore those sources when I know, "Oh, this isn't good reputation." I'm not going to watch it and give them more money to do that.*

But they also acknowledged the impact of negative depictions of queerness that pervade fictional media regardless of format. When recounting examples of poor representation, they focused on instances that reify negative stereotypes about queer, and in particular bisexual, individuals that occurred in relatively popular television shows:

> *Yeah, I go away from those, I guess I think of shows, well,* Sex and the City*, and then there's one show that my mom watches and I can't remember, I think it might be one of the* Law & Order *shows that has a bi character in it, and they really treat them like they're dirty. You can't be trusted, things like that. I had another one on my brain and now I can't remember what it is….Oh*! Modern Family. *I was talking to my partner about this the other day in* Modern Family. *There was an episode they were seeing, it was like, there's two gay men on the show, and they were seeing if they could be with women. And then when I think one of the guys was like, "Yeah, I could have," and then his identity came into question and* [the character's partner] *was like, "Well, no, you're not. You're married to me." That's that kind of thing. I don't want to see identities questioned. Nobody knows your identity better than you do.*

Melody also stated they are more inclined to engage with media that has queer representation in it; however, they also are drawn to queer narratives that extend beyond the traditional coming out narrative that seems to be the center of queer characters' development. In particular, they noted:

> *And I think of things like—*The Handmaid's Tale *is another show that—there is queer representation in that 100%. It's not necessarily the center of the story, but it's also a very big part of it because it's talking about oppression under a nationalist theocracy and just being able to interact with that and have discussions about, "Okay, what does this look like? If this were our world, what would that look like for us?"*

However, finding clearly queer representation, particularly that with plurisexual characters in it, is something Melody stated she would have liked to have seen more often during earlier moments in her identity construction. When asked how she felt explicit plurisexual representation would have affected her experience coming to understand her sexuality, Melody said it would have had a positive influence:

> *It definitely would've helped me figure that out faster because again, that is the hill that I will die on today, is that I did not have the language that I needed. I did not have the education around identities that I needed to fully understand myself. And seeing not just umbrella identities, but really niche identities on paper is so fricking important.*

They also talked about the timing of meeting the characters that were meaningful to them as they constructed their identity. Looking back, Melody explained that their experience may have been different if they had engaged with them earlier given the environment she was in:

> *I read all of these I've engaged with in college, so I didn't have any reticence in engaging with them, but I think if I had been younger and found them, I would've felt like I was*

doing something wrong. It would've been one of those books that I read under the bed covers with the flashlights when my parents were asleep.

One of those books, Samantha Shannon's 2019 queer fantasy epic, *The Priory of the Orange Tree*. Proved to be the source of strong relationships with characters for Melody, particularly reconciling her religious background with her sexuality: "I think it would've taken me a lot longer to find peace of my religion, especially if I'd not found *Priory*." The characters in this novel, Sabran and Ead, and the relationships Melody cultivated with them allowed Melody to see that religion and queerness can coexist:

I think for me, it's made me realize I can be queer and exist. I'm not going to blow up if I say that I'm gay. I mean, for me, that was huge because it was like when I was younger, it was like, "Oh my God, if I say this out loud, if I manifest that I put it into the universe, then literally I'm just going to strike me down with lightning" especially, and this is something that I mentioned in the journal as well, but especially with Priory *being that these two characters are existing within a pseudo religion that is an allegory for Christianity, seeing that this character still is very much in tune with their religion and is still queer. If I had had that when I was younger, that would've been a really big deal.*

When asked what their relationships with Ead and Sabran were like, Melody indicated that these were strong relationships that "felt really connected" to both characters, but particularly Sabran because of shared experiences growing up in religious environments:

I felt connected to both Ead and Sabran, but I really felt connected to Sabran just because I understood the religious thing very deeply and feeling like, oh, the need to follow motherhood, even though that is not something that she wanted and felt very nervous about.

Melody further expanded what "connected to" meant, describing a deep understanding of her actions and emotions, feeling them along with the characters while reading:

> *Just because I felt like I understood them so deeply. It was like every time Ead hurt or Sabran hurt, I hurt. I remember reading the scene where they were attacked by, I can't remember the name of the big one, of basically the right hand of the main dragon. And the scene where she miscarries, I was literally sobbing because I felt like I had that pain. And with Ead is feeling like that separation of being away from the person that you love and not being able to be with them for reasons is something that I also really resonated with.*

Melody even noted how their relationship with these characters evolved over time. They talked about how these characters reflected their own journey and evolution as they came to understand their sexuality:

> *It was seeing two different sides of myself* [in Ead and Sabran]. *Here's me now, who is much more Ead* [was] *at the beginning of the book, who is very accepting and open to magic, open to all these things. And then there was me 10+ years ago* [like Sabran] *who was very closed off in my ideology.*

Centering and Celebrating Queer Knowledge. An educator herself, Melody was the only participant to ask me at the beginning of our first conversation *"What inspired you to talk about the correlation between fiction for kids and that being, I don't know, their gay awakening?"* and allowed me to explain my connections to my research. Their role in peer education as both an undergraduate and graduate student allowed them to work towards creating a climate that was not simply open to queer students but celebrated queer ways of knowing, particularly in a state that was not friendly politically to queer individuals:

> *And having that little private bubble meant we didn't have to follow state regulations, or at least to an extent of [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility] policies being restricted. And it was a bubble. So there, for the most part, among my peers, my sexuality was never questioned. I was always, always accepted. Even students who weren't necessarily queer who would ask questions about it were always very polite. Sometimes with my faculty, once I was more open about my sexuality with the faculty, I would kind of be like the person they came to if they had questions.*

While they appreciated other students' and faculty's willingness to learn from them, Melody explained that serving as an educator about queerness can become tiresome.

> *And sometimes I had to be like, "Hey, I really appreciate that you're interested, and I really appreciate that you did the whole safe zone course, and you want to learn more, but don't put the burden of education on me. I'm happy to give you resources like the Trevor Project and their resource center that gives you great definitions of all these identities. But this is not my job as a queer person to educate you."*

Serving as an educator, though, complicated this and forced Melody to create boundaries about when they are a queer educator versus when they are simply a queer individual. When asked if they were able to do that, Melody replied:

> *Yeah, I mean, and let's be real. I'm in a role where that is my job, and if you want to come and be educated in a space where I am performing my job, I am more than happy to explain that to you. But if I'm just walking down the street, I really don't want to be bombarded with questions about, "Oh, what does this identity mean? Why does gender look like to you? What does your sexuality look like to you?" Because that I don't get paid for.*

When asked how representation plays into the lack of knowledge about queer experiences for the greater public, Melody explained that there seems to be a connection between the media depictions of queerness, including plurisexual identities, because of the overreliance on stereotypes about queer people. She explained:

> *I feel like when [bisexuality or pansexuality] not portrayed by people in the community, that's usually what I see is like, "Oh, I can fix you," or that kind of attitude or that sexual people are dirty or that they cheat and things like that. And that's not the case. There are more options, but if I am taken, then there are no other options, or at least for me, because I'm monogamous, I'm not polyamorous.*

Clarifying that she by no means views polyamory as being a bad thing but noting that they *"don't happen to be [polyamorous]*," Melody said that in these stereotypical depictions, there is a lack of nuance afforded to queer characters that influence how they feel when consuming it. Agreeing with my statement that "it's often a more holistic representation that kind of knows these traps that media often falls into" when queer creators write queer stories, Melody added that queer-created queer characters are more multifaceted and have greater narrative range than in queer characters created to "*fill a diversity quota"* as is often the case in media:

> *I think for me, going further, what you said made me think of something and just when it's done, I feel like when it's not done by queer people, the focus of that entire character's personality is them being X minority. And that's not just a queer thing. It's like you think about Black characters in the media, their whole [narrative] is often focused on battling racism wherever they are.*

While she also noted *"that's not to say that there aren't creators out there that are like, we want to tell queer stories because it matters,"* sometimes these good faith attempts to create

multidimensional queer characters result in harmful depictions that portray queer characters in stereotypical ways. For plurisexual representation, Melody also explained that the pervasiveness of biphobic tropes and views within culture at large make it even more difficult for nuanced representation. After reading a passage from *Perfect on Paper* (Gonzales, 2021), they specifically talked about how bisexual+ characters, even when depicted, often have their bisexuality+ erased, especially when done by non-queer authors:

> *I think when [bisexual] representation is done by, and for queer folks, we see the full facet of that identity. I feel like something that often comes up about my identity is like, "Oh, you're dating a man, so you are actually just straight and that's erasure." Or if it was the other way around, it's like, "Oh, you're dating a woman, so you're actually just gay." It's that kind of erasure.*

Melody noted how this binarization is reinforced by media depictions, affecting queer and heterosexual individuals' views on the legitimacy of bisexuality by defining a bisexual individual as queer or straight depending on how their relationships appear which leads to bisexual erasure. This statement connected to Melody's own experience with bisexual erasure with her father who did not see her as queer given her hetero-presenting relationship, something that she also noted when reacting to a clip from the television adaptation of *Heartstopper* (Oseman & Lyn, 2023):

> *[Quoting David] "Oh, he can't even admit he's gay. He meant he was gay." And then when he [Nick] was like, "I'm bi actually," and he [David] is like, "Well, I don't really believe that." Oh, that was so triggering. I mean it's exactly what my dad says. He is like, you're dating a man, so you're actually just straight. And I'm like, no.*

Both of the excerpts were created by queer authors and creators, and the resonance they had with Melody reflected their previous statements that queer-created stories about queerness often are

more honest as well as allow for less cliched and problematic representation. For her, the depictions that were most impactful were those that reflected queerness in a variety of ways and settings:

> *Most of the representation I've mentioned has been instances of queer characters living their lives without having the mantle of the "token queer character" or have their main motive being to address queer or biphobia. This kind of representation has been vital to my identity because it allowed me to understand fully who I am, living through all the complexities of my identities as a bi+ individual.*

Seeing these characters as multifaceted individuals who have strengths and weaknesses and are not reduced to their sexuality allowed Melody to see her queerness as an aspect of who she is and uncover how it interacts with her other identities. These types of depictions, however, are not often found in media because of a variety of factors and Melody noted there are barriers to ensuring queer voices are able to tell their stories in media due to a variety of reasons.

When asked about why good representation was so hard to find, Melody first mentioned the commodification of queerness that is common within society at large that impacts the ability to tell queer stories. When asked how it feels to see this in action, they noted it is "incredibly frustrating" because:

> *It feels like they're capitalizing on the people in this world's hate knowing that it will make them a dime. And that's really frustrating in general about engaging in media when it comes to queer representation, or any marginalized representation, is that it's always got a dollar motivation behind it.*

When queerness becomes connected to money and notoriety, given the politicized nature of queerness in the current United States socio-political climate, Melody highlighted that sometimes

it feels like queer characters are added to shows, books, and movies in an attempt to both court congratulations for being diverse but also to stoke the fires to increase ratings or popularity:

> *But for a lot of people, including this character means that they're going to gain viewers or not including this character or depicting this character in a certain way means they're going to retain their fan base, and that in the end affects how much money they're making off the show. And that, I think, is the most frustrating thing when it comes with engaging in representation with queer people.*

Melody also noted that seeking representation now is becoming increasingly difficult, given the rise of hyper-conservative grassroots efforts, like Moms for Liberty, to remove depictions of queerness, both good and bad, from school and public libraries through weaponizing queerness. When asked about why the actions of these grassroots movements are so harmful to queer children looking for themselves in media, Melody stated:

> *I think we're seeing it—We have a political party right now that's very, very much focused on weaponizing queer identities and they spread misinformation that leads to books being removed off the shelf without an open dialogue.*

Without these representations, Melody noted it harms all children even though *"they think they're protecting their children."* Pushing back against this claim based on their own experiences with finding themselves in media and feeling affirmed in the queerness by the representations they encountered within books, Melody added:

> *They don't realize that they're actually going to hurt their kids if their kids are queer. And there's no discussion on whether or not these books are removed, they block out anybody they disagree with. The only discussion that happens is confirmation bias creates an echo chamber. There is no discussion with queer people on what having that*

kind of representation did for them as people. And frankly, those groups like Moms for Liberty groups like the Republican Party, I don't know that they see us as people and they're not going to want to engage with us in that conversation if they don't see us as people in the first place. And that's the narrative that we have to change.

Despite Melody's frustrations with how queer people are treated by media as things to be used to boost ratings or gain viewership by fanning the flames of unrest within the United States, Melody looks back on her own experiences engaging with queer created content positively, even in instances when a show has changed course in how it handles representation. In recalling their drop off in engagement with *The Dragon Prince*, an animated series on Netflix that has had a plethora of queer and plurisexual representation from the beginning, Melody noted:

> *And then* The Dragon Prince *I haven't resonated with as much recently because of the direction that the show is gone, because right now it feels like they're moving more towards tokenism. It was really good at the beginning and now it's like, "Oh, we're only keeping those characters–" the show has character bloat. There are too many characters in the show right now to be able to handle it all. And I think they're too afraid to get rid of certain characters because of diversity quotas. And I'm like, "That's not the right reason to be doing that. Your show should be diverse no matter how many characters are in there."*

Melody noted this is only exacerbated by the centering of whiteness and cisgender characters when the show had a diverse cast of characters, highlighting how *"[the creators and network] picked the straightest, whitest cishet people as the main characters."*

For Melody, the relationships she created with characters as she constructed her identity were incredibly influential on their ultimate understanding of who she is. But she was also

adamant that representation needs to matter and reflect the plurality of experiences the queer community is comprised of, not just take the easy way out and create depictions that rely and reaffirm negative and damaging stereotypes, especially for plurisexual individuals who are subject to invalidating messaging from inside and outside of the queer community. Still, Melody was hopeful and optimistic about how media can help queer individuals construct their identities in ways that have positive effects. When asked what seeing herself in media meant to her and what she learned about herself and being queer, Melody noted:

> *And I think that—just general, I guess—seeing that we can exist, that there is space for us to exist in this world, we just have to shape the narrative that we want it to be in order to exist. I think that if I'd had these resources earlier than I did, because again, I found all of these resources in college because that's when I came out and was allowing myself to look at this kind of inclusive literature. I would've been able to find myself a lot sooner.*

Toshi

Definitely learning just to be yourself. That's one of the biggest things, rereading it now. Something that really stands out to me is how annoyed I get with Dorian and Chaol, how they're like, "Oh, I need to protect [Celaena]." Dude, she's literally the best assassin in your world. The fuck you mean "You need to protect her?" I understand some people are into that kind of, "Oh, I need to protect this person I'm in love with." But Rowan is just like, "Yeah, no, I know what she can do. And while I worried about her, I know she's her own person and she can handle herself" and that's always been something I try to be.

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Toshi (any pronouns[12]) is a 19-year-old student in their second year studying cyber security at a medium, public, 4-year institution in the southeastern United States. Identifying as *"bi with throw of aro and ace,"* Toshi grew up in the southern United States *"in a really kind of an isolated environment…on a farm about 15 minutes away from everything."* They consider themselves more of a reader than a watcher and found books to be a source of connection and comfort as they were growing up due to living in the country away from their peers. The conversations that Toshi and I had often revolved around three major themes: (a) negotiating sexual and romantic identities; (b) connecting to media and fandom through fanfiction; and (c) searching for *"badass women"* characters.

Negotiating Sexual and Romantic Identities. When asked about how they came to understand they were bisexual, Toshi remarked that it was not something that was particularly difficult or caused them much anxiety, noting *"realizing I was bi, honestly, it wasn't that hard."* Opening up about their neurodivergence, Toshi added that they feel at home in the queer community because of the acceptance they have experienced. When talking about if they had been on the receiving end of any negative experiences from other queer individuals due to their bisexuality, Toshi said they had not before adding:

> *Honestly, I don't think it's really affected my experiences more than other things have. Being neurodivergent majorly– that already drives most people away, leaving people mostly who are in the queer community or are really understanding. So because I'm not exactly normal or regular, I more easily find people who are like me and are understanding, and I don't really interact with others who aren't because, well, they*

[12] Toshi approved the use of they/them pronouns throughout as a way to balance clarity with their use of any pronouns during member checking.

don't really want to get near me. I was the kid who was wearing a foxtail in middle school. So that kind of drove people away.

Toshi's experiences with other queer individuals allowed them to find connection, but it was not always easy. While within these groups that were composed of *"fellow weird people or queer people"* where Toshi *"never felt ostracized in those groups,"* they noted times where their childhood on the farm made it easier for their peers to forget about them given the distance and lack of ease for hanging out that would have been found had they lived in a more populated area. While describing what it was like finding community in their high school years, Toshi was rather blunt, noting they did not really find a sense of community until they *"reached end of high school into college,"* something they largely attribute to living so far away:

because I lived in the middle of nowhere and my mom didn't really like taking me to friends' houses or having people over. So during summer break where my entire friend group– they lived close to each other in a neighborhood– they would all spend the summer together, hanging out, doing things. I would spend the summer mowing the fields, doing farm work, repairing fences. And then I come back at the end of the summer to they've all gotten closer, and they completely forgot about me. And it was just that cycle over and over until they just kind of dropped me.

When asked where they then sought connections with others, Toshi stated they found them on the internet via apps like Discord or through gaming:

And that's where I started making friends online instead. Or I'd make friends who gamed. So I still see 'em at school, but we mostly communicated through Discord how we played games together rather than physical hangouts because, well, I couldn't go anywhere at least until I got a car, but it was always a cycle of I—I'd make friends and

then they just kind of fuck off and then I'd make new friends and then they'd kind of fuck off and then COVID hit.

While these online connections were a welcomed change as they were able to make friends that were not as location specific, the end of high school presented the possibility of a new start with the start of college impending. Coming to college was somewhat of a refresh for Toshi as they were able to leave some of the toxicity of their high school experience behind and begin anew. However, there were lingering tensions after the dissolution of a long-time friendship as they left:

> *And then I went into college with maybe two friends because a whole complicated story involving a really toxic, shitty person that made me lose my best friend of 7 years. That was fun. So, went to college with no one. I spent the first month or so: go to class, I'd come back and I'd play* Destiny *with one of my friends. I'd go to class, I'd come back, I'd play* Destiny*, I'd do my readings, I'd play* Destiny.

During this period, Toshi found solace in their video game space and eventually found that as a way to connect with others both on their campus and in virtual spaces:

> *I mean, I've joined a couple queer [Discord] servers, but I never really interacted with 'em. I am not exactly great with going out and interacting with people. I have my own server that I've been running since freshman year of high school where it's been in and out of people. It's like for a solid year I kicked everyone out and it was just me and maybe one other person. But in the past year, I've slowly started growing it again. Very cool. And having that kind of environment where I'll make a friend on campus or yeah, I'll make a friend on campus or through gaming and I'll invite them to the server.*

As this was occurring and Toshi was finding their feet in college, they also began to question their sexual and romantic orientations. While realizing they were bisexual was easy, coming to understand their asexuality and aromantic identities was more difficult as *"only recently did [they] really start trying to come to terms with possibly being aromantic."* When asked what negotiating their romantic identity felt like, especially given how easy it was for them to understand and accept their bisexuality, Toshi recounted an experience with a professor that made them look at their asexuality and aromanticism in a different light:

> *And it wasn't until the beginning of this semester where I had had an hour long talk with my cyber professor about things I've done in the field so far and things I've been wanting to do and topics I'm interested in. And I realized that no one either I've dated or ever thought about, made me as happy and giddy as talking about cybersecurity with someone. So, I feel like that's a really telling thing, or when I get the chance to tell someone about* Bungo Stray Dogs*, which is currently my favorite anime.*

Looking back at their high school years, they added:

> *All throughout high school, I'd constantly be jumping between relationships because I didn't want to be alone, but it would always be, "Oh, this person is cool. We hang out a lot, maybe we can date." And then about a week in or 2 weeks in, I'm like, "Okay, now I'm bored." And I think that's also the ADHD, and I just kept doing that all throughout high school.*

Toshi compared their realizations of being bisexual and asexual to each other, noting the ease with which they came to identify as bisexual and then the more recent realization of their asexuality:

I read a lot. So I was always, I didn't have that kind of pressure of other people and other people's views and things. So of course I was always the weird one at school, but I went to—realizing I was bi wasn't really hard. It was more like, oh, that is a term cool. And just going with it. And then going into last, or I think going into college was when it really kind of cemented asexual because I haven't really felt kind of any sexual desire for anyone or apparently people see hot people on the street and be like, "I want to have sex with them."

When asked about how their asexual and aromantic identities influenced their experiences, Toshi noted that cultural norms about aromanticism and asexuality make the process of realizing these identities more difficult:

It was hard to come to terms with because there's kind of this societal stigma about aromantic people that you're going to be alone and you're never going to find anyone, and I really don't like being alone. So, trying to come to terms with that was kind of hard.

Because bisexuality is often portrayed as being synonymous with hypersexuality, I asked Toshi how they reconcile their identities and how their bisexuality and asexuality co-exist. They noted that their bisexuality is often reflected in other forms of attraction:

If I ever get into a relationship or find a queerplatonic relationship, I don't care about what the package is in, I care about who is in there. So that's how I've been identified as bi is because I don't care what they are. It's who they are.

They continued, describing the invalidating rhetoric they often heard about their asexual and aromantic identities that is centered around the amatonormative expectations to get married and find a romantic partner:

So, a lot of people are like, "Oh, ace just means you haven't found the right person." So, it's kind of that denial of, "Oh, I haven't met the right person yet, but still kind of knowing that there won't be the right person in that sense." But there will be the right person who will respect my identity and boundaries. And I guess that's how [being bisexual and asexual-aromantic] come together. Hopefully there will be a person for me who we can fit together in a way that's not reaching each other's identities and values.

Toshi's combining of their various queer identities still expresses the possibility of relationships, but ones that are not defined by the cultural markers associated with them. For them, their combination of bisexual, asexual, and aromantic identities allows them to look at relationships from a different perspective. Additionally, despite the cultural pressures to conform to expectations about gender and sexuality, Toshi talked about their identity in a positive way that, even with periods of identity negotiation, is something they are proud of.

Connecting to Media and Fandom Through Fanfiction. One of the reasons for this positive sense of self could be the lack of stereotypical and negative depictions of queerness, including bisexuality, they interacted with growing up:

I honestly can't think of any examples of homophobia or bi-phobia that I've really experienced, whether in my own life or in the media I consumed. Even in NCIS*, where sexuality and gender is brought up every once in a while it was never really shown in a negative light or seen as a bad thing.*

However, they did note that their media engagement was more centered in books than other spaces, like television or movies:

> *I wasn't really allowed to watch TV a lot besides walking through the TV room and mom's watching* Bachelorette *or* NCIS*, and then I'd be like* SpongeBob *anytime I got the chance to actually watch something. So I was more of a reader rather than a watcher.*

Still, even in the books they read, Toshi noted that they *"still didn't find"* explicit queer representation, noting how they have *"read so many books, they all kind of blend together, but there still weren't too many depictions of queerness."* Because of this, Toshi looked at their media consumption as separate from their identity construction processes. When asked if they engaged in media to learn about themselves, they responded *"not really to learn who I was. I didn't really actively pursue that. I was like, 'I'll figure it out eventually' and continued on my way."*

However, they also talk about enjoying television and books now, enjoying a variety of formats and series:

> *But since I was left, mostly to my own devices, I watch a lot of tv, mostly anime, but I read a lot. I'm binge watching NCIS for the fourth time because it's what my mom watched when I was growing up and reminiscing. Yeah, it's watching it again and again and again. Mostly because I love Ziva [a character on* NCIS*] so much.*

When our conversation shifted to characters and what drew them to their favorite media, Toshi said that it was "usually the character first" that drew them into a book or show. After talking about the characters they brought up, I asked how they feel queer characters, broadly, are depicted in media, they brought up the lack of multifaceted queer characters and the proclivity of media to water down a queer character to being simply queer without other personality traits or narrative importance:

So, while there's just this majority of really, anytime you find a queer character, it's always that is their main defining feature. And it's also, it's really nice to find characters such as Nico and Will where their problems aren't the fact that queer.

When talking more about Nico DiAngelo and Will Solace from the *Camp Half-Blood Chronicles* series by Rick Riordan, Toshi noted how nice it was to see two queer characters in a relationship that was not solely focused on their queerness. They noted how despite *"Cupid out[ing] Nico to Jason as gay"* in 2013's release, *The House of Hades*, Nico's character arc is not focused on coming to terms with being gay:

It is like he knows it's who he is. He's just afraid of other people knowing. And then after seeing that acceptance and then going back to Camp Half Blood and during that final battle against the Roman forces and he meets Will Solis and their entire relationship, it doesn't define Nico's character any different than the way he is.

Reading this series over time also allowed Toshi to see the relationship between Nico and Will develop and become more than simply the queer couple in the series. In the recently released novel about Nico and Will, *The Sun and the Star,* which Toshi had not yet finished, they talked about how Nico and Will's relationship has conflicts, but they are not based on either of them feeling uncomfortable with their sexuality:

their relationship problems or the kind of conflict in the book between the two of them isn't about their sexuality. They're both completely comfortable in it. Will is bi. Nico's gay. And that's just how they are. It's something they know, it's something they accept, something that's not questioned, but rather their problems are like,"Oh, Nico is the son of Hades. The underworld is kind of a comfort space for him" while Will is the son of

> *Apollo and is kind of disgusted by the underworld and Nico's just like you can't be disgusted by the underworld and love me at the same time.*

When asked why they are drawn to stories where there are queer characters present but that do not focus on those same characters' experiences coming to understand their sexuality, Toshi talked about how they feel more realistic, partially due to their own experiences coming to understand their identity being rather straightforward. Upon being asked what they look for when they come across queer characters, Toshi stated:

> *Just that casual representation. That's kind of the biggest thing of, it doesn't have to be a big deal. The queer community wants representation, but that doesn't mean make a character that's entire personality is being queer make a character that happens to be queer. And it's not a defining, I mean, it's not a defining personality trait to most actual queer people. It's just their preference in people or who they are. It doesn't have to be such a "Oh my God, I'm queer. Look at me."*

However, in response to viewing a clip from *Heartstopper* (Oseman & Lyn, 2023), Toshi noted the need for representation that does focus on queer characters learning about and coming to celebrate their queerness. In response to Nick's identity development and coming out over the course of the first two series, Toshi remarked how these types of depictions can be beneficial:

> *I feel like there'd be a lot more kind of understanding because only recently has, I don't want to say recently, but kind of recently has the queer community really started to be able to be open about it. So having* Heartstopper *when back in the 2000s I feel like it could have– I don't know if it would go over well, but I feel it would help closeted people probably feel more comfortable with themselves and more validated.*

When asked if they ever connected with other people who also were interested in the same media and characters through digital spaces, Toshi indicated that they would have like to if they would have *"had the opportunity to have those conversations"* as they did not grow up with social media:

> *I wasn't really given technology growing up. That's why I turned the books. I didn't have my phone until high school. So at that point I was reading other things just in books and in fanfiction. So I never really got around to engaging those fan spaces. I still haven't actually. I do think I have a tab open to the wiki just so I can look at the pictures of characters.*

Despite this, they still participated in fandom spaces in other ways like fanfiction:

> *I wasn't really allowed to have social media, so I tried to do it on Tumblr, but I wasn't allowed to. So that kind steered me into fanfiction space where fanfiction.net, it's okay, but kind outdated. Wattpad was a good option but I found the crown jewel: AO3 [Archive of Our Own].*

Toshi noted that they still write and *"read so much fan fiction and it's almost entirely gay fanfiction"* and participate in fandom spaces in this manner. They also engage in creating stories that correct canon in a way, or that add representation or narrative changes that are accepted by fans but not explicitly in the canonical story. They noted one example in *Voltron*, and how the stories focused on Lance and Keith and their relationship "*that should have been canon, it would've made sense."* Toshi said that this practice allows them to create what they want to see in the canonical universe, *"usually building off of the canon and digging more into what happens and underlying reasons and stuff like that"* because of what they and other fans felt should have happened in the show or book. Describing how it feels to be able to write these canon corrections

and include the queer representation that they feel was supposed to exist, Toshi said they feel like *"squealing on the bed? Kicking my feet? Yeah. Just kind of this happening, this is what should have happened."* This act of correcting and envisioning queerness as canonical allowed Toshi to write representation in ways they found engaging but also were appealing to them in terms of why they engaged with media.

Searching for "Badass Women." One character in particular that Toshi both talked and wrote about connecting to due to her characterization was Celaena Sardothien, later called Aelin Galathynus, from the *Throne of Glass Series* by Sarah J. Maas. As Toshi noted earlier in our conversations, books were their media type of choice, and, in particular, books with strong female characters:

> *I was always more drawn to books where the main character was a badass girl, such as the* Throne of Glass *series, where Celaena is a very strong-willed individual who I've always loved. It was characters like her that I was always drawn to, usually ending up with the feeling of wanting to either be them or be with them. I guess reading so much growing up and being exposed to such strong female characters made it easier to realize my attraction to both genders.*

This connection, of wanting to be them or be with them, reflected the strength of this relationship that allowed Toshi to connect to this particular book series. They noted that they wished to emulate Celaena/Aelin's strength and individuality:

> *I wanted to be her so badly. I don't know. I really loved her character both as a character in the book and just as a person in general. Then as I said, the reflection. I've always kind of been drawn to those badass kind of women who are able to stand on their own and be their own person.*

Toshi noted how they were drawn to Celaena/Aelin's character development across the eight-book series and how her development in ways outside of her romantic relationships was central to the plot:

> *Seeing how she grew as a character and also seeing what the end of the story is. That's always the draw. Seeing where it all ends. Watching her grow as a character, watching her come out of the mines in the first book to being the Queen of Fire and accepting—Throughout* Heir of Fire*, she goes through the whole thing of accepting that she's part fae and having to deal with that. And it's just the whole growth of her characters throughout the series that I've always enjoyed.*

Celaena/Aelin is not an explicitly queer character as she is only depicted in relationships with male characters before ultimately marrying Rowan, a male fae warrior; however, there were elements of her narrative that Toshi felt were queer-coded. In particular, they noted a relationship between Celaena/Aelin and Nehemia, another female character in the first two books of the series. This relationship, while not romantic, felt somewhat queer to Toshi given the closeness of the characters:

> *[Celaena] has this really close relationship with and admits the fact that she loves [Nehemia], but not in a romantic way. But has that—I guess, has that kind of queer platonic relationship. I feel like that's more than just a friendship.*

Toshi noted that she was rereading this series again at the time of our conversations but said that they still felt a *"strong connection"* to Celaena/Aelin even upon the second read. When I asked them what this relationship felt like, Toshi described it as similar to how many people feel with celebrities:

It's not really much different than having a celebrity or a person you can't reach that you admire because it's all about your own perception of them. And it's not like you can contact them and be like, Hey, I admire you. Any advice or anything you want to say to me? Because not getting that you're not going to get a celebrity respond to you. You're not going to get someone who's dead to respond to you. You're not going to get a book character to respond to you.

This relationship, while parasocial in nature as indicated above, served as a space where Toshi was engaged and learning about themselves while also finding a figure *"to look up to."* While they may not have engaged with Celaena/Aelin to learn about their sexuality, they still noted they learned a lot about themselves because of her because of the growth she experiences over the course of the series. For Toshi, they connected to how *"it shows there's more to a character than just what they're portrayed as, because with a narrative journey, that's something you can relate to more just because everyone goes through a narrative journey."* Celaena/Aelin reflected possibility for Toshi and the ability to change and evolve over time.

Toshi stated that they have noticed different things in their second read through that were not as apparent during the first. As they have read through this time, they noted how *"previously, the things that stood out to me were that she was a badass assassin, and I don't know, because of me reading it again, I get more of her emotional state throughout it."* They also mentioned Feyre from the *A Court of Thorns & Roses* series, also by Sarah J. Maas, as a character they formed a similar relationship with. Feyre is another character Toshi connected to as she demonstrates strength and individuality while undergoing extensive character growth over the course of the series. While Toshi originally noted they were drawn to Feyre because of her connection to *"the*

Court of Night just because I've always kind of liked the more darkness," upon another read, they found themselves more drawn to Feyre's narrative than they did her aesthetics:

> *I've always loved that series [A Court of Thorns & Roses] as well because I really love Feyre and her character development. And so she goes through a whole different path, but it kind of still rings the same point of being an individual. And her problem with Tamlin was that he was way too overprotective to the point where he literally locked her in the house while Rhys lets her figure out who she is and lets her be her own self, even though he knows that they're mates.*

Even though there are romantic arcs that are central to both *Throne of Glass* and *A Court of Thorns & Roses*, the agency and self-determination and self-definition of Celaena/Aelin and Feyre allowed them to grow in ways outside of and unrelated to their romantic relationships with Rowan and Rhys, respectively.

When asked why they found themselves coming back to these characters, Toshi explained how they genuinely resonated with them, and they found a sense of admiration for them:

> *Having a character to always come back to and be like, I can follow along her path, and I can look to that whenever I'm lost, and this is a character that I really look up to. This is where she ended, this is how she got there. It wasn't a clean path, but she made it out at the end. And that to me is kind of more important than, "Hey, look at this cool character."*

Mainly, however, the evolution and the possibility for change that Celaena/Aelin and Feyre represent to Toshi made them characters that engaged them not once but twice. For Feyre, Toshi summed up her admiration for the character as appreciation for the growth she showed them:

So, I was more like she's in a cooler place style. And then reread again, going through the mental state of it and seeing how being in a relationship with Tamlin was just so awful for her of how stifling he was and how escaping that helped her grow as a character and deal with the trauma that she went through and learn to live with it. So going through the rereads now is more like what standing out more is the emotional side of it rather than the actions. It's more of the process of what she's going through and what are they learning to live with and what are they learning to get over.

While Toshi did not have as strong of connections between constructing their identities and media, they did have a sense of affirmation through these interactions about who they are and the growth they have experienced throughout their life. After asking what they learned about themselves from these character relationships, Toshi said they helped them learn that there is power in being yourself and knowing who you are:

Definitely learning just to be yourself. That's one of the biggest things, rereading it now. Something that really stands out to me is how annoyed I get with Dorian and Chaol, how they're like, "Oh, I need to protect [Celaena]." Dude, she's literally the best assassin in your world. The fuck you mean "You need to protect her?" I understand some people are into that kind of, "Oh, I need to protect this person I'm in love with." But Rowan is just like, "Yeah, no, I know what she can do. And while I worried about her, I know she's her own person and she can handle herself" and that's always been something I try to be.

Froggy

Even if I didn't know in the moment, there was something about that character that helped me figure out or helped me understand that all of these norms and binaries we can push back against. And it's not going to, this sounds so stupid, but there were definitely times within The

Powerpuff Girls *where I was like, I don't think they ever were like, "H.I.M. is an evil, disgusting creature." They weren't even like that. They were just like, "Alright, time to go back. We're going to beat you up now. Don't do that again."*

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Froggy (they/them) is an 18-year-old, non-binary undergraduate student at a large, public, 4-year institution in the mid-Atlantic United States. Currently pursuing *"a degree in horticulture with some entomology thrown in,"* Froggy described their program as *"very stereotypical queer. Seriously. It's either farmer or very gay. No, in-between in that program."* In describing their sexuality, Froggy noted: *"I usually just tend to say for my sexuality it's queer or if I'm pressed more, I guess pansexual is the easiest way to describe it. I don't really tend to think about things."* My conversations with Froggy focused on: (a) identity negotiation; (b) connection to media; and (c) rooting for the villain.

Identity Negotiation. Growing up primarily in the midwestern and mid-Atlantic United States, Froggy described their family as *"very Midwestern,"* particularly when they described how sexualities were or were not talked about when they were younger:

> *It wasn't that other sexualities weren't talked about in my family, but it was a very Midwestern family of, if it doesn't come up, we're not going to really talk about it because activism is nice and all, but unless it's in the forefront type thing.*

When asked how that environment influenced their ability to construct their identities and understand their queerness, Froggy reflected on how not talking about these led to them feeling like they needed to follow gender and sexuality binaries. In describing what this was like, Froggy stated:

So, I was like, ah, so I must be a lesbian or gay because you can't like men and women, that's not an option. Then I had a weird, internalized biphobia thing going on for the first year of high school, and then I was like, why am I being a hater? Why am I being so judgy? And then I experimented a little, I'm like, okay, "I'm clearly not just lesbian" or "It's clearly not just homosexual." So I just kind of went with pansexual because that fit the'best. But aside from that one epiphany I was, I've been kind of just like, yeah. Yeah.

Tracing the impact of growing up in an ambiguously queer-affirming environment allowed the binary, which Froggy talked about feeling restricted by, to crystalize and influence their identity construction processes, both in terms of sexuality and gender. Recently, Froggy noted they explored their gender identity, ultimately settling with calling themselves non-binary:

I sort of recently had my epiphany about gender and such last year, specifically last semester when I was like, "Are you comfortable with this?" And then I had a whole thing, and I also had a friend who identifies as non-binary that I'm just kind of like, "Hey, that is an option."

While identifying as queer and non-binary pushes back against compulsory binarization in terms of gender and sexuality, Froggy talked about how this sometimes is more difficult than it needs to be. They highlighted how even within queer spaces, there are times where they feel pressure from other queer individuals to follow binary-based expectations about how they present themselves:

Personally, I do identify as somebody in the trans [community], obviously I'm not taking any medication. I'm fine with that. I'll do things to wear more gender-neutral things. But also I think that in the media, at least there is, in Western culture at least, there is an inherent need to portray things as masculine or feminine. So when you do, and sometimes

you get an in-between, so for non-binary, at least a lot of the time they're sort of inherently more masculine presenting.

When asked if the fluidity and freedom in identifying as queer as opposed to a more specific label was appealing, Froggy said that it was because it reflected what sexuality truly is:

I think also a lot of it is that sometimes it really is, there might not be a word for whatever. I know that there's a very much a sliding scale of sexuality, obviously. So I think that it's definitely, sometimes it's just easier to be like, oh yeah, I'm queer. Instead of being like "I lean this way most of the time."

Despite this, there are times where Froggy still said they felt constrained by the binary and the seemingly hyperfocus on labels within the queer community for both gender and sexual identities. While talking about their own journey to identifying as queer, Froggy noted how knowing they were queer was not difficult, but feeling external pressures to settle on a label was harder than it needed to be given how personal that choice is.

I mean, this is definitely probably a very western take on it because like you said, our culture's definitely very obsessed with labels. But so it was definitely sort of not panicking, but like, "Oh my God, if I don't have a label for myself, what am I?" "Is whatever– Am I just overthinking things if I can't come up with a term or a label for something?" And it…not confusing, just felt like you can't really talk to it with anyone just because you're like, I would be having to use way too many words to describe a very small thing.

They also talked about how they had been someone who enforced labels in the past, adding that because of this, they understand why there is such a clinging to labeling your gender and sexuality:

I was definitely a dick probably for a while. I was definitely very, I was very strict in my own labels, and it took my own, get your head out of your ass kind of moment to be like, oh, you're being a dick. So obviously I know that people can be very particular about the labels.

I then asked Froggy to describe what their experiences with other queer people have been like as someone who pushes against the binary given their shift in how they look at identity over the past few years:

So then you end up talking to other queer people. But a lot of the other queer people I talk to, this sounds probably so presumptuous or whatever, we're more of a traditional queer person. That sounds so bad. I've used that term before though, of an effeminate gay man or masculine gay woman or something like that. So, it's—like, it's hard to explain to that person as well. Especially just for me at least my gender comes before my sexuality just always been sort of a…I don't know. That's been the one I struggled with the most probably.

When asked if in these interactions they felt pressure to conform or hear any rhetoric that invalidated their identities, Froggy said that *"since I am associating myself with pleasant people,"* they feel like most of that type of linguistic gatekeeping is more often found when people talk about fluid labels broadly than to an individual person. They noted how:

a lot of it is never actually said in my experience, if there is any negative perception, maybe that's just from where I am. It usually never is a said comment about your sexuality or about your gender. It's usually just sort of talked about, thought about.

Froggy noted that overall, they do not have a lot of connections to the queer community as a whole, stating that *"just because of COVID happening during high school age-ish,"* they tend to

keep to themselves. However, they also have noted they have started to connect with more queer individuals, especially after feeling more confident in their more fluid labels than when they felt compelled to select a micro-label:

> *But since then, I try to interact with people. I try to talk about things with people and be open about my decisions and stuff. I try to understand things. I definitely feel sometimes I feel like my great grandmother, sometimes whenever somebody mentions something that I don't understand—the concept of neo pronouns, I'm trying. I really am trying and damn it, if they want to be referred to that, I'm going to refer to it like them, but I don't fucking understand it. But that is fine. Don't need to understand it. I'll just do it.*

Froggy also noted they grew up in a Christian household which they feel both influenced their own identity construction but also is something that most people feel the effects of in the United States given the prominence of Christianity and some denominations views on queerness. Because of the negative rhetoric that some conservative Christians espouse that equates queerness with an increase in sexual behaviors, Froggy noted that this is rhetoric that they sometimes hear. To Froggy, this false equivalency of sexual activity determining worth and acceptability hit close to home as they shared that they *"definitely [are] somebody who's very hypersexual or whatever you want to call it,"* and noted how this sometimes caused a rift between them and their mother:

> *I love my mother to death. Thank God she does not tie in my hypersexual things with my sexuality in general. She does judge me a little. I love her. I love her. But she's definitely made some comments before about it. And I wonder if she does sometimes affiliate that with my sexuality and stuff. My favorite comment has been, I was just like, oh yeah, I'm going to go out tomorrow night or whatever. And she's just like, "Did I not hug you*

enough as a child? Do you not feel loved enough?" I'm like, "Where does this come from?"

When asked how this made them feel, Froggy initially said that it was *"annoying,"* before adding that it also was rather hurtful:

> *It's annoying. That's the main thing, obviously. Yeah. It hurts when your mother's out here being like, "Did I not love you enough?" And I'm like, I'm 80% sure you're serious right now. And they do end up being serious. So, it's a little like, no, that's just if I want to regret this in 30 years, let me regret it in 30 years.*

The combination of the different tensions Froggy navigated as they constructed their identity required them to seek out different spaces and sources of affirmation. Upon being asked what spaces they felt their identity was affirmed in, Froggy noted they felt affirmed in research and science-focused spaces:

> *This is going to sound really funny. The main place that I was sort of able to, there was a couple of ones, but the ones that I still to this day feel comfortable in is, I don't even know how to explain it. I do enjoy reading and such, but I love reading research books. I love reading most things.*

They further explained that within the science papers they read, the lack of gendering, in favor of using biological sex, was something they found affirming:

> *That definitely helped because I feel a lot of, for some reason, I don't know if you've experienced this whenever you've had to read a science paper, whatever, a lot of science papers and stuff, yes, they gender things as they gender things, obviously, but they don't say man or woman. They say things like female or male. They're very sex specific. They don't really, to me at least, it was so interesting how they never really seemed to, I mean,*

of course some do, but they don't focus on the inherent gender of the thing. They view it as a biological thing. So that sort of helped me figure out, okay, there is a difference, there is a clear difference.

The possibilities of non-conformity that Froggy read about and the lack of emphasis on gender as an identifier were two elements they found affirming within science and non-fiction. They still find themselves more drawn to non-fiction than fiction, particularly when they are seeking affirming media.

Despite their own course of studies within a STEM field, Froggy said that they do feel able to integrate their queer identity into their studies which has been helpful as well:

> *For some reason I got really into reading about not pornography, but prostitution and the sex industry, and especially the queer aspects of it. I mean I'm a STEM major, but I do believe that there is an inherent tie between [STEM, humanities, and social sciences]. So, when I just started reading more about that and that it just has sort of opened up ideas and then would, I would do research projects whenever I was given the opportunity, like, "Oh, what are you going to research? Stonewall." Then I kind of had this idea of, "Okay, yeah, trans people exist, but also it's never really just a straightforward type thing."*

Through their academic pursuits, the ability to explore and learn allowed Froggy to explore their queerness in a space where they feel comfortable in the world of facts and knowledge. Despite this, there were still moments of media interaction that Froggy noted as helpful as they constructed their sexuality.

Struggling to Connect to Media. When first asked about media examples, Froggy noted that they felt connected to a news anchor, noting they *"just realized, I guess for my queer*

identity, my queer identity is funny, honestly, because when I was growing up, this is really funny. Do you know who Judy Woodruff is?" I replied that I did not, and Froggy explained that she was a correspondent on PBS NewsHour, something that was often played in their home growing up. Froggy continued, explaining more about this relationship:

> *My mother would talk so much about her, she'd be like, "I love Judy Woodruff." And I fully blame partially my mother for constantly playing* PBS NewsHour*, but I developed a crush on Judy Woodruff, the grown ass woman at middle school. So, I still love that woman. Love her, love my girl. We– Judy would– I stopped watching* PBS News Hour *after she left. Well, she didn't leave, she just went somewhere else anyways.*

Our conversation then moved into how they feel media portrays queerness, specifically identities like bisexuality or pansexuality. They noted that they have not seen or read many and *"the only experience I have of pansexual being shown in a show or something is—it always sounds so rude, but slut, that's always been how I've seen it."* This particular example was in reference to *"a cartoon on YouTube called* Helluva Boss*, and one of the characters there is pansexual and they're definitely very slut portrayed."* In describing how this makes them feel, Froggy noted that it brings up the cultural tie between sexual activity and a person's worth, noting that if it is not promiscuity *"they'll tie another negative trait into their sexuality."* They also noted how queer character's sexuality and the stereotypes that are often used in their characterization seem to be what is deemed important for the character, sarcastically quipping:

> *Oh, this is Gorgon. They're a slut that sleeps around. And then they're also the destroyer of worlds. I'm like, those are two very different things. I think we have to worry about Gorgon destroying worlds first here.*

Ultimately, Froggy described these stereotypes as *"annoying,"* but not because they exist but because they are overused. They noted that having bisexual or pansexual characters that are more sexually active would be okay if:

> *it was spaced out with other representation of that sexuality or gender, then I would not really care because that is obviously some people's personalities, but when it's very constant, I feel, especially when there is a stereotype.*

They also noted that they feel *"disappointed in the media"* and its obsession with depicting queer characters as synonymous with sexuality and subsequently having them be seen in a negative light given how they have embraced their sexuality. When asked to expand beyond feeling annoyed, they noted they felt:

> *I guess irritation, and this one's a weird one, but I guess this is just because of my personality as well. Just a little bit hurt, I guess too. I definitely am somebody who's very hypersexual or whatever you want to call it. Reading about that in traditional media being hypersexual is portrayed as a negative thing, whether it's outright stated or just implied. And then so it's kind of a bit hurt because it's like, okay, not only are you just outright dissing part of my, not personality, but part of my personality I guess, but also you're inherently tying it to a sexuality that I somewhat identify with. And then you're like, damn, what about the people that aren't hypersexual that are pansexual or bisexual? That's just mean.*

Froggy noted how reducing bisexual and pansexual characters to their sexuality and their sexual choices makes the characters less important and less multifaceted. They also noted that it implicitly perpetuates the view of queer characters not being as important or having a purpose outside of who they sleep with:

It also sucks to be judged obviously by your sexuality, and you're just like your sex drive, if that's what you want to call it. People do judge you whether they want to say it or not, unless they are in the same boat as you. In my experience, they will judge you on some level. And I don't mean that inherently as a negative thing. Sometimes it's hard to not if you're not in the boat, especially when it's so portrayed, at least in the media here, that being sexual is inherently tied to being wrong or bad.

When asked how they feel this affects viewers, queer and straight, Froggy said that there is definitely an influence: *"I mean to an extent, I can't blame them for starting to develop a negative bias,"* saying that that is what happened to them when they were growing up. Continuing, they explained:

If that's all you're shown, that's all you're going to know and experience. Obviously I will blame them then if they refused to look at other viewpoints, but can't blame someone for their inherent beliefs. At the end of the day, they're going to develop a negative viewpoint if that's what they're shown. They're going to internalize that on some fundamental level. That's what I did when I was younger.

Upon being asked what media did a good job with related to bisexual or pansexual representation, Froggy brought up examples where the character's sexuality was simply a facet of who they are. In talking about *The Owl House*, an animated series on Disney Channel between 2020 and 2023, Froggy hoped to see representation more like how it was done in this series:

I do think that would be more things like that. It felt like it was clear that there was queer representation going on, but it was also—I guess I really loved it when they introduced Rain. I was like, you know what? This is great. They're just introducing them as a character. They're not making a big deal out of their [identity], and they're like, yeah,

> *they introduced their sexuality or their gender in I guess in Liz and Amity's cases. It wasn't like…forefront. That wasn't their entire character. It just happened to fit really well into this [young adult] show. And I think things like that, it just fits into this show. Instead of having it be a boyfriend-girlfriend type thing, having a girlfriend-girlfriend, boyfriend- boyfriend, they/them friend. I think that definitely helps younger kids probably understand things as well.*

They also noted that having queer representation that was normal within the world combined with the strength of the plot made them more engaged during their viewing of the series. Froggy explained that they dislike the centering of coming out narratives in queer media because it reduces the queer experience to that moment noting that it makes the story *"boring"* and that *"I think I'd get real tired of Voltron or whatever if it was all about the straights, just as much as I'd get tired if it was all about the gays."* For them, *The Owl House* presented a show with a good plot where characters happened to be queer:

> *There's some work being done on it and clearly it's successful. I think another reason why* [The Owl House] *was so good is because it was a good plot. I think that's the other thing. We need more queer representation with good plots. I'm sure there's so many trashy ones out there. I mean some good ones sometimes. Definitely. But we can hope. We can hope and pray.*

However, they did note that seeing positive coming out narratives is important, but that there needs to be more variety in those stories and have it done in less cliche ways. They noted that everyone has *"times where your queerness or your gender identity or your sexuality or whatever comes into play, whether you're straight or queer,"* explaining:

If somebody's hitting on you when they're not the sex you're interested in, you're like, "Hey, no, I don't swing that way or whatever." Or it's like, "Oh, I'm going to the bathroom." Which bathroom do you go into type deal? Or some shit like that.

When I asked if they had any examples of characters sexuality or gender identity being revealed in more subtle ways than the traditional coming out narrative, Froggy paused before describing a webcomic they had recently been reading:

I can't remember what it was. I think I was just reading a web comic or something and it was like never confirmed if this one character was trans. And then I just remember that they had, it was in the background of some changing room scene where it was the main character was getting changed and they just happened to be talking to this other character that was unconfirmed to be trans or not and then they changed. It's just sort of a couple of panels. You're like, "Oh, they have top surgery scars." There's your answer. It was just sort of, like, a simple, like, "Oh yeah, there's my answer, I guess." But they didn't focus on it at all, which I found nice. I found it nice that the main character wasn't like, "What are those?"

In summarizing their views on representation and the need for a variety of queer depictions, Froggy noted that both explicit and more ambiguous queer representation is necessary and *"there's definitely a balancing thing in between the two. Yeah, sometimes it's just showing that it's a thing."* This desire for a plurality of queer representation that extends beyond the classical coming out narrative that is often the center of queer-led media segued into the types of characters Froggy was more likely to connect with: the villains.

Rooting for the Villains. Froggy openly acknowledged that they found themselves connecting with or resonating more with the villains of the series they were watching or reading.

When asked why, they noted that the villains *"were interesting and a lot of the time I liked them because they weren't inherently assigned a love interest,"* again separating their narrative from sexuality as they noted before. Despite knowing *"what would happen to them in the end. They're the villains, they get beat, whatever, yada, yada, yada,"* Froggy simply found them more engaging and appealing:

> *But in the meantime, they were just so much more interesting. It just made more sense for them to be doing whatever they were doing, or it made as much sense as why the protagonist was doing what they were doing, and it was just kind of like, I don't know. They just seemed more unique, interesting, and not inherently tied to a love interest.*

After thinking about why for a moment, Froggy brought up a potential theory as to why they found the villains more given their queer-codedness, acknowledging *"there was also likely some of that going on that contributed to my preference for the villains."* Still, there was something about their "essence" that made Froggy feel more aligned with the villains than the protagonists, in particular H.I.M from *The Powerpuff Girls*:

> *Yeah, even to this day I still cannot find the words to explain my connection to certain characters like H.I.M. I just know that they seemed like they would be more kind (on some level) than a more traditional protagonist.*

Noting that they *"want more dramatic things,"* the focus of villain narratives on pursuits beyond the romantic was something that Froggy mentioned multiple times over the course of our two conversations and in their journal response:

> *I probably connected with the antagonists more often in books or shows (especially when I was in my [young adult] or just not children-books era) was likely because a cis-hetero romance was heavily pushed onto the protagonist, compared to the antagonists who were*

> *either uninterested in relationships or were queer-coded enough that you would have to be blind to not notice it.*

Similarly, they also considered how the queerphobia, whether aware or not, on the creator's part potentially led to why they frequently found the villains more intriguing and interesting than their protagonist counterparts. While they acknowledged this may play a part, Froggy noted that if that were the case, it did not particularly bother them because the villain characters were multifaceted and well-developed:

> *All the characters I relate/connected too were often not shown fully in the most positive light, which I don't mind. I think that the author's queer-coding and internalized (or outright) queerphobia allowed these characters I enjoy to develop complex and deep personalities. But I do wish I had some more open/positive media to look back at when it came to queer characters while growing up. Sometimes you want your favorite character to be taken seriously, or not viewed as being evil, but I know these days more shows and novels are coming out to pander to that audience.*

However, there is a difference for Froggy in the villains that have more positive queer-coding than those that are clearly queer-coded in a negative way, noting they *"feel like a lot of the Disney people, like villains specifically, are probably queer coded on some level. And you can tell that it's not nicely queer coded."* While they do not always see queer-coding as problematic, Froggy does draw the line in how these characters, while not the good guys, are depicted to ensure they are not extensions or reifications of queerphobia.

With that in mind, Froggy also noted that sometimes feeling more compelled to align themselves with the villain characters is *"more headache inducing than anything,"* largely due to how it requires more explanation and justification to others and how the queer-coding of these

characters then continue to support the association of negative character traits and stereotypes of queer characters within media:

> *Bold claim here, I'm not an idiot. I can recognize that, hey, this person's characteristics, aside from bad do not inherently make them bad. I can separate the evil actions from the person I know. That's the thing. I'm like, "Oh God, somebody's going to be out here being like, 'Oh, people that wear hats are killers.'" Some idiot's going to be thinking that. And that just makes my head hurt.*

But, like before in their discussions of how queer media centers coming out narrative to an overwhelming extent, Froggy noted that it does get tiring to always relate to the villain of the story and that they do want to find characters who are more good than evil and feel real to them:

> *But then at the end of the day too, it's like, okay, but I don't want every, I already said I don't want all representation to be sweet and go lucky, but I also don't want all representation to be evil. I think there needs to be a balance and I think more people need to take reading comprehension classes if they're able to.*

Although Froggy noted that they were not a voracious media consumer, they acknowledged that media relationships still influenced their identity construction, albeit in a smaller capacity. For them, it was less so finding themselves and more so being engaged in space that allowed them to explore and push back against the binaries that they felt in real life. In a way, aligning themselves with the villains seems almost like pushing back against norms, just as they did in constructing their sexual and gender identities. Still, they noted that they did learn about themselves when talking about why H.I.M. was a character that stuck out in their memory:

> *Even if I didn't know in the moment, there was something about that character that helped me figure out or helped me understand that all of these norms and binaries we can*

push back against. And it's not going to, this sounds so stupid, but there were definitely times within The Powerpuff Girls *where I was like, I don't think they ever were Like, "H.I.M. is an evil, disgusting creature." They weren't even like that. They were just like, "Alright, time to go back. We're going to beat you up now. Don't do that again."*

Imogen

I think they solidified it a bit, I guess because again, seeing people, I mean– I guess real people but characters, but people that are designed to look like real people, yes. Having traits similar to me, whether they—some of them are more similar to me, some of them are very different to me—but we all have that in common bisexuality. And so seeing that this is also, I think, again, I think I mentioned in the journal that we're not monolithic, but there are so many different types of bisexual people. And I think that was something that mattered to me in that the idea of, "Okay, I don't have to fit this one mold in being bisexual."

Imogen (she/they) is a 21-year-old, genderqueer woman in their senior year at a small, public, 4-year institution in the southern United States. Studying "a beautiful and important area of research" in anthropological archeology and biology, Imogen hopes to go into osteology, *"so bio-archeology, dealing with the ethics of human remains."* They come from the Appalachian region of Virginia and identify as bisexual or queer, noting:

> *I identify with both labels. I used to only really say bisexual. And then as I kind of learned what the term queer meant, I really like that. I really liked it as well in terms of my own experiences. But I definitely fall under the bisexual umbrella and yeah, that's me.*

My conversations with Imogen centered around three major themes: (a) identity negotiation; (b) connecting to media, characters, and fandom; and (c) queerness and religion.

Identity Negotiation. When asked to tell me about how they came to identify as bisexual and queer, Imogen noted she knew from an early age. Coming to understand their bisexuality was something that happened before they had the language to put terms to what they were feeling:

> *So, I think I maybe am a bit of an exception that I kind of always knew that I was bisexual. I didn't have the words, but I remember I always was drawn to women and men, or both all equally. Of course, when you're little—I guess I didn't grow up in a space where I was taught really what non-binary people were. It just wasn't, not out of ignorance on my parents, it was just not as much of a thing that was openly discussed and a lot wasn't, I guess, known about, which is insane how much has been learned even in the past 20 years.*

Describing what one of these early bisexual moments was, Imogen talked about how she remembers being drawn to both Aladdin and Jasmine from *Aladdin*, the animated Disney film. In this memory they note:

> *I remember making, I was a list making child and I remember making a list of pros and cons whether I should marry Jasmine or Aladdin. And I ultimately settled on marrying Aladdin so that Jasmine could be my best friend. But it was a close race, and I don't know how old I was there, but I mean definitely way younger than 10, probably not maybe just in kindergarten. And as I got old, I kind of just knew, but it didn't really strike me as odd.*

Imogen said as they grew older, they *"definitely solidly started identifying as bisexual, not super openly because I didn't really feel the need to come out, but it was just kind of there."* For them, being bisexual was simply a part of who they were, not something that warranted a

great deal of identity exploration. During middle school and high school, Imogen said she had close relationships with her friends and noted in particular the relationship between her and her best friend at the time:

> *And my friend, my absolute best friend at that time who, looking back on it, we didn't have a friendship breakup, we just drifted apart, and it was the most agonizingly painful thing. And I still get a thing in my chest when I think about her looking back. That was definitely a queer relationship. And I think that's a joke now that people talk about, oh, "Who was that middle school best friend that you had an unusually close relationship with? And y'all were like sisters?"*

Whether queerplatonic or potentially having romantic undertones, the way Imogen talked about this relationship highlighted how important it was to her during this time and how it affirmed her queer identity. She recalled a memory from middle school about this individual:

> *And we got, I remember we both got our middle school boyfriends and both of us were just unreasonably pissed off and couldn't figure out why. Anyway…so, she called herself straight, but was super supportive and sweet, was involved in watching the shows and reading the fan fiction and doing all that. So she was kind of a support for me, which is funny enough, I don't know how she identifies now.*

Given Imogen's own relationship with religion, where she found connection and community, comparing their relationship to religion to that of a reflects how religion can have a range of influence on the acceptance of queer identities. Whether this friend was queer or not, there was something about this relationship that, for Imogen, was something beyond a friendship, noting how close and intimate it felt. The influence of this relationship's dissolution was lasting and

something that remains in Imogen's memory when recounting how they came to understand their sexuality, stating:

but I was in that relationship. I know she was too, and I can't speak for how she feels now, but I know that it was very painful for me when we could no longer spend every waking second together.

While this relationship had somewhat of a melancholic tone in how Imogen reflected about it, she also noted other friendships that developed that affirmed their identity during this time:

But I did choir and there were some gay people in there, and I guess I found some friends. Again, my absolute to this day best friend is I met her sort of through choir and other, we just happened to have some classes together and it just worked out. And I remember her kind of journey as well. And it just kind of turned out we're the end of freshman year and beginning of the sophomore year, this is the joke of gays, find gays. And we just, with the exception of me, and it was…basically there were five or six of us, and none of us were out at the beginning of the friendship. And all of us were out at the end of the friendship.

Without being openly queer, Imogen noted they still gravitated towards other queer individuals without knowing it, talking about how their best friend came to also identify as queer, something a conversation with Imogen helped her realize:

And I remember my best friend, she's the only one that I really still keep in contact with, her journey of being like, "Oh, I think maybe I'm bisexual because I'm super attracted to women, but men are okay. I would want to hang out with one." And I remember saying to her, I was like, "[name], that's a friend." And she was like, "Oh my God." And she kind

of realized that she then she identifies as a lesbian now and it's great. But yeah, I guess it's kind of more, I gravitated naturally towards other queer people without even realizing it.

However, they noted that they do not necessarily find themselves connecting to other queer people simply on the basis that they are queer but rather because they like them as people first who happen to be queer. They even said that within their current romantic partnership, there is a strong basis of friendship in addition to other forms of attraction:

And I do have straight friends, but most of my friends are queer, and that's continued into college. And I have really strong, I think, friend group and not friend, just individual kind of friends. My partner, actually their friends are some of my best friends too, because they are my partner. And we do—obviously we are a romantic couple, but also we are just kind of best friends. And so, we go, and we have fun with our little group and everybody, everybody in it is queer.

They described how even if these friendships were not formed because of shared queerness, there is a nice benefit from having strong and close relationships with fellow queer individuals. Imogen talked about why these relationships are affirming in multiple ways:

And it's not like an active thing, but it is also nice to have something where if you want to talk about your sexuality, you have that. And there are people that can understand or at least come close to understanding or even provided a slightly different perspective on stuff.

While Imogen described knowing they were bisexual from an early age and finding spaces that affirmed her identity, her journey with constructing sexuality was not without

moments of questioning. They noted, in particular, their first year of college when they began to question if they were truly bisexual:

> *I had a sort of turn of thought, and I had to actively rethink my sexuality. And so, I was like, "I'm still bisexual, I'm still bisexual." And then I kind of started engaging with theory a little bit more. And that was partially, there were some things in class that I had to read. I can't remember what class it was, but just kind of being in an academic setting and having to read all this. And that's kind of when I discovered the term queer, I mean, I knew what it was, but then I discovered it in terms of relating it to myself. And so, I was still comfortable with the term bisexual, but I was leaning more into queer. And that was a period for a year or so where I really, really, really strongly preferred queer.*

When asked to describe why she leaned into queer over bisexual for a period of time, Imogen brought up how there is drama in the queer community when it comes to labels. Particularly, Imogen talked about the *"silly internet drama"* that exists between lesbians and bisexuals:

> *And I just wanted no part of it. And so, I thought sticking the label queer on myself is—it feels good, it fits, and I also don't have to worry about all of this. And now that I've kind of realized more that kind of internet discourse is not a reflection of real life and not a reflection of real people all the time, sometimes it is, I don't really care. So, I'm very comfortable with bisexual and queer, whatever people use to call me is fine.*

As they were negotiating between using queer, bisexual, or both when referring to their sexuality, Imogen also noted she was simultaneously thinking about gender and how they identify in that aspect of their identity:

> *Another thing for queer, I think I forgot, is that another thing that I discovered during college was like I had never really thought about my gender. I just kind of always*

assumed, okay, woman, good. And then I started to think about it more and I was like, "I don't really know why I identify as a woman, and I'd like to know that." And I still think it's not bad, but I do prefer genderqueer or a gender queer woman. That is perfect because I feel like I perform the role of a woman in society, but as I'm sitting alone in my room, I don't identify as a woman. I identify as Imogen, which is... so I think genderqueer is good. So, I liked the term for my sexuality as well. I was like genderqueer, sexuality, queer. Queer. Its total package queer.

With them coming to identify as genderqueer in mind, Imogen talked about how gender identity and views on gender and its relationship to sexuality can complicate choosing an identity label. Imogen brought up the discourse about how, for some, bisexuality is transphobic because of the misunderstanding that it means attraction to men and women. Given their negotiating of their gender identity, the perception of bisexuality versus pansexuality was on her mind:

And I still think that was another thing, as you mentioned with the idea of bisexuality only being applied to men and women. I remember reading something years ago and it was like, oh, if you're not bisexual—or if you're not pansexual and you're bisexual, then you're transphobic. And I knew it was bullshit, but also it does stick in your head a little bit. As I was renegotiating my own gender, I was like, "Can I be bisexual?"

Despite this rhetoric, Imogen ultimately still felt bisexual, in addition to queer, felt like the correct label for them to use. However, Imogen noted that they do have hesitations about the larger queer community:

But I'm not super involved with the sort of public queer community. And I also find that– and I think it's getting better—there have been strong efforts to improve it, but it's very much a white queer experience. And I am a white queer, but I don't like the "white

queer"…what's the word I'm looking for? Just the centering of white queerness when it's, and of course it's a valid experience, but it is a very different experience from a lot of queer People of Color, trans People of Color.

When asked to explain a bit more about this, Imogen noted that they still prefer being in community with their friends, many of whom happen to be queer, than going to large queer spaces or gatherings. They note that they:

just much prefer having my friend group that is quite diverse, and I feel like I get more out of that than I would going to a meeting where all the gay people are supposed to go for once a week or something. Which is interesting because—kind of controversial—because I do naturally gravitate towards gay people, but I also don't want to go to a space for the most part. I don't want to go to a space for queer people just because I'm queer. If there's a fundraiser with queer prom, yeah, I'll go, I want to dance. And I didn't get to go to prom, I guess, with a woman or of another queer person or a non-binary person because I grew up, it was a very conservative area, and even if I wanted to, I wouldn't have just because I didn't want to deal with it. So that stuff is nice, but I also just don't want to go to something just because it's gay when I could just hang out with my friends.

Imogen explained that the queer community has a plurality of experiences, so it can be difficult for them to talk about their experiences with the larger queer community. Imogen openly expressed that she does not want to come off as espousing "I'm not like the other gays"-esque rhetoric, but her descriptions of experiences in the queer community highlight a tension that impacts how she experiences these spaces. When asked about their experiences, they noted:

It's so strange because on the one hand, actively, I can tell you how my experience has been, but then it's also weird to do that. It encompasses so many different people, so many different personalities and viewpoints and positionalities and cultures, and so it's very fluid. But I think—I mean, I am ***not*** *a gay hating gay. I like being queer. I'm not embarrassed to be queer, and I will not engage in queer bashing with straight people. I will not do it. There are some gay people that will sometimes do it for like, "Oh, yeah, I understand that we can be annoying," but I'm not like that. I don't think that that's a good approach.*

Imogen clarified that she by no means feels that their version of queerness is somehow better, nor do they wish to add to discourse that seeks to further divide the queer community. However, they did talk about how this essentializing that happens to the queer community at the hands of larger cultural structures and forces which merits note within her narrative. Imogen talked about how this allows for the fluidity she mentioned to be erased in favor of relying on a single stereotypical depiction of queerness that excludes the plurality of experiences within the queer community. When this stereotypical and essentialist depiction of queerness weaves its way into queer spaces and interactions, she noted how it frustrates her as well. Because of this, there are aspects of the larger queer community and whose experiences are centered that make her feel uncomfortable and "*exhausted*." In describing an experience with a coworker, Imogen talked about how there are different privileges given to particular members of the queer community and not afforded to others. She noted:

And I think, again, centering on that cis white, gay male experience that tries to be very dominant. And it's obnoxious to me. I think I've actually recently, I never realized, I guess because I was trying to always to be an outlet how misogynistic gay men can be,

and there's—oh God, there's a person I work with, and it's just got to be—probably if he was straight and he was saying some of the stuff that he said, I would be afraid, but there's a part of me that feels like you have to endure it because he's gay, and it feels almost weaponized. And I don't know if that's conscious or if it's just kind of genuinely thinks he can't be misogynistic.

That said, finding queer community is still important to Imogen, but these experiences with other queer people that they feel are detrimental to their identity does stick with them. In describing that same experience with a queer co-worker Imogen said he told her *"Oh, we're speaking gay. You wouldn't understand,"* when he and a female co-worker were *"making noises at each other or whatever, and I was just doing my job and I was hanging out."* In explaining what that felt like, Imogen said:

I was like, "I've never told you my sexuality," and I just didn't say anything. And I think there's an assumption that I am not, or that you have to act a certain way or behave a certain way or have a certain viewpoint or…be a certain level of flamboyant to be a valid queer person, to be notable. And I think that that is ridiculous because there are queer people everywhere. We all behave differently. We all are different. And I think it's a diminishing, thank God, aspect of some of the queer community, but that has, it's actually recently, that is maybe just because it has been grinding my gears a little bit. I find the online gay community to be a source of great support and also a source of great frustration.

Imogen's interactions with this co-worker reflect both the centering of gay men as the creators of norms within the queer community as well as the erasure and invisibility that is unique to those who identify as bisexual, pansexual, or other plurisexual identity.

Imogen also discussed how sometimes there is an expectation within queer spaces to automatically know everything there is about being queer, something that she feels is almost impossible. Talking about the focus on labels and the increasing use of micro-labels, Imogen noted *that:*

> *I know there's also controversy about micro-labels, and I think there's an expectation for all queer people. Every single queer person must understand every single queer experience. And I don't think that's possible, but I think it is possible to respect it. And that's another thing where people disagree. It's like, "I can't understand these micro labels, so I'm not going to use them." And it's like, well, you don't have to understand it.*

In a way, the experience she described with her co-worker reflects how for some in the queer community, they do not respect the plurality of experiences that extend beyond the white, cisgender, male norms. For Imogen, being respectful and acknowledging the possibility of unique and distinct experiences within the queer community is more important than knowing exactly what every label means. In general, Imogen reflected on the judgment within the queer community towards others that calls into question the inherent queerness of bisexual and other plurisexual identities. These arguments and views, Imogen noted, are harmful to the queer community as a whole because it creates infighting and prevents the queer community from truly addressing harmful systemic structures that continue to oppress them:

> *And in terms of actually, or the idea of judging bisexual women or queer women who are not monosexual—I like that term. I would be using that more now– and in judging them for being attracted to men. And the whole point is that you can't control who you're attracted to if you're who you're, and that there are challenges, but then it's also, but some bisexual women, I also have seen bisexuals just say horrific things about lesbians.*

It's like, why are we fighting? Why, who? It feels very crab bucket-y. It's we're all, we're pulling each other down, and it's like somebody else is putting us in the bucket.

Connections to Media, Characters, and Fandom. When asked when their experiences with media characters began, Imogen noted that they were a *"a big TV girly"* and engaged with various types of media. Television, however, remained the main method of engagement for Imogen:

I like watching things. I can never be one of those people who's like, "Oh, no, I don't really watch TV." No, no. I watch TV. I love it. And I will continue to love it. And I think as a kid, I would start new shows with my family, and we'd do that as a group activity.

One such show that Imogen talked about as a family activity was *House M.D.* which also was the first character that Imogen spoke about connecting with.

But I remember I turned on House *one day,* House M.D., *and I really liked it. I was drawn to it. I thought he was funny. And then I just continued watching it a couple seasons in. There was a character called Thirteen, played by Olivia Wilde, and she was bisexual. And for some reason that clicked, and maybe especially because at the time I wanted to be a doctor, and so I was like, "Oh, a bisexual doctor, that's me." And looking back on it, which I'm sure it's honestly a very problematic portrayal of bisexuality, but it also was something for me. And it was important to me, and it still is important to me. To a certain extent, I still feel bonded with that character.*

While Imogen noted that they have engaged with media before because there were queer characters or they have "heard that there's a good representation in something," they noted that for them what drew them to Thirteen and what still draws them to certain characters more than others is their narrative growth and the plot that surrounds them:

I'm actually less likely to stick with it [by engaging solely because of representation]. I think I just need a good story. And even though we still do need representation, the only shows that I'll do it with, if it's not my show already, but if there's really good trans representation, I'll be more likely to watch it, especially just kind of for education and shows that, oh, I didn't think I was going to like this, but I actually did.

However, Imogen did not discount the importance of seeing bisexual characters in the media they watched and the role they played in her construction of her identity and her willingness to seek out representation in media. In particular, they noted that,

finding a bisexual character that I really loved, or a queer character that I really loved was helpful in continuing to watch it. But also, I just found them to be quite entertaining as shows, and that pushed it, that kept me, that kept me watching.

While Imogen did not have social media growing up, she noted that she still engaged in fandom and community spaces, but through a more distant way:

I wasn't allowed to have social media accounts, which honestly, looking back on it, I'm very grateful. But I had Pinterest and Pinterest would have screenshots of Tumblr posts. And so, which is really interesting, I never engaged, I never spoke with these people, but it would be all these different posts and I felt like, "Oh, I'm one of them." And so, it's like by just screenshotting these Pinterest things and keeping them on my phone or looking at my Pinterest folder at all these funny gay memes, I'm a part of this community. I—looking back on it, it's like I felt fully involved. I was like, "I'm here," but I wasn't doing anything.

As they got older and began to engage in social media spaces, Imogen saw the value of people having these spaces to explore and express their identities in a safe and somewhat anonymous

way. Talking about the *"Holy Trinity of Twitter, Tumblr and TikTok"* when it comes to queer individuals connecting and constructing their identities in digital spaces, Imogen noted they saw the pros and cons of these spaces evolve over time:

> *But again, TikTok, and it is interesting. Tumblr was, and this is something my partner and I have talked about a lot, where Tumblr was a great way for people to anonymously try out these ideas and have these sometimes ludicrous, sometimes very real and powerful, sometimes both at the same time, debates and conversations. TikTok, you don't have any of the anonymity usually because it can be, well…things I think are more easily traceable now, even if you don't put your face on there. And a lot of people do put their faces and their real names, and it can lead to serious real-life consequences for them when in reality this is a 15-year-old kid. And that is an interesting shift in the location of queer discourse.*

Imogen's observation of how these spaces have shifted over time somewhat reflects the acceptability of queerness by the culture at large when it moved from a very anonymous space in the Tumblr years, through a somewhat identifiable period on Twitter, to where most of this discourse currently exists on TikTok where there is very little anonymity.

In all of the spaces Imogen noted, there is discourse surrounding characters in popular books, movies, and televisions as well as other forms of media where there are often discussions about characters and their various identities. Imogen said that while they engage in fandoms for the media they enjoy, they also noted that for many of the impactful series and characters for them in terms of exploring their identity, many of their views on the characters came before they engaged in fandom spaces. However, for characters like Dean from *Supernatural* and Reid from *Criminal Minds*, fandom often served as a space that validated the headcanons she had of these

particular characters' queerness. While neither of these characters was ever canonically queer, Imogen noted that they felt both were queer even before they saw that others in the fandom shared their view and felt affirmed by seeing others interpreting the characters the same way. When asked how it then felt to see those characters not end up canonically bisexual, Imogen noted:

> *It can sometimes be quite frustrating, I think because the initial moment where with both of these characters [Reid and Dean], I had a thing where I decided in my head, literally, I had canon like my own, that they were bisexual before I engaged with any online content. No, I had decided, I looked at and I was like, oh, okay. And then I went online, and I realized that there's that thing. And I looked at it and it looks like it does seem to be probably supported that he [Reid] was initially meant to be bi. The producer wouldn't let it because 2005.*

Seeing these structural barriers to representation made the ability to headcanon characters as queer a way to real was frustrating for Imogen, but they also noted the quasi-grassroots-esque nature of fan spaces, like those she participates in, allows those headcanons to serve as a way to create the representation she hopes to see through things like fanfiction and fan edits to combat queerbaiting. However, they note the precariousness with which these headcanon-based edits need to be approached with:

> *I think that it's having to invest your energy and that's where things, I guess edits—I was actually, I was looking through my—I have a* Criminal Minds *folder on TikTok and I have a couple of edits of the funny bisexual Reid things, and they're just sweet and cute. But then things like fan fiction can, on the one hand be gratifying because you get to live out your fantasies or read, or not fantasies as in even sexual fantasies, but just like, "Oh,*

this is something I'd like for this character to happen to this character." But then also I do think fanfiction can sometimes be a little bit, if you go into it too much and then you go back to the show, it can be, again, frustrating. Just like, "What about this beautiful thing that I read? Why is this happening?" You almost, "fanon" becomes better than "canon." And I feel like that happens for a lot of queerbaiting shows or shows that do similar things.

Engaging in these fan spaces allowed Imogen to connect with others who both held similar identities as they did but also allowed them to develop close relationships with the characters they connected to as they engaged with different media sources. When asked how they would describe their relationships to the characters they wrote about in their journal, Imogen noted that they were close relationships:

> *To a certain extent, it feels quite intimate, but it's interesting because Thirteen* [from House M.D.] *and Dean* [from Supernatural] *were mostly from when I was younger and Reid [from* Criminal Minds*] and Kristen* [from Fantasy High] *are, now that I'm older. And so I don't want to say it feels like having an ex, that's not the right way of, but it's just like it's someone that I used to be super, super connected to and I'm still grateful for, but I don't actively engage with. And now Reid and Kristen, I still really actively watch* Criminal Minds *and I actively watch* Fantasy High*, which it's done, but I rewatch things.*

She continued, describing noting:

> *I don't want to say I felt like I was dating them, except for maybe Reid at one point. I was so obsessed with them. But yeah, they feel like friends. They feel like friends. They feel like very good friends and they feel trustworthy almost…and safe.*

I also asked Imogen what specifically drew them to these particular characters as they all come from ensemble shows and Imogen said that their being multifaceted was originally what made them stand out from the rest and how once she learned they were either canonically queer or there was a contingent of fans who agreed with her headcanon, these characters went beyond the typical treatment of queer characters appearing for diversity. Imogen noted:

> *They didn't feel like people that were just designed to be token diversity things, which I think, honestly, I think token diversity characters can actually serve a purpose. The idea of even it's a sign of progress in society, even if it's not the representation that we deserve. It's the idea that this being, okay, this has become a social norm to the point that people feel the need to include queer characters, which is on one hand frustrating that you're not putting thought into developing an actual human being. But, on the other hand, it is indicative of a society that is changing to the point that queer people are meant to be visible. But neither of them felt really token queers. Thirteen was not a token queer, but just a very stereotypical queer person.*

Queerness and Religion. One particular character Imogen mentioned seeing as a friend allowed them to explore queerness and religion was Kristen Applebees from *Fantasy High*, an actual play web-series of a *Dungeons & Dragons* table[13]. When Imogen talked about their relationship with Kristen, they highlighted how she felt like she and Kristen shared similar

[13] With the rise of e-sports and Let's Play streamers who would stream themselves playing video games with commentary on Twitch, in the 2010s, streamed campaigns of *Dungeons & Dragons* began to appear as podcasts (e.g., *Acquisitions, Incorporated* [2008–present]*; The Adventure Zone* [2014–present]; *Dungeons & Daddies* [2019–present]*; Not Another D&D Podcast* [2018–present]) and streamed on Twitch and YouTube (e.g., *Critical Role* [2015–present], *Dimension 20* [2018–present]*, High Rollers* [2016–present], *L.A. by Night* [2018–2021]). These series blend the interactivity of Let's Play streamer communities with the narrative focus of traditional media; however, they also present distinct identity-based considerations for fans given their roots in the androcentricity of early tabletop war games (M. L. Allen, in press).

experiences with faith, noting they *"just related to Kristen a lot because she grew up religious and was discovering her sexuality and her sexuality kind of caused some real tension between her and her religion to the point that she abandoned it."*

Imogen explained that she grew up very connected to their Catholic faith. Even though her parents *"weren't super religious, they were Catholic, Irish Catholic, but not, it wasn't a thing as I was growing up super small."* However, her *"grandma was very religious, but it would never have come up in that it wasn't really a doctrine household.*" Despite this, Imogen felt very driven and welcome in her faith, going to private school which increased her religiosity:

> *So I went to a private school, a Catholic school and I became deeply religious, which it's really interesting because on the one hand I am a cradle Catholic, but I went hardcore and not out of a weird– I just loved it. And I was confirmed at the age of eight, which is slightly unusual. I think most people are confirmed when they're 14, 15. And I can't remember how I swung that, but I just loved it and I was so convinced and I just felt so at home.*

While they enjoyed their experience in Catholic school, arguably more than their experience in public school where they were *"bullied terribly,"* Imogen also said that their faith did make things more difficult later in their life when thinking about sexuality:

> *And still to this day, I am very grateful for all that that school has given me. It still is a home to a certain extent, but I think it laid the groundwork for things getting a little bit trickier later on.*

At her Catholic school, Imogen felt supported by her teachers and church leaders, even when they had opposing views than she did. Despite the views of queerness in the Catholic Church, Imogen still felt comfortable in her queerness during this time:

> *And oddly enough, throughout my entire time at Catholic school, I never felt conflicted at all, honestly. I chalk it up to how great the school was. They actually gave me the space to feel like I could argue things where I could argue, where obviously there would be things where they would talk about abortion, and I would argue with my teachers and argue with the priest, and they would be receptive and nice.*

When she left Catholic school and returned to public school, however, things shifted. She became more conservative and started feeling friction between her queerness and the Church, noting that:

> *As I got older, as I went into public high school and I separated myself, I sort of realized what the majority of the Catholic Church was saying and I was like, "Oh, this is what I should be saying." And so oddly enough, the farther away I got from my Catholic school experience, the more conservative I got in my own mind. Not publicly, I was still very, my friends being gay and pro-abortion rights. But there was a lot of inner conflict and that grew and grew and grew. And then I joined Catholic Twitter in my senior year of high school, which was the worst mistake of my life. And it got, I have [obsessive compulsive disorder], and it got very scrupulosity-esque and gross.*

Looking back, Imogen noted how there were similarities to how she felt in the Catholic Twitter space and how she feels in queer spaces, noting the grandstanding and how *"those spaces, they can, it gets echo-y and not in a good way. And I think it comes from people trying to prove how good of a person they are, which is wonderful, but it turns into a competition maybe sometimes."* Imogen openly stated that she has participated in those behaviors, particularly in her defense of Catholicism at this point in her life. She noted how those efforts to gatekeep often resulted in her arguments *"shattering instantly."* Reflecting on their time in Catholic Twitter, Imogen said:

But yeah, I remember doing that and becoming a little bit of a soldier in certain aspects of things, even on sides that I wish were true in terms of, "Oh no, the Catholic Church isn't homophobic." And just certain things like that that I was like—I never argued in favor—I don't think—of bigotry or anything, but in terms of certain things that turned out not to be true.

When asked why she leaned into her faith when she felt it conflict with her sense of identity, Imogen stated that some of it had to do with wanted to feel liked and as if they belonged which they did not feel a strong sense of during their time at their public high school:

And then in high school, I hated high school, which I think is part of the reason why I became so hardcore Catholic, where I was just like I had to find something where people liked me. And honestly, in high school, I wasn't horrifically horrendously bullied by every single—it wasn't a mean girl thing, honestly, it was a thing in my high school where some of the popular they were—they could be petty and kind of condescending, but they were honestly nicer than some of the "outcast" kids who I just thought were dicks. And maybe just because they felt like they had to be on the defense or whatever.

This wrestling with faith and sexuality came up again when we started to talk about characters that Imogen connected with as they have constructed their identity and she brought up Kristen Applebees. Within *Fantasy High*, a *Dungeons & Dragons* actual play series, Kristen is a cleric, a class centered around religion and connection to her deity, but much of Kristen's narrative arc centers around not simply growing up queer in a queerphobic religion, but what happens when someone who is queer and religious becomes disillusioned with their faith. While Imogen described how they felt connected to Kristen because of shared religion-based experiences, they also noted how their experience differed from hers:

> *And I think there are differences between Kristen and I in that I always knew I was queer. Kristen definitely did not, or didn't have the words for it, and never at a point felt comfortable with it. So, for me, I kind of grew uncomfortable with it, whereas she just had this sudden moment where she realized that she was queer, which I think is common for a lot of people. And it just wasn't my experience, I guess.*

Beyond religion, Imogen also found connection with other parts of Kristen's characterization and narrative progression. She noted how Kristen feels like an honest portrayal of a queer woman coming to terms with her sexuality, particularly highlighting how the relationship between Kristen and her girlfriend, Tracker is:

> *just a very sweet approach to a sapphic relationship that it's not all about sex, even though the character actually is quite—it's like she goes—which I think a queer kid can understand that you're so repressed and then goes hardcore into making sex jokes all the time and constantly asking about sex and being quite inappropriate.*

Imogen also noted that as an actual play web series, the type of media *Fantasy High* is could have made developing a parasocial relationship easier and she was well aware of the risks and how parasocial relationships can turn harmful on a dime:

> *And so* Dungeons & Dragons *is interesting too because you're not, while they are playing, again, a lot of them do obviously get quite into it, it's still the actor to a certain extent while the in-between comments and all that. So, you're connecting with that person as well. And so, you get this kind of interesting dynamic with the creator where it almost feels like you know them to the point of it's like, what do they call that? Oh God, what's that term for when you project onto a celebrity?*

I replied that I thought she was talking about parasocial relationships and Imogen continued:

Yes! So, we can get kind of parasocial, I think, which is where you have to be careful a little bit, especially when you're dealing with a real human being. But I think being aware of that, and I don't think I would ever do anything weird, and I'm not super into "If I have a thought, I will post it on Tumblr, I'll post it on Twitter," and maybe that's just from me being a little bit older too. So, I don't think I've ever done anything that would disrespect that person's boundaries. I've never posted online. If I have [been parasocial with the actors], then they would have to be psychic to know.

Within *Fantasy High*, there is a bisexual character that Imogen noted she *"didn't connect with her as deeply as I did with Kristen in this specific way [regarding] sexuality"* because of the shared experiences outside of being queer that Imogen found in Kristen:

I was thinking about—I do love Fig [the bisexual character on Fantasy High*] on different levels. I think she's so sweet and funny. But there's something about Kristen that really—just kind of the relationship between Fig and Ayda [Fig's female love interest] I related to a lot in terms of how navigating a relationship with an autistic person, but in terms of Kristen's personal stuff, but Brennan [*Fantasy High*'s game master] creating Tracker and creating Ayda, and then even characters like Sandra Lynn* [*Fig's mother*]*, who I know is controversial, but I love her.*

When I asked them to sum up what influence Kristen and other characters had on their identity construction, Imogen noted how simply seeing the possibility for a multitude of ways to be queer was a big thing for her to see. In particular, learning that there was no one way to be queer or one way to be bisexual was integral for them as they moved through various periods of identity negotiation and renegotiation. Ultimately, they noted:

I think they solidified it a bit, I guess because again, seeing people, I mean, I guess real people but characters, but people that are designed to look like real people, yes. Having traits similar to me, whether they, some of them are more similar to me, some of them are very different to me, but we all have that in common bisexuality. And so seeing that this is also, I think, again, I think I mentioned in the draw that we're not monolithic, but there are so many different types of bisexual people. And I think that was something that mattered to me in that the idea of, "Okay, I don't have to fit this one mold and being bisexual."

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter provided the narratives for each of the five participants in this study. By providing a chapter dedicated to the individual narratives, it creates space for their individual voices and experiences within this research study, as well as places them on equal footing with the metanarrative constellation presented in the next chapter by providing their own space within the manuscript of my dissertation. Ensuring participant voice is the prominent element within the findings led me to prioritize using direct quotations from the participants themselves to ensure their voices are shining through and not my own. Providing space for the individual voice separate from the metanarrative aligns with the Foucauldian influences of the research design as our experiences are unique to our own contexts but they are not isolated from the greater cultural systems and structures we navigate daily. This exploration of the greater narrative draws upon these individual narratives. Serving as the foundation for the creation of the metanarrative constellation (Garvis, 2015) in the next chapter, I explore the shared themes across participant narratives in more detail and using the experiences of multiple participants together when illustrating them.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS, PART II:

THEMATIC STARS IN A METANARRATIVE CONSTELLATION

While the previous chapter presented the narratives related to the individual experiences of each participant, this chapter builds upon those findings in the creation of a metanarrative constellation (Garvis, 2015). Aligning with the thematic analysis roots of the analytical approach employed in this study, this chapter presents the thematic overview of the metanarrative created from the stories of each participant to answer the guiding research questions:

RQ1: What do participant narratives reveal about how bisexual emerging adults construct their identity through interactions with media characters during their identity construction processes?

RQ2: How do bisexual emerging adults utilize parasocial relationships during identity construction processes?

Why Stars and Constellations?

Constellations have been used in critical and queer-centered research as ways to illustrate the importance of connection and community within marginalized communities as well as the influence of the constantly shifting and changing contexts we exist in throughout our lives (Benjamin, 1928/2019; Chisholm, 2004; Krauß, 2011). Often focused on creating a socio-geographic constellation that shows connections between physical places and people like in *A Queer New York* (Giesking, 2020) which explored the historical geography of queerness in New York City as queer individuals create spaces "in spite of and alongside cis-heteropatriarchal

precarity" (p. 3). Giesking (2020) described stars as "our guides: experiences, ideas, and memories. Stars are how we find our way when the physical landscape fails us" (p. 201). While this study does not chart socio-geographical connections, the ephemeral and almost liminal nature of stars and constellations and their inherent fluidity provides an apt metaphor for the experiences of bisexual+ individuals who feel simultaneously too queer for some but not queer enough for others. In the context of thoughts and ideas, a constellation "allows for a depiction of the relation between ideas that gives individual ideas their autonomy but does not thereby plunge them into a state of isolated anomie" (Buchanan, 2018, para. 1). Just as we can observe the constellation as a whole or focus on the individual stars, we can also look at narratives in the same way.

Within narrative inquiry, using constellations as a metaphor aligns with Garvis' (2015) concept of narrative constellations. I adapted this concept to fit this study as a metanarrative constellation given how it provided a visual representation of narratives that simultaneously relate and vary greatly. The structure of a constellation truly serves as a strong metaphor to illustrate the contextual nature of and relationship between common themes across narratives within a qualitative study. Like constellations consisting of a pattern of connected stars, a metanarrative provides an overview of the thematic relationship(s) between narratives, some of which are connected to each other while some are not.

Narratives reflect a specific place, time, and social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and are constructed based on those three dimensions just as the location and time we observe a constellation influences its shape and the stars it contains. Our individual narratives are situated within a context that is ever changing and shifting, meaning the data themselves shift and morph as well and are not complete without exploration of the interaction between ourselves and our

contexts. By recontextualizing the concept of narrative constellations to display not the relationships between individual narratives but rather the relationship between shared themes, the resulting image reflects how through our individual stories, there are similarities between our experiences. While our experiences may feel fundamentally distinct given the different contexts, times, and places in which we live, when looked at on a macro level we can begin to see how we are connected to one another.

Just as stars can only belong to a single constellation at a time, the themes explored in this chapter are unique to my participants' experiences; however, that is not to say that other bisexual+ emerging adults may not share themes if they were to recount their experiences forming relationships with media characters. While the focus of qualitative research is not to generalize, exploring themes shared across narratives provides a different perspective of the data that is not captured by individual narratives on their own. It also provides the opportunity to explore larger structures that participants must maneuver through that are not as easily identifiable on individual levels, something that expressly aligns with Foucault's view about the interconnectedness of our individual experiences and greater cultural norms and expectations.

How we perceive the orientation and the arrangement of stars in a constellation is a result of our own location and position, making them inherently subjective and reflective of the contexts in which we view them. Similarly, narratives and their thematic construction are inherently connected to the unique weaving of contexts each participant exists in throughout their story. Just as certain stars in a constellation may look brighter depending on where we are observing them from, a certain theme may be more apparent and impactful for one participant while not as prominent for another. For each participant, the totality of their experiences is what ultimately determines the saliency of each of these metanarrative themes.

In describing the connection between constellations and meaning-making, Krauß (2011) highlighted how they serve as an apt metaphor for this process, noting:

> To look from the earth into the sky in order to "read" the positions of the stars to one another, the constellations, is to become a relative observer in relation to an investigative object that is continually shifting; and it is to observe puzzlingly structured "surfaces" that only coalesce into recognizable astral images when an "external" knowledge intrudes into the domain of dispersed points of light, when significant patterns produce something legible among these intrinsically unspecified shapes. (p. 439)

Through analysis of each participant's narrative on an individual and metanarrative level, it highlights how the interpretation of the data in narrative inquiry that focuses on constructing and reconstructing stories allows for patterns to be used to create an image that spans across participants while honoring their individual experiences. It is only when we "read the position" (Krauß, 2011, p. 439) of themes respective to each other do they become understandable on a larger scale.

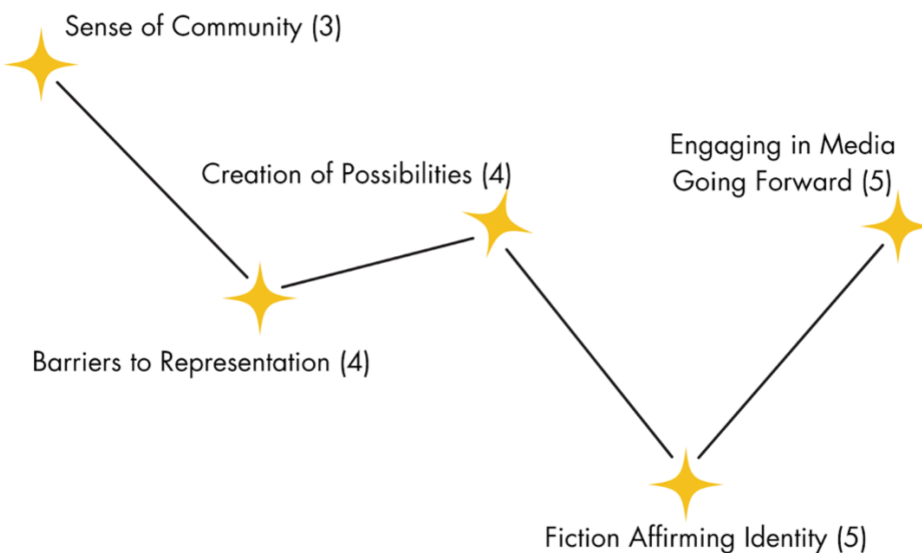
Metanarrative Constellation

While the participants' experiences and the resulting individual narratives reflect their distinct and unique experiences with media and character-based relationships during their identity construction processes, themes across all or some of their accounts reflect the possibility of shared experiences and uses for these relationships. This metanarrative constellation (Garvis, 2015) reflects these thematic relationships across multiple narratives and considers ways participants acknowledged the role their contexts played in their understanding of their identities and ultimately how they came to view themselves today.

While not all participants' experiences align with each theme, these themes encompass codes found in at least three of the five individual narratives and reflect shared or similar experiences between participants. In Figure 5, the number in parentheses by each theme name reflects the number of participants whose narratives contained that particular theme. Within each theme, subthemes are also discussed below, highlighting the ways these themes aligned between participants while also acknowledging how despite sharing themes, the ways in which they were present was different from participant to participant.

Figure 5

Metanarrative Constellation



Seen in Figure 5, the overall themes connecting these narratives were arranged into a constellation and were labeled as: (1) fiction affirming identity; (2) sense of community (3) creation of possibilities; (4) barriers to representation; and (5) engaging in media going forward. The arrangement of these stars in this constellation was not arbitrarily done. To create this

constellation image, I used an existing constellation with five primary stars as a starting point, Cassiopeia, due to its distinct and recognizable shape regardless of location. Although it might be oriented in different directions or inverted to make an ‘M’ or even an ‘E,’ Cassiopeia retains its recognizable ‘W’ shape when looking at it in both hemispheres, reflecting how context influences our experiences but there are shared elements that unite them.

From there, I labeled the brightest star in the constellation as *fiction affirming identity* which was the most comprehensive theme in this metanarrative constellation, integrating all participants at varying degrees. I then labeled the other stars based on their relationships to each other. These relationships were determined by their saliency to each other and any logical connection between the different themes. Most notably, I intentionally set *engaging in media going forward* away from the other themes as it was distinctly different from the others as it was more oriented towards forward looking. Setting it away from the others while noting the connection via the line still highlighted how it is connected to the other themes through a need to find affirmation in these characters but also depicting the difference between this theme and the rest. The illustration of these relationships also coincidentally happened to mirror a decreasing progression of the main stars’ magnitudes in the real-life constellation. For instance, the star for *engaging with media going forward* is the second brightest star in the constellation and this theme appeared in every participant’s narrative while the star where I placed *sense of community* on the most dim main star in the constellation as this theme was only present across three participants’ narratives. While this structure and organization was initially a happy accident, it also resists and subverts attempts to read the constellation from left to right and instead requires intentional engagement with the construction, something that feels very poststructural itself.

Each narrative star is presented in detail in this chapter, using participants' own language to illustrate how despite having distinctly different experiences with parasocial relationships, there are uniting elements that reflect the ways in which our experiences are influenced by shared external forces and structures. The themes of (a) fiction affirming identity, (b) sense of community, (c) creation of possibilities, (d) barriers to representation, and I engaging in media going forward and their subthemes are illustrated below.

A Note About Pronouns

As in the previous chapter, the use of multiple pronouns was continued in this chapter as well following guidance from queer and trans journalism association style guides (Association of LGBTQ+ Journalists, 2023; Trans Journalists Association, 2023). However, given the potential for confusion when using quotes from multiple participants, the use of pronouns is a bit more standardized in this chapter. In the metanarrative constellation, pronoun usage for participants who use multiple pronouns is still variable, but the same pronouns are used in a single paragraph when talking about the participant to provide clarity. For example, a short paragraph about Imogen's experiences reads:

> Imogen noted that much like Kristen, they experienced a similar uprooting of norms and beliefs as they came to look at their relationship to Catholicism in a new way. While they also talked about how they were able to reconcile their faith with their sexuality at an early age, that shifted as they grew and found themselves aligning more so with their Catholic identity than their queer identity.

Although Imogen used she/they pronouns, to ensure clarity, pronoun usage remains consistent throughout a paragraph. This respects each participant's identities, including their gender

identity, while making sure readers can accurately understand to whom I am referring or who is speaking.

Fiction Affirming Identity

Each participant noted that they felt connected to these characters as they constructed their identity for one reason or another; however, they described their relationships to characters as occurring at varying degrees. Across their individual narratives, similar themes about how these character-based relationships influenced their identity construction processes were drawn from the individual narratives. Within fiction affirming identity, four subthemes were identified: (a) reconciling religion, (b) affirmed by different types of representation, (c) affirmations beyond sexuality, and (d) influence of media relationships.

Reconciling Religion. Melody, Moon, Froggy, and Imogen all noted they grew up in religious environments. While their experiences with religion, and Christianity in particular, varied, Melody and Imogen indicated media served as a way to connect with queer characters and reconcile ideas and perceptions they learned in religious spaces with their queer identities. For Melody, they noted the dual depictions of religion and queerness within *The Priory of the Orange Tree* allowed them to process some of the religious trauma of their youth that prevented them from exploring their identity earlier in their life, despite knowing they were queer. In their journal, Melody noted that the shared experiences with religion, particularly Christianity, with the two queer main characters, Ead and Sabran, allowed them to forge a deep bond with these two characters. She notes:

> *While I am unsure of Ead's identity, I know Sabran falls under bisexual+. I relate to them a lot because while there isn't blatant queerphobia in this novel, Ead and Sabran live in a fantasy-medieval Queendom who has a pseudo religion that parallels*

> *Christianity. Having been raised in fundamentalist Christianity, I resonate with the pressure of religious stigma. Most of the other cultures in this world accept queerness without question. Ead is from the Elysr, and the priory, an all-female circle of mages, all who regularly engage in sapphic relationships. In the Queendom of Inys, where Ead and Sabran are located, queerness isn't illegal; it just is "taboo" for those in the royal court as it may prevent the queen (Sabran) from producing an heir. (Their whole religion revolves around the continuing of Sabran's family line.) Honestly, Ead and Sabran's differing social statuses cause more of an issue for them because of their identities. I think if I had this representation sooner, I could have realized I can be pan and love my God.*

Melody spoke about how looking at their relationships with both Ead and Sabran allowed her to see herself at two different points in her life. Melody feels like Ead and her openness to her sexuality reflects where she is now while:

> *Sabran was like me 10 years ago, being very closed-minded and thinking you were an open person, but then really judging somebody when they were different, when they were queer, when they were X, Y, Z identity, that was different than mine. So, it was literally watching two sides of myself grapple with each other.*

Growing up in their fundamentalist Christian home, these relationships allowed Melody to think about and process their history with queerness and its relationship to their religious history. Particularly, the progression of acceptance of queerness seen in Sabran's narrative resonated with Melody's own change of heart about queerness and sexuality as they came to identify as panromantic asexual.

Similarly, Imogen's narrative about feeling affirmed by representation in *Fantasy High* reflected a similar use of media to process evolutions of faith and queerness. Finding a source of connection in Kristen Applebees, who questioned her own deeply rooted faith as she came to identify as queer, Imogen spoke about the process of reconciling religion and their queerness. Like Melody, Kristen's journey did not make them realize they were queer but instead allowed them to continue learning about who they are and how they identify in relationship to faith. Imogen noted that much like Kristen, who "*is super funny and sweet and just wants to be a good person and trying to figure out how to still be a good person while the world that you have known is crumbling around you,"* they experienced a similar uprooting of norms and beliefs as they came to look at their relationship to Catholicism in a new way. While they also talked about how they were able to reconcile their faith with their sexuality at an early age, that shifted as they grew and found themselves aligning more so with their Catholic identity than their queer identity.

Similarly, Imogen added that the shared history with the actor playing Kristen may have also led to them creating a stronger relationship with the character. Ally Beardsley, the actor who plays Kristen, came out as non-binary themself over the course of *Fantasy High'*s first two seasons, they share a similar religious background with Kristen and Imogen, something Imogen brought up in conjunction with acknowledging the unique interactions that occur within this particular type of media. However, Imogen noted they were able to distinguish connection with Kristen, the character, from connection to Ally, the actor:

> *But I think I love the character, and I think I know the actor or the, I guess, actor/player playing Kristen, Ally Beardsley, also had a similar experience as far as I can tell growing up. I think with* [Dungeons & Dragons] *stuff, it's interesting that it is such an*

important…you have to be a little bit more careful, I think, in terms of not super attaching yourself to the actor, but at the same time recognizing that this is a person that probably has gone through some similar experiences to me, and you see them in quite an independence, maybe not the right word, but real or what feels authentic sitting and where they're kind of bouncing between a character of themselves.

This shared background, however, is something that Imogen said made Ally's portrayal of Kristen as a religious and queer teen feel so real and honest, describing it as:

And they're playing a teenage– the character's a teenage girl. So she's trying to find her place in the world when it comes to sex and love, but it's just really…gosh, what's the word? Authentic, isn't it? But just a really honest, I think, portrayal of the queer experience. As honest as you can be, I guess, in a world where you're playing a sorcerer and there's magic and stuff.

However, even with this explanation of simply experiencing a greater sense of connection to Kristen over the openly bisexual Figueroth "Fig" Faeth, Imogen noted that sometimes she does catch herself thinking about how gender influences her experiences in these connections as Fig is played by Emily Axford, a cisgender woman, as opposed to Kristen's non-binary actor, Ally Beardsley. Imogen acknowledged that relating to the actor in terms of gender identity may influence these relationships, stating that:

And so [Ally Beardsley has] an interesting little niche there where I think in some ways, the D&D *community doesn't treat them, and Kristen the same way that they treat other women players, which is why I hope on some level that—I'm like, "Oh God, am I not connecting to Fig because Fig is being played by a woman?" I don't think that's it. I don't think I have enough internalized misogyny to make because I have—there's other*

Emily Axford characters that I like, like Jet Rocks [*from* A Crown of Candy]. *But yeah, that's just a little side tangent that I have thought about, been thinking about a lot recently is the role of women in* D&D *and as a player myself, the idea of how do I create, or do I feel the urge to play men or male characters just because I want people to like me, or is that actually what I want to play anyway?*

This combination of connection to the character and the actor intensified this relationship, but Imogen always noted that Kristen was what drew them to the series and kept them engaged. It was Kristen, the character, not Ally, the actor, that provided the space for Imogen to explore and think about their own relationship with faith and sexuality as well as their relationship with their gender identity.

Melody and Imogen both discussed the way these relationships allowed them to process what they had learned about queerness within religious contexts, but Moon and Froggy both noted how they grew up in religious environments and internalized those beliefs. The difference between how Melody and Imogen spoke at length about religion and how it influenced their identity construction and how Froggy and Moon discussed it demonstrates how these metanarrative themes can show up in different ways and at different degrees. Another discussion of differences when looking at sources of affirmation in media was the specific types of representation with which participants engaged subsequently formed parasocial relationships from.

Affirmed by Different Types of Representation. While all participants noted they found these relationships affirming, they also noted that they were looking for different things in the characters they connected with. Across all five participants, there was not a single character type or archetype that they all connected with. Similarly, they all also indicated different factors

drew them to form these relationships in the first place, highlighting how there is a need for diverse representation within depictions including that of bisexual characters. Most notably, this was highlighted by the participants' differing reactions to the excerpts they engaged with in our first interview.

For some, like Moon and Melody, even reacting to the excerpts was validating and affirming. Upon being asked what resonated with them while reading excerpts from *Imogen, Obviously* (Albertalli, 2023) and *Perfect on Paper* (Gonzales, 2021), two young adult novels centered around two girls wrestling with bisexuality in high school, Moon noted how reading this kind of representation would have helped them if it had existed when she was coming to understand her bisexuality. She also talked about how simply reading the excerpt in the interview was affirming. In reacting to *Imogen, Obviously* (Albertalli, 2023), Moon noted the way Albertalli depicted the invalidation of bisexuality by other queer people as well as the importance of being identified correctly and the subsequent exhaustion that comes from constantly correcting people as relatable to their own experiences. Moon stated:

> *What's another thing? The whole conversation on this page about how queer people really seem to love shitting on other queer people: "weighing in on whether or not bi and pan girls count as queer." That really stood out to me. Another thing is "giving it so much mental energy like, oh, who cares?" But it's like I care because it's about me and it's a huge piece of who someone is though it may seem insignificant a little bit on the outside, but on the inside it's like this whole thing. And I feel like I can personally relate to that.*

Moon also noted how these excerpts also affirmed them as someone in a hetero-passing relationship when they addressed the erasure often felt by bisexual individuals, even by others

within the queer community, because they do not 'look' queer. When asked what it was like to read a calling out of this behavior within the queer community, albeit a fictional one, Moon explained that bisexual erasure is frustrating:

> *because it's perpetuating the fact that you're no longer queer because you're dating—you're in a heterosexual relationship and this person who's experiencing the biphobia. I also like how they brought that up like, "Dude, you're experiencing biphobia, that's what it is." And put a name to it and kind of called it out. I really like how they did that, and I felt—I'm nodding as I reading, I'm like, "Oh yeah, I totally feel like that too."*

This depiction of bisexual erasure and its subsequent criticism in the novel's narrative was something Melody noted as well, as they are in a hetero-passing relationship too. When reading this section of *Perfect on Paper*, they talked about how Darcy's fear of being seen as less queer if she were to date a male student is something that Melody experiences with their father, stating in response, "*Yeah. I mean it's exactly what my dad says. He is like, "You're dating a man, so you're actually just straight." And I'm like, 'No.'*"

Both Moon and Melody also talked about the affirmation they felt after reading an excerpt from *Imogen, Obviously* where the titular character expresses frustration about her queer friends' response when she came out after years of being friends with queer individuals. When the character described coming out later than her largely queer friend group, some of her friends call into question if she is only saying she is queer to fit in, something both Moon and Melody noted is sometimes used to invalidate their own experiences coming out. For Moon and Melody who came out after friends or classmates and in college as opposed to high school, this created a feeling as if they came out late. For them, Albertalli's (2023) depiction of a bisexual character wrestling with the pressures of coming out and the optics of it was something they

connected with in our first interviews. For Moon, she noted in response to this excerpt that she connected to *"the convenience"* argument that Albertalli wrote about the main character grappling with, stating:

> *You're really good friends with a group of queer people and you being queer to be seen as they rubbed off on you or they had an influence on you or they turned you gay when in reality they just kind of helped you see what you are already feeling. And I also liked how they mentioned if this celebrity had come out sooner, she would've helped all these fans and been a role model, but it wasn't up to her couldn't. You can't control when or when, when you don't feel comfortable with a sexuality and coming out and again, not being queer enough. If you don't come out as queer when you're really young, then are you actually queer or this predisposed responsibility of being a role model for other people? And it's like it's not your responsibility to do that. It's great if you are, but if you're not then you shouldn't be feeling guilt over it.*

For Moon, the culturally imposed timeline or expectation to come out by a particular moment in life or for other people was something she felt as she constructed her identity. The fear of invalidation of her queerness due to coming out later than her friends compounding with biphobia within the queer community created an extra layer of cultural pressure for Moon to navigate through, an experience she felt this excerpt affirmed.

Melody, in particular, noted they experienced feeling like the *"token straight friend"* in their friend group, just as the title character did and how it made them feel as they wrestled with their identity. They reacted to this excerpt, saying:

> *The token straight friend, that's who I was. All of my friends were queer and they would be literally be like, "Oh, we're so happy. You're the token straight friend." And I was*

like, but I might not be. And then I also had that thought of, "What if I'm just thinking I'm queer because all my friends are queer?" And then it was, "Oh, well." That same thing. I'm drawn to other people who are like me, who get my story and my situation.

For both Moon and Melody, the experiences described in these coming out-centered books validated their experiences and felt a sense of affirmation. Both noted how they did not see this kind of representation growing up and felt as if it would have been impactful to read during their identity construction processes. Moon noted:

If I had read this as a high schooler and saw an actual word being put or being suggested and accurately described all the feelings I was describing or I was feeling in myself, I felt like that could have really, really impacted my development in a positive way.

For Melody, the affirmation they felt was even more notable. For them, reading about Imogen's friend, Lili, and their dialogue about how they identify as panromantic asexual was the first time Melody saw their exact identity on paper. After finishing the excerpt, the first words out of Melody's mouth were *"that was so affirming to see my fricking identity on paper. Oh my God!"* In our conversation, I asked Melody if that was the first time they saw their identity in media to which they explained:

I think in fiction, yeah, because online spaces where it's like—Oh, I also do visual art and I'll see people, they'll draw things that incorporate different identity colors and people always be like, "Hey, can you do this identity next and give it some representation?" But in formal published representation, seeing the words panromantic asexual, oh my God.

While some participants felt very affirmed by these depictions of bisexual characters that follow the classic focus of queer narratives on coming out and constructing your identity, some

found them to be somewhat cliche and did not feel as deeply affirmed by them. Although none of the participants found them to be incorrect or feel as if they would have negatively influenced their sense of identity, Toshi, Froggy, and Imogen noted that they did not feel particularly connected to these excerpts. For each of these participants, they articulated similar reasons. It was not the depiction of bisexuality that they did not relate to but rather the focus on coming out and romantic relationships they felt was somewhat cliche and overdone.

After Imogen finished reading the excerpt from *Perfect on Paper*, they noted how it was *"very different guess to anything I would've read when I was in the young adult reading phase. I can't tell if I like it or not. That's really interesting."* They paused, looking slightly vexed and considered the passage before they continued:

> *I'm trying not to judge because it's maybe just not my style of writing. It feels a bit, just like everything I've ever read on text posts, it feels a bit, I don't want to say cliche, but also sometimes everybody does go through that experience and does have to deal with the fact of like, "Oh, if I'm attracted to a guy, am I no longer bi?"*

However, Imogen also noted the value of narratives that focus on these types of identity construction narratives. While it did not appeal to her, she acknowledged that there is a need and a purpose for narratives like Darcy's in *Perfect on Paper*, explaining:

> *But I could see why somebody—I think maybe I'm just a bit too old for it and I've certain, maybe I've grown out of that range, but somebody 14, 15 discovering their sexuality could read that and be like, "Oh," and have that be a really important thing to them. That's really interesting. But I think overall that's amazing how far representation has come. The fact that these books are being written, these characters are being talked about. This feels like something I would've– so embarrassing. This feels like something I*

> *would've read in a fanfiction 10 years ago of a bunch of characters that are probably not actually queer, but characters that have been made queer in the story.*

In Imogen's case, they simply have outgrown, somewhat, the need for such focused stories about queer coming of age and look for different narrative foci for queer characters when engaging with media and forming parasocial relationships with characters.

For Toshi, they talked about how they are not often drawn to romance and relationship-based stories, finding them somewhat boring and uninteresting. When asked what a representation like Darcy's would have meant for them when they were growing up, Toshi stated:

> *I don't really know. I've read a lot more action where, like* Throne of Glass*, where people still had that confliction of being in a relationship, but it's more of problems of, "Oh, this is my enemy." I never really enjoyed reading the romantic parts of things or really cared about the relationships.*

When asked how they feel seeing queer representation frequently and almost exclusively in romantic narratives, Toshi noted how "*it's something that always annoyed me. Whenever there's a queer character, they always make a big deal about [a romantic relationship]. That's why I really enjoyed Rick Riordan's works.*"

Froggy had a distinctly negative reaction to one of the depictions given a character's claim that hypersexuality makes someone a bad person. Reacting to Darcy's statement of "I'm bisexual not a nymphomaniac" (Gonzales, 2021, p. 297), Froggy noted that while they understand what is trying to be said, and that consistently depicting bisexual characters as hypersexual reinforces negative stereotypes, this language made them uncomfortable. To them, this particular phrase, while indicating that bisexuality is not equated with hypersexuality, paints

hypersexuality in a negative light in order to positively depict bisexuality. When asked to walk through that reading of the phrase, Froggy said it was due to:

> *giving some power to that word. Yeah, so much so—you know what? You're disassociating yourself. You're not even saying, fuck that word. I feel like it'd be fun. I mean, I would probably be like, I'm bisexual and an nymphomaniac. I'm going to do both. But it definitely also tied in this thing of nymphomania being inherently being bisexual or pansexual when I don't think there's any sexuality limit on nymphomania personally, but it was just a unique choice of words.*

Ideally, Froggy felt as if there could have been a way to divorce bisexuality from the false connection to increased participation in sexual activities without continuing to rely on the stereotype that hypersexual people of all sexualities are inherently worse or less trustworthy than other people. So when asked if they felt connected to Darcy upon reading or if they potentially would have had they read this earlier in their life, Froggy stated *"I can't really say I relate to Darcy."* For Froggy, representation needs to balance the sum of their identities in order to be a character they connect with.

A need for a variety of characters and narratives to be present in media was a central subtheme that straddled all participants' narratives and reflects the notion that there is no 'one size fits all approach' to understanding experiences. Although all participants identified under the bisexual+ umbrella, their unique contexts and experiences as they grew up and where they currently are influenced the type of character they were able to construct a parasocial relationship with. Because of this, it begins to highlight how the characters bisexual+ individuals form parasocial relationships with need to be characterized and have narratives beyond simply serving as the token bisexual character is a show, series, movie, or other type of media. They are looking

for representation that is multifaceted and diverse. When this occurs, it provides an opportunity for affirmations beyond just those related to sexual identity to occur, something Froggy and Toshi talked about at length.

Affirmations Beyond Sexuality. Participants also noted that some characters affirmed more than their sexuality. Most clearly and explicitly, Froggy and Toshi both expressed how the characters they connected with also challenged the ways in which gender is culturally constructed and forces an individual to comply with a strict binary. For both Froggy and Toshi, their attraction to characters centered on those that forcefully opposed and pushed back against conceptualizations of gender. Toshi noted that seeing characters who were more androgynous allowed them to see a depiction of their own feelings about gender in the media they were engaging with:

> *I loved Ghirahim from* Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*, as he looked so androgynous and just gave off a very fluid energy. Exploring my identity and who I feel I am, I was always drawn back to just how "gender" he was and how I wished I could look like that.*

Froggy also expressed that resistance to binaries also made them more likely to engage with certain characters more than others. While not noting something like the character's androgynous gender presentation, Froggy talked about how their attraction and connection to the villains in the media they consumed was likely because they felt the villains challenged norms and expectations about gender more than the protagonists ever did. In talking about their connection to H.I.M., a villain from *The Powerpuff Girls*, they reflected how the coded resistance to binaries was not something they were aware of when they were younger but looking back something that was affirming even then:

Yeah, I didn't, obviously as a kid I wasn't like, "It's challenging the binary! I like this!" But it was just kind of like, "Oh, that's unique. And that's something that I don't see and it appeals to me in some way." Probably something like, "Oh, I enjoy the colors or the design of this particular thing." It was probably something like that, but maybe if I was older, I'd be like, "I like how it isn't stuck to the binary" and I still continue to say it's unique.

Even when characters technically followed the gender binary, Toshi noted that they were more drawn to engage with and ultimately connect to characters if their actions and gender performance still went against cultural norms, like Celaena/Aelin in the *Throne of Glass* series. When describing what drew them to the series and to the character, they stated that *"I just really liked her doing badass things. Yeah, I liked characters doing badass things, and that's the void that was filled."* Toshi's relationships with characters affirmed things outside of their sexuality, potentially due to their dislike of the romantic centering of many queer depictions within media.

Still, even in these depictions that were not queer, they still allowed Toshi to feel affirmed in who they are and the journeys and growth they experienced in their own identity exploration. In talking about their relationship with Celaena/Aelin, Toshi highlighted how they found a character that they feel acts as a touchpoint when they feel lost or unsure and someone that they look up to largely because of the strength she displays throughout the series as she overcomes numerous obstacles. When asked about what they learned from their relationship with Celaena/Aelin, Toshi talked about the resolve and power she displays even when the odds are against her, something that is only apparent because of the strength of her narrative in the series. Toshi stated that these kinds of depictions:

> *show there's more to a character than just what they're portrayed as, because with a narrative journey, that's something you can relate to more just because everyone goes through a narrative journey. Having a character to always come back to and be like—I can follow along her path and I can look to that whenever I'm lost, and this is a character that I really look up to. This is where she ended, this is how she got there. It wasn't a clean path, but she made it out at the end. And that to me is kind of more important than, "Hey, look at this cool character."*

Even though Celaena/Aelin is not canonically queer, the themes of her narrative and the ways she eschews gender expectations allowed Toshi to feel affirmed and validated as they engaged with the series because their own constructions of gender and sexuality push back against the compulsory binarization imposed by larger cultural forces and structures.

While Froggy and Toshi were the main participants who talked at length about finding affirmation beyond sexual identities through their parasocial relationships, all participants at least mentioned this in passing. This subtheme, when explored in conjunction with the two discussed above, reflects a need for a nuanced and deliberate addition of bisexual+ characters who do more than simply fill a diversity quota on a television show or in a book series. Because participants were able to construct these relationships with multifaceted characters, they all discussed how media relationships had a noticeable influence on their identity construction processes, including that of their sexual identity.

Influence of Media Relationships. All participants noted that these relationships were integral to their identity construction and their positive view of their identities in some way. While the extent to which they credit these relationships differs, each noted that the ability to engage with media and form these character-based relationships was impactful at various points

in their identity construction processes. Additionally, they all also noted how having positive depictions of bisexual characters to connect with could have positively influenced their identity construction.

Imogen noted that their connections to media were very integral as they came to understand their sexuality. In her audio journal, Imogen noted that the journal reflection made her realize how influential relationships with media characters were throughout her life. She stated in her recording that responding to the prompt allowed her to explore these relationships in ways she had not formally done before. She noted *"it was me realizing…and I guess I kind of knew it, but consciously and spending energy into realizing how closely media is tied with my identity and me discovering my identity."* For Imogen, she discussed how seeing different depictions of bisexuality, even more problematic ones, allowed her to see that there is no single way to be bisexual. In particular, she noted that representation and even more so the close relationships she formed with Thirteen from *House M.D.* through canonical representation and the Spencer Reid from *Criminal Minds* based on her headcanoning, allowed her to construct her own understanding of bisexuality and reassured her that *"I can just be myself and I'm bisexual and that's what matters and I fit into this club."*

Imogen also noted that she would have been *"a lot lonelier"* without the relationships she cultivated with media characters. She continued, stating "*I don't know for certain that I would be like, 'Oh, I never would've figured it out.' But it was nice to have the support along the way, and it was nice to have something to bounce ideas off of or to see as just reassurance."* Again, she reiterated that these relationships and this representation did not make them realize they were bisexual or queer but rather allowed them to feel more comfortable in their identity:

> *I don't think I'd go as far to say as, I would never have figured out that I was queer. I think I was kind of already there before I got the word bisexual, but it may have been delayed a bit and would've probably looked quite different. I think as we're– none of us, no man is an island or whatever, we're all impacted by everything that happens around us every day. So yeah, I don't know. Probably it would be different if I hadn't encountered these people, and I don't know exactly how. I can't…can't quite imagine it.*

Like Imogen, Moon, who expressed a strong capacity to relate to characters and find community within fan spaces, noted that they could not even begin to think about who they would be without their media relationships and all that they brought them in terms of acceptance of self and construction of their identities. They stated *"if I didn't have that, I just think it's such a huge part of my personality and who I am as a human being. I can't even imagine myself without it."* Additionally, like Froggy and Toshi's connection to characters for reasons beyond sexuality, Moon's relationship with Ahsoka from *Star Wars* allowed them to combine their identity as a bisexual individual with their identity as a Person of Color within a world that is predominantly white and embedded in structures and systems rooted in whiteness. In talking about this relationship, Moon described the strength of it, saying:

> *And I have a whole shrine, my shelf, a* Star Wars *shelf dedicated to her. And I could write essays about her character arc and her as a character and the representation she serves not only as a female character, but a character with she has, I feel like she has a lot of [Person of Color] features and that serves as identity based representation that people can see, especially in a super white dominated fandom piece of media like* Star Wars *where you see a person of color very rarely, and if you do, it's like a side character. But Ahsoka is really important.*

For Moon, finding and connecting with a character that shared not just their queerness but also their experiences as biracial within a world governed by whiteness allowed them to explore how those identities interact and feel affirmed by seeing themselves on screen. Like with Ahsoka, Moon noted that they often engaged in headcanoning, a fandom-based action discussed in a later theme, to create their own representation. While they found headcanoning affirming, it did not replace their desire to see queer characters within media canon and they noted they wished they had canonical representation to connect to as well.

Melody also expressed a desire to see a range of plurisexual people within the media she consumed. When asked how the depictions they reacted to in the excerpts I selected would have influenced their identity construction processes, they noted that having clear depictions of bisexual and pansexual people:

> *might've helped me with my acceptance sooner. Definitely not when I was younger, but maybe late high school. Seeing that exposure and having the language for it, that was my big thing. I just didn't have the language to describe myself, so I was like, "Well, I don't have the language. So, I guess I'm not." So, if I'd had that, that probably would've helped me figure some things out sooner.*

Melody's belief that representation and the ability to connect to characters who shared her sexuality may have allowed her to accept her panromantic asexuality earlier highlights how visible representation is integral to allowing queer individuals to see themselves in a positive way. For Melody, seeing positive representation that deviated from depicting bisexual and pansexual people as untrustworthy and promiscuous would have also helped her see that those stereotypes are unfounded. She noted that seeing this, as opposed to creating the representation in her mind or in fan spaces, could have been particularly helpful because:

> *I think I am a very big visual person, and seeing it in print would've been so helpful when I was feeling like could I even continue the relationship with the person that I was with? Because also that I was feeling a lot of guilt for having crushes on different people while I was with this person and not understanding why that was happening. And once I addressed it, those things went away, but it was something I had to address, and I was worried about being seen as a cheater or someone who sleeps around or things like that. If I had had this example, I would've, again, I think it would've helped me figure out acceptance sooner.*

Toshi also noted that not having queer representation that they could connect with until later in their life impacted their identity, but in a lesser way. While they knew they were queer from an early age, Toshi noted that the lack of representation:

> *just kind of left me in a void that I never really touched until high school or even little after high school because while I didn't have queer characters to connect with, I had those strong female characters where I'm like, "I'm not sure if I want to* be *her or be* with *her because damn, is she hot?*"

While Toshi noted that they are not necessarily drawn to characters because they are queer, seeing queerness within the characters they are drawn to could have allowed them to understand their combination of queer identities sooner. Despite this, engaging with media and connecting to characters, even if they were the *"badass women"* they often felt most connected to allowed them to figure out what bisexuality means for them, noting "*that's kind of also how I figured out that I really don't care what the package is in. I enjoy the package itself. The content of a character is what's more important than what they are."*

In their reactions to the excerpts, Toshi really did not connect with the characters or feel they would have connected to them had they engaged with them earlier in their life; however, they noted the importance of having more representation, how fictional characters, for better or worse, act as a resource for queer individuals, so having more representation of bisexual and pansexual characters will provide queer youth who are exploring their sexuality more positive models. They stated:

> *Because though now we have a whole bunch more representation of bisexual and queer people in media in the area I was growing up, I can see it being a lot more impactful just because there's so few resources to look to for being bisexual and looking for just exploring that there's just so few resources. And if those resources are all negative, then you're going to get a more negative light on that identity.*

Of all the participants, Froggy expressed the least importance of media characters on their identity construction in our interviews and found themselves most affirmed in non-fiction and research that they engaged with at various points in their life. Still, they did note that the relationships they cultivated with media characters, while not as strong, still helped them develop a sense of who they are and see themselves in a positive way, even if in a roundabout way given their connection to the villains. For Froggy, these relationships did not necessarily point to their sexuality and queerness outright but did so through the ways they depicted resistance to binaries. To them, their identities:

> *could have also possibly affected the media and the people that I related to. Then later on and then that reflected off of me. I have always liked a more alternative sort of aesthetic to an extent, and I think I started liking that because that was usually sort of, maybe it*

was because it was, I tended to more of the queer-coded villains in general. I love my person. I don't know what they go by, H.I.M. They were an icon.

They noted they were drawn to characters that were more flamboyant and alternative and as a result, they integrated this into their own conceptualizations and constructions of their queerness:

I would say it was more encouraging for creativity and artistic type things, but that's very off topic, I'm sure. But it is a stereotype of, especially with queer-coded characters, if they're male, they're more flamboyant or dramatic and just in general, the outfits of queer coded characters, especially villains, tend to be a lot more dramatic and interesting. So, I guess maybe there's some of that in there.

Still, even though Froggy expressed the least connection to characters, they ultimately wrote in their journal *"connecting (or at least relating) to a character is kind of a justifying experience. It made me feel like my personality and actions were shown, even if the characters I liked didn't have the best media portrayal."*

This final subtheme within *fiction affirming identity* highlights and amplifies the need for representation that does more than add a bisexual+ character to the narrative. These characters need to be well developed and play an integral role in the story being told. When characters are constructed in such a way that the audience develops close and intimate connections to them as they form parasocial relationships, it allows the audience to find spaces where they are affirmed for the sum of who they are. Similarly, those strong connections can also serve as springboards or catalysts for forming relationships with other people in a variety of spaces, increasing the relationships audiences create with others in real life.

Sense of Community

Although the relationships participants formed with characters allowed them to engage with affirming representations of their identities within media, these characters served as conduits for connecting with other fans as well. Through both virtual spaces and in real life, these character-mediated relationships encouraged the creation of communities where participants cultivated friendships and connections that served as sources of affirmation as they constructed their identities. Sense of community was broken down into two distinct subthemes: (a) connection via fandom, and (b) connections to peers.

Connection to Peers. Three participants, Moon, Melody, and Imogen, talked about how media and their relationship to these characters allowed them to connect with others in real life. A self-proclaimed nerd, Moon noted how media was something that allowed her to connect with her family, most notably her cousin. She talked about how a love of media was shared between the two and they would engage with similar types of media both together and on their own. Moon noted:

> *Well, I've always been a huge nerd ever since I was young. I blame my dad for making me watch* Star Wars *as a child all the time. My cousin and I are really, really close and they're like a sibling to me. My other siblings and I are multiple years apart, so I'm close with them now because we're older, but when we were younger, they were just annoying little brothers and I hated them. So, my cousin was a second—almost like a sister, like a sibling to me, and she was obsessed with games. YouTube, we grew on the internet when, not when it was first coming out, but when it was really starting to develop. YouTube was a huge thing when I was younger.* Minecraft– *I remember when* Minecraft *came out, I*

would play on my dad's 15-pound Toshiba laptop and I would beg my mom to buy it for me, but she never did, so I just played the demo over and over again.

Moon's cousin introduced them to a lot of the media that ultimately served as touchpoints for them during their identity construction, showing how media can act as a conduit between people and create community based on shared interests.

Melody noted how their majority-queer friend group shares interest in the same shows and books, something that helped strengthen their friendships. For them, having those close friendships that were amplified by shared media relationships allowed this group of friends to become a space where Melody was affirmed and felt their queerness was celebrated. She stated:

> *I would definitely say that they helped me connect to that a lot more. Plus, I was being surrounded by all of my queer friends when I was reading this literature, and that friend group is also very deeply invested in* The Dragon Prince. *So that was also a lot of discussion on that show. And it just in general both—my best friend is bi. Again, pretty much everybody in our friend group is queer in some sense of the word. And just being able to share that community and share literature that celebrates us is really, really affirming.*

The creation of real-life community overlapped with Melody's relationships with media characters. Because connections to shows like *The Dragon Prince* were shared throughout their friend group, Melody was able to use the individual relationship she had with characters from this series, like Amaya, or Ead and Sabran from *The Priory of the Orange Tree* to help build their sense of community in real life.

For Imogen, her friend group, which is largely queer as well, introduced media that she strongly connected to like *Fantasy High.* She talked about how even interacting with affirming

media and being able to form relationships with characters that also strengthened real life relationships during college was something that she has found very impactful and validating. She noted how because of this friend's recommendation, it turned into something that allowed her to connect with Kristen Applebees and see her own journey with religion and sexuality on the screen, but it also served as an activity that brought her friends closer together. Describing this, Imogen stated:

> *I didn't start watching* Dimension 20 *until I got to college when it was recommended. It'd been recommended actually by one of my best friends for years and years and years. And I was like, "I do not have time." And then I got pulled in through* A Court of Fey & Flowers*, which is the Victorian or, whatever, Regency [campaign]. And I was like, "That is me." So, I watched it. We watched it as a group, and I loved it so much. And then my friend was like, "You need to watch* Fantasy High*. It's so good." And I did. And instantly I was like, "Oh my God, Kristen."*

Being able to use media to connect to characters that affirmed their identity while simultaneously connecting with their friends through that same media allowed Imogen's use of media to serve multiple functions. She experienced identity affirmation through engaging with Kristen and her narrative across the seasons of *Fantasy High* but also continued to build a sense of community with her friends, who also affirmed her identity, while watching.

The connections participants made that were mediated through their parasocial relationships allowed them to use the affirmation they found in a parasocial relationship to create dyadic ones in real life. This use of parasocial relationships to create real life interpersonal interactions and friendships demonstrates how parasocial relationships serve as both environmental and interpersonal factors. However, they also allow relationships to develop in

other spaces including virtual communities. For some participants, engaging in virtual spaces connected to the media source their parasocial relationship stemmed from allowed them to connect to others who shared similar interests in fandoms and online fan spaces.

Connection via Fandom. For some participants, being able to engage in fan spaces and the fandom for the media they interacted with not only allowed them to feel more connected to the character(s), but also to other individuals who engaged in those spaces as well. Both Moon and Imogen talked about how engaging within fandom spaces for media they enjoy has served as both a way to affirm their identities but also made them feel a sense of community and belonging.

Imogen talked about how they did not grow up with social media where fandom spaces are often found, noting the *"holy trinity of Tumblr, Twitter, and TikTok,"* but it did not stop them from engaging in fandom practices before they were able to fully engage in those spaces. They noted:

> *I had a thing where I decided in my head literally, I had canon like my own, that they were bisexual before I engaged with any online content. I didn't read a thing and was like, oh, okay, that makes sense. I rewatched it. No, I had decided, I looked at and I was like, oh, okay. And then I went online, and I realized that there's that thing. And I looked at it and it looks like it does seem to be probably supported that* [*Spencer Reid from* Criminal Minds] *was initially meant to be bi.*

In engaging with fans in those spaces, the ideas about and reads of the characters they made prior to engaging in fan discourse, particularly talking about how they felt Dean from *Supernatural* and Spencer Reid from *Criminal Minds* were supposed to be bisexual, were validated by others within the fan community. This back and forth of sharing ideas within fan spaces allows

members to connect. For queer individuals reading queerness into the canonical narrative, like Imogen did, these connections with other fans via virtual spaces could create a sense of community based on shared beliefs and thoughts.

Moon talked at length about the sense of community she felt when interacting with other fans in fandom spaces. For her, seeking out these connections to others in these spaces was mediated by shared love of characters and social media and fandom are other ways of engaging with the shows and series she loves. When talking about why she connects so strongly to characters and media, Moon noted that:

> *I would say definitely when it comes to stuff, I can't be normal about it because I'm just obsessed and whenever someone shows a slight interest, I'm super excited about it, even to the point where creating your own character and certain fandoms, like me and my partner made our own Pokemon trainers and where he's obsessed with it and we'll get art done of them together, and it's super cute. I love it, love that. And I used to think that stuff was super cringe, and I was in middle school, but now it's actually super cool and I'm in grad school now.*

Because she connects so strongly to media, engaging in fan spaces allowed Moon was a way to continue to immerse herself in worlds and foster close relationships with media characters, but it also served as a way to connect with others through shared interests:

> *So, I would say a huge part of it is viewing myself in that world or making a character that's based on myself and then starting them in that world because I just get so immersed. I can't just watch it normally and be like, "Yeah, that was cool," and go about my day. I really like something. I'm thinking about it all the time, or I'm actively searching for other people who like it. Or if I see someone wearing a shirt or have a*

keychain, I'm going to go out of my way to be like, "Hey, that's cool," because I keep saying I can't be normal about it, but that's literally what it is, I'm obsessed.

Through this connection to others via media, the relationships Moon cultivated with media characters allowed her to connect with other people who share similar interests and views. When asked if she tended to seek out fandoms with queer characters, Moon noted she was initially simply drawn to the media itself over the presence of queerness, either canonically or speculated within fan spaces. However, upon finding queerness within those fan spaces, Moon explained how they acted as spaces of affirmation for their identity, stating, *"it's kind of like I sought out the fandom but not the queerness of it. And I would say the queer community kind of found me instead of me finding them, if that makes sense."*

Moon also talked about how there is some risk in engaging in these spaces given the anonymity afforded to members in fan spaces. Moon brought up how politics and socio-cultural norms weave their way into fan spaces which can make navigating these spaces tricky, particularly as they grow over time. When fans begin to read queerness into characters and narratives, it sometimes angers fans who have been able to enjoy holding more power within a cis, white, heteronormative dominant space. In talking about the *Star Wars* fandom, Moon explained how this often shows up:

I feel like a lot of spaces are, I don't want to say I feel like it's divided into two groups, so I don't want to say the "normal people." Not a good term. But maybe people who aren't really acclimated to social justice as much as others are. Or you could say privileged who don't view the world through a certain lens because of their identity, or they don't feel the need to search for identity, or they don't feel the need to be affirmed by representation in media because they don't care about that stuff versus people who do

care about that stuff, which is usually who your people or People of Color from marginalized backgrounds who actively look and care about those things. And I feel like they're separated, and when they mesh in fandoms, it never goes well because it's usually one point of view or one ideology versus another who are completely opposite. And because of the political climate and social media every second, it gets worse, if that makes sense.

While sometimes fan spaces become toxic, particularly when its members begin to add previously absent identities into an established narrative as was the case in the *Star Wars* fandom Moon talked about, she also noted that there are ways to avoid those voices so these spaces stay affirming and by continuing to exist in this space, they begin to become sites of resistance to such queer- and transphobic rhetoric. When talking about how this particular fandom reacted to the inclusion of queer identities via headcanoning and other canon-corrective actions, Moon explained how they navigate this quasi-minefield of anti-queer rhetoric:

Of course, I surround myself on Twitter or other spaces with people who agree with me because I don't want to be getting hate comments from men who say that, "Oh, Ahsoka kissed this one guy in one episode, so that means she's married to him and she's straight." And I'm like, "I don't care what that says. I hate that episode. I choose to ignore it." Or people who are like, "Actually, this is in the canon," and it's like they aren't [the characters] real. Stop. Let me do what I want and be in my space. And they are always very hostile, even if it's widely accepted or even if it's actual'y canon, people will still argue over it and become hostile towards queer people, or there's trans characters and video games.

While some fandoms are explicitly queer-friendly, Moon acknowledged that there are growing pains when creators begin to integrate more representation into existing media that has historically served as a preserve for cisgender, heterosexual, white men to enjoy unchecked. In addition to *Star Wars*, Moon highlighted an example from *Guilty Gear*, a video game series, where a character came out as transgender and transitioned over the course of the games:

> *One I can think about is Bridget from* Guilty Gear*, and I think she was originally a male character in the older games, and then she became female. And the creators were like, "yeah, she's trans…a trans character" and everyone loves her. She's super cute. But in online spaces it was a war zone because people were still being transphobic and misgendering Bridget and harassing queer people over it. Or the whole woke tirade that Republicans are going on right now or in video games if they allow you to make yourself non-binary.*

In talking about this, Moon highlighted how times like these where fandoms have difficulty growing and changing makes them less enjoyable to be part of. However, while the *Star Wars* fandom has experienced growing pains with the inclusion of queer characters, both canonically and through fan contributions, there is a large enough contingent of welcoming and queer-affirming fans that it remains a space where Moon is able to create representation she wished to see in worlds she enjoyed as well as form connections and relationships with other people in this virtual fan community.

However, Moon also brought up some of the potential risks of fandom spaces as sites of negotiation of queer identities. After watching the clip from *Heartstopper*, Moon recounted their experiences on Twitter when the show came out and some queer individuals did not understand

why Nick correcting his brother's assumption that he is gay by stating "I'm bi, actually" was so important. Moon explained:

> *I'm actually familiar with that scene because people were complaining on social media on how or why Nick had to specify that he was bi. I remember seeing on Twitter, people were complaining like, "Oh, why did he do that? That's so cringe, blah, blah, blah." And they were people from the queer community too. So, it's like why is that a problem that he is pointing it out and he's correcting his brother who's assuming that he's gay, which again is a stereotype that is perpetuated in both the heterosexual and homosexual queer community that you can't do both. Or if you are bi, then people refer to you as gay or use that as an umbrella term when in reality that's not the case.*

Similar to Moon, Imogen also noted that fan spaces are where parasocial relationships can become dangerous, particularly for film and television, when fans begin to equivocate the character with the actor. While she noted that in fandom, *"there's a little bit more room for imagination"* in what happens to the character, it can reach a dangerous point. When imagination continues to be teased as canon, or in the case of queer characters, queer baited to maintain viewership or readership, sometimes those fandom spaces can become volatile. When talking about the toxicity within the *Supernatural* when a character's bisexuality was walked back by an actor after over a decade of queer baiting, Imogen talked about how fan spaces can become harmful because of the parasociality of fan to character relationships, particularly noting:

> *when you're facing not just ambiguity, but avid actual backlash almost from the creators of the show and the people producing the show of queer people approaching the actors. And whether that's a good idea or not, I don't know, but you're 13, these are…they're*

kids and they want some kind of justification being just shot down so aggressively over something that we all see. It's frustrating and it's invalidating, and at the same time.

Although in this instance fandom uproar did not necessarily make fan-to-fan relationships harmful, fan to character relationships serve as the foundation for fandom and fan spaces and the dissolution of those relationships can often cause infighting that makes fan spaces less welcoming and impacts the creation of connections between fans.

Using connections to media via parasocial relationships, fans of series, shows, and other media can use those relationships and connections to engage with each other in virtual spaces. Fandom and fan spaces allow for those who share interests in a particular media source to connect and discuss the characters and stories being told in their favorite fictional worlds and presents a new way to connect to others that mirrors real life friendships that are simply mediated by a virtual space. Participants also indicated that the freedom afforded to members of these fan spaces afforded them the opportunity to consider their queerness in ways that were not beholden to norms and expectations they felt in their daily lives. This ability to create representation and have unlimited possibilities was woven through the participants' narratives.

Creation of Possibilities

Four participants discussed how their engagements with media reflected the creation of possibilities. Whether this was through being transported to a setting that was not beholden to norms about gender and sexuality or being able to create the canonical characterization and narrative choices they wished to see, the ability to engage with a more expansive range of possibilities was discussed by multiple participants. As with the previous theme, the ways in which creativity and possibility within media influenced their identity construction processes

varied participant to participant. However, there were shared experiences that were identified, resulting in two subthemes: (a) headcanoning and (b) queer normative fantasies.

Headcanoning. Even in media without explicit queer representation, three participants expressed how they engaged in a practice called headcanoning to effectively write queerness into the media they were consuming. Directly connected to fandom, headcanoning is a practice that fans of a particular media property engage in that either fills in the gaps for or builds upon existing character identities or narratives by creating what they hope will or think should have occurred. These views are often expressed in fan spaces and serve as a connection between fans of a particular media property who share these headcanons. By headcanoning, participants were able to create queer representation they connected to in spaces where a character's queerness was ambiguous at best. While headcanoning could be viewed as an element of *connections via fandom*, the act itself reflects the use of fandom to create representation and environments where queerness is not stigmatized. Because of this and the extent to which participants who noted both fandom and headcanoning behaviors in their narratives described them differently, I have chosen to present headcanoning as a discrete function of fandom spaces rather than simply an element found in fandom.

For Imogen, she spoke of engaging with fan edits and fanfiction that allowed her headcanon of Spencer Reid from *Criminal Minds* as bisexual to come to fruition. She noted that this practice was helpful in creating representation that mirrored her own identity even if it was not something that she felt would have happened in the show itself. While she acknowledged even before engaging in fan spaces that *"the common narrative or lore is that he was meant to be bisexual and the producers of the show wouldn't allow it,"* by headcanoning a bisexual Reid, it reaffirmed her positive feelings toward her sexuality:

> *I was actually, I was looking through my—I have a* Criminal Minds *folder on TikTok, and I have a couple of edits of the funny bisexual Reid things, and they're just sweet and cute. But then things like fanfiction can, on the one hand be gratifying because you get to live out your fantasies or read, or not fantasies as in even sexual fantasies, but just like, "Oh, this is something I'd like for this character to happen to this character." But then also I do think fanfiction can sometimes be a little bit, if you go into it too much and then you go back to the show, it can be, again, frustrating. Just like, "What about this beautiful thing that I read? Why is this happening?" You almost, "fanon" becomes better than "canon."*

Imogen noted how the creative exercise of headcanoning allows fans, particularly those with marginalized identities, to write themselves into the stories they connect to; however, she also highlighted how this practice can create almost a false sense of representation when the lines between what actually happened, the canon, and what they wish happened, the fanon, become blurred. Despite this, engaging in this ability to create representation reflects how fandom and fan spaces allow for the creation of media that serves as a source of affirmation, even if only in the mind of an individual.

Of all the participants, Moon talked most about the importance of headcanoning during her interviews and journal response. For them, headcanoning allowed Moon to place their identities on the characters they were drawn to. In their journal, they wrote that *"projecting my identity onto other characters that don't have an 'official' sexuality is really affirming, especially when other fans agree with you. It serves as a form of representation, even in media that doesn't state the character's sexuality."* Because media representations of bisexual+ identities are severely lacking, headcanoning became almost necessary for Moon to see herself represented in the media she consumed. For bisexual+ individuals like Moon, this has created the need for

engaging in creative practices like headcanoning to create the representation that producers and studio executives are not willing or able to include in their media. While Moon talked about explicitly bisexual characters, the headcanons she made have been just as, if not more, impactful for her as she has constructed her identity:

> *So, I would say even though the characters weren't canon bisexual or confirmed by creators, if I asserted my identity onto those characters, it definitely helped me in forming my own identity and understanding bisexual culture and all that. And I talked about it a little bit in my journal too, but a lot of fandom surrounding the media, they will assert their own canon onto characters, and sometimes it will be, it's mutually agreed upon that the whole fandom thinks that. So that's even more affirming and people make fan art of the characters with the flags and stuff.*

This combination of seeing the possibility within existing media for representation and then taking the initiative to create the representation that she wished to see reflects how media impacts go beyond simply watching or reading. Media can be looked at as a participatory and active factor that influences how someone constructs their identities and sense of self. Additionally, the relationships and connections made in fan spaces can be intensified and strengthened through shared headcanons. Not only does it increase representation (in a way), but it also serves as a mediating factor for creating connections and relationships with other people simply in a virtual space.

Toshi also noted that they engaged in headcanoning and other canon-corrective activities. While they did not engage in fan spaces on social media sites and platforms, they did read and write fanfiction about characters they were closely connected with. When asked what they often focused on in these endeavors, they noted "*usually building off of the canon and digging more*

into what happens and underlying reasons and stuff like that." When I asked what it felt like to write what they feel should happen with a character's narrative, Toshi noted that it makes them feel like *"squealing on the bed? Kicking my feet? Just kind of 'This happening. This is what should have happened.'"* By being able to engage in headcanoning, it reflects how these relationships are truly interactive while continuing to be parasocial. Toshi's focus on digging deeper into a character and their actions highlights how fan spaces and the activities that occur within them, like headcanoning, again reflects how media interactions extend beyond the media itself. For some, there is more to a character than what occurs canonically, and it could be those out-of-canon ideas and interactions that allow an individual to form a relationship with a character.

Engaging in headcanoning acts as a method of resisting the heteronormative depictions of sexuality in media and gives fandom members a space to engage in actions that correct what they perceive as characterization and narrative choices that do not align with their reading of a character. It also reflects how individuals, such as those noted above, engage in this behavior because it allows them to create a world that does not view queerness as abnormal as well as creates a world that is distinctly different from their own where they can escape to when they need a reprieve from the queerphobic and transphobic rhetoric pervading through the United States today. Similarly, participants noted they were drawn to media set in worlds where queerness was assumed to be as normal as heterosexuality from the outset. In these queer normative worlds, the actions many take in headcanoning become the standard as they are presented with worlds where their queerness is not cause for uproar and alarm.

Queer Normative Fantasies. Many participants noted that they found themselves connecting with characters more often in fantasy settings. While some noted they were simply

drawn more to these settings aesthetically, others highlighted how fantasy offers more freedom and possibilities in terms of sexuality and gender constructions as those worlds are not beholden to the strict gender and sexuality binaries forced upon individuals in the United States. Similarly, queerness is sometimes viewed as normal within these fantasy worlds, something the participants articulated they found engaging and attractive.

Imogen noted they had often been drawn to fantasy and speculative worlds as they grew up and within these worlds, they saw the potential for queerness to be normalized and accepted by the greater societies within these locales. In talking about early speculative fiction they engaged with, they explained that even if not in the moment, looking back, they realized how queerness was a valid option for these characters:

> *But yeah, I grew up liking* Dr. Who*, and I loved* Merlin*, which again, I think that maybe people really thought that Merlin and Arthur were a thing. And as I'm older, I look back and I'm like, "Oh, yeah, that makes sense." But at the time I was like, "No, no, it's Arthur and Gwen," which again is valid.*

This connection to fantasy worlds only increased for Imogen as they continued to engage with different types of media. For them, the combination of both playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and watching actual play series of the same allows them not just to experience these queer normative worlds through watching and connecting to characters, but also engaging in them as they play themselves:

> *I do like fantasy and sci-fi a lot as I play* D&D *and I watch* D&D*. And I think that that is something that a lot of* D&D *characters or* D&D *watchers, players can relate to. It's nice. I say most of my characters that I play and my campaigns are queer, whether I intend them to be or not, it just kind of, well, when I design a character, I'm like, they'll*

> *figure out what their sexuality is along the way. I'm not going to decide that for them. We'll figure it out.*

Imogen's connection to fantasy worlds is best encapsulated by her relationship to Kristen Applebees from *Fantasy High*:

> *But yeah, I guess maybe, and I just mentioned that it feels funny to say, "Ah, yes, Kristen Applebee's the most honest, real bisexual as she casts spirit guardians and tries to go down a tower with a ribbon." So there obviously is a fantastical element, but I think it's cool how in fantasy settings, even though you have all this magic going on, you can still have these really lovely human moments and real authentic moments of sexuality and emotion. And because I think fantasy is a reflection of reality, no matter how much we don't, even if it is an escape, we bring things from our own life and our own experiences into that, which is clearly what Ally Beardsley was doing. So yeah, I think it's cool to see. It's like, "Oh, queer people can exist even when there are dragons. We belong everywhere."*

For Imogen, seeing queerness existing in these fantasy spaces without question demonstrates how it is possible for the same to happen in real life. As they stated, even in these spaces that act as escapism, seeing herself in a character who is fully accepted for who they are, including their queerness, challenges the cultural norms that govern queer expression in reality as well as the stigmas queer individuals must deal with on a daily basis.

Similarly, Moon discussed how engaging in fantasy and other speculative media allowed her to see a world where queerness is normalized. In particular, she noted how these spaces do serve as escapism, for better or worse, given the current political climate within the United States where there are active attempts to erase visible depictions of queerness:

> *More in a way that is a blessing and a curse because that goes into escapism, which is like, yes, it's good, but if you do it too much, it can be toxic and depressing, especially for queer people or trans people right now with a climate that's horrendous, even in progressive states, it's still not as good or not good at all. And just thinking about being in a world where being non-binary or being trans or using these series of pronouns is normal and people don't throw tomatoes at you or call you slurs is comforting. So of course, or a super sci-fi, hyper fantasy world like* Star Wars*, there's freaking aliens. No one is going to care if you use they/them pronouns.*

Moon also noted, however, that even in these fantasy spaces, there is still often fan opposition to the inclusion of queer characters, particularly in spaces historically dominated by white, cisgender, heterosexual men as fantasy and sci-fi spaces often are. Moon noted:

> *Whenever there's a queer character in* Star Wars*, Disney or—people will be like, that's woke. And it's like, "There's aliens and you're mad about gay person. Make that make sense to me." I don't get it. But definitely I would say that serves a huge role in it. "Oh, if I was in this world, it would be normal for me to exist instead of me being a political object, especially for queerness." Gay marriage is legalized, but it's on the table and the Supreme Court for it to be reversed, like* Roe v. Wade *was reversed, like dystopian society incoming sort of thing. But definitely I would say that plays a massive role in how much I enjoy it or finding a comfort in that space.*

While Moon acknowledged that these spaces still can be potentially hostile, the fantasticalness of fantasy and sci-fi settings is somewhat freeing and opens up more possibilities for being queer to be viewed as just as normal as being straight in their experience. On top of that, the fear of political decisions in the United States walking back protections and rights for queer individuals

is a valid and timely concern for which being able to escape into fantastical worlds functions as a salve. While escapism, as Moon noted, can be dangerous, this ability to see themselves outside of the strict boundaries and binaries that serve as the bedrock of American culture makes these spaces affirming and validating for those who feel restricted by those norms and pressures. Being able to play and exist in that space, even if simply through engaging in media and forming relationships with characters, allowed Moon to develop positive feelings about their sexual and gender identities despite larger cultural rhetoric.

Like Moon, Melody expressed similar views about fantasy worlds and their proclivity for normalizing a multitude of gender and sexuality expressions. For Melody, these spaces challenge the cultural norms that continue to relegate queerness to being viewed as an abnormality. They noted how fantasy:

> *makes you realize how relative everything is. If queer characters can exist in this world, why can't they exist in ours? It's like, yes, it's a made-up story, but those characters were written in a way that they could exist within that story. And I think that's like we have the opportunity to shape the narrative we want in the way that we want it to be in this world.*

They noted similar feelings towards *The Dragon Prince* in her journal response, saying that,

> *Though I'm not as big of a fan of this show now, it does have a lot of good queer representation. This show truly showcases a world where queerness is just "normal and accepted." I wish I could have seen queer people thriving and accepted like this when I was younger.*

Seeing queerness accepted just like heterosexuality is was something that Melody talked about in our interviews when bringing up this particular series. Even though they did not engage with this

media when they were initially constructing their identity, they acknowledged the impact these kinds of depictions could have had.

In talking about the uproar that often accompanies the inclusion of queer characters, especially in spaces that have historically been dominated by heterosexual characters like fantasy spaces are, Melody expressed frustration with this response. They noted:

> *It's like you have representation everywhere of your identity. Your representation, your identity is considered the standard. Why are you upset that we're sprinkling in other identities in there? It's not a zero-sum game. We're not taking your identity away to put ours in. We're trying to make the circle bigger.*

From Melody's perspective, the fantastical nature of fantasy settings allows for more expansive depictions of a variety of identities, including gender and sexuality, yet in these spaces the addition of these characters is often read as attempting to remove white, cisgender, heterosexual characters from the narrative. But, as Melody noted, adding more queer characters and those with other marginalized identities does not remove straight characters from media but rather allows more people to be welcomed into these worlds.

For Toshi, they also found the freedom characters find in fantasy series and settings something that draws them to those types of media. When talking about *Throne of Glass* and other media with characters they feel drawn to, they noted how *"a big thing of seeing myself in fantasy worlds is just wanting to be there and not here because of magic. It would be so cool to have magic and have the freedom to do stuff with that."* With the ability to enter the world of *Throne of Glass* through their relationship with Celaena/Aelin, they were able to experience what living in a world where constructions of gender and sexuality are both less rigid and one where other facets of an individual are more important, like magic, would be like. Comparing this

freedom from norms to the dominance of gender and sexuality norms that are strongly imposed by structures and systems in American culture, the affirmation from the possibilities in fantastical settings was a way for Toshi to, even if just momentarily, escape the pressures to conform and comply to binaries they felt constrained by.

By engaging in worlds where queerness was effectively a non-factor in terms of acceptance by others, participants noted how it was a freeing escape from what often feels the opposite in real life. In these queer normative worlds which often ended up being fantasy spaces, participants were able to construct relationships with characters who they felt mirrored their own experiences or had traits they desired to emulate. However, these spaces are not always easy to find as explained through participants' views on barriers to accessing representation they felt compelled to form a parasocial relationship with.

Barriers to Representation

In talking about the ability to make strong connections and cultivate meaningful relationships with media characters, four participants also discussed the barriers in representation that prevent this from occurring with openly bisexual or pansexual characters. When diving into what some of the reasons behind the lack of bisexual or pansexual representation might be, all four participants who explored this noted the problem was an extension of the structures and systems that prevent queerness from being visible in other aspects of American culture. Within this theme, two subthemes were identified: (a) prevalence of cultural stigmas about bisexuality and queerness, and (b) media resistance to depictions of queerness.

Prevalence of Cultural Stigmas About Bisexuality and Queerness. While talking about barriers to accessing bisexual and pansexual representation, Imogen noted how representation of bisexual characters, particularly that which is not harmful, often appears in

media marketed towards tweens, teens, and young adults. When discussing the excerpts I selected, I noted how they came from sources made with teens in mind. I then asked how they feel seeing positive bisexual representation almost exclusively in media for children and teenagers and they responded saying:

> *Yeah, that's really interesting. I think that, and that's an interesting way about it being only in [young adult]. I think it runs the risk of people assuming that it's just a kid's thing. It's something you could grow out of because as we grow out of reading those– we grow out of reading those books, but we don't grow out of our sexuality. So, it would be great to see more in adult lit, but also it's a good start.*

Having positive depictions of a range of identities in media marketed towards children and teenagers is incredibly important given how salient identity construction is during young adulthood; however, as Imogen noted, we refine and potentially discover our identities outside of this stage of life, so seeing bisexual characters in media for adults is still important for identity construction in emerging adulthood and beyond.

Toshi discussed barriers to representation within anime spaces, and how there are times where cultural norms surrounding queerness are so strong that creators feel they must comply with them in order for their show, book, movie, or game to be released. Talking about the relationship between the two main characters in an anime called *Banana Fish*, they noted:

> *it's really obvious they have this kind of queer relationship except because the writer was in Japan, he wasn't able to, or he feared being able to actually write that into it. Instead at the end there's this letter saying they had a "special connection like no other." And we're like, "Yeah, we know what that meant. We know what would've happened if Ash hadn't died."*

This subtextual queerness implied through these characters' "special connection" reflects how queerness often falls by the wayside due to societal pressures and norms restricting a creator's ability to create fully queer characters in their stories. While, as discussed earlier, these moments of ambiguous queerness or queer coding can be used in fan spaces to justify headcanons and the creation of fan-created revisions or additions through things like fanfiction or other fandom practices; however, those fan-based actions do not compensate for the impact explicit queer representation has during periods of identity construction.

When asked why having positive and multifaceted depictions of bisexuality and other plurisexual identities is important, Toshi talked about how the implicit and explicit messages in media are what people use when creating their views about something. They noted how oftentimes, people *"always see what's in the media as what is true,"* so when negative or stereotypical depictions of bisexuality+ are commonplace and what is frequently seen in media, it allows queer and non-queer people alike to create negative associations with bisexual+ individuals. They noted:

> *having depictions of an actual bisexual person and not what people think, that they're untrusted, but just a normal person that is bisexual. People are like, "Oh, that's the truth." People always look to media for stereotypes and things to think about people. So having positive roles of bisexual people in the media will just allow for positive view on bisexual people.*

While positive depictions of bisexuality will not fully erode negative and stereotype-laden views about bisexual people, they would provide another depiction that challenges the harmful depictions that are integrated into views of bisexuality by culture at large. For participants in this study, they discussed how there are stigmas and stereotypes about both queerness at large but

also specifically related to bisexuality+ that may prevent well-crafted depictions to be present in media sources, regardless of type. Additionally, there is a well-documented resistance to depicting queerness within media that is also a barrier to representation discussed by most of the participants.

Media Resistance to Depictions of Queerness. While connected to the previous subtheme, three participants explicitly discussed how media seems resistant to depicting queer experiences, particularly those of bisexual, pansexual, or other plurisexual identities. For some, like Moon, they acknowledged that there are moments of resistance from creators as they subtly integrate queerness into their media; however, for queer depictions to become more commonplace, large structural changes that address the root of why studio executives are hesitant to include queer characters must be enacted. When talking about what they would like to see in depictions of bisexuality going forward, Moon noted that they

> *would personally like to see that specific term [bisexual] being used. What a lot of cartoons do nowadays is having a flag in the background that you can barely see. But I guess it still works. It still matters that the character has a bisexual sticker or a keychain on their backpack that you can only see if you pause and zoom in. But hey, I mean that works for me. When you have to deal with corporate overlords who won't let you say anything in the show, you've got to sneak it in as an animator or whatever.*

These seemingly small acts of resistance on the part of animators and creators that work to include queer representation do not go unnoticed, but seeing bisexual characters openly expressing their bisexuality seems to be rare according to Moon.

Moon also noted how even when media has openly bisexual characters, studios seem to struggle with accurately depicting bisexuality because they do not understand bisexuality

themselves. Moon talked about how when bisexual characters are present, they are often read as lesbian or gay, if in a queer relationship, or straight when in a relationship with a character of another gender. They noted that this leads to erasure of bisexuality in favor of other queer labels:

> *Since corporations are still struggling to blatantly create specific bisexual characters in their media and explicitly identify it. I feel like the most common consensus with representation is seeing lesbian characters, or assuming a feminine presenting character who expresses love towards another feminine presenting character as a lesbian (even if their sexuality is never identified in the media).*

The erasure of bisexual characters' bisexuality echoes the erasure bisexual individuals often experience within queer spaces, something Moon noted they observed in fan spaces when other queer individuals questioned why a bisexual character corrected another when they stated he was gay as they talked when reacting to an excerpt from *Heartstopper*.

With that in mind, Moon noted that this representation still needs to be well done. Simply adding a poorly executed bisexual narrative or creating a character that negatively depicts bisexuality is not an acceptable resolution of this barrier. She noted that:

> *I don't want to see that– if you're going to do it, do it right and I'm going to criticize it, even if it's good, if it's still a bad rep or if it's cringe or it's not done or there's stereotypes being perpetuated, I'm going to say it and complain about it.*

For media corporations, who Moon feels are averse to the potential repercussions of adding bisexual characters to their stories, this means ensuring representation does not reaffirm negative stereotypes or depict bisexual characters as they have historically done so: absent, promiscuous, or untrustworthy. It also means that these characters must be intentionally created and studios willing to receive feedback to ensure representation reflects bisexuality+ in a positive way.

Melody expressed similar views about the resistance to depicting bisexuality. Like Moon, she noted how there seems to be dissonance between what the creators of a series want to see in their show and what the media executives will allow them to do. When talking about *The Dragon Prince*, Melody noted that the series began with diverse queer representation where characters of a variety of identities were present and integral to the narrative. Over time, she talked about feeling less engaged with the series *"because right now it feels like they're moving more towards tokenism"* when it comes to its queer representation. While she applauded this show for its boldness in centering queer characters, she talked about how the series has evolved over the course of the five seasons that have aired:

> *and they picked the straightest, whitest cishet people as the main characters. And the show is called* The Dragon Prince. *So, the beginning season is about helping this baby dragon get back to its mom. And so, it really should be about Zym, who's a dragon, and Ezran, who is a boy who forms a very close bond with that dragon. And instead, it's about his older adopted brother Callum, who is white but he is bi. And Rayla, who is a white moon elf. And so, I haven't resonated with that as recently because I just don't feel like…I feel like they're starting to not do representation in the right way.*

Melody also brought up the tension between what they writers of *The Dragon Prince* have stated they wish to have happen with what ultimately ends up in the final cut:

> *And I know I've read a lot about the writers and things, and I know that the writers, that's not what they're wanting to do. But then the producers and things, they're less apt to tell diverse stories. And it's very disappointing to see a show that I really loved the first season and just kind of see it go down the gutter.*

Much like Moon, Melody's view that creators who would be willing to depict bisexual characters as part of a diverse cast seem to be restricted by those with more power in media corporations. Melody's experience with *The Dragon Prince* highlights how simply adding queer characters, including bisexual ones, is not enough. Those depictions need to be intentional and well crafted.

Melody also noted how their sentiments were shared throughout *The Dragon Prince*'s fandom and being able to voice that discontent to others who felt the same was very affirming. They noted that the discourse was hopeful, *"recognizing that the writer feels this show is not going the way that we want to, but we do know how it should be. And in that community, we affirm each other's identities."* Melody's experiences in this fandom space not only reflected how fandom creates community but also how these spaces have the power to address, even if only in that space, the harm done by media's resistance to depicting well developed queer characters.

Imogen also talked about the resistance to depict bisexual characters within media, bringing up experiences with characters that were coded as queer like Spencer Reid from *Criminal Minds* and Dean Winchester from *Supernatural*, two television shows that aired mainly in the 2000s and 2010s. Acknowledging that the cultural views on queerness were vastly different in 2005 when these shows began airing, Imogen noted that while it still does not absolve producers of the harm of queer baiting, it does somewhat explain why older media has fewer explicitly queer characters. However, they noted that this act still is frustrating as a queer viewer looking to see themselves in the media they consume:

> *And so it's frustrating because you see it so clearly in this, and as somebody who is really wanting this representation and knowing that you'll probably never fully get it. And it's a*

> *little bit different between Reid and Dean because I don't feel with Reid that it's actively queer baiting. So sometimes it's a little bit safer to watch and that you're just kind of noticing things and it's really nice. And sometimes you wish there's more or you see certain directions and you're like, I wish that this character had treated him differently because of this, or I don't know.*

They continued explaining why they feel queer baiting has continued into more current media that is airing or being published during a time where queerness has become more visible within American culture. For Imogen, media corporations see queer baiting as the best of both worlds, drawing viewers in who hope to see queer characters while also not alienating viewers who wish to see the status quo of majority heterosexual characters maintained. They note how *"that's kind the whole point, I think, that it keeps you. And it's a way to keep people watching on the hope, which I think is just fucked up. That's capitalism, that's advertising."*

Participants articulated the continued employment of queerphobic actions within media spaces, like the prevalence of queerbaiting, as a barrier to accessing media that would allow them to find spaces of affirmation like that of a parasocial relationship. Even when media companies have the best of intentions, there are still choices that begin to erode the trust of queer viewers as Melody explained when she talked about the tokenism that representation in *The Dragon Prince* devolved into. Despite this, the importance of media in the lives of these participants and their avid engagement with fictional characters has allowed them to construct ideas about what would encourage them to engage with fictional media where they would ultimately be more likely to construct parasocial relationships.

Engaging in Media Going Forward

The final theme focuses on elements of representation the participants noted they hoped to see in media representations of queerness going forward. The two subthemes explored below reflect what participants said could help facilitate the creation of more media-based relationships with characters that are openly bisexual or, at the very least, queer. All five participants discussed how these changes would not only increase representation but ensure that representation of bisexual characters reflects the multitude of experiences bisexual+ individuals have in the real world. The subthemes discussed below are: (a) queer-created queer joy, and (b) multifaceted representation.

Queer-Created Queer Joy. Two participants, Melody and Imogen, openly talked about the need for representation that does not succumb to the harmful tropes that often befall queer characters within fictional media. Melody noted that narratives that center queer joy often serve as a type of resistance against the systemic oppression queer individuals face in heteronormative spaces:

> *And sometimes you just want to see queer joy because queer joy is resistance, and you can have a character that exists. There is a time and a place for discussion and media for discussing queer oppression. But I also really appreciate media that just lets queer characters exist openly and explicitly in the world without having to face queerphobia in the plot line.*

While realism has its place in media, according to Melody, there is a need for stories where queer characters exist without fear of queerphobia as those depictions allow for queer youth to see themselves existing without fear of repercussions for their sexuality. Imogen noted similar

feelings about needing queer narratives that are not centered around trauma and do not fall back on integrating harmful tropes like *bury your gays*:

> *I think less "kill your gays." Stop killing us! Stop giving us tragic, which I don't think that's always—people are like, "Oh, that's so homophobic." I think if it's made by straight people, sometimes it can be, but sometimes it's also a reflection of how I think unfortunately hopeless queer people can feel sometimes.*

Like Melody, Imogen also felt there was a time and place for realism within queer narratives. Telling stories that reflect the history of queer individuals as well as the still very real threat of violence against queer individuals ensures this history is not lost to time, but ensuring happy and joyful queer narratives are accessible pushes back against the fear and uncertainty queer individuals may feel as they construct their identities. As a writer themselves, Imogen noted how they find themselves often writing more tragic stories given the history of queerness in the United States:

> *And we, in designing our own stories, we can't help but include tragedy. A lot of the queer characters that I write, not all, but have kind of a sad ending, especially because I write historical fiction. I think it's historically accurate, but I'm open to being corrected.*

When they talked about their own writing, Imogen went on to say that while historically the queer experience in the United States was wrought with pain and trauma, their own experiences as a queer person have been positive and allowed them to feel they are being their authentic self. While they note that it is still dangerous in some spaces to be queer:

> *there is really no better space and time to be queer than now. And even as rough as now can be, I'm grateful for that and I realize that. But yeah, it would be great. Aside from historical stuff, more modern stories of just normal queer people having normal stories*

that are also queer and not just no more us dying at the hands of the IT *monster. No more Pennywise killing us. We are the only ones who happen to be sucked out of a plane and you're like, "I don't know if that's explicitly homophobic, but it's just weird."*

Because queer individuals are out and openly expressing their queerness and celebrating their identities publicly, the ways queer identities, including bisexuality+, are depicted need to mirror that optimism and joy. As Imogen talked about, stories where queer individuals are living normal lives devoid of killer clowns or structural oppression would allow for more positive connections and associations to be made through media interactions and relationships.

With depicting queer joy, Melody also noted that it was important for queer stories to be told by queer creators, something Imogen also echoed. While they noted that there are heterosexual creators including queer characters in their stories, Melody said that they are often left *"wondering what their actual intent would be."* They continued:

And that's not to say that there aren't creators out there that are like, "We want to tell queer stories because it matters." But for a lot of people, including this character means that they're going to gain viewers or not including this character or depicting this character in a certain way means they're going to retain their fan base, and that in the end affects how much money they're making off the show. And that, I think, is the most frustrating thing when it comes with engaging in representation with queer people.

With the inclusion of queer characters created by queer writers and creators, it may make it more likely that the narrative does not delve into frequent tropes like 'bury your gays' or using queer sexuality to lure in more viewers. Overall, Melody summed up their views about this by saying:

I'm looking for queer stories told by queer people. If you're telling a story that the focus is their identity. It's a little bit of a red flag to me if it's written by someone who's not a

part of the community or not very closely connected to the community. That is not to say that an ally can't write a queer story, but they better be getting a lot of consultation from the queer community in order to write that story in a way that isn't harmful.

Multifaceted Representation. For the final subtheme, all five participants expressed a desire for multifaceted representation of queer characters within different types of media. Each participant noted that having a larger range of depictions of queerness and seeing queer characters that serve more narrative importance than being the token queer character would have allowed them to form connections to characters more easily. Broadly, Melody expressed a desire to engage with media:

where queer people are allowed to exist and their identity completely isn't always being questioned, that they're just there and that is a part them. But the larger story as a whole doesn't surround that. That's not their whole personality. That isn't the whole part of the story. It's a facet.

Similarly, Toshi openly expressed being less inclined to engage with the types of media where queerness is still often predominantly found, like contemporary young adult novels centered on discovering identity and romance. For them, seeing queer characters have narratively important traits outside of being queer would make their connections to media stronger. They note they truly desire casual representation that mirrors how straight characters' sexuality is frequently a non-factor in their stories. They continued, saying they were looking for:

Just that casual representation. That's kind of the biggest thing. It doesn't have to be a big deal. The queer community wants representation, but that doesn't mean make a character that's entire personality is being queer make a character that happens to be queer. And it's not a defining—I mean, it's not a defining personality trait to most actual

queer people. It's just their preference in people or who they are. It doesn't have to be such an, "Oh my God, I'm queer. Look at me."

Like Toshi, Froggy also expressed how the heavy-handed focus on queer characters' sexuality made them less inclined to engage with queer-centered media and if queer characters became more expansive and moved beyond simply being queer, they would be more likely to engage with queer fiction. When queer narratives continue to center on queerness and queerness alone, Froggy noted they felt it reduced queer individuals down to their sexuality. They continued:

It's just putting such an emphasis on—obviously our lives are complex. I don't think that romance is inherently a bad way to represent queerness, but it shouldn't be the only way to represent it. And then when it's brought up in other scenarios, it's like, okay, it's still brought up, but it's like shoehorned in like you were saying earlier.

Froggy, in tandem with Melody and Toshi, expressed a need for queer characters to be more than simply the queer character in the story, but they also indicated that there is a way for characters that to embrace and display their queerness while serving more of a narrative purpose, something Moon and Imogen talked about as well.

While Moon and Imogen also noted the need for multifaceted queer characters, they also talked about how this cannot happen at the expense of explicit representation, particularly in the case of bisexual+ characters. Both Moon and Imogen noted how depicting bisexual characters requires somewhat of an emphasis on their bisexuality given its hidden nature when compared to other queer sexualities. For gay and lesbian characters, seeing them in relationships automatically reflects their queerness but because bisexual+ characters could be in relationships that pass as gay or straight, clearly depicting bisexual+ characters who openly claim their bisexuality ensures they are read as specifically bisexual+. Moon noted that seeing characters

acknowledge bisexuality+, as opposed to being ambiguously queer, would push back against the erasure bisexual individuals face in real life. They noted how they:

> *want to find specific representation. I don't want it to be glossed over or kind of skirt around it or for people to be sheepish about it. It needs to be upfront and no shame in it fully using the term bisexual and no other term or just saying that the person is queer that fits every category and they're diverse and the show is woke or whatever. No, we need to see specific things and it's important to see that. So, I would just say that I want to be more apparent about it and vocalizing my opinion and giving people feedback on characters they create.*

Moon's final sentence reflects how the power of fans can help make this desire a reality, echoing their similar feelings about fandoms and challenging the barriers created by media corporations afraid of angering some fans.

Along with wanting explicit naming of bisexuality within fictional media, Imogen also explained how bisexual characters seem to always end up in hetero-passing relationships:

> *That's the other thing. When they always end up, which it is totally valid for a bisexual person to end up with a person of the opposite gender, like a woman to end up with a man or a man to end up with a woman, that's totally cool. But when it's all that you see ever, it's just a little bit– and it's not any individual character's fault. It's just an overwhelming societal thing.*

For them, seeing characters reflect on past relationships or have partners of different genders across seasons could allow for more ways to include a plurality of bisexual experiences that viewers or readers can engage with. While Imogen acknowledged there is no one way to be bisexual, there seems to be a singular pattern often followed when bisexual characters are present

in fictional media that implicitly tells viewers, both queer and straight alike, how bisexual+ people should display their bisexuality+. For Imogen, she noted how seeing Thirteen on *House M.D.* who was very depicted as very hypersexualized in her relationships with women while not with men *"maybe shaped my opinions on what kind of relationships I should have with men and women"* and implies *"how bisexuals to a certain extent should be, or not in terms of behavior, but in terms of actual physically what are the proportions of attraction."*

Despite the struggles of queer individuals in finding representation that is affirming, all participants noted they hoped to be able to engage with positive representations of queerness, especially bisexuality+, going forward. For these participants, multifaceted representation that does not focus solely on the character's sexuality and representation that does not fall into trope-laden depictions of bisexuality+ are two integral changes they would like to see going forward. Making these changes would not only increase media engagement but also facilitate the development of parasocial relationships because the characters feel more realistic and less like they are simply filling a desire to claim diversity within the media source.

Summary of the Chapter

By presenting the individual narratives in conjunction with the metanarrative constellation, the unique experiences of each participant were introduced in the previous chapter before exploring the metanarrative created across their experiences above. Ensuring that participants' stories and voices are given equal importance is central to Foucauldian-informed thematic discourse analysis as it emphasizes both the individual experiences and the larger narrative they create. Drawing from queer researchers who conceptualized queer relationships and meaning-making through constellation metaphors as well as the use of Gavin's (2015) metanarrative constellation framework for presenting narrative findings, it shows how the

saliency of these common themes varies from participant to participant; however, it is important to note commonalities, even if not shared by all participants.

Upon interviewing, I realized that not all participants would share each and every theme; however, I do not view this as a negative or something that weakens the findings as it instead reflects the plurality of experiences within not just the queer community, but the bisexual+ one. Similarly, the metanarrative themes may not be relevant to every bisexual+ emerging adult, something that is clearly seen through the variation in saliency of metanarrative themes for each participant. For some participants, a particular theme may be more salient in their own experiences with fictional-media characters during identity construction. The overall alignment of participants to the themes of the metanarrative constellation can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5

Participant Alignment With Metanarrative Constellation Themes

Theme	Participant				
	Moon	Melody	Toshi	Froggy	Imogen
Fiction affirming identity	✳	✳	✳	✳	✳
Creation of possibilities	✳	✳	✳		✳
Sense of community	✳	✳			✳
Barriers to representation	✳	✳	✳		✳
Engaging in media going forward	✳	✳	✳	✳	✳

Within the construction of the larger metanarrative constellation, more salient themes for a participant would be noted by brighter stars while those less salient would be significantly dimmer. For some, those metanarrative themes may not have applied, removing that star entirely

and shifting what their metanarrative constellation looks like given their unique context. Even if stars are removed, the shape of the constellation remains largely the same, reflecting how even though our contexts and orientations create unique experiences, there are still shared elements and structures within those that unite us to one another.

Within this study, saliency of these thematic stars ranged from two to all five. While arguments about this disparity may acknowledge this discrepancy between participant alignment, I embrace these differences and view them as a strength of the findings in this study. Truly, the variance between narratives reflects why approaching this study from a position rooted in narrative inquiry that values each narrative independently was the appropriate methodological choice. When read in tandem with Chapter 4, this metanarrative illustrates how each individual narrative theme has threads of connection to the larger, metanarrative themes even if their saliency differs participant to participant (Table 5).

Additionally, the thematic findings reflect the interdisciplinary nature of my research. While all findings relate to the experiences participants had in forming connections with media characters, some are more relevant to educational spaces, particularly the *affirmation of identity* and *sense of community* themes while others may be more appropriately oriented towards media studies research; however, presenting them in tandem demonstrated how addressing the construction and use of parasocial relationships with fictional characters truly bridges media and communication studies with identity construction research within the college student development theory space. This overlap is further explored in Chapter 6 when this study's findings are contextualized within existing college student development theory research as well as media and communications studies research while also discussing the findings in relation to the two research questions guiding this study.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on both the narratives of each individual participant and their shared themes within the metanarrative constellation, this final chapter presents a discussion of the findings and their relationship to previous research, its implications, and highlights avenues for future inquiry into the use of media and parasocial relationships during identity construction processes for bisexual+ emerging adults. With these foci in mind, this Foucauldian-informed narrative inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

> *RQ1:* What do participant narratives reveal about how bisexual emerging adults construct their identity through interactions with media characters during their identity construction processes?
>
> *RQ2*: How do bisexual emerging adults utilize parasocial relationships during identity construction processes?

The findings were presented in Chapters 4 and 5, with Chapter 4 focusing on the individual participants' narratives while Chapter 5 thematically explored the metanarrative they created. Both individual (micro) level findings and metanarrative (macro) level findings are discussed in this chapter as they provide different perspectives in the context of the research questions noted above. Additionally, both levels of findings present implications for practice as well as highlight areas for future research to occur.

Discussion of Findings

Through interviews and journal responses, five bisexual+ emerging adults who are currently enrolled at a college or university within the United States explored their experiences with fictional media-based parasocial relationships and how they influenced their identity construction processes. By approaching this study from a Foucauldian-informed perspective, it allowed for both the individual and meta experiences to complement each other. When both are looked at as equally important and influential, it provides a look at the unique experiences participants have while also acknowledging how individual experiences occur within larger cultural contexts and in relation to the experiences of others. By critiquing larger cultural structures and systems that influence our experiences while simultaneously elevating the individual participants' stories, this study provides a broader perspective than would otherwise have been possible through a different methodological approach.

A Cautionary Note: Representation and Parasocial Relationships Do Not "Cause" Queerness

When reading rhetoric surrounding book bans and restrictions on discussions of queerness in academic spaces, an oft touted notion is that queer representation in media 'turns' children queer. Not only does this undermine efforts to allow youth to see themselves in the media they consume but is also inherently incorrect, something the findings of this study support. The participants in this study noted that engaging with media and constructing queer-affirming parasocial relationships did not make them queer, but it did allow them to construct a positive association with their queerness and combat some of the negative rhetoric surrounding queer individuals they learned from family members, friends, and/or culture at large (Callis, 2013; Hayfield et al., 2014; H. J. Johnson, 2016). Throughout their narratives, participants expressed how engaging with their parasocial relationship characters played a role in shaping their views

on norms and behaviors about sexuality (Bond & Drogos, 2014) as well as allowing them to construct an understanding of what their bisexual+ identity meant to them but in no way 'made' them queer.

While qualitative research in no way attempts to explore causation, or even correlation, the narratives in this study explicitly note how the capacity to form parasocial relationships with explicitly queer or queer-coded characters did not 'make' these participants queer, pushing back against the harmful rhetoric propagated by conservative right-wing politicians and activist groups under the guise of 'parental rights' (Foran, 2022). However, knowing that these groups often remove context, twist words, and erroneously extrapolate and generalize to fit their homophobic views, I felt it important to highlight this as a separate finding as opposed to an element of the findings discussed below. Throughout history, the use of censorship and fear have been the bedrock of conservative moral outrage. Book bans are not a new phenomenon with articles in the American Library Association Bulletin going back to 1948 when both the Second Red and Lavender Scares were in full swing in the US (e.g., Berninghausen, 1948) and "there was a swelling of censorship and anti-communist sentiment" (Pickering, 2023, p. 33). Although efforts to censor have shifted from a focus on the Red to the Lavender, censorship efforts today share not just a foundation but a similar form to those that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s as white, upper-middle class women were far more effective arbiters of anticommunist sentiment than the political elite at the local level.

However, the strength of moral panics of today and their focus on children pull at the heartstrings of the same demographic that was outraged with the rise of comics in the 1940s, the fear of communism in the 1950s, and the supposed removal of religion from schools in the 1970s and 1980s. Because of the cyclical nature of these queer targeted attacks, actively addressing

how this research pushes back against rhetoric that diverse literature and media depictions are seen as obscene and harmful to minors[14] by Moms for Liberty and other anti-LGBTQ+ hate groups (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2024) hopefully prevents the twisting and manipulating of this research by the very groups I, as both a queer individual and queer researcher, hope to see go by the wayside. While media representation allows consumers to develop positive self-concept and attitudes towards their identities, as shown in this study, it simultaneously has the possibility to allow us to develop empathy and understanding about experiences that are distinct from our own. The importance and influence of representation cannot be understated, something groups like Moms for Liberty, have capitalized on; however, their logic and rhetoric about queer representation 'turning' children queer is irrevocably flawed as "reading a book about being gay does not make the reader gay, any more than reading a book about menstruation will not make the reader menstruate if that is not what their body does" (Pickering, 2023, p. 37).

By continuing to use rhetoric that paints queerness as a choice as opposed to an inherent identity from birth pathologizes queerness and depicts queer individuals as dangerous groomers who "turn children queer," perpetuating the moral panic using the same formula seen throughout

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[14] Although United States case law has had a variety of approaches to legally defining obscenity from the subjective "I know it when I see it" from Justice Potter Stewart's concurrence in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964) to the currently used *Miller* test. Under this three-pronged test, a media source must meet each of the following criteria to be deemed obscene: (a) of prurient interest; (b) patently offensive; and (c) lacking literary, artistic, scientific, and/or political value (*Miller v. California*, 1973). This test gains ambiguity and relies on subjective judicial interpretation when the material in question is consumed by children and could be considered "harmful to minors" (*Ginsburg v. New York*, 1968). The phrase "harmful to minors" is often present in legislative efforts to ban books from classrooms and school libraries, like Act 372 (Furnishing a Harmful Item to a Minor, 2023) in Arkansas which amended the state code to threaten librarians and booksellers with jail time if they gave 'obscene material' to youth. The ambiguity of the phrase is used to conflate depictions of queerness with obscenity, priming novels with queer characters, particularly those where identity is often central to the themes as sex and romance are present in those books. For anti-queer groups like Moms for Liberty, they capitalize on this by intentionally pulling the sections about sex and calling them representative of not just the book as a whole but queerness as a whole, leading to bans. With the equating of queerness with sex, it allows Moms for Liberty to broadly paint any queer narrative as sexual in nature and therefore, inappropriate for children.

American history. This research, in particular, has the potential to be twisted and manipulated to serve these fearmongering groups and, hopefully, by addressing this explicitly and at the beginning of the discussion of findings, it will prevent decontextualization and manipulation of the participants' individual narratives, the metanarrative constellation, and the discussion of those findings for use contrary to the goals and intentions of this study.

Characterizing the Character-Participant Connections

As a whole, participants described their connections to these characters using language that either specifically called them relationships or described a relationship rather than a simple interaction. While the magnitude and intensity of these relationships differed from participant to participant, they described them using the word *relationship* and/or talked about them in a way that reflected the continued closeness, elevating them from a parasocial interaction to that of a relationship (Giles, 2002; Klimmt et al., 2006). When directly asked if they felt these characters were friends, a majority of participants answered in the affirmative, noting they experienced emotional response that celebrated when good things happened to the character while also experiencing the character's sorrow during moments of sadness (Stever, 2017). Similarly, many also noted how they admired traits these characters possessed and hoped to emulate those same traits themselves (Bond, 2018; Horton & Wohl, 1956; R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Even the participant who talked around calling the connection between them and their parasocial connection a relationship more so than the others still used language which reflected a closeness evocative of a parasocial relationship that is not present in a parasocial interaction (McQuail et al., 1972; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). Feeling both an emotional connection and a desire to emulate reflects one of the integral elements of parasocial relationships—wish fulfillment—where we create relationships with characters we hope to be like and/or wish to be (Hall, 2019;

Hoffner, 1996; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). When admiration becomes an element of a parasocial interaction, it begins to shift and morph into a parasocial relationship given the increased intimacy of the connection.

A second identifying trait of a parasocial interaction turning into a parasocial relationship is the "overtime components of the media consumers' connections with media characters" (Sherrick et al, 2022, p. 2), meaning where parasocial interactions end upon the cessation of engaging with media, a parasocial relationship continues beyond that (Dibble et al., 2016; Sherrick et al., 2022). This does not mean that parasocial relationships require constant thought outside of media engagement, just as we do not think of our real life friends at all hours of the day; however, consistent engagement, and particularly engagement in a variety of spaces (e.g., talking about the character with friends in real life, engagement in virtual spaces, the creation of fanfiction and other fan media) is a hallmark of parasocial interactions moving into parasocial relationships. While distinguishing between parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships is discussed below, beginning this discussion with an overview of how participants viewed these connections as strong and impactful provides important contextualization.

Parasocial Relationships as Sources of Affirmation

The findings in both individual and metanarrative contexts support prior research from student development theory, communications, and media studies research about how media and other environmental factors present the opportunity for viewers, readers, and those engaging with other types of media to learn about identities they possess (Dajches, 2022; Fisherkeller, 1997). The relationship element of a parasocial relationship also weaves in an element of interpersonal factors that influence identity construction processes, highlighting how parasocial relationships serve as both environmental and interpersonal factors on the construction of identity as they

serve a similar function to that of a dyadic relationship between two people in real life (Derrick et al., 2008; Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016; Gardner & Knowles, 2008). This merging of interpersonal and environmental factors present in the participants' creation and use of parasocial relationships to find and engage in affirming spaces reflects findings in extant literature about how these one-sided relationships truly function in similar ways as relationships with peers and family during their identity construction and coming out processes (Bond, 2011, 2018). The findings highlight how these relationships allow for the cultivation of a positive association with queerness and allow participants to express their identities without fear of repercussions in a world where queerness simply exists (Bond, 2018).

The active and transportive nature of parasocial relationships as described by participants supports the concept of *window, mirrors, and sliding glass doors* first conceptualized by literacy researcher Rudine Sims Bishop. As Bishop (1990) suggested, the participants in this study discussed how the relationships they created with fictional characters allowed them to "become a part of whatever world has been created or recreated" (p. ix). Other prior literature noted how fictional spaces present us with the opportunity to become a part of a world that is distinctly different from our own and one where we are valued for our identities (Derrick et al. 2019; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Additionally, when participants discussed parasocial relationships, they often described how these relationships allowed them to be transported to new worlds. For relationships like the ones described by participants in this study, they illustrated how constructing relationships that affirmed their queerness was not always the easiest task in real life, so they engaged in constructing parasocial relationships as a form of social surrogacy (Bond, 2018; Derrick et al., 2019; Jarzyna, 2021) where they were able to feel part of a larger

community with characters who share their identities (Gabriel et al., 2016; Green et al., 2004) canonically or through fandom-based canon corrective actions like headcanoning.

While connecting with other individuals who share identities is important and plays a large role in identity construction processes, not all queer individuals have the luxury of being open about their sexual identity. All participants in this study echoed the notion that parasocial relationships "share similarities with real-world relationships, can feel psychologically real, and be perceived as personally meaningful" (Rain & Mar, 2021, p. 2796), often serving the function of dyadic relationships when they were not an option or simply amplifying the dyadic relationships the participants had in real life. These relationships with fictional characters also served as social surrogates when individuals may feel unsafe to explore this facet of their identity in real life, which most participants noted occurred in their own identity construction processes at some point (Bond, 2018; Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). A majority of participants noted that these relationships were close and intimate, mimicking that of dyadic relationships in real life, which allowed them to feel more comfortable in who they are and feel as if they belonged (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Like research about connection to others increasing sense of belonging, the ability to construct affirming relationships made a majority of participants feel protected from isolation, rejection, and loneliness (Gabriel et al., 2016).

The influence of being transported to new worlds via parasocial relationships was most evident when participants described how their relationships allowed them to be transported into worlds where their queer identity was either seen as a non-issue by others within these fictional worlds or something that is normalized and valued. This ability to transport to a new world also provides queer individuals the freedom to exist in different socio-political environments and see their identities displayed in ways that are not possible in real life given the socio-political climate

in the United States. Because peers and family may not be a safe space to explore or even acknowledge their queerness, parasocial relationships filled a void left by an intrinsic need to connect and relate to others that was not occurring in real life (Rain & Mar, 2021; Sherrick et al., 2022). While the strength of these relationships varied from participant to participant, each noted they felt empowered in their queer identities when engaging with their parasocial relationship character(s), acknowledging the safety these relationships provided as they constructed their bisexual+ identity (Bond, 2018; Fisherkeller, 2007; Rain & Mar, 2021). Like previous research suggested, not all parasocial relationship characters were queer themselves but instead possessed some character trait that the participants felt aligned with queerness in some way, shape, or form (Bond, 2018; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Nylund, 2007).

By seeing this facet of their identity devoid of the harmful socio-political rhetoric currently governing expressions of queerness in the United States, creating and engaging in parasocial relationships allowed participants to cultivate positive associations to identities that have historically been marginalized by society at large (Dajches, 2022; Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016; Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2014). Similarly, the affirmation received from these parasocial relationships began to splinter the doors of the "double closet" (F. Marks, 2022, p. 37) bisexual+ individuals must navigate given the lack of acceptance from the queer and heterosexual communities alike. When presented with positive depictions that have the potential to grow from an interaction to a relationship through prolonged contact, as is the case for media-based parasocial relationships, over time these relationships begin to serve as spaces where identities are affirmed, especially those that do not receive affirmation in reality (Bond, 2018; McQuail et al., 1972; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). As a result, finding spaces that are affirming within a world that has regressed in the past few years in terms of acceptance towards queerness

has become increasingly important to ensure queer individuals are able to cultivate positive feelings about their sexual identity even if those somewhat serve as escapism. With this, however, the findings also illustrated how the affirmation the participants felt from these relationships was often rooted in how they simultaneously acted as sites of resistance to culturally constructed norms and expectations regarding bisexual+ identities as well as queerness as a whole.

Parasocial Relationships as Sites of Resistance and Subversion

Each participant noted how parasocial relationships were more likely to occur when they were able to explore a plurality of their identities, particularly with characters who challenged norms and expectations about gender. As all participants in this study identified as an identity within the gender nonconforming or non-binary community, many of their responses reflected a need to explore their sexuality in tandem with other salient identities. Because “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 179), the participants in this study reflected on how even though they were being asked to explore the functions of parasocial relationships in context to their sexual identity, they could not divorce their sexuality neither from their gender identity and performance nor other identities they possess. Due to the strong influence of culturally constructed and mutually constitutive expectations about performance of gender and sexual identities, understanding how they interact, particularly when both challenge the monosexual and gender essentialist status quo, as was the case for all participants in this study, maintaining a sole focus on a singular identity does not provide an accurate depiction of how participants viewed their sexual identities.

The ways in which participants viewed their sexuality was somewhat filtered through a lens that also desired to find spaces where they could subvert culturally constructed gender norms that act as reflections of their micro-level contexts and how those are situated within larger cultural discourse. For bisexual non-binary or trans individuals, they doubly destabilize the gender binary as bisexuality inherently “calls into question the certainties of both gay and straight identities” (Newsweek, 1995, para. 21) given how gender becomes less of a factor in the contexts of sexual attraction for bisexual+ individuals. Because so much of society is rooted in gender norms and expectations and is dependent on reaffirming those (Fairyington, 2005), even within discussions of sexual identity, we must integrate and allow for exploring how identities intersect in both individual experiences and cultural-level norms and expectations (Callis, 2013; Elizabeth, 2013; Rodríguez, 2016). Acknowledging the intersecting identities each participant holds at least partly informs why seeking parasocial relationships with media characters who subverted culturally created and constructed expectations in their own fictional worlds in addition to the viewing the construction of a parasocial relationship in general can be viewed as subversive act, particularly in in a culture that is increasingly less tolerant and accepting of queer individuals.

Because of this regression in terms of acceptance of queerness and the creation and manipulation of larger systems and structures intentionally designed and created to oppress and threaten the existence of queer individuals regardless of age, queer young people report increased feelings of anxiety, depression, and suicidality than their heterosexual counterparts, all of which are increased for those who identify under the bisexual+ umbrella given the creation and perpetuation of binegative stigmas by some within the queer and heterosexual communities (Blosnich et al, 2016; I. H. Meyer, 2003; McInnis et al., 2022; Pollitt & Roberts, 2021; Ramirez

& Galupo, 2019; Ross et al., 2018). Given the recent politically charged attacks on queer and trans individuals, mental health concerns within the queer community have been exacerbated (Gordon et al., 2024; Marken, 2023). Although all participants in this study were open about their sexual identity, for bisexual+ individuals, they may be less likely to be open about their sexuality and conceal it for fear of repercussions which negatively affects their mental health (Feinstein et al., 2020). Because of this, finding spaces where they can be open about their sexuality, like the fictional spaces they are transported to via parasocial relationships, could help abate some of the negative impacts of concealing their identity particularly due to the increased rates of rejection sensitivity experienced by individuals that prevents some from coming out (Feinstein, 2019). The recent increase in attempts to weaponize structural power through political and legislative efforts to prevent queer and transgender individuals from openly expressing their identities highlights the need to find spaces that are affirming, like parasocial relationships, to combat the uptick in anti-queer and anti-trans sentiment in the United States to find spaces that are not as threatening to their existence and mental health.

Participants discussed how parasocial relationships allowed them to form these affirming and positive connections in ways that were not subject to the active efforts to legislate queerness out of society at large, describing these relationships almost as a salve for the stressors of the future given current rhetoric surrounding queer identities. Although all participants discussed how the recent regression of societal attitudes towards queerness have influenced how they navigate through different spaces, one participant, Moon, specifically brought up the fear and uncertainty these societal shifts and the rise of anti-queer ideologies have created for her and other queer individuals she knows. From book bans in public schools and libraries to attempts to restrict gender affirming care, between 2022 and 2023, societal opinions in the United States

about viewing queer relationships as morally acceptable decreased from 71% to 64% (J. M. Jones, 2023). Similarly, there is now precedent within the American legal system after the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) overturning *Roe v. Wade* (1973) that threatens a whole host of legal protections of queer Americans (e.g., the right to marry in *Obergefell v. Hodges,* 2015*;* the right to engage in sexual activities in *Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003) as the decisions in these cases is rooted in the same jurisprudence interpretation of the Equal Protection Clause as that which was struck down when *Roe* was overturned.

I bring these judicial decisions up to illustrate the current macro-level structures and systems that have made it a tumultuous and unsettled time to be queer in the United States and highlight why finding and engaging in spaces where queer individuals are able to openly express their queerness without fear or judgment while not having that ability in real life allows these parasocial relationships to function as pseudo-countercultural spaces of resistance. While not truly absolving themselves of the grim realities for queer people, especially trans and non-binary queer people, simply being able to exist in a space, for however long, where queerness is normalized, subverts the fear and uncertainty and replaces it with joy, something participants noted they were looking for in the media they were more likely to engage with and develop a parasocial relationship.

For the participants in this study, their gender identity adds another layer of fear as they all identify under the non-binary and/or transgender umbrellas which have both faced even more attacks as of late. Within each of the participants narratives, there are micro-level structures and systems present they described in their own lives and contexts, which make being openly queer more dangerous than remaining in the closet; however, all participants noted they were open and

out about their sexual identities despite the steps back the larger American culture seems to be making in regards to acceptance of queer and trans identities. Some participants noted how even though they were able to find communities and spaces on their campuses that were affirming, the fear of that changing was a legitimate concern for them during their time at their institutions. In describing their work as a peer educator at their institution, Melody noted how this anti-queer and anti-trans rhetoric had risen to the surface on their campus, specifically noting how there was *"a lot of anti LGBTQ+ hate circulating right now."* When faced with these structural systems, students may find physical spaces, like Melody found with their friends and affinity groups, but they also discussed how they "*definitely hop into [media] if [they] can't connect with people*." Reflecting on how this macro-level discourse can become pervasive even at our colleges and universities and despite the best efforts of practitioners to create welcoming and affirming environments, we are beholden to legislative mandates and cultural rhetoric.

When the culture(s) we live in are openly hostile and antagonistic towards identities we possess, searching for spaces where that is not present presents us with spaces where we can feel affirmed and valued for who we are, including our queerness, is crucial to reducing the stresses and anxieties that are more prevalent in queer young and emerging adults than their heterosexual counterparts (Gordon et al., 2024; Marken, 2023). Parasocial relationships have the ability to serve as spaces of solace when reality feels dangerous and unsafe. Because of how drastically different the fictional spaces participants described engaging in are to American culture in its current state, being transported to these queer-normative spaces via parasocial relationships begins to feel subversive and function as a space of resistance to the greater cultural views on queerness. This is particularly noticeable if the fictional setting and world where the parasocial relationship occurs is one where queerness is viewed as normal and un-extraordinary. With this,

the influence of the parasocial relationship environment on if it functions as a site of resistance and subversion cannot be understated.

As existing research found, the environment and setting of the media are equally as important as the characters themselves in developing a parasocial relationship as a character's narrative progression cannot be separated from the setting and the canonically explicit identity of characters is less important to queer individuals (Bond, 2018). Supporting previous literature which found queer individuals are more likely to develop a parasocial relationship with a heterosexual character in fantasy, dystopian, and/or sci-fi world than in realistic fiction (Bond, 2018), participants in this study described similar experiences where they connected with characters across the sexuality and gender spectrum within fantasy and speculative environments with each participant in this study noting at least one parasocial relationship with a character that exists in a setting that could be considered speculative or fantastic. Similarly, participants noted how in these spaces, they were drawn to narratives where the character still deviated from the norms and expectations of the world but ultimately overcame injustices despite feeling pressure to conform or face adversity (Bond, 2018); however, a character's sexuality was not the norm being subverted, something participants noted encouraged them to continue engaging as it provided a similar narrative to their own while providing participants a sense of escape from subverting expectations regarding sexuality as they must do in real life. When asked about their proclivity to embrace fantasy settings over those which are more evocative of American culture, each participant expressed feeling drawn to the sheer difference between the settings and their real life. By being able to engage in fictional spaces where queerness is viewed as normal, each participant described how this made them question why American culture struggles to allow queer individuals to exist openly without punishment.

Participants also expressed how these relationships allowed them to critique expectations of gender and sexuality performance. From feeling a stronger sense of connection to villains as Froggy did to Toshi's proclivity to connect to "badass women," all participants expressed a kinship with characters who pushed back against binaries and expectations based on gender and sexuality. For two participants, they expressed frustration with expectations about how their relationships with their partners were often read as heterosexual despite their queer identity, an experience that is unique to bisexual+ individuals (Charley et al., 2023). By forging connections with characters who were queer themselves or were headcanoned to be queer not only did they feel reaffirmed in their queerness, but they also were able to resist the erasure of their bisexual+ identity they felt as a result of being in a hetero-passing relationship. In a parasocial relationship, their queerness was not called into question and the worlds they were transported to acknowledged that queer identities come in all shapes and sizes. Where in real life, their bisexuality+ in the context of a hetero-passing relationship was used by others to not view them as queer based on appearance (Wandrey et al., 2015), the affirmation they experienced in their parasocial relationships allowed participants to construct a space and relationship that would both affirm their identities and resist the bisexual erasure they experienced in real life.

Like with resistance to bisexual erasure in hetero-passing relationships, all participants discussed how these relationships aligned with their desire to challenge norms and stereotypes. The characters they connected with all actively resisted tropes associated with bisexual+ characters. With the prevalence of tropes like the promiscuous and hypersexual bisexual (Chickerella et al., 2021; H. J. Johnson, 2016) to viewing bisexual+ identities as not truly queer identities (H. J. Johnson, 2016; Rodríguez, 2016; Thöni et al., 2022), being able to construct relationships with characters that affirm their identities in a positive way is in itself an act of

resistance to cultural norms that depict bisexual+ individuals in a negative light. While one participant in particular, Froggy, expressed frustration with the depiction of hypersexuality as a negative thing, all participants expressed a need for representation that is multifaceted. They all agreed that bisexual+ characters can be hypersexual, but they cannot *always* be hypersexual. By intentionally engaging in media that does not fall into these traps, the relationships the participants built with fictional characters actively pushed back against binegative tropes.

Participants also discussed how they felt frustrated when it seemed media fell into problematic trope, such as burying your gays (Bridges, 2018; Cameron, 2018; Cover & Milne, 2023; Waggoner, 2018), that either traumatized or even killed queer characters at the expense of furthering the development of heterosexual ones. Along with similar discussions about queerbaiting (J. Brennan, 2018), they reflected how these negative behaviors made them more selective in the media they engaged with to create lasting parasocial relationships. When participants discussed their specific parasocial relationships, they noted how they were more likely to construct relationships in media that avoided these tropes or media that had a space where they were able to engage with other fans who felt similar about the treatment of queer characters. By being intentional about the media they engaged with, it allowed the formation of parasocial relationships to occur in media where depictions of queerness and bisexuality are neither reinforcing harmful tropes nor reliant on stereotypes, pushing back against the dominant views of bisexuality+ that depicted it negatively.

For some participants, these relationships also allowed them to unlearn harmful views they grew up with. Four out the five participants noted they grew up in religious environments that influenced their identity construction in negative ways at various points throughout their lives. By forming relationships with characters that affirmed their bisexual+ identity, it broke

down some of the lingering queerphobic rhetoric they grew up with and replaced it with feelings of acceptance and positivity. Even for Imogen who expressed the most positive relationship with their faith and sexuality growing up, they described how these relationships, particularly that with Kristen from *Fantasy High*, has allowed them to reconcile some of the harmful views they ultimately had about their sexuality as they saw the character wrestle with the same. While Imogen's relationship with Kristen as well as other participants' use of parasocial relationships highlight how they allowed them to unlearn and relearn ideas about queerness, this reflects how even through parasocial relationships are spaces and sources of affirmation, the choice of allowing these relationships to stem from media that depicts queerness in ways that subvert norms and expectations reflects how they are utilized as sites of resistance as well. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Parasocial Relationships are Catalysts and Intermediaries for Dyadic Relationships

While for some, parasocial relationships truly are "found to be similar to that of how we interact with, "know and understand flesh-and-blood friends" (Perse & Rubin, 1989, p. 60) and facilitate interactions that mirror those of dyadic relationships (Fisherkeller, 1997), participants described how their parasocial relationships allowed them to construct relationships with people in real life or in virtual spaces. Discussing interactions with others via social media platforms and in fandoms and fan spaces online, as Moon and Imogen explored in great detail, supports findings about how individuals with marginalized identities use online spaces as ways to connect with others who share similar experiences and views and ultimately integrate what they learn there into their construction of identities (Miller, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016; Simms et al., 2021). When parasocial relationships served as a catalyst for interacting and forming relationships with others through engaging in "lively discussions with others regarding the representation, which

occur[s] both in person and in online spaces" (Cipriano & Holland, 2024), participants noted how these spaces became arenas where they found a sense of connection and community, something that is a direct reflection of interpersonal factors that influence identity construction that is mediated by an environmental factor. As noted above, these relationships were often created to fill a unique social need and functioned as a social surrogate (Bond, 2018; Derrick et al., 2019). Just as real-life friends introduce new people who may or may not be a connection or a friendship, parasocial friends do the same, but in different contexts. Even as younger generations become more technologically savvy and started to use technology as a way to meet friends and romantic partners, digital-based relationships are often viewed as lesser than physical dyadic relationships.

While Melody and Imogen reflected on how shared interest in media and parasocial relationships allowed them to make connections to friends in real life, one particularly impactful space where parasocial relationships served as a catalyst for the creation of a dyadic relationship was in spaces dedicated to specific media. The increase in engagement in fan culture and fandom through social media websites and platforms like Tumblr, Twitter, and TikTok, extends the longevity of parasocial relationships even after the media source has been consumed as interactions between consumer and character continue to occur in these digital spaces (Chatman, 1990; Hall, 2019). In a way, the creation of parasocial relationships and continued engagement in fan spaces on social media platforms does somewhat bring up a question of which happens first as both actions are mutually constructive (Blight et al., 2017). For the participants in this study, many reflected on relationships they constructed during their adolescence and young adulthood, many of which continued to this day. This was most notable when talking with Moon who noted her relationship with Ahsoka Tano from *Star Wars* was cultivated from her childhood but has

remained active to present day because of her engagement with other *Star Wars* and Ahsoka fans in digital spaces.

Because "people become fans for various reasons, one of which is to satisfy specific psychological needs" (Wesselman et al., 2022, p. 158), these spaces are primed to serve as spaces to connect to others (Reysen & Lloyd, 2012) and have functions beyond simply a space to embrace interests in media sources that reflect the unique needs of a particular member (Ray et al., 2017). Prior research found positive correlations between participation in fandom and an increased sense of belonging (Chadborn et al., 2018; Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017). For participants who described engagement in fan spaces as they constructed their parasocial relationships, being open about their fan interests also "serve[s] a purpose to attract others who share their interest to increase their chances for new friendships" (Chadborn et al., 2017). When parasocial relationships encourage engagement in fan spaces, it presents the opportunity for dyadic relationships to develop based on this shared interest, something Moon discussed when talking about her engagement with other fans on Twitter.

For those who have marginalized identities, interests in fandom can be intensified as they attempt to find spaces where they can openly share and express identities which are stigmatized in real life. Similarly, when fan spaces themselves are stigmatized as is often the case for fantasy and science fiction spaces, particularly for women or non-binary fans who have historically been excluded from these very spaces and face gender-based harassment (Nisbett, 2018), fans "may find that locating other individuals who share the interest and engaging in a community may be more critical to identity construction than other motivations" (Tague et al., 2020, p. 329) for engaging in fan spaces such as eudemonic reasons like enjoyment and pleasure. When participants have identities that are marginalized in real life but then exist in fan spaces that are

stigmatized as well, using these spaces to cultivate a sense of belonging becomes even more noticeable.

Within these fan spaces, participants also described an interesting occurrence of making corrections to perceived missteps or missed opportunities within canonical characterization through interactions with others in these spaces. Whether through headcanoning or the creation of fanfiction, attempts to write queerness and diversity into stories that are meaningful to consumers allowed participants to create the representation they wished to see occur within the character's canonical narrative progression and growth. Engaging in canon-correcting actions that may ignore cultural norms and expectations about the perceived appropriateness or queer identities in reality reflects how "utopian imagination nevertheless continues to play for fans who engage in excessive/extrapolative queer reading" (Jackson, 2023, p. 32).

This action connects back to how participants used parasocial relationships as sites of resistance to cultural norms and views on queerness as they constructed their identity. Ultimately, participants noted how they took this a step further and used their participation in fan spaces to continue to create subversive additions to canonical representation that may be resistant to including queer narratives without fan pressure. These actions in themselves can create connections between fans as they work to address what are perceived as manipulative actions, like queerbaiting and burying your gays, to gain viewership at the expense of supporting queer viewers through explicit and positive representation, or even console each other when it happens time and time again (Bourdraa, 2018; Lowe, 2017; McDermott, 2021).

In the context of fanfiction and headcanoning, fans edit canonical representation to "either to 'fix' some perceived error or trouble with the canon" (Hardin, 2023, p. 60). Some of these choices "[seem] deliberately to ignore or override clear textual messages indicating

characters' heterosexuality" (S. G. Jones, 2014, p. 118), something Moon noted when talking about an episode where Ahsoka kisses a male character. This act of accepting or rejecting canonical choices or engaging in efforts that correct perceived slights is, in itself, a subversive act. In the case of Ahsoka, Moon's act of canon-correction resists the "wider cultural logic [which] dictates that heterosexuality can be assumed while homosexuality must be proved" (S. G. Jones, 2014, p. 118). Moon's insistence that she is bisexual+ could very well be true given her sexuality is not explicitly confirmed in canonical representation, meaning she could still engage romantically and sexually with male characters. Moon's active choice to read her as queer before it is canonically confirmed decenters the socially constructed assumption that characters are straight until proven otherwise. Particularly related to a bisexual construction of Ahsoka, Moon's headcanoning her as bisexual from the start subverts the invasive need for bisexual+ individuals to 'prove' their identity to others before being able to claim the label (Cipriano et al., 2023), something that is exacerbated by the forced-hypersexualization of queer women in general (Witcomb & Cooper, 2023) but especially for bisexual women (Callis, 2013; Chickerella et al., 2021; Elizabeth, 2013; H. J. Johnson, 2016; Rodríguez, 2016). For Moon, Ahsoka is bisexual because Moon simply believes she is not because of the character's romantic or sexual history, a view she found affirmed through the connections with like-minded fans of the character in online fan spaces.

Looking at parasocial relationships within the context of fan spaces, the uses and gratifications (Katz et al., 1973; Sherry et al., 2006) that stem the construction of these relationships begins to take the shape of a multifaceted prism, each side representing an integral but connected reason these relationships are created and used. For participants in this study, their use of parasocial relationships stems from a variety of needs that are unique to the individual

participant. Because of this, the interactions they had which led to the relationships they formed served different functions and had distinct outcomes or gratifications (Katz et al., 1973). When we “seek our specific media and content genres in those media in order to receive sought-after gratifications” (Greenberg et al., 2010, p. 240), those gratifications will look different for each person. This reflects how parasocial relationships are contextually constructed, filling the specific needs the individual needs at a given point in time, something reflected in the unique ways this study’s participants described their parasocial relationships, as well as potentially mirror the function of dyadic relationships if that is the gratification being sought.

Parasocial Relationships Mirror the Form and Function of Dyadic Relationships

As noted above, the form and function of parasocial relationships mirrors that of dyadic relationships, if that is a type of interaction the individual desires (Bond, 2018). As evident in the different ways participants talked about their parasocial relationships, the strength of these varies from person to person. Some individuals may be more likely to develop parasocial relationships and feel them more deeply while others might find these relationships to be weaker. Just as in real life, repeated interaction with a character increases the likelihood of developing a parasocial relationship. Like their real-life counterparts, parasocial relationships allowed participants to learn about themselves and their queerness while forming a relationship where they felt a sense of affirmation. One of the unique uses of parasocial relationships for queer young and emerging adults is the dual roles of both complementing relationships that exist in reality while also compensating for relationships they have been unable to construct for a variety of reasons (Bond, 2018). Because of this, there is no one expected function of parasocial relationships that we can assume queer emerging adults because they are constructed in a way that fills whatever need(s) or void(s) that an individual has.

However, this also means that these relationships can have harmful impacts on our identity if the environments they create are not affirming, particularly when they allow for the interaction with other people in fan spaces. Because of their mirroring in form and function of dyadic relationships, it allows parasocial relationships to have positive and negative psychological consequences of dyadic relationships between two people (Derrick et al., 2009; Gardner & Knowles, 2008; Wesselmann et al., 2022). As Moon and Imogen discussed, sometimes fan spaces are not affirming for queer individuals even if their parasocial relationship with the character is a source of affirmation. This is particularly noticeable and more likely to occur if these spaces have served as male preserves (Dunning, 1986) since their conception. For queer individuals who engage in spaces like the *Star Wars* and *Dungeons & Dragons* spaces as Moon and Imogen, respectively, noted they do, there is the potential for these relationships to be affirming while the environment is not.

Like other research that explored the environment of fan spaces and how it governed the ability for those with identities that have been historically absent (Pitti, 2019), both *Star Wars* and *Dungeons & Dragons* fan spaces are rooted in norms that give cisgender heterosexual white men *carte blanche* in terms of responsibility for their actions (M. L. Allen, in press; Dashiell, 2020, 2022). When fans who are not white, cisgender, heterosexual men begin to take part of the discourse in these spaces, and introduce their subversive headcanons that alter the canonical lore of the media source and fandom itself, these environments become somewhat hostile for those who do not share the dominant identities of the space and challenge the ability for the majority to continue creating hostile environments under the guise of ‘boys will be boys.’ Moon discussed this when they described the *Star Wars* fandom, a fandom notorious for perpetuating misogyny and anti-queer sentiments (J. A. Brown, 2018; Golding, 2022; Scott, 2019; Wray, 2020), but she

also noted how even with these potentially hostile spaces, connecting with other queer fans allowed them to chip away at the unchecked behaviors of the white cisgender, heterosexual male majority and create an environment that has the possibility to be largely positive and affirming in the future.

Regardless of whether the environment is affirming, participants noted how their parasocial relationships had the capacity to reflect the strength and intimacy of dyadic relationships despite being one sided, but only if that was something they were searching for. Parasocial relationships have the potential to function as a variety of relationship types from friendships or even relationships with tinges of romantic attraction (Gardner & Knowles, 2008; Hartmann, 2008, 2017; Liebers, 2022; Liebers & Schramm, 2017; Liebers & Straub, 2020; Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018), a variety of which were seen in the parasocial relationships participants described in study. For Froggy, these relationships were not particularly strong but still allowed them to learn about themselves even if only retrospectively. Compared to the other participants, like Toshi who noted multiple times they were not sure if they wanted to be Celaena/Aelin's friend or be with her romantically, which aligns with the ways fantasy facilitates romantic parasocial relationships (Liebers & Straub, 2020), or Moon noted she would not be who she is today without her parasocial relationships, these different emotions and uses of parasocial relationships demonstrate how they filled different needs at various points in their lives when these relationships were strong.

For participants who noted strong connections to media and stronger parasocial relationships, they also brought up the phenomenon of parasocial breakup or parasocial dissolution (Barbara & Dion, 2000; Cohen, 2003). Melody noted how she felt herself drift away from her relationship with characters within *The Dragon Prince* as she felt less connected to the

series due to creative decisions she did not agree with. Similarly, Imogen presented multiple characters she constructed parasocial relationships with that ended in parasocial break up. The way she described these relationships slowly fading in importance mirrors how friendship breakups look like in real life. While neither Imogen nor Melody described these breakups as bombastic as the literature suggested they can be (e.g., Cohen, 2003, 2004; Daniel & Westerman, 2017; Krakowiak, 2023) they reflect how some friendships simply fade from existence due to one party's growth and change making them no longer necessary or useful.

Parasocial Relationships are Contextually Based Connections

Because parasocial relationships mirror the form, function, and environmental influences of real-life dyadic relationships, they are connections we make that are heavily dependent on our contexts. The contexts in which they are created are equally as influential as the media content itself. While participants may have used similar language to describe how these relationships function at times, the contexts in which they were created were starkly different for each participant. One such factor that influences how participants construct these relationships and ultimately use them in their identity construction processes is the type of media source of which the character is a part.

No two participants noted a parasocial relationship with the same character, but there were shared media sources or formats between participants. Drawing from television shows, books, and participatory new media including *Dungeons & Dragons* actual play series, each of these formats consists of multiple interactions with characters over a long period of time (Chatman, 1990; Hall, 2019). Whether as lengthy as the more than 5,000 pages Toshi spent with Celaena/Aelin in the *Throne of Glass* series to the more than 100 hours Imogen spent with Kristen Applebees in the two fully aired seasons of *Fantasy High*, each media source participants

brought up required them to engage for an extended period of time. This frequent and consistent interaction is what shifts casual engagement with characters through parasocial interaction to a close and intimate parasocial relationship (Klimmt et al., 2006; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Stever, 2017; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). Similarly, continuing to engage with the character outside of the media interaction, such as contributing to fan discourse or talking with others about a particular character, is an integral part of distinguishing a parasocial relationship from a parasocial interaction (Dibble et al., 2016; Sherrick et al., 2022).

Factors like the length of time and frequency of interaction contribute to the likelihood of developing a parasocial relationship; however, there are other factors as well that increase the chance of developing one as well. Historically, the interactive-ness of media has been explored as a factor that makes developing parasocial relationships more likely but mainly in the context of children's educational programming as they are uniquely structured for children to talk to and interact with the characters on the screen (Bond & Calvert, 2014; Lauricella et al., 2011). However, there are types of media, particularly newer formats, that provide similarly interactive environments for older individuals, including emerging adults. While no participant noted a particularly strong connection to a video game character which has been seen as a particularly interactive form of media for adults well suited for the construction of parasocial interactions and relationships (Elvery, 2022, 2023; Hartmann, 2008; Kavli, 2012), Imogen's connection to a character from a *Dungeons & Dragons* actual play series presents another interactive media type that seems to be more conducive for the construction of parasocial relationships (Lasley, 2021) given the multiple types and sheer amount of the content for each series (Friedman, 2021) with players that "pride themselves on an intimate relationship with their fans" (Torner, 2021, p. 29). While there is not much research in on fan experiences and parasocial relationship creation in the

context of *Dungeons & Dragons* actual play series specifically, Imogen's experience feeling a strong connection to both Kristen Applebees and the actor who plays her, Ally Beardsley, reflects research on other new participatory media like gaming live streaming including esports, Let's Play videos, and Twitch streamers (Kneisel & Sternadori, 2023; Kowert & Daniel, 2021; Kreissl et al., 2021; Leith, 2021; Sherrick et al., 2023). Because of this, further research on this specific media type is warranted given its conduciveness for cultivating parasocial relationships as well as the rapid growth of the fan base of these series.

One of the most intriguing contextual factors that influenced how participants constructed and used parasocial relationships was their age. When organized by age, two distinct groups formed, one consisting of Imogen (21), Melody (22), and Moon (22), and the other with Froggy (18) and Toshi (19). Upon looking at the narratives in these groupings, they begin to illustrate the influence of age on how they described the construction and use of parasocial relationships. While all participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 and members of Gen Z, Froggy and Toshi were still in their teenage years while Moon, Melody, and Imogen were in their 20s. This difference in ages may not seem large on the surface but given the amount of development that occurs during emerging adulthood, particularly that in the context of identity (Arnett, 1995), the 3–5 year difference between participants allowed for distinct uses of parasocial relationships to occur between the two groups. While each participant had contexts and environments specific to themselves on an individual level, when participants are grouped in this way, there are differences in macro-level contexts and environments as well.

In particular, one area that may have been affected by this difference in age is the use of fan spaces. Best articulated by Imogen who noted the *"Holy Trinity of Tumblr, Twitter, and TikTok,"* this reflects the progression of fan spaces across a generational divide that influences

the interactions an individual has in a virtual fan space. As a millennial myself, my fan interactions were limited to Tumblr which is still the platform my mind automatically associates with fandom and fan spaces. For participants in this study, they were more likely to participate in Twitter or TikTok communities which have distinctly different fandom interactions when compared to more blog-like platforms like Tumblr. While research on fandom culture as a hallmark of millennial nerd-dom exists (Stein, 2015), there is not as much focus on the role of fan spaces and fandom on Gen Z individuals and how their experiences differ from the Tumblr-centric fan experiences of millennials. While like their millennial counterparts before them, Gen Z grew up even more connected to the internet and social media, so it makes sense that virtual spaces are attractive to those who are currently emerging adults given their access to the internet since birth. However, recent research into the ways in which Gen Z access fan spaces and engage in fandom practices is different from that of millennials (Booth & Dare-Edwards, 2021). Because most fan studies research draws from millennial experiences, acknowledging that the older participants in this study who are closer in age to their millennial counterparts could be a partial explanation for why fan spaces were seen as more important for them versus the two participants in their teens because their use aligned more with that of what is depicted in research. For instance, while Toshi wrote fanfiction, they did not engage in fan spaces in a similar fashion to Moon or Imogen who expressed actively contributing to fan discourse on a variety of platforms.

When comparing media usage, acknowledging that "media behaviours or fandoms may be linked to a specific generation" (Hunting, 2019, pp. 95–96) brings to the forefront any biases that may be present in previous literature as well as expectations. Because media use is ubiquitous for Gen Z, particularly the younger members, it may not feel as impactful or important to participants as it would for older individuals whose engagements with digital spaces

was more of a learned behavior than an innate one. While the age range between the two groups of participants is small, there is an argument to be made that even within generations there are stark differences between subsets of people and that,

> Within the fifteen to twenty years that make up a societal generation are often significant social and cultural changes that result in any two people having dramatically different relationships to media texts and fandoms. (Kies & Connor, 2022, p. 3)

However, across these groups, participants described how fandom serves as a site of community even if interacting with that community looks different for each participant. Woven through discussions of fan spaces for the four participants who noted the importance of fandom, their views aligned with research about Gen Z engagement in these spaces. For younger fandom members like the participants in this study, fandom-based community is "about sharing knowledge, and being able to talk in depth with others who understand all the same intricacies about the fan object, often using language in a way to signal their emotional investment and fan identity too" (Booth & Dare-Edwards, 2021, p. 223).

Providing an overview of the role of age in fandom students helps contextualize how a participant's age influenced how they described parasocial relationships and the role of media in their identity construction processes. For older participants, like Moon and Melody, they talked about these relationships in a way that appeared rather nostalgic, something that was clearly present in their reactions to the excerpts I had all participants react to. Although they expressed a somewhat melancholic yearning to have had representation like that presented in the excerpts for them to connect with earlier in their lives, younger participants noted that these excerpts felt childish and unrealistic. Similarly, older participants Moon, Melody, and Imogen were more likely to clearly call their parasocial relationships an actual relationship while younger

participants, and in particular Froggy, alluded to their relationship with H.I.M. from *The Powerpuff Girls* as a such without using the word relationship. While all participants, regardless of age, noted these relationships were impactful, even if only looking in retrospect, the influence of age in terms of the responses and the linguistic choices illuminates age as a contextual factor that influences both the construction of and discussion about parasocial relationships.

Acknowledging the Influence of Demographic Factors

While qualitative research is not meant to generalize across populations, it is important to acknowledge the circumstances surrounding a study when contextualizing the findings that could play a role in the findings and their interpretations. For this study, the demographics of the participants were somewhat homogenous, despite my efforts to be as least restrictive as possible in sampling criteria. Because identities intersect, reflecting on how the homogeneity of sampling allows for better understanding of the transferability of these findings. Out of the five participants, four self-identified as white while one, Moon, identified as biracial (*"Mexican and white"*). Because of this, exploring how these relationships function in a more racially diverse sample could provide findings distinct from the ones presented and discussed earlier because of how deeply woven whiteness is within the queer community at large as well as the bisexual+ community. It is also equally important to acknowledge how the racial homogeneity may have influenced my findings that largely did not incorporate the intersection between racial and sexual identities.

However, Moon did talk about their experiences being a Person of Color within queer spaces, specifically discussing her experiences at the intersections between her biracial and bisexual identities and highlighting how it can be difficult to exist in the liminal space for both racial and sexual identities at the same time (Galupo et al., 2019; Ghabrial, 2019; Ramirez &

Galupo, 2019). Foucault's (1976/19990) work explored how sex and sexuality is a manifestation of power and through the policing of social acceptability of sexuality and sexual expression based on norms centered in whiteness and have been used to ensure allocations of power favor white individuals throughout the history of the United States (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012). For bisexual+ People of Color, like Moon, they are beholden to more scrutiny from the structures and systems upholding whiteness, including those that dictate what types of sexual activities and expressions are socially acceptable. When they challenge the long dominant norm in the United States which centers heterosexuality and monosexuality by simply openly identifying and expressing their bisexuality+, they are held to a different standard of compliance to these cultural norms and expectations than their white bisexual+ counterparts because their existence threatens the centricity of whiteness in both American culture at large but within the queer community as well (Flanders et al., 2019; Galupo et al., 2019; Ghabrial, 2019).

Similarly, all five participants identified as non-binary or genderqueer, both of which push back against rigid constructions of gender based on expectation and norms rooted in gender performance (Butler, 1990/1999). However, the most recent data about nonbinary and transgender identification in the United States notes that 5.1% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 identify as nonbinary or transgender, a stark contrast to the 1.6% of 30- to 49-year-olds and the 0.3% of those over the age of 50 (S. Brown, 2022). This increase in identifying under the nonbinary and/or trans umbrella(s) echoes the increase in LGBTQ+ identification within Gen Z, the generation of which all participants from this study are members. As of 2024, 22.3% of Gen Z identifies as LGBTQ+, 68% of whom identify as bisexual (J. M. Jones, 2024). Just as younger individuals are more likely to embrace less prescriptive terms for sexuality, like queer instead of a specific sexual identity label than older individuals (Savin-Williams, 2011),

there seems to be a similar age-based increase in identifying under the transgender and/or non-binary umbrellas.

Upon comparing interviews and findings between the pair of participants in their teens with the three who were in their 20s, the responses are distinct enough from each other that their age may have had an influence on the ways they described their parasocial relationships, their functionality, and how participants responded to questions on a broader level. For instance, it felt as if younger participants were more focused on answering questions and verifying they had answered in a way they thought I wanted them to. Older participants, however, were more willing to be conversational and explore the nuances of these relationships, feeling unbothered if their answers were contradictory. This difference aligns with cognitive development models that move from young and emerging adults seeking validation from external figures to trusting their own knowledge and intuition. Just as it is impossible to isolate a single facet of identity from the others people possess, other forms of development occur simultaneously with identity construction and influence the ways in which an individual talks about and makes meaning of their experiences.

Early waves of student development theory research and broader human development research incorporated ages within models that prescribed developmental milestones attached to a particular age range (e.g., psychosocial development [Erikson, 1959/1980]) or had strict directionally-prescribed stages or schemas that students progressed through in a particular order (e.g., cognitive development [Perry, 1968]; moral development [Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1969]) Even early models of sexual identity development published during the second wave of student development theory had strict stages that queer college students moved through in a particular order (e.g., Cass, 1979). While this finding in no way encourages reverting to age-

based models given their inability to adapt to the environmental and contextual factors that have since been identified as influences on development, acknowledging the range of ages in our student populations can help provide insight into why students respond in particular ways. While this study did not explore other facets of development, like cognitive or psychosocial development that present more structured developmental paths, elements of those models could have influenced how participants answered questions.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings in this study provide implications for both scholarship and practice. Discussed below, these have been organized into three implications rooted in college student development theory research and broader educational research as well as student affairs practice, particularly focused on programmatic efforts within co-curricula on college and university campuses. Based on the findings, three implications for student affairs practice were identified: (a) reconceptualizing our view on virtual spaces and media use, (b) advocating for access to media with queer characters, and (c) embracing third wave and poststructural student development theory considerations.

Reconceptualize Views on Virtual Spaces and Media Use

Although co-curricular programming has often employed media as a method of engaging students, intentionally using media that is not only engaging but that could also help students feel affirmed, regardless of identity, requires student affairs professionals to reassess their views on the use of media within co-curricular spaces. Engaging with a media source is not a passive act, but it does require intentionality and planning on the part of professionals. As someone watches, reads, and/or interacts with a media source, they are constantly interpreting and analyzing new information and how it aligns with their own views and—in the case of fictional media—their

identities as they determine how to feel about a character. Although media-based programming has historically gotten a bad reputation in both curricular and co-curricular spaces as a cop out and is often viewed as having little educational merit, when intentionally designed to engage students in discussion and reflection, this research shows how media based programming has the potential to allow students to create strong bonds with characters they feel both connected to and safe with to explore parts of their identities they have not yet uncovered.

Just as any other pedagogical tool, integrating media into curricular and co-curricular spaces should be well thought out and intentional. In my own pedagogy, I have found integrating media can serve as a way to illustrate complex and abstract concepts, but it also allows me to introduce students to depictions of identities in media that are well developed. Do all students form parasocial relationships as a result of this act? I would have to say they do not; however, integrating media use into learning spaces could introduce a student to a media source that allows them to feel safe to explore who they are, highlighting how students experience development, including that of their identities, in all spaces, curricular and co-curricular alike. Identity construction is not something that students experience only in specific spaces, but it is often something that is seen as a co-curricular experience. By encouraging faculty members to be creative in their use of media and see themselves as individuals who can help facilitate identity construction in tandem with student affairs practitioners, not only does it highlight the interconnectedness of curricular and co-curricular learning, but it also creates an environment where students are able to be their full selves in the spaces they occupy, bringing all aspects of who they are to their academic classes just as we hope they do to their residence halls, student organizations, and other co-curricular spaces on campus.

Given the sheer amount of growth students undergo during their time at colleges and universities, particularly those who are in their emerging adulthood, allowing them to explore their identities through media provides a safe way for them to do so without fears of having to openly name their identities before they are ready. However, this requires professionals and administrators to acknowledge not all development that occurs in college can be assessed in quantifiable ways that have come to be the norm in student affairs assessment practices. While *assessment* is a broad term that encompasses a vast range of data collection and analysis, qualitative and quantitative alike, there is a field-wide skew towards that which can be assessed via pre-tests and post-tests, favoring types of development that are more easily assessed over types of development, like identity construction, that are more fluid. Like our K-12 counterparts, the calls for increased accountability and data-based decision making within higher education's co-curricular spaces over the past two decades have positioned the field to follow a similar trajectory of over-reliance on statistical data when drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative assessment practices provide a more complete image of the learning occurring in our spaces as well as allow practitioners to ensure they are collecting data that is ultimately useful to them (Schuh et al., 2016).

While student affairs assessment scholars note that "well-reasoned, rigorously conducted, and effectively reported qualitative assessment is more relevant than ever" (Schuh et al., 2016, p. 113) and that a mixed-methods approach to assessment aligns well with the profession's own underpinnings, the focus on *outcomes*-based assessment culture makes it challenging to engage in programming focused on development that is not as easily explored via concrete learning objectives to be used in yearly reports. When the value of a residential college experience is being questioned, it is understandable that focusing our programmatic efforts on that which can

be evaluated for its effectiveness rises to the top; however, we do our students a disservice when we do not create environments and opportunities for them to engage privately in activities that encourage and facilitate identity construction. In recent years, there have been efforts to incorporate more qualitative measures into student affairs assessment (e.g., *phenomenographical assessment* [Rands & Gansemer-Topf, 2016]) as well as more critical perspectives (e.g., Covarrubias & Vélez, 2013; Garcia et al., 2018; López et al., 2018) and queered approaches (e.g., Kilgo, 2022; Simpfenderfer et al., 2024; Strunk, 2024) to quantitative data analysis ensuring professionals, particularly new and entry level professionals who are responsible for developing and implementing programming, are introduced to more critical and poststructural methods of analysis.

Exploring identity development through co-curricular programming is not antithetical to the cultures of assessment higher education institutions have worked to build since the 1990s. What it asks practitioners to do, however, is broaden what assessment looks like and, as is done in research design, ensure assessment methodology aligns with what is being assessed. Although qualitative assessment is time intensive, this study shows how using qualitative methodologies in assessment spaces can allow practitioners to explore how their programming and work in general influences more fluid types of development through the richness of qualitative data. However, by incorporating more qualitative methods as well as critical and queer quantitative methods into standard assessment practices, it needs to be matched with adequate supports for those constructing the assessment and collecting and analyzing the data as these approaches require knowledge beyond what is often focused on in introductory statistics and/or assessment courses in student affairs preparation programs (Dean & Langham, 2022).

Additionally, the findings related to the role of fandom and fan spaces as mediated by parasocial relationships calls upon scholars and practitioners to rethink how our profession looks at media and virtual spaces. This study echoes the calls of college student development theory scholars who argue for extending the boundaries of the collegiate experience beyond the physical campus. The relationships created not just with these characters but those that form because of shared connections in virtual spaces echoes previous research about the need to expand the collegiate context to include spaces beyond the campus itself (Duran & Jones, 2019) including virtual ones (P. G. Brown, 2016; Mastrodicasa & Metellus, 2013; Nicolazzo, 2016; Simms et al., 2021). We cannot view students through a *tabula rasa*-esque lens that does not incorporate prior experiences or experiences beyond our institutions into how we approach student development theory from both practical and scholarly spaces. At the same time, we cannot ignore that students are forming relationships and engaging with others in spaces we are not privy to. These relationships, which parasocial ones are an example of, are no less valid or impactful than the relationships built between students in residence halls, in classrooms, and in campus offices. For queer students, as well as those who possess any marginalized identity, forming parasocial relationships provides interactions that mirror dyadic relationships and have an element of safety that cannot be guaranteed in real life (Bond, 2018; Fisherkeller, 2007; Rain & Mar, 2021). While we hope our campus environments are welcoming and open, we must respect and acknowledge that every student brings their past experiences with them when they join our campus communities, the good and the bad, that may influence both how they participate in our institutions and how willing they are to do so.

Advocate for Access to Media With Queer Characters

With the recent increase in anti-queer and anti-trans legislation aimed at schools and libraries, the impacts of these restrictions on identity construction are not yet known. However, given the ways participants in this study talked about the importance of interacting and forming relationships with characters who affirm their identities calls attention to the potential negative impacts of legislation that restricts access to media with a wide range of diverse characters. While queer representation in media has not historically been plentiful, queer students have, up until now, had the ability to go to their school library and engage with queer characters through books to start to construct their understanding of their queer identities. Given the effects of bills like Florida's colloquially called "Don't Say Gay" law (Powers and Duties of District School Board, 2002/2022), which has effectively removed any depiction of queerness from school and classroom libraries, queer students may come to college without having been able to form relationships and develop positive associations with their sexuality through characters if they were reliant on access to positive depictions of queerness through their schools.

Regardless of an individual's identities, engaging with media full of diverse characters has the potential to increase empathy and acceptance. Because of this, advocating for students to be able to access materials with diverse representation ensures they are able to engage in identity construction and negotiation as well as learn about those whose identities differ from their own. Just as Bishop (1990) noted that diverse characters have the possibility to serve as mirrors that affirm us when we engage with media containing characters who share our identities, they also serve as windows that allow us to develop empathy and understanding for those who are different. Parasocial relationships take this a step further by allowing us to move through the metaphorical sliding glass door and enter these worlds. Each of these types of interactions occur

in different contexts for different students. As educators, we must support students' ability to engage in all three, meaning we must vocally oppose legislation which restricts access to literature in schools and public libraries even if it is not directly affecting institutions of higher education as written.

Although attempts to restrict access have historically been focused on K-12 schools as part of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, these restrictions are beginning to creep into higher education spaces with the defunding of offices and programs related to diversity, equity, and inclusion at colleges and universities. This has been most recently seen in Texas at the start of 2024 (Responsibility of Governing Boards Regarding Diversity, 2023) as well as in Florida where the statute governing the powers of the Board of Governors was updated to mandate they conduct an "intellectual freedom and viewpoint diversity assessment" (Powers and Duties of the Board of Governors, 2007/2023, line 13b). Additionally, this revision also removed courses "based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, and economic inequities" (Powers and Duties of the Board of Governors, 2007/2023, line 5a) from general education status including the complete removal of sociology courses from general education curricula. Student affairs educators and higher education administrators must use their voices to ensure students are able to access spaces that foster negotiation and construction of identities, one of which is a student's right to engage with diverse media. When programming, how can we use media that features diverse characters? How can we work with faculty in media studies and literature spaces to collaborate on ensuring students are accessing texts with diverse characters in spaces where parasocial relationships may be more likely to occur? Are students who are studying creative writing or film studies taught about how to create well rounded diverse

characters who serve more than simply being a diverse character? Whose voices are present in the syllabi of the courses we teach? As participants in this study noted, reading and watching queer characters did not make them queer but rather made them feel comfortable in and proud of their queerness which may not have occurred without these relationships and interactions via media and some of these interactions can occur in curricular and co-curricular spaces at colleges and universities.

Embrace Third Wave and Poststructural Student Development Theory Considerations

Supporting the shifts currently occurring within college student development theory research, this study reflects the need to embrace third wave considerations in favor of rote memorization that has historically been the standard in these courses. Every participant in this study had different experiences with understanding their sexual identity and how it interacted with the other identities they possessed. Their experiences are nuanced and directly influenced by the socio-cultural contexts they lived in throughout their lives. Because of this, looking towards theoretical considerations as opposed to solely relying on concrete identity construction theories that prescribe what expected development looks like will allow for more nuanced understandings of how students construct their identities during college. This call for more intentionality and critique of theory is not a unique recommendation (e.g. Abes et al., 2019; Abes & Hernandez, 2016; S. R. Jones & Stewart, 2016; Lange & Duran, 2021; Perez, 2019). Approaching theory from a space that encourages college student development theory researchers and practitioners to "critique, challenge, and seek to dismantle inequitable power structures" (S. R. Jones & Stewart, 2016, p. 21) woven throughout the theories given the socio-historical contexts in which they were created.

This does not mean we ignore or throw away theories and models, but rather apply them with thought and intentionality. When applying theory, we need to question and interrogate its history and context as we approach theories and models through critical and poststructural lenses. The student bodies at our institutions today are vastly different than those at the time of when research for second wave theories occurred. Because of this, applying theories without critiquing the circumstances and contexts of their creation does not accommodate for the roles of various identities play in development. For instance, considering applications of first wave theories without acknowledging the overwhelming presence of an almost exclusively white, upper class male samples for these studies neglects to acknowledge the role of gender, race, and socio-economic status on development. Even for second wave theories, which were significantly more aware of the influence of identity and context on collegiate experiences, still require interrogation with some scholars critiquing their own theories after years of use within the field. By approaching theory application with third wave considerations in mind, it does destabilize assumptions of development (S. R. Jones & Stewart, 2016) and may result in using some theories less than others because they no longer meet the needs of our students or reflect their experiences. We can celebrate and highlight the impact of first wave theories in the history of the profession while simultaneously acknowledging they are no longer appropriate to use in many current collegiate contexts upon critical analysis because of they lack a sample that reflects our present day student populations and they do not integrate the roles of context, collegiate and personal alike, that cannot be removed from an individual's development. Again, this does not mean eschewing theory for complete theoretical anarchy, but rather embracing the ever-evolving nature of student development theory research to ensure students' needs are met the structures and systems that influence all types of development are acknowledged. Like with the shift

between first and second wave theories before us when scholars challenged the more static structures within development with increasingly fluid models and theories, there is a continued "need to practice intentional and consistent interdisciplinary engagement by directing our theorizing toward liberatory and healing ends" (S. R. Jones & Stewart, 2016, p. 25).

When looking specifically at sexual identity development theories, the same critical and poststructural lenses should be applied. The conceptual framework for this study was the result of applying poststructural considerations to existing theories of sexual identity construction as outlined in Chapter 1. As noted in Chapter 2, historical views on queerness that align chronologically with first and second wave theories tended to see queerness as a deviation from normality (De Block & Adriaens, 2013; Denton, 2016) as well as look at queer experiences through the lens of a white gay male. Even within the sample of all bisexual+ participants, their experiences were quite distinct from each other. If I had attempted to create a theory that tried to explain the use of parasocial relationships, the nuances and unique experiences each participant articulated would have been lost. As a result, looking beyond theories focusing on universal explanations or paths and instead incorporating critical and poststructural approaches that challenge linear progression will better reflect the plurality of experiences emerging adults have during their time at college or university.

For sexual identity in particular, embracing the fluidity inherently present in queer theory concepts can allow for integration of assessment of external factors that influence development on a structural level. Because queer theory is directly connected to Foucauldian thought, our research into sexual and gender identity construction must acknowledge the role of power and larger cultural views (Denton, 2016, 2019; S. R. Jones, 2019). One such critique is the lack of sexual identity models that incorporate how heterosexual individuals construct their heterosexual

identity which reaffirms the assumption that heterosexuality is innate and does not change or morph while queer sexualities are abnormal and not something that is an integral part of our identities from birth (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Sedgwick, 1990/2008). If we were to lean into exploring the conditions affecting how emerging adults construct their sexual identities across the spectrum as opposed to trying to create models that predict what that construction might look like, our research would push back against the normal-abnormal binary regarding sexuality present in non-queer theory informed social science research.

Future Research

While some of the above implications had bearing on guiding future research on the role of parasocial relationships during identity construction, other areas of future inquiry have been identified as well. These include inquiry within the college student development theory field as well as note opportunities for collaboration with other disciplines, including media studies, communication studies, and teacher education.

Increased Research About Bisexual+ Experiences

There is very little research in the college student development theory field that is focused exclusively on the experiences of bisexual+ individuals. While creating strict categories for exploring sexual identity construction or the experiences of a particular community within the larger LGBTQ+ creates some friction with queer theory's eschewing of labels, ensuring research on queer individuals reflects the nuance of experiences within the community is integral to moving away from monolithic treatment of the queer community. One such way is avoiding the use of larger groupings like "LGBTQ+ students" or "LGB" and subsequently moving toward more descriptive methods of identifying a particular population.

One of the difficulties presented to scholars researching the experiences of bisexual+ individuals, particularly that from a queer theory perspective, is bisexuality and other plurisexual identities inherently challenge concrete labels (Bauer & Brennan, 2013; Cipriano et al., 2023; Flanders, 2017; Flanders et al., 2017; Galupo et al., 2017). Within the plethora of labels to describe attraction to multiple genders, there are unique elements that separate them from each other. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, these differences can get lost in translation and create tension between those who hold different identities within the plurisexual community. Does the bi in bisexual refer to attraction to two genders: male and female? If that is the case, does that mean bisexuality is inherently transphobic? Or does it refer to attraction to genders different and the same as your own? If the latter is correct, then is pansexuality distinct enough from bisexuality to warrant its own research? How does the broad label of queer influence our understanding of plurisexuality?

Because of "wide variations in sexual identity categorization and related analyses based in differing assumptions about who 'counts' as bisexual[+]" (Cipriano et al., 2022, p. 574), choices, like those I made, which do not prescribe a particular definition for identity labels or a metric to 'prove' one's sexuality are vulnerable to critiques of murkiness within research participant criteria. However, attempts to place our own definitions of identity, particularly if we possess the identity in question ourselves, begins to restrict our research to our definitions rather than those that are used by a wide spectrum of plurisexual people. That does not mean we do not prescribe some sort of guidelines for participant recruitment, but we can make choices that both respect the plurality of experience but also provide some guardrails during the research process.

For example, this study used "bisexual+ umbrella" to depict a plurality of experiences that are related to each other but may use differing language to describe their plurisexuality due

to a label(s) which resonates more deeply with their construction of sexual identity. Still, there are scholars, and plurisexual people in general, who find the term 'the bisexual+ umbrella' is limiting and removes the differences some pansexual, queer, and other plurisexual individuals feel are distinct enough and warrant exploration of smaller communities on their own (Cipriano et al., 2022; Galupo et al., 2015). These fears are justified given the lack of attention paid to plurisexual identities outside of bisexuality (Hayfield & Křížová, 2021); however, there is also research indicating that there is a sense of unity between people of various plurisexual identities because they navigate similar barriers throughout society that umbrella labels, like bisexual+, illustrate that would be lost if we were to focus on each individual identity label specifically (Gonzalez et al., 2021).

Because of the importance of language and definitions in exploring bisexuality+, research exploring plurisexual identities is well suited for integrating poststructural methodological approaches and considerations. Identity labels are directly connected to an individual and the way their environments have caused them to make meaning in particular ways as they came to identify with a particular label. Since context is important within poststructural inquiry, allowing participants to define their plurisexual identity requires a fluidity and lack of permanency only present within poststructural inquiry. Like in this study, we need to provide participants the space and agency to define what their bisexual+ identity meant in their own words, highlighting the socially constructed nature of sexual identity as no two definitions were the same despite some participants sharing identity labels. This requires us as researchers and scholars to relinquish a modicum of control even though it may result in tension and dissonance between participant responses. When we research identity from a poststructural lens, we understand that dissonance and conflict in our data are not bad things. Truly, those areas of tension are where we need to

continue to work with our data to find what we can learn from that conflict and dissonance beyond what the participants are saying. The unique opportunities that arise when researching plurisexual experiences provide a great opportunity to embrace poststructural research, even in areas where there is hesitancy eschewing of convention and structure afforded by a constructivist approach.

Still, research focusing on the experiences of plurisexual students is lacking regardless of methodology or paradigmatic approach. While there are other higher education scholars doing research focusing on the experiences of plurisexual students during college (e.g., Prieto, 2023), most of the research in college student development theory still treats the queer community in a monolithic way despite bisexuals and other plurisexual individuals comprising a majority of the queer community (J. M. Jones, 2024). Mirroring other fields, like psychology, which have a significant amount of research that focuses on individual communities within the greater LGBTQ+ community will allow for a more nuanced understanding of the unique experiences and needs of bisexual+ emerging adults during college.

Collaborations With Media Studies and Communication Studies Researchers

As explored in the literature review, this dissertation drew from other disciplines, most notably media studies and communications studies. Parasocial relationships are a phenomenon extensively researched within the communications studies field (e.g., Horton & Wohl, 1956; Horton & Strauss, 1957; Giles, 2002; Klimmt et al., 2006; R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). Further research into parasocial relationships and their role in identity construction processes presents an opportunity for education researchers to collaborate with media studies and communications studies scholars to

bring their expertise on this phenomenon to media-based research within the higher education field.

One particular area of future research could explore the relationships made in virtual spaces that were mediated by parasocial relationships. Given the importance of fan spaces for most participants in this study, exploring how these virtual relationships which are rooted in shared fandom and character connection function and what role virtual spaces dedicated to different media sources play in identity construction as well. Understanding how these spaces differ from other social media spaces that are not created based on shared interests could provide a better understanding of how to conceptualize the interactions that occur in fandom spaces.

Parasocial relationship research is rooted in connections with media personae with the foundational research focusing on how viewers connected to newscasters and game show hosts (Horton & Strauss, 1957; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Similarly, most research on young and emerging adults' use of parasocial relationships is focused on media personae as well but instead of television hosts or newscasters, it now focuses on media personae on modern day platforms like Instagram influencers and TikTok celebrities. Understanding how parasocial relationships with fictional characters compare to those with media personae could provide better understanding of this phenomenon in current contexts. Additionally, determining if one type is more helpful or harmful during periods of identity construction would influence practice in a variety of fields including education given the recent efforts to restrict social media and internet content under the guise of mental health concerns pertaining to overuse of social media on mental health of young adults that have been manipulated in conservative-led states with hopes to restrict access to online affirming spaces for those with marginalized identities as seen in

Florida[15]. On the federal level in the United States, a ban on TikTok unless sold by ByteDance, the Chinese corporation which owns it, recently passed the House of Representatives with overwhelming bipartisan support; however, before it had a chance to move through the Senate on its own, a revised version of the bill was included as part of the foreign aid appropriations bill (National Security Act, 2024) that passed both chambers of the United States Congress and was signed into law on April 23, 2024. Supporters of banning TikTok claim the focus is to prevent American data from being used by foreign governments deemed hostile to the United States but not all agree with this view. While the revised and passed version of this bill extended the amount of time given to ByteDance to sell the application from 180 days to 270 (National Security Act, 2024), there are concerns from many critics who highlight the effects a blanket ban will have on younger Americans who use the app as a place to connect with others and find community (Schneider, 2024).

As described earlier in this chapter, the demographic composition of participants in this research was not particularly diverse and, as a result, conducting this inquiry with a more diverse sample could provide more insight into the ways other salient identities influence the construction of relationships with fictional characters during identity formation. While these participants provided insight into how bisexual+ identities intersect with non-binary gender identities, there is a particularly noticeable lack of research with bisexual+ men. The cultural views on bisexual+ men are quite different from those of bisexual+ women and they have not been investigated as frequently as the experiences of bisexual+ women. While we are starting to see more depictions of openly bisexual+ men in fictional media that have the potential for

[15] In March 2024, Florida Governor Ron Desantis signed HB3 to create Florida Statute §501.1376 that restricts access to social media platforms for Floridians under the age of 16 and terminates existing accounts for those underage as well. This will go into effect on January 1, 2025 and be part of the 2024 Florida Statues.

positive impacts on bisexual+ men's identity construction (M. Allen, 2023b), exploring how the tensions between the culturally constructed expectation of men to be hypermasculine intersects with the view of queer men as inherently effeminate are intensified or abated by media depictions and relationships could provide insight on how to create spaces where bisexual+ men can grapple with conflicting expectations of sexuality-dictated gender performance (Anders et al., 2023).

Lastly, the participants in this study noted they connected with characters across different media types. Comparing how parasocial relationships with characters from different types of media function would provide insight into which types are more conducive to constructing meaningful parasocial relationships. One particular media type that needs further inquiry, both connected to parasocial relationships and in general, is participatory media like *Dungeons & Dragons* actual play web-series and podcasts. As discussed heavily by Imogen, this format of media creates a very close relationship between viewers and the players in the series as well as has very active fandoms where fans connect to each other and talk about the series. The nature of viewer connections via *Dungeons & Dragons* actual play series allows viewers to "engag[e] deeply with a story that [in a way that allows] the lines between player and viewer become blurred" (M. L. Allen, in press, p. 15) which is not seen as clearly in other types of film media.

Because of this, it allows for very distinct parasocial relationships to develop "between player, player-character, and viewer" (M. L. Allen, in press, p. 15), creating tandem parasocial relationships with both the player and the character that are simultaneously occurring with fictional characters and media personae who are also uniquely connected. Described as "'one-and-a-half' way (rather than a traditional 'one-way')" (Kowert & Daniel, 2021, p. 2), the nature of parasocial relationships that occur in new media formats is somewhat of a cataclysm of types

and intensities of parasociality. In new media formats where there is both connection to the characters and the players, there is a merging of the more interactive nature of parasocial relationships with media personae like Instagram influencers with the players, the intimacy of a parasocial relationship with the fictional media character, and the resulting increase in sense of community and belonging that comes with fandom participation (Chadborn et al., 2018; Kowert & Daniel, 2021; Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017). These series, along with other forms of new media that are more participatory, are uniquely constructed to facilitate the development of parasocial relationships and are growing steadily in popularity, particularly with queer individuals given the ability to create characters who are not beholden to cultural norms and expectations (Femia, 2023; Kawitzky, 2020; Lichtenstein, 2021). Given the proclivity for parasocial relationships to develop in these spaces due to their interactive nature, further research is needed to explore them in the context of participatory new media like *Dungeons & Dragons* actual play series or Twitch streaming.

Collaborations With K-12 and Library Science Researchers and Practitioners

This study also highlights an opportunity for collaboration between K-12, library science, and higher education researchers and practitioners to explore the impact of banning discussions of sexuality and access to queer-centered media on identity construction. Although queer students have historically been able to access literature in their school and classroom libraries that allows them to see queerness depicted in positive ways, the effects of queer books being pulled from shelves due to anti-queer and anti-trans legislation in Republican-led states is not yet known given the relative recency of the adoption of these regressive policies. Working with teacher education researchers as well as K-12 teachers themselves, explorations of how queer

youth are able to construct their queer identities without these sources in environments that are openly hostile towards a facet of their identity could illustrate the impact of these policies.

Although some young and emerging adults come to understand their queerness during college, there are many who come to campuses with an understanding of their queer identities. For higher education professionals, understanding the impact of this harmful legislation on identity construction specifically could provide insight into the new needs of queer students coming from hostile spaces and allow us to think about how we can best support a demographic that has been structurally prevented from exploring sexuality. Like other college student development theory scholars have suggested, moving away from terms like *more developed* and *less developed* approaches this discipline from a position rooted in equity and social justice so I am not claiming these students are less developed if they have been unable to access queer media prior to coming to college; however, if students are entering universities without having had the opportunity to negotiate and explore their identities, both curricular and co-curricular spaces will need to adjust to provide this exploration period to students when they enter our campus communities.

Collaborating with these two groups in particular can also shed light on the use of media in educational spaces in K-12 education and how those could translate into higher education spaces. Not all faculty at colleges and universities are trained in teaching and pedagogy and while there are programs that focus on college teaching, our current K-12 teachers and teacher education professors have a wealth of knowledge to share about good pedagogical techniques, including the use of media. Much of the research about media use as a pedagogical tool is centered in K-12 spaces and library science, so collaborating with those who have experience effectively integrating media into the classroom could provide a good starting point for media

integration in higher education spaces. For queer and questioning students, in particular, the use of media can provide "provide a shared narrative that both educator and student(s) can use to discuss identity without feeling they need to disclose their own identities if it would be harmful" (M. Allen, 2023b, p. 204). In a way, integrating media into all educational spaces whether they be curricular or co-curricular, K-12 or higher education, to unravel the "tangled web of ignorance that currently exists in and around discourses about sexuality" (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 300) in educational contexts.

Concluding Thoughts

As an introverted and shy person who struggled to connect with her peers, I found solace in the books I read, games I played, and television shows and movies I watched as a child and teenager. Now as someone who is about to leave the ever important 18 to 29 demographic for media ratings, I still find myself swept away from the real world into fictional spaces where I can accompany my favorite characters on their adventures and feel a sense of sadness when our journeys are over. Whether exploring Bahumia with Moonshine as I listen to *Not Another D&D Podcast* (Axford et al., 2018) while driving up I-95, traversing the post-apocalyptic United States with Aloy in the *Horizon* games (Guerilla Games, 2017, 2022) with controller in hand from the comfort of my couch, or even getting transported to Westeros to see Arya continue to push gender-based boundaries while sitting and reading *A Game of Thrones* (Martin, 1996) at a coffee shop regardless of how many times I have read it, these are relationships that feel incredibly and palpably real.

Even before I was able to label my own queerness as bi-oriented aromantic-asexual, I always felt somewhat different from those around me, and I could not figure out why. The way my stomach churned for a plethora of reasons when someone would inevitably ask "Who do you

have a crush on, Melissa?" is something that I feel viscerally to this day and when I felt that discomfort in the moment, I would often find myself seeking solace and comfort in these fictional spaces with my parasocial friends. Because of this, it is not surprising how given my own experiences as someone who often finds herself drawn to media characters, even as a 29-year-old woman, pursuing this avenue of inquiry has been not just enlightening as a researcher and scholar. But, and potentially even more importantly, it has acted as a salve to the confusion with and distance from my peers I felt in my high school and undergraduate years which, to an extent, I am still processing today. Through this narrative inquiry study informed by Foucauldian views on the influence of power and socio-cultural norms on our identities, the experiences of five bisexual+ emerging adults attending a college or university in the United States recounted their own experiences with media characters as they came to construct their identity as a bisexual+ individual.

From these narratives and the resulting metanarrative constellation, these relationships are unique and specifically constructed in ways that align with the needs of the individual, serving different functions and purposes based on what the individual needs at that point in time. Across the participants, parasocial relationships with fictional characters allowed them to learn about themselves as environmental factors but also mimicked the relationships they cultivate with their peers as interpersonal factors. Serving as both sources of affirmation and sites of resistance, the participants noted how being able to be transported to fictional worlds allowed them to leave the regressive socio-political climate felt in the United States today as Republican-led states attempt to strip queer and trans people of their rights. For the participants, seeing queerness accepted as normal made them question why existing as a queer person, especially as a

non-binary queer person, is so fraught with tension and fear in real life when they can do so in fictional spaces without question.

In describing the process of constructing their sexual identities, participants noted that parasocial relationships served a variety of functions. Most notably, participants discussed how they acted as catalysts and intermediaries for a multitude of other relationships in addition to serving as spaces of affirmation and pleasure. Shared enjoyment of a type of media or a connection to a specific character allowed participants to connect to others in real life or in virtual fan spaces and fandoms. Similarly, they also served as social surrogates, mimicking the connections and relationships between friends in real life. Because they mirrored the form and function of dyadic relationships. The findings of this study largely support the notion that parasocial relationships "compensate, rather than complement, real-life social relationships for LGB adolescents by providing them with personal connections to like-others on screens and in print that they yearn for in their real-life social networks" (Bond, 2018, p. 474). However, given the plurality of the participants' experiences and the use of a qualitative methodology, I have to add an asterisk to *support* as drawing generalizations across a population is not the intent of this study. While prior scholars of parasocial relationships, including Bond, come from the quantitatively-oriented field of communication studies, making such a clear claim is not possible with qualitative research; however, based on the participants' descriptions of their parasocial relationships, while the compensation may look different from person to person, they all expressed these relationships serving as such in some way, shape, or form. What that way, shape, or form looked like, though, was unique to the participant.

Because they often serve as surrogates for real life relationships, parasocial ones take on many of the traits of dyadic relationships in real life. They are socially constructed and reflect the

needs of the individual involved, meaning no two parasocial relationships are the same even if they are with the same character. Like real life dyadic relationships, fiction-based parasocial relationships run the gamut from close and intimate like a romantic relationship or strong platonic connection to a relationship that, while important and present, simply exists as one of many relationships in a person's life. The relationships participants described with fictional characters existed at various points across this spectrum, highlighting how their function is directly tied to the needs of the individual forming the relationship.

Because the participants in this study expressed somewhat disparate views at times about how influential parasocial relationships are, the choice to explore this from a poststructural lens afforded me the opportunity to not feel compelled to resolve those differences but rather embrace them as illustrative of the reality that no two people have the same experiences. This methodological choice reflects calls to embrace poststructuralism within college student development theory research and move away from concrete models that have been the norm throughout the past two waves of research. Similarly, narrative inquiry's focus individual experiences allows for the elevation of individual experiences to be seen as valid contributions to scholarly inquiry. When combined with a metanarrative constellation, the combination of the micro- and macro-level explorations of bisexual+ emerging adults' use of fictional parasocial relationships weaves investigation of larger structural pressures and factors that may not be as identifiable in individual narratives but are when cross-narrative analysis is performed.

As a result, the findings of this exploratory study highlight the need to approach educational research from an interdisciplinary perspective that acknowledges the convergence of factors that influence our students' experiences in educational settings, including that in co-curricular spaces at colleges and universities. Expanding our educational context to include

virtual spaces and other non-physical arenas, like the liminal space between reality and fiction in which parasocial relationships occur, will allow practitioners to have a more comprehensive understanding of what influences our experiences as we come to know and define who we are, something that is integral to college student affairs' focus on holistic student development and learning.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW 1 PROTOCOL

Introduction:

My name is Melissa and my pronouns are she/her and I'm just really grateful that you are participating in my dissertation research! I study identity development and the role of media in those processes and that is really what we'll talk about today and in our next interview. As a reminder, these interviews will be recorded but they'll be kept protected on my personal laptop as well as on a locked flashdrive only for the extent necessary. I won't use your name or any identifying information when writing my dissertation so I hope you feel comfortable sharing your experiences with me. Additionally, as I go through this interview in the coming weeks, I'll send my analyses to you just to make sure that what I am coming to is reflective of your views and experiences and I want to make sure that I honor them and write about them appropriately.

Do you have any burning questions that you want to ask now?

The first question I'm going to ask is for you to tell me a little about yourself, so I figured I would do the same…

Questions:

1. I was hoping you would be able to tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Tell me about your sexual identity
    a. Was there a moment where you felt your sexual identity was defined?
    b. What was that like?
3. Is there any particular language you use to describe your sexual identity?
    a. Tell me a little about how you came to choose these descriptions?
    b. How did it make you feel to come to this realization?

4. Did you talk to anyone about this experience and the process of realizing your sexuality and coming out?
    a. Why those people?

5. What does being ____________ mean to you?
    a. What has your experience in the LGBTQ+ community been as a _______________ individual?
    b. How do you feel media portrays ________________ and other nonmonosexual identities?
6. What is your reaction to good/positive portrayals of bisexuality? It may be a specific character or just how characters talk about bisexuality.
    a. What depiction came to mind when you thought of a “good” depiction?
7. What is your reaction to more problematic portrayals of bisexuality?
    a. What depiction came to mind when you thought of a “problematic” depiction?
8. How did seeing these depictions influence your own identity? Positively? Negatively?
9. What is something you wished you would have seen?
10. Excerpts:
    a. What stands out to you or resonates with you?
    b. Is this something you wish you would have had as you were coming to understand your sexual identity? Why or why not?

APPENDIX B

EXCERPT FROM *IMOGEN, OBVIOUSLY* (ALBERTALLI, 2023, pp. 385–389)

"But then I [Lili] started getting the feeling it might not be one-sided? Like when you [Imogen] suddenly wanted to come back for the party–I was like, huh. And then yesterday, when you were telling me how Gretchen was such a dick about your crush."

I nod slowly.

"Right, so. By the end of that conversation, I was like—I don't know—maybe sixty percent sure the crush was Tessa? Sixty-five percent? Just a hunch. It was the way you were talking about it...the fact that Gretchen didn't believe you. Which, by the way, is profoundly fucked up."

"Yea, definitely." I pause. "Though, it wasn't so much that she didn't believe me about Tessa. She basically just said that Tessa's some kind of magic lesbian who attracts straight girls." "Wow. Yeah. That's not a thing." Lili lets out a short laugh. "I mean—okay, fine, if you're out there crushing on girls and want to call yourself straight, you do you. But Gretchen Patterson of Penn Yan, New York, is not the final fucking word on other people's queerness."

I laugh, a little sadly. "I know."

Lili's quiet for a moment. "It's like the Kara Clapstone [a celebrity] thing. People saying she should have come out sooner because it would have meant so much to her fans or whatever. Even Gretchen talking about that unlabeled kid in Pride Alliance. I'm like—how did we get here? When did we decide this stuff needed our input?"

"But I get where she's coming from." I bite my lip. "You want to know your safe space is actually safe."

"Safe for who?" Lili counters.

"Yeah. That's—hard. It's complicated."

"Right." Lili pauses. "You know, I feel guilty sometimes for not coming out in high school." "Guilty?"

"I don't know. I was talking to Mika last week about the DMs they get from baby queer kids. Trans kids. Some of them are like twelve years old. Mika's account means so much to them. And it's literally just the fact that Mika's this cool Japanese American nonbinary college kid out there existing and thriving and making art. Because some of them don't know any openly

trans people in real life.” Lili shrugs. “Maybe I could have been that for some little Brazilian pansexual kid in Penn Yan.”

“Are there any other Brazilians in Penn Yan?”

She laughs, scratching Mel’s head. “Totally not. But you know what I mean.” “Well, yeah, but”—I glance at her—”isn’t that just like what people were saying to Kara? That she should have come out sooner for her fans? But she didn’t owe that to anyone. And neither do you.”

“I know, I know.”

“Also, you’re my Mika. You know that right?”

She snorts. “I am not.”

“Lili, the whole backstory thing? That was actually really helpful.”

“You mean when I lied to all my friends and made you go along with it?” She eyes me skeptically.

“It did! I think it helped just having people take it as a fact. Like, I’m Imogen, I’m bi.” My breath seems to catch for a second. “I was so entrenched in thinking of myself as the token straight, world’s best ally. You know? Like, that was my autofill. And the idea that I might not actually be straight seemed...a little too convenient, I guess? Or unrealistic. You can just picture someone rolling their eyes about it, right? Like it’s some kind of peer pressure thing. All my friends are queer—”

“Maybe because you’re drawn to fellow queer people?”

“I guess.” I scrunch my nose. “Why do I feel like I’m just making all of this up?”

“Probably because of toxic-ass Gretchen. Or the five million other Gretchens out there on the internet. Some queer people just really seem to love shitting on other queer people. Every day, someone’s out there weighing in about whether bi and pan girls even count as queer to begin with. Or we’re only queer under certain circumstances. They’ll say it with their whole chest. Absolutely zero awareness that their very specific queer experiences isn’t one hundred percent universal. And it’s almost always this very white, very Western framework—completely rooted in colonization. No acknowledgement of regional differences, generational differences—just the same people litigating the same semantic fuckery. But it still gets in your head! I feel like half of us are just drowning in impostor syndrome all the time. More than half, probably. I know I’ve been there.”

I look at her. “Really?”

“Why do you think I made the whole thing up about us dating?”

“Yeah but that was pretty much right as you came out. You seem so confident now.”

“Sometimes I am,” she says, “and then ten minutes later, I’m convinced I’m somehow faking it in my own head.”

“That’s how I feel!” Suddenly my eyes brim with tears.

“It’s the worst. And it’s such bullshit.” She shakes her head. “And like, there’s this whole other part of it where I’m pretty sure I’m panromantic asexual, actually. Or demisexual. I don’t even know. And I haven’t even dated anyone. Which isn’t because I’m asexual.” She shrugs. “Sometimes I feel like, oh my God, why am I giving this so much mental energy? I’m literally home watching Netflix. Like. Who the fuck even cares? But I care! It matters.”

“Of course it matters. It’s a whole big piece of who you are.”

APPENDIX C

EXCERPT FROM *PERFECT ON PAPER* (GONZALES, 2021, pp. 294–297)

"So," I [Darcy] said. "I've been feeling really…confused, lately. The thing is, I'm . . . really scared to have feelings for a guy, any guy," I spat out. There. Now I'd said the words out loud, I couldn't deny them to myself if I wanted to. "I'm bi. But the last time I liked I guy, I wasn't part of this group [Queer & Questioning Club], and being bi wasn't this huge part of my identity. But now it is, and, I guess, I feel weird about it?"

"Weird, how?" Finn asked.

I swallowed, and scanned the faces staring up at me. No one looked judgy or irritated, even though it felt like such a stupid, trivial thing to bring up. The fear of passing as straight, for god's sake. "I feel like if I'm with a guy, I won't belong here properly anymore. What if I got a boyfriend? I'd feel weird bringing him to pride events, or even telling queer people I have a boyfriend. I'd feel judged."

"Oh my god, Darcy," Jaz said. "We wouldn't judge you."

"You'd belong," Finn said simply. Brooke nodded, and my breath caught in my throat. It was the first time she had acknowledged me in person in weeks.

Alexei folded their arms and leaned across the table. "That's all in your head," they said.

"You're the only one thinking that, I promise."

"No," Ray said sharply, and I turned to look at her. She didn't look angry, but her tone was firm. My stomach dropped. This was what I'd been so terrified of. That I'd open up and my fears would be reinforced. But then she went on. "Don't gaslight her. What she's describing is internalized biphobia, and bi's didn't invent this shit. Society sends us that message. We're made to feel like we're not queer enough to hang with queer groups all the time."

Well. Stunned was an understatement for how I felt at that moment. All at once I rush a warmth and gratitude toward her. Gratitude that was instantly tempered by something that felt a lot like guilt. I didn't deserve her backup.

"It's true," Lily said. "Ace and aro people get that sort of shit, too." Erica whipped her head around to look at Lily, eyes widening hopefully. "Exactly," Ray said.

"Internalized biphobia?" repeated Jason.

Ray didn't skip a beat. "Yeah. It's when bisexuals start to believe the biphobia they're surrounded by. We're told that our sexuality isn't real, or that we're straight if we're with another gender, and that our feelings don't count if we've never dated a certain gender, that kind of crap. Then we hear it so many times we doubt ourselves."

"Yeah," I said. "That's how I feel. I've been told I was 'turning' straight or 'turning' lesbian again depending on which gender I got a crush on. And a little while ago, someone told me it was good I can date guys, because then I don't have to face discrimination."

Brooke startled in her seat, and it was only then I remembered it was actually her who'd made that comment. I hadn't brought it up to guilt her, and I hoped she didn't take it that way. Now that I'd started letting out some of the anger and frustration I'd barely known was there, though, I couldn't stop.

"And I guess I could technically choose to just never act on my crushes when they're not on a guy, but what the fuck? And the implication that I'm less queer than others, because, you know, I can just go straight and not deal with any oppression at all, easy. Like being with a guy magically makes me straight. Like it's a competition, or a ranking, and I need to stop speaking on queer issues because am I really queer? Really, though? And I want to clarify that this person didn't say any of that, but that's just how it felt. And maybe I don't know what it's like to be gay or lesbian, but I do know some people will never understand what it's like to be queer and blush every time you join in on a conversation about it because you feel like you're treading on people's toes, because when they say 'queer' they don't mean you."

I hadn't meant to yell.

The room fell uncomfortably quiet. Brooke had covered her mouth with her hand, and Ray bit her lower lip. "Once I had a girl ask me who I would choose," Ray said. "And I was like, well who are they?" And she's all oh, no one in particular. And I asked her if she had to choose between girl A and girl B who would she choose, and she got all grumpy at me and said that was different."

Around the room, the others were starting to break into smiles.

"I'm always hearing that it's 'weird' if I like one gender after being attracted to another," I said. "Oh, and once, some straight guy asked me how being bi 'works' when I'm in a relationship. And I asked him how it works for him and he said 'it works in that I'm not

bisexual.' Then I asked, if he's attracted to women, how can he possibly stop himself from cheating on his girlfriend with every woman he runs into. Like, for fuck's sake, dude, I said I'm bisexual not a nymphomaniac."

"Oh my god," Ray snorted.

"I swear, most people think we're either lying about being attracted to multiple genders, or that we must be so attracted to literally everyone that we need to make out with every human on this earth, immediately, damn it!"

APPENDIX D

EXCERPT FROM *HEARTSTOPPER: FAMILY* (OSEMAN & LYN, 2023)

(**CHARLIE** *sits on the bed, petting Nellie as* **DAVID** *walks into* **NICK**'s *room*.)

DAVID

Hi.

(Nellie growls)

CHARLIE

Hi.

DAVID

What was your name, sorry?

CHARLIE

I'm Charlie, and you're...

DAVID

You're Charlie. Right. Um…I'm David. Sorry. So, I'm...I'm Nick's older brother.

CHARLIE

Yeah.

DAVID

(Exhales) Nice to meet you.

CHARLIE

Nice to meet you.

(*Cuts to* **NICK** *walking up the stairs, holding two mugs of tea for him and Charlie, and overhearing* **DAVID** *talking to* **CHARLIE**)

DAVID

And where did you two meet?

CHARLIE

We're in the same form at school.

NICK

(*Entering his room with two mugs of tea, clearly uncomfortable and tense because of his brother*) David.

DAVID

There he is. Um... I was just getting acquainted with, um... with Charlie here.

NICK

(*To* **DAVID**) Yeah, well, we're busy, so you can go away now. (*Quietly to* **CHARLIE**) Are you okay?

CHARLIE

(*Quietly*) Yeah.

DAVID

(*While walking backwards out of* **NICK***'s room*) I just... I just wanted to meet the guy that, you know, turned my little brother gay.

NICK

(*Long pause as he turns to face* **DAVID**) What?

DAVID

I mean, I should've always known you'd turn out to be gay.

NICK

I'm bi, actually, and so what?

DAVID

(mockingly) "I'm bi, actually." So... Look, if you're gonna be gay, at least *admit* you're gay.

NICK

Oh... (*Begins to walk towards* **DAVID***, ushering him out of the room and down the stairs*) (*Bordering on angrily*, *frustrated and upset at the very least*) See, this is exactly why I didn't wanna tell you!

DAVID

Too late now!

(*Camera remains in* **NICK***'s room, focusing on* **CHARLIE** *as he processes hearing his boyfriend's brother's homophobia and biphobia while the dialogue continues off screen*)

NICK

This is ridiculous.

DAVID

I'm not allowed to be skeptical?

NICK

No! You're not!

DAVID

Why?

(*Camera cuts to* **DAVID** *and* **NICK** *walking down the stars as their mother,* **SARAH***, interjects*)

NICK

I knew you'd be like this! Like what? Like a homophobic prick!

SARAH

Boys, what is going on?

NICK

Why did you tell him about Charlie?

SARAH

(*Shocked, taken aback*) I didn't, darling!

DAVID

Mum didn't tell me. You left a picture of you two kissing on your bedroom wall.

NICK

(*Anger no longer beneath the surface*) Why do you keep going in my room?!

DAVID

Come on! Mum, he's saying he's bi. I mean, what a load of absolute bullshit.

SARAH

David, please don't swear.

DAVID

He can't even admit he's gay. I mean, I bet you haven't told Dad yet, have you? *(scoffs)* Oh my God. Imagine what Dad's gonna say.

NICK

He's such... He's such a dick!

DAVID

I'm just being realistic.

SARAH

Boys, that is enough. David, in the kitchen now.

(**SARAH** *and* **DAVID** *leave the frame.* **CHARLIE** *has joined* **NICK** *on the stairs.* **NICK** *looks clearly distressed and* **CHARLIE** *echoes his concern through his body language.)*

SARAH

(Off screen) Why are you winding him up on purpose?

DAVID

I didn't do anything! It's him getting wound up for no reason.

SARAH

What are you doing going into his bedroom?

DAVID

I went in there one time! If he didn't want me to know…

CHARLIE

Should I go home?

DAVID

…where anyone could see it. mum: You've got no right to...

(**DAVID** *and* **SARAH** *continues arguing indistinctly*)

NICK

I'm sorry. I'll text you later, okay?

APPENDIX E

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL PROMPT

Image Sent to Participants:

Reflective Journal Entry

What are some fictional characters you connected with as you developed your understanding of your sexuality? They can be bisexual+ themselves or simply a character(s) that helped you understand your bi/pansexuality. What was it like to connect with this character? Why do you think you connected with them? What about them drew you to this character? How did they help you accept or strengthen your identity as a bisexual+ individual? How did they push back against biphobic and bi-negative tropes?

Entries can be written or recorded, whichever you prefer and emailed to Melissa (mlallen@wm.edu) at least two days before our next interview

Reflective Journal Prompt

What are some fictional characters you connected with as you developed your understanding of your sexuality? They can be bisexual+ themselves or simply a character(s) that helped you understand your bisexuality+. What was it like to connect with this character? Why do you think you connected with them? What about them drew you to this character? How did they help you accept or strengthen your identity as a bisexual+ individual? How did they push back against biphobic and bi-negative tropes?

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW 2 PROTOCOL

Because the second interview was more unstructured given the focus on discussing the participant's journal response, all the questions were not the same for each interview. However, there were shared questions across all five second interviews provided below. A short period of rapport building occurred prior to beginning the interview as well as a reminder about the protection of data.

Core Questions:

1. What was it like to reflect on characters that you felt connected to as you came to understand your sexuality?
2. Who are some fictional characters you connected with as you developed your understanding of your sexuality? They can be bisexual themselves or simply characters helped you understand your sexuality.
    a. How has your interaction with this person or character affected your understanding of your identity?
    b. What made you seek this media source out?
    c. What made this character stand out?
    d. What made you keep coming back to engage with this character/media?
    e. Do you admire this person or character? Why or why not?
    f. Do you model their behavior? Why or why not? If so, how?
    g. Do you wish to be like this person or character? If so, how?
    h. Did you ever engage in fan spaces about this character or media? What was that like?
3. How do you think your journey with your sexuality would have been different without these characters?
4. Do you think these characters helped you feel more connected to the bisexual or LGBTQ+ community or more affirmed in your identity?
5. How do you feel media portrays bisexual and other non-monosexual identities?

a. Are there depictions that have negatively impacted your sense of belonging within the queer community or that make you feel negatively about your identity?
b. What types of media characters/personalities do you relate to?

6. Are you more interested in watching LGBTQ+ characters or heterosexual characters? If yes, why? If no, why not?
7. Looking forward as you continue to develop what being bisexual means to you, what is something you would look for in media?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add or that you wish I would have asked?

APPENDIX G

RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Social Media and Email Recruitment Flyer:

Seeking Research Participants!

Do you identify under the bisexual+ umbrella? Was there a character that helped you as you came to understand your sexuality? Are you between the ages of 18 and 24?

Consider participating in a study about the role of media characters on identity!

Participation entails two interviews via Zoom and one short journal entry.

QR Code

For more information, contact Melissa Allen at [redacted] or scan the QR code to get started!

W&M EDIRC-2023-07-26-16412

Accompanying Personal Social Media Text:

Shameless use of social media but I am in the data collection phase of my dissertation and I am recruiting participants for my study on the role of media on identity construction processes for bisexual+ emerging adults. I would be forever grateful if you would be able to send any students my way that might fit my criteria by having them fill out a quick form at the link below. Recruiting participants is the only part of my Ph.D. that has truly increased my anxiety so I'd appreciate your help if you can!

Accompanying Text to Master's Program Alumni:

Hello fellow CSPA alumni! I hope your August has been (relatively) calm knowing how busy of a month it is. I am currently in my dissertation year of my Ph.D. at William & Mary and I am recruiting participants for my study on the role of media on identity construction processes for bisexual+ emerging adults. I would be forever grateful if you would be able to send any students my way that might fit my criteria by having them fill out a quick form at the link below. Thank you for your help and I hope the start of the year goes smoothly for everyone!

Email Text Sent via CSPTalk:

SUBJECT: Seeking Participants for Research on Bisexual+ Identity Development

Hello!

My name is Melissa Allen (she/her) and I am a Ph.D. candidate at the William & Mary School of Education. I am currently recruiting participants for my dissertation research that explores how bisexual+ emerging adults (18-24) use media-based relationships during their identity development processes! I would greatly appreciate if you could share this with students who may be interested in participating in my research and meet the following criteria:

(1) Are between the ages of 18 and 24
(2) Attend a US college or university
(3) Identify under the bisexual+ umbrella
(4) Connected with a fictional character as they came to understand their sexual identity.

Participation consists of two Zoom interviews and one short reflective response in between and I am able to offer a $25 gift card to participants selected to complete the study. I have provided a link (…………………) for the Qualtrics form for participants to complete to determine if they meet the criteria. Thank you so much for your help!

Please feel free to share this to other colleagues who may know of students as well or with your institution's SOGIE centers!

Thank you!

Physical Flyer:

Seeking Research Participants!

Do you identify under the bisexual+ umbrella? Was there a character that helped you as you came to understand your sexuality? Are you between the ages of 18 and 24?

Consider participating in a study about the role of media characters on identity!

Participation entails two interviews via Zoom and one short journal entry and selected participants will receive a $25 gift card upon completion of their participation.

For more information, contact Melissa Allen at [redacted] or scan the QR code to get started!

Tabs with Contact Information and QR Code

QR Code

W&M EDIRC-2023-07-26-16412

APPENDIX H

RESEARCH PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

Below, I provide information relevant to this research study that will help you decide whether to participate. You can decide not to participate in or withdraw from this research study at any time. Your choice not to participate will not affect your educational or professional standing.

Study Purpose
This study, titled, *A Foucauldian-informed Thematic Discourse Analysis of Bisexual+ Emerging Adults' Use of Fiction-based Parasocial Relationships During Sexual Identity Construction* (William & Mary EDIRC-2023-07-26-16412), is designed to explore how fictional characters have helped you understand both your identities and how you view the world as a plurisexual individual.

Why is your participation important?
Studying your experiences and relationships with fictional characters will help educators and those who work in roles with emerging adults who are bisexual+ understand the impact of media consumption on identity construction for individuals in this community. Additionally, this study serves as my dissertation research for my Ph.D. in Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership, Higher Education Administration concentration.

This study seeks to recruit participants who meet the following criteria:
(1) between the ages of 18-24; (2) enrolled at a college or university in the United States; (3) identify as an identity under the bisexual+ umbrella; and (4) connected closely with a fictional character as they came to understand their identity. This study will have between 5-10 participants.

What Is Requested of You
- Completion of two (2) 60 minute interviews via Zoom about sexual identity, media representation, and connections with fictional characters that will be recorded.
- Completion of one (1) Reflective Journal Entry emailed to the researcher at least three days prior to the second interview.
- Completion of the “Introduction Form” prior to the first interview is requested. This form includes your name, pronouns and the term you feel best describes your sexuality as well as other demographic information. Additionally, you will be given the ability to choose your pseudonym to ensure you feel comfortable with the name the researcher will use in her manuscript when referencing your responses.

- Following each interview, the researcher will contact you via email with a summary of her understanding of the information that you shared. The researcher will request that you confirm, append, and/or change any of the summary's contents so that it accurately reflects your thoughts, opinions, perceptions, and experiences.

Timeline

Data generation will take place between August 2023-January 2024. Each participant will complete a written component in the form of a Qualtrics survey (demographics), two (2) 60 minute individual interviews with the researcher via Zoom with a short reflective journal entry in between the interviews over a three week period.

Potential Risks & Benefits of Participation

There are no perceived risks associated with this research study. The possible benefits include contributing to research and practice on identity development and the experiences of bisexual+ individuals. Additionally, participants will receive a $25 gift card upon completion of both interviews and the journal entry.

Additional Information

Please know that:

- The confidentiality of your personally identifiable information will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.
- Your name and other identifiable information will be known only to the researcher through the information that you provide. Neither your name nor any other personally identifiable information will be used in any presentation or published work without prior written consent.
- The audio recordings or Zoom recordings, whichever is applicable, of the interviews described above will be erased after the study is complete.
- Data and transcripts will be kept private on the PI's laptop in locked files to ensure it is only viewed by the researcher as well as on a password protected flash drive in case of computer malfunction.
- You may refuse to answer any questions during the interview, if you so choose. You may also terminate your participation in the study at any time. To do so, simply inform the interviewer of your intention. Neither of these actions will incur a penalty of any type. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.
- A summary of the results of the study will be sent to you electronically once the study is complete.

Contact Information

If you have questions or concerns about this study, please contact the PI, Melissa Allen ( ) at The College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia or her supervising professor, Dr. Erica R. Wiborg ( ). If you have any additional questions regarding your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact Dr. Tom Ward, tjward@wm.edu, 757-221-2358, the William & Mary Chair of the Education Institutional Review Committee that supervises the treatment of study participants.

By typing your name below you are stating agreement to voluntary participation in this study, and are confirming that you are at least 18 years of age. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Participant Signature: (digitally signed on Qualtrics) Date:

APPENDIX I

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Page 1 – Contact Data and Criteria Confirmation

Thank you so much for your interest in participating in my dissertation research! Please take a moment to read the following and complete this brief information form to determine if you are eligible to participate.

Name ____

What is your email address? ____

Do you identify under the bisexual+ umbrella?

The bisexual+ umbrella refers to "a range of nonmonosexual identities, behaviors, and attractions" (Flanders, 2017, p. 1) including but not limited to bisexuality, pansexuality, queer, omnisexual, and fluid.

- Yes
- No

What is your current age?

(Select from Dropdown; 18 to 24 as the options)

Do you attend a college or university in the United States?

- Yes
- No

As you came to understand your sexuality, did you connect with a fictional character(s)?

- Yes
- No

Page 2 – Largely Served as Demographic Data Collection; only appeared if participation criteria were met

Based on your responses, I would like to learn a little more about you before our first interview. Please fill out the questions below or note if you would like time to think and I will follow up in our first interview.

What is your gender identity? ____

What label(s) do you use to describe your sexuality? _________________________________

Do you have a romantic identity (eg., aromantic, demiromantic, etc...) that you would like me to be aware of? If so, what label would you like me to use?

____

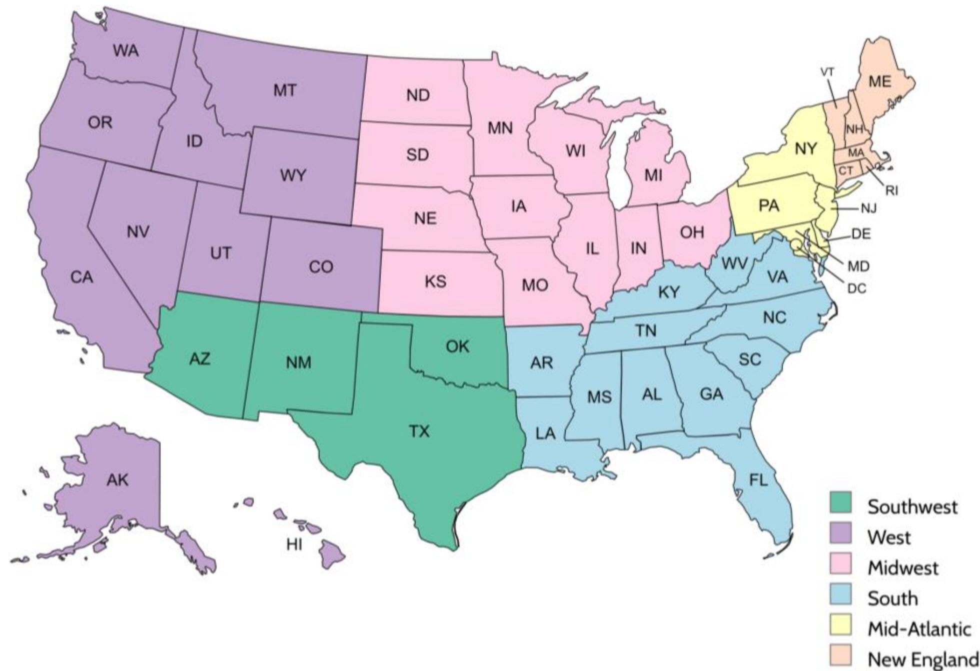
What is your racial and/or ethnic identity(s)? _______________________________________

What pronouns would you like me to use? ____

When writing about your responses, I will use a pseudonym. What would you like that to be?

Keep in mind to make sure it is not too close to your name or a nickname you go by in order to keep your responses private.

____



Map created on mapchart.com and reproduced under their Creative Commons license (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Where did you grow up?

- Mid-Atlantic (DC, DE, MD, NJ, NY, PA)
- Midwest (IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI)
- New England (CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT)
- South (AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, TN, VA, WV, SC)
- Southwest (AZ, NM, OK, TX)
- West (AK, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY)
- Other: ____

Where do you go to school?

- Mid-Atlantic (DC, DE, MD, NJ, NY, PA)
- Midwest (IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI)
- New England (CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT)
- South (AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, TN, VA, WV, SC)
- Southwest (AZ, NM, OK, TX)
- West (AK, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY

Page 3 – Largely served as checks and verifications with one demographic question added; only appeared if participation criteria were met

What is the name of the institution you attend?

Note: I will not use the name but give a description of the institution such as "a large, public, 4-year institution in the south."

____

How did you find out about this research opportunity?

____

If I were to ask where home is for you, how would you answer?____

APPENDIX J

FAIR USE EVALUATORS

The following fair use evaluation tools were used to determine the compliance with laws regarding copyright and fair use in the United States. Based on both tools, the use of these excerpts in my research and providing them as part of my protocol in these appendices reflects an educational and transformative use of a previously copyrighted material(s) that does not infringe upon the rights of the copyright holder. An overall checklist created by Columbia University (https://copyright.columbia.edu/basics/fair-use/fair-use-checklist.html) was used to gauge an overall look at the Fair Use of these materials while an individual form provided by the Office of General Council at Yale University (https://ogc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Fair-Use-Tool-Website-7-2020_fillable.pdf) was completed for each of the three sources of the excerpts that examined each source on its own.

Overall Checklist (Columbia University)

Fair Use Checklist
Copyright Advisory Office
Columbia University Libraries
Kenneth D. Crews, Director
http://copyright.columbia.edu

13 → favor Fair use
5 → oppose Fair use

Name: Melissa Allen

Institution: The College of William + Mary

Project: Ph.D. Dissertation

Date: Spring 2024

Prepared by: Melissa Allen

Original Sources:
- Albertalli (2023) - Oseman + Lyn (2023)
- Gonzales (2023)

Purpose

Favoring Fair Use (4)

- ☐ Teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use)
- ☑ Research
- ☑ Scholarship
- ☑ Nonprofit educational institution
- ☐ Criticism
- ☐ Comment
- ☐ News reporting
- ☑ Transformative or productive use (changes the work for new utility)
- ☐ Restricted access (to students or other appropriate group)
- ☐ Parody

Opposing Fair Use (0)

- ☐ Commercial activity
- ☐ Profiting from the use
- ☐ Entertainment
- ☐ Bad-faith behavior
- ☐ Denying credit to original author

Nature (2)

Favoring Fair Use

- [x] Published work
- [ ] Factual or nonfiction based
- [x] Important to favored educational objectives

Opposing Fair Use (2)

- [ ] Unpublished work
- [x] Highly creative work (art, music, novels, films, plays)
- [x] Fiction

Amount (3)

Favoring Fair Use

- [x] Small quantity
- [x] Portion used is not central or significant to entire work
- [x] Amount is appropriate for favored educational purpose

Opposing Fair Use (0)

- [ ] Large portion or whole work used
- [ ] Portion used is central to or "heart of the work"

Effect

Favoring Fair Use (4)

- [x] User owns lawfully purchased or acquired copy of original work (own books or subscribe [illegible]
- [x] One or few copies made
- [x] No significant effect on the market or potential market for copyrighted work
- [x] No similar product marketed by the copyright holder
- [ ] Lack of licensing mechanism

Opposing Fair Use (3)

- [ ] Could replace sale of copyrighted work
- [ ] Significantly impairs market or potential market for copyrighted work or derivative
- [x] Reasonably available licensing mechanism for use of the copyrighted work *
- [ ] Affordable permission available for using work
- [ ] Numerous copies made
- [x] You made it accessible on the Web or in other public forum
- [x] Repeated or long-term use

Most recent revision: 051408

* while permissions are available, they are largely constructed for benefitting financially from their use which I am not.

Yale University - Office of the General Council Fair Use Assessment

***Heartstopper: Family* (Oseman & Lyn, 2023)**

Description of Copyrighted Material (title, author, date of copyright):

Oseman, A. (Writer), + Lyn, E. (Director). (2023, August 3). Family (Season 2, Episode 2) [TV series episode]. In P. Walters, I. Canning, E. Sherman, E. Lyn, + A. Oseman (Executive Producers), Heartstopper. See-Saw Films.

Amount of Proposed Use: (e.g., number of pages, chapters, lines, or duration) vs. whole work:

2:04 worth of screenplay → 5% of episode and less than 1% of season 2 (0.722%)

1. Purpose and Character of Your Use

Rule: While the copyright law distinguishes between commercial and nonprofit educational purposes, this distinction is not dispositive of fair use. In enacting the law, Congress specifically rejected an exemption that would protect all use for educational purposes. Court decisions have upheld this position. More significant to your assessment is whether your intended use of a copyrighted work merely duplicates the work or whether it will alter or transform the original work in such a way as to create something new that is beneficial to society. Where the intended use is educational and transformative, your use is more likely to fall under fair use. Even if your use is arguably commercial, your use may still qualify as fair use if it is highly transformative. Where your use merely duplicates an original work, it is quite likely that your use will not fall under fair use, even if your use is for nonprofit educational purposes.

Application

- Is the purpose of your intended use different than that of the original work? Y
- Does your proposed use transform the original work by adding something new, presenting it in a different medium and context, or altering the original work by creating new expression, insights or meaning? Y

Your assessment

Describe details regarding purpose and character of the proposed use:

This use is for academic use in a dissertation appendix. Only the written screenplay is being used to provide a comprehensive protocol that reflects my research process. I am not adding the video but a transcription (my own) of the dialogue. The work has been transformed to an educational space and has no commercial aspect.

2. Nature of the Copyrighted Work

Rule: This factor is straightforward, but as with the other factors, not dispositive. Courts have considered use of works that are factual or published as weighing in favor of fair use, and use of works that are creative or unpublished as weighing against fair use.

Application

- Is the work that you wish to use a factual work or are you seeking to use a highly creative work, such as a poem, play, photograph or novel? Y
- Is the work that you seek to use already published? Y

Your assessment

Describe details regarding "nature" of the proposed use:

this has been "published" and is a work of fiction. However, the use of this excerpt is important to the educational objectives of my dissertation.

3. Amount and Substantiality of the Portion to be Used

Rule: There is no bright line rule here and your analysis of this factor will be particular to the facts. In general, the smaller the portion of a work used, the more likely the use will be considered fair. However, if you use a portion considered to be the "heart of the work," even if that portion constitutes a very small percentage of the entire work, your use will less likely qualify as a fair use. Moreover, the extent of permissible use may vary depending on the purpose and character of the use (See Factor 1 above). Thus, even if your use is arguably substantial, provided your use is the amount necessary to accomplish your specific purpose and/or is highly transformative, your use may be fair. For example, at least one court has determined that the use of a copyrighted photograph in its entirety was fair use, where the use was transformative and the photograph was reproduced only as a thumbnail with less clarity than the original image.

Application

- Is only a short clip or excerpt to be used? Y
- Is the portion to be used the "heart of the work"? N
- Is the amount to be used limited only to the portion required to accomplish your purpose? Y

Your assessment

Describe details regarding amount and substantiality of the portion to be used:

A small quantity of the dialogue is used: 5% of the episode runtime (2min/34min) and less than 1% of the season's runtime (2min/277; 0.72%.) The excerpt is not the heart of the work but one of many important and impactful moments in the series. Only the amount needed to achieve the educational purpose is used.

4. Effect on the Market for the Original Work

Rule: This factor is typically given great weight by courts, and, as a practical matter, is the factor most likely to trigger a challenge against the claim of fair use. Consider whether your use deprives the copyright owner of income or whether it undermines a potential market for the copyrighted work. Note that your consideration of this factor may turn on previously considered factors, such as the amount and substantiality of the portion used. For example, the greater the amount of the material you intend to use, the greater the negative impact on the market for the work and the less likely your intended use will be considered fair. If you intend to use the material on an ongoing basis, the repeated use may not be a defensible fair use, but the determination will depend on individual circumstances.

Application

- Is the material (e.g., a digital image, an excerpt from a book) already made available for a price? Is the price a fair market price? Is the contemplated use one which permission from the copyright holder is generally required?
- Is there an existing licensing or other payment mechanism in place for the contemplated use? If not, based on current indicators, how likely will such a mechanism be put in place?

Your assessment

Describe details regarding effect of the contemplated use on the market or any potential market:

After consulting Netflix and See-Saw websites, I was unable to find a permissions contact. My use does not undermine the market or finances/financial gain of the copyright holder. While this dissertation remains on proquest, it will not keep the copyright owners from enjoying the boons of their success.

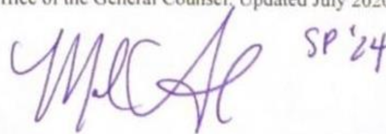
Your Fair Use Determination

Your determination requires a subjective balancing of each of the four factors. You may find that some factors are more significant than others under the particular circumstances or that certain factors impact others. If you determine that the fair use defense applies to your intended use, briefly explain how you have arrived at this conclusion in the box below. Please note that the University appreciates that fair use assessment is not an exact science and requires only that you make a good faith determination.

Describe details regarding your final determination:

Based on this analysis along with a check list from Columbia University, this use complies with US Fair Use. It is transformative from entertainment to scholarship, and provides me with no commercial gain. Less than 1% of the season is used and only enough to serve an educational purpose is used. As a result, factors favoring Fair Use outnumber those opposing it.

If you determine that your intended use does not constitute fair use, then permission of the copyright holder is required to use the work. Keep in mind, however, that you do have alternatives. You might reevaluate your proposed use and/or consider using a smaller portion or composite portions of materials to adjust the fair use analysis outcome. You can also link to the material, or find a substitute, if these options are available. If your use requires displaying performances of copyrighted works online for distance learning purposes, the use may be permissible under the TEACH Act, enacted in November 2002 as an amendment to the U.S. Copyright Act, which provides copyright exemptions independent of fair use. Please consult the University's TEACH Act Guidelines for guidance on invoking the TEACH Act.



SP '24

***Imogen, Obviously* (Albertalli, 2023)**

Description of Copyrighted Material (title, author, date of copyright):

Albertalli, B. (2023). Imogen, obviously. Balzer + Bray.

Amount of Proposed Use: (e.g., number of pages, chapters, lines, or duration) vs. whole work:

~890 words from pp. 385-389; original work is 416 pages

The amount used is 0.96% of the OW in pages.

1. Purpose and Character of Your Use

Rule: While the copyright law distinguishes between commercial and nonprofit educational purposes, this distinction is not dispositive of fair use. In enacting the law, Congress specifically rejected an exemption that would protect all use for educational purposes. Court decisions have upheld this position. More significant to your assessment is whether your intended use of a copyrighted work merely duplicates the work or whether it will alter or transform the original work in such a way as to create something new that is beneficial to society. Where the intended use is educational and transformative, your use is more likely to fall under fair use. Even if your use is arguably commercial, your use may still qualify as fair use if it is highly transformative. Where your use merely duplicates an original work, it is quite likely that your use will not fall under fair use, even if your use is for nonprofit educational purposes.

Application

- Is the purpose of your intended use different than that of the original work? Y
- Does your proposed use transform the original work by adding something new, presenting it in a different medium and context, or altering the original work by creating new expression, insights or meaning? Y

Your assessment

Describe details regarding purpose and character of the proposed use:

This excerpt was used in my interview protocol for participants to react to and reflect about. I am hoping to add this to my dissertation appendices to provide a more comprehensive protocol for my interviews. There is no profit I make from this use. It is not being used to "tell the story" but reflect this excerpt's use in research.

(Yale University)

2. Nature of the Copyrighted Work

Rule: This factor is straightforward, but as with the other factors, not dispositive. Courts have considered use of works that are factual or published as weighing in favor of fair use, and use of works that are creative or unpublished as weighing against fair use.

Application

- Is the work that you wish to use a factual work or are you seeking to use a highly creative work, such as a poem, play, photograph or novel?
- Is the work that you seek to use already published? Y

Your assessment
Describe details regarding "nature" of the proposed use:

This is a published fictional work that, in the proposed use, adds to an educational work.

3. Amount and Substantiality of the Portion to be Used

Rule: There is no bright line rule here and your analysis of this factor will be particular to the facts. In general, the smaller the portion of a work used, the more likely the use will be considered fair. However, if you use a portion considered to be the "heart of the work," even if that portion constitutes a very small percentage of the entire work, your use will less likely qualify as a fair use. Moreover, the extent of permissible use may vary depending on the purpose and character of the use (See Factor 1 above). Thus, even if your use is arguably substantial, provided your use is the amount necessary to accomplish your specific purpose and/or is highly transformative, your use may be fair. For example, at least one court has determined that the use of a copyrighted photograph in its entirety was fair use, where the use was transformative and the photograph was reproduced only as a thumbnail with less clarity than the original image.

Application

- Is only a short clip or excerpt to be used? Y
- Is the portion to be used the "heart of the work"? N
- Is the amount to be used limited only to the portion required to accomplish your purpose? Y

Your assessment

Describe details regarding amount and substantiality of the portion to be used:

Based on pages which amounts to 4 full pages, less than 1% of the original work is being used (4 out of 416). The excerpt is not the "heart of the work" but one of many bi-positive moments within Albertalli's novel. I only used the amount of the original work necessitated by the educational and scholarly use of the excerpt.

4. Effect on the Market for the Original Work

Rule: This factor is typically given great weight by courts, and, as a practical matter, is the factor most likely to trigger a challenge against the claim of fair use. Consider whether your use deprives the copyright owner of income or whether it undermines a potential market for the copyrighted work. Note that your consideration of this factor may turn on previously considered factors, such as the amount and substantiality of the portion used. For example, the greater the amount of the material you intend to use, the greater the negative impact on the market for the work and the less likely your intended use will be considered fair. If you intend to use the material on an ongoing basis, the repeated use may not be a defensible fair use, but the determination will depend on individual circumstances.

Application

- Is the material (e.g., a digital image, an excerpt from a book) already made available for a price? Is the price a fair market price? Is the contemplated use one which permission from the copyright holder is generally required?
- Is there an existing licensing or other payment mechanism in place for the contemplated use? If not, based on current indicators, how likely will such a mechanism be put in place?

The use of this work doesn't deprive the owner of income nor does it undermine any potential market for the work. While the publisher has a permissions form, the nature of the requested information seems to align moreso with use that will have a financial impact. The fees are not provided until you go through the multi-month waiting period too. While this dissertation is hosted in ProQuest in perpetuity, there is still little effect on the rights of the copyright owner.

Your assessment

Describe details regarding effect of the contemplated use on the market or any potential market:

(see above)

Your Fair Use Determination

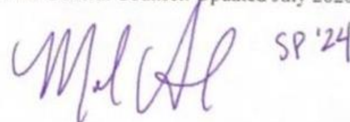
Your determination requires a subjective balancing of each of the four factors. You may find that some factors are more significant than others under the particular circumstances or that certain factors impact others. If you determine that the fair use defense applies to your intended use, briefly explain how you have arrived at this conclusion in the box below. Please note that the University appreciates that fair use assessment is not an exact science and requires only that you make a good faith determination.

Describe details regarding your final determination:

Using this narrative form and a checklist from Columbia University, my use reflects fair use. It is scholarly in nature without commercial gain. Despite being from a fictional work, less than 1% is used and is re-purposed in a new state (fiction → non-fiction). I legally possess a copy of the original work. I am not disseminating my dissertation. The excerpt used is not the heart of the work and my use will not affect the market for the original work. As a result, factors supporting Fair Use outnumber those which oppose.

If you determine that your intended use does not constitute fair use, then permission of the copyright holder is required to use the work. Keep in mind, however, that you do have alternatives. You might reevaluate your proposed use and/or consider using a smaller portion or composite portions of materials to adjust the fair use analysis outcome. You can also link to the material, or find a substitute, if these options are available. If your use requires displaying performances of copyrighted works online for distance learning purposes, the use may be permissible under the TEACH Act, enacted in November 2002 as an amendment to the U.S. Copyright Act, which provides copyright exemptions independent of fair use. Please consult the University's TEACH Act Guidelines for guidance on invoking the TEACH Act.

5 Office of the General Counsel: Updated July 2020



SP '24

***Perfect on Paper* (Gonzales, 2021)**

Description of Copyrighted Material (title, author, date of copyright):

Gonzales, S. (2021). Perfect on paper. Wednesday Books.

Amount of Proposed Use: (e.g., number of pages, chapters, lines, or duration) vs. whole work:

~940 words drawn from pp. 294-297; original work is 342 pages. The proposed use is 0.88% of the OW in pages.

1. Purpose and Character of Your Use

Rule: While the copyright law distinguishes between commercial and nonprofit educational purposes, this distinction is not dispositive of fair use. In enacting the law, Congress specifically rejected an exemption that would protect all use for educational purposes. Court decisions have upheld this position. More significant to your assessment is whether your intended use of a copyrighted work merely duplicates the work or whether it will alter or transform the original work in such a way as to create something new that is beneficial to society. Where the intended use is educational and transformative, your use is more likely to fall under fair use. Even if your use is arguably commercial, your use may still qualify as fair use if it is highly transformative. Where your use merely duplicates an original work, it is quite likely that your use will not fall under fair use, even if your use is for nonprofit educational purposes.

Application

- Is the purpose of your intended use different than that of the original work?
- Does your proposed use transform the original work by adding something new, presenting it in a different medium and context, or altering the original work by creating new expression, insights or meaning?

Your assessment

Describe details regarding purpose and character of the proposed use:

This excerpt is in my appendix of my dissertation as it was used in my interview protocol in which participants read, reacted to, and reflected on the excerpt. It is not being used in a fictional work so it is being transformed. I also have no gain commercially from this use with an academic & scholarly intent.

2. Nature of the Copyrighted Work

Rule: This factor is straightforward, but as with the other factors, not dispositive. Courts have considered use of works that are factual or published as weighing in favor of fair use, and use of works that are creative or unpublished as weighing against fair use.

Application

- Is the work that you wish to use a factual work or are you seeking to use a highly creative work, such as a poem, play, photograph or novel?
- Is the work that you seek to use already published?

Your assessment

Describe details regarding "nature" of the proposed use:

Fictional + published, but used to meet an educational purpose to provide a comprehensive protocol.

3. Amount and Substantiality of the Portion to be Used

Rule: There is no bright line rule here and your analysis of this factor will be particular to the facts. In general, the smaller the portion of a work used, the more likely the use will be considered fair. However, if you use a portion considered to be the "heart of the work," even if that portion constitutes a very small percentage of the entire work, your use will less likely qualify as a fair use. Moreover, the extent of permissible use may vary depending on the purpose and character of the use (See Factor 1 above). Thus, even if your use is arguably substantial, provided your use is the amount necessary to accomplish your specific purpose and/or is highly transformative, your use may be fair. For example, at least one court has determined that the use of a copyrighted photograph in its entirety was fair use, where the use was transformative and the photograph was reproduced only as a thumbnail with less clarity than the original image.

Application

- Is only a short clip or excerpt to be used?
- Is the portion to be used the "heart of the work"?
- Is the amount to be used limited only to the portion required to accomplish your purpose?

Your assessment

Describe details regarding amount and substantiality of the portion to be used:

Less than 1% (0.088%) of the original work is used and it is not the "heart of the work" but rather one of many bi-positive moments in the work. Only that which is necessary to achieve the educational intent is used.

4. Effect on the Market for the Original Work

Rule: This factor is typically given great weight by courts, and, as a practical matter, is the factor most likely to trigger a challenge against the claim of fair use. Consider whether your use deprives the copyright owner of income or whether it undermines a potential market for the copyrighted work. Note that your consideration of this factor may turn on previously considered factors, such as the amount and substantiality of the portion used. For example, the greater the amount of the material you intend to use, the greater the negative impact on the market for the work and the less likely your intended use will be considered fair. If you intend to use the material on an ongoing basis, the repeated use may not be a defensible fair use, but the determination will depend on individual circumstances.

Application

- Is the material (e.g., a digital image, an excerpt from a book) already made available for a price? Is the price a fair market price? Is the contemplated use one which permission from the copyright holder is generally required?
- Is there an existing licensing or other payment mechanism in place for the contemplated use? If not, based on current indicators, how likely will such a mechanism be put in place?

Your assessment

Describe details regarding effect of the contemplated use on the market or any potential market:

This use does not impede the copyright owner's ability to gain financial benefit nor does it impact the market for the original work, while permissions can be requested, the information requested doesn't align with a non-commercial, academic use, Potential fees are not available pre-assessment.

Your Fair Use Determination

Your determination requires a subjective balancing of each of the four factors. You may find that some factors are more significant than others under the particular circumstances or that certain factors impact others. If you determine that the fair use defense applies to your intended use, briefly explain how you have arrived at this conclusion in the box below. Please note that the University appreciates that fair use assessment is not an exact science and requires only that you make a good faith determination.

Describe details regarding your final determination:

Despite this dissertation remaining on ProQuest indefinitely this use meets US Fair use criteria based on this analysis + a checklist from Columbia University. This use transforms the original work into a scholarly space and uses less than 1% of the original. My use has no effect on the market and doesn't prevent the copyright holder from profiting. As a result, the factors favoring Fair Use outnumber those which oppose.

If you determine that your intended use does not constitute fair use, then permission of the copyright holder is required to use the work. Keep in mind, however, that you do have alternatives. You might reevaluate your proposed use and/or consider using a smaller portion or composite portions of materials to adjust the fair use analysis outcome. You can also link to the material, or find a substitute, if these options are available. If your use requires displaying performances of copyrighted works online for distance learning purposes, the use may be permissible under the TEACH Act, enacted in November 2002 as an amendment to the U.S. Copyright Act, which provides copyright exemptions independent of fair use. Please consult the University's TEACH Act Guidelines for guidance on invoking the TEACH Act.

5 Office of the General Counsel: Updated July 2020

APPENDIX K

EXPEDITED IRB APPROVAL NOTIFICATION

STATUS OF PROTOCOL EDIRC-2023-07-26-16412-erwiborg set to active

Compliance <compli@wm.edu>

Fri 7/28/2023 9:31 AM

To:Wiborg, Erica <[redacted]>;Allen, Melissa <[redacted]>;edirc-l <[redacted]>
Cc:Allen, Melissa <[redacted]>

This is to notify you on behalf of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee (PHSC) that protocol EDIRC-2023-07-26-16412-erwiborg titled A Foucauldian-informed Thematic Discourse Analysis of Bisexual+ Emerging Adults' Use of Fiction-based Parasocial Relationships During Sexual Identity Construction has been approved through the EXPEDITED review process with a start date of 2023-08-15.

This protocol must be submitted for annual renewal on 2024-08-15 at which time the PI will be asked to indicate whether the protocol will continue as active or should be set to inactive.

Should there be any changes to this protocol during the project period or if you wish to continue the protocol after this expiration date, please submit your request to the committee for review using the Protocol and Compliance Management application (https://compliance.wm.edu).

Please add the following statement to the footer of all consent forms, cover letters, etc.:

THIS PROJECT WAS APPROVED BY the W&M PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone [redacted]) ON 2023-08-15 AND EXPIRES ON 2024-08-15.

You are required to notify Dr. Jennifer Stevens, Chair of the PHSC at [redacted] ([redacted]) if any issues arise with participants during this study.

Good luck with your study.

COMMENTS

No comments available

BASIC INFO

Title: A Foucauldian-informed Thematic Discourse Analysis of Bisexual+ Emerging Adults' Use of Fiction-based Parasocial Relationships During Sexual Identity Construction
Start Date: 2023-08-15
Year Number: 1
Years Total: 1
Campus: Main
Committee(s): EDIRC
Cc: Emails: [redacted]

PI INFO

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W&M UserID: mlallen
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Ext:
Alternate Phone:

Protocol modified by tjward on 2023-07-28 09:31:30

APPENDIX L

EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS FOR MEMBER CHECKING

Hello!

I hope you are doing well and you had a relaxing and restful winter break since we last spoke! I am writing because I have (finally) finished data analysis for your individual narrative write up based on our conversations. I would greatly appreciate it if you would give it a read and let me know if any content needs to be changed. You'll notice I relied heavily on your own quotes because I want to make sure your voice is prominent in my findings. If you could let me know by **Wednesday, January 24th**, it would be great. Hopefully this doesn't add too much to your plate at the start of a new semester. Feel free to mark any changes using track changes in Word. If I don't hear from you by then, then I'll assume that you do not have any edits for me to make.

Outside of any interpretations I made, make sure that you still like your pseudonym, your pronouns are correct to the extent that APA allows (as frustrating as that is), and that there is nothing you feel is too identifiable about yourself. Additionally, if you have had a birthday since we talked, happy birthday! But, you don't need to correct the age as it was the age you were when we talked.

These are still very much drafts and I have not had a chance to proof them, so please excuse my wordiness and my proclivity for long, quasi-run on sentences. I just want to make sure that I have your stamp of approval before diving into edits.

My one request is to not share this with anyone as I have not yet defended my dissertation at this point in time and don't want my findings getting out before then. I believe I should have a virtual option for people to attend via Zoom, so if that is the case, I will send information so you are able to attend my defense if you would like.

Please let me know if you have any questions and wishing you the best as you start the spring semester!

VITA

Melissa L. Allen

Education

The College of William & Mary *May 2024*
Doctor of Philosophy | *Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership*, *Higher Education Administration*

James Madison University *May 2019*
Master of Education | College Student Personnel Administration

James Madison University *May 2017*
Bachelor of Arts | *Modern Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, Spanish*
Bachelor of Music | *Vocal Performance*

Publications

Refereed:

Allen, M. L. (in press). "Reset the counter, guys!": A thematic analysis of fan discourse about female players on *Dungeons & Dragons* actual-play web series. *Journal of Fandom Studies*.

Allen, M. L (2023). How is it that someone like you: paragon, damn near saint, could love this world so damn much but no one in it?": *Horizon Zero Dawn's* Aloy and the disruption of amatonormative benevolent sexism in female-led games. *Games and Culture*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231179511

Allen, M. (2023). "In a romantic way, not just a friend way!": Exploring the developmental implications of positive depictions of bisexuality in Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper*. *Journal of Bisexuality, 23*(2), 197-228. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2022.2153191

In Process:

Allen, M. L. (in process). "Snow lands on top": Classism in higher education as a catalyst for Coriolanus Snow's revitalization of the Hunger Games in *The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes*. *The Lion and the Unicorn*, intended journal.

Allen, M. L. (in process). Ludonarrative harmony in *This Bed We Made* as a reflection of the socio-culturally created panopticon restricting expressions of queerness during the Lavender Scare. *Games and Culture*, intended journal.

Presentations

Allen, M. L. (2023). Using graphic novels to promote social-emotional learning in first-year seminars. American College Personnel Association Annual Convention, New Orleans, LA, March 26-29, 2023.

Co-teaching Experience

Qualitative Research Methods & Design I | Social Justice Praxis in Higher Education | Student Development Theory

Honors and Awards

Armand J. & Mary Faust Galfo Education Research Fellowship | 2023-2024 | $20,843
John. R. Thelin Higher Education Research Award | 2022 | $1,000
Phi Beta Kappa | Inducted Junior Year, Spring 2016