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Tatianna Brown

Can You Hear Us? A Content Analysis of Queer Representation in Audio Dramas

18 December 2020

Media Studies Senior Project

Dara Greenwood

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Qualitative Observations	12
Fan Responses on Social Media	30
Concluding Remarks	37
Bibliography	44

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Introduction

Studying diverse representation in the media is hardly a new topic. For decades, scholars from countless disciplines have mined cartoons, magazines, films, books, and countless other media forms for who they represent, how they are represented, and what effects they have on audiences. Diverse media representation shows us the good, bad, and ugly of how different communities are portrayed by media industries and how that affects the opinions of media consumers toward those groups. Despite this broad field of study, little work has been done to study different aspects of the burgeoning podcasting industry.

Though a relatively new medium — the word “podcast” was first coined in 2004 by Ben Hammersley, a columnist for *The Guardian* — podcasts have quickly pervaded modern society, echoing the style of old radio shows (Hammersley). Based on research from Edison Research Infinite Dial in 2020, estimates suggest that over a third of Americans have listened to a podcast in the last month and nearly 25% of people listen to podcasts weekly (Winn). Unique to podcasts is their accessibility to both their audiences and the creators who want to enter the platform, as well as the freedom of podcast content, allowing creators the ability to create stories for large audiences that would struggle to be told elsewhere.

Podcast listeners have unrestricted access to podcasts. A range of online platforms and apps — like Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Audioboom, and Spotify — are home to podcasts and allow listeners to download episodes at any time for free. The wide distribution and lack of financial investment attract large audiences, and the option to download episodes allows audiences to listen to shows at their leisure as many times as they want. There are hundreds of thousands of podcast shows and millions of episodes for audiences to choose from, a number that grows daily, ensuring that listeners will be able to find content that specifically appeals to their

individual tastes (Winn). Just as it is easy for listeners to find and listen to shows, it is just as easy for the average person to create and share their own podcast show.

Unlike media like film, television, and books, there is nearly no gatekeeping for creators to enter the podcast industry. Podcasts are relatively easy to produce; as Cecil Baldwin, the lead voice actor for the *Welcome to Night Vale* podcast, explains, “if you can get your hands on a microphone and a computer, you can make an artistic endeavor that has the potential to be heard by literally billions of people” (Considine 43). Mainstream media present several barriers for creators, like large overhead fees, long production processes, and even content censorship. Professor Sarita Malik and research fellow Photini Vrikki, in their work on how podcasts could be used for social justice as an anti-racist tool, note that podcasting stands out from other media industries with its “flexible production (predominantly self-organised, low-budget, content-led, and operating outside traditional regulatory structures), and... its potential to produce narratives that oppose exclusionary forms of representations and politics found in” other media (Vrikki and Malik 276). Podcasts, with their open online nature, can thus exist outside of dominant industry hierarchies and even challenge hegemonic entities and narratives. This leads to a mass of independent creators of podcasts, as opposed to a small dominant group of corporate content producers.

Along with a proliferation of independent creators, the lack of bureaucratic intervention also allows podcast creators freedom with their content. Since “podcasts aren’t restricted by traditional broadcast regulations,” creators can make shows on just about any topic (Hennig). Compared to media created for the masses like blockbuster films, many independent podcasts intend to reach a targeted audience, not the greatest number of people. Podcast creators lack concern over censorship, which many mainstream books, movies, and TV shows struggle and are

unable to do. New media, like podcasts, can be “a space for creativity and production because of ease of accessibility,” with the benefits being that they are “more flexible and open, and less constraining” (McInroy and Craig, “Perspectives” 41). Podcasters can afford to take more authorial “risks,” including creating content that larger production companies and media generally tend to avoid, such as queer or racially diverse characters and narratives.

Within podcasting is the subgenre of “audio dramas.” These serialized fiction podcasts tend to be less popular than their nonfiction counterparts (with a few exceptions) and tell a story with a cast of characters through dialogue, music, and sound effects. This is a small, yet growing, niche within the podcast industry, but it offers a rich array of shows that fully portray the creative freedom that independent podcast creators have; its openness welcomes “more diverse stories and voices” to share them (Copeland 220). Most audio dramas are independently produced, though large and established corporations, like iHeartRadio, are present in the genre, and the BBC has been creating radio dramas for decades. Podcasts are “a space increasingly dominated by professional media producers,” but just as many creators operate independently of any corporation (Bottomley 180). Since podcasts are so widely available through the Internet and apps, any show, no matter its producer, can reach a global audience (Dann 144).

In my own consumption of audio dramas, I have consistently noticed the prominence of queer characters in some of the shows. Significantly, there is an overall normalization and abundance of queer characters in this genre that is unlike any other media I consume. Whereas movies tend to turn the fact that a character is queer into the focal point of its plot, queer characters in podcasts simply exist and are treated with the same respect given to straight characters. These audio dramas serve as spaces where queer fans can see themselves reflected in media without being turned into a spectacle. The “circulation of queer desires, experience, and

voices” is vital for audiences who can finally see their own voices represented (Copeland 210). The types of queer representation in audio dramas vary, just as the shows and their premises vary. Queer representation that is so easily accessible and freely made is invaluable and allows for a multiplicity of stories and perspectives that affect their queer listeners in positive ways that I will discuss in the ensuing chapters. The podcast medium is ideal for diverse storytelling, revealing the impact and role that audio dramas have in producing a range of stories that cannot be found in other media forms, and the benefits it can have on the diverse audiences who are listening.

To analyze this queer representation in audio dramas, I will look at episodes, characters, and plotlines from seven popular audio drama shows. The shows are as follows: *Welcome to Night Vale*, *Alice Isn't Dead*, *The Bright Sessions*, *ars PARADOXICA*, *King Falls AM*, *The Strange Case of Starship Iris*, and *The Magnus Archives*. I chose these shows in particular because of my familiarity with them, the prevalence of queer characters in the show, and their relative popularity in the audio drama genre. Though the listenership of these shows greatly varies, from millions to only a few hundred thousand, they all have deeply dedicated fanbases, and listeners tend to be fans of more than one of these shows; though their content differs in its genre, these shows all exist in the same orbit. Since I was unable to find accurate and current numbers regarding the number of episode downloads each show has (which is how listenership is roughly measured), I also took into consideration the number of Twitter followers the shows' accounts had and the number of ratings the shows had on Apple Podcasts since these are the only metrics I could find that are up-to-date and available to the public. Initially, I had planned to analyze more shows, like *Girl in Space* and *EOS 10*, but I decided against it. In conjunction with being unfamiliar with it, *EOS 10* had fewer Twitter followers and ratings compared to the other

shows (@eos_10). *Girl in Space*, though it has a significant number of Twitter followers at over nine thousand, had very infrequent and offhand discussions of sexuality and gender identity, despite queer characters being present, and thus I felt that it did not have enough material to work with (@girlinspacepod).

I will look at the role of queer characters in these shows and the focus, or lack thereof, on their sexualities and gender identities (specifically, any nonbinary or transgender characters), as well as how those identities potentially affect the show's overall plot. I will also look closely at *Welcome to Night Vale*, *King Falls AM*, and *The Magnus Archives* to analyze fan reception on social media and the communities that fans create around these shows. This will provide a glimpse into fan opinions of the shows and their reactions to queer characters, their plotlines, and the influence these characters have on the audience.

Throughout my analyses, I use the term “queer” as a reclaimed umbrella term that encapsulates any non-heterosexual sexuality and any non-cisgender gender identity. “Queer” also allows for nonspecificity and ambiguity when it comes to identities, which is especially helpful since I will be looking at characters who have no definitively labeled identities, but who are either not heterosexual or not cisgender. The only exception to this is when I discuss or quote from the work of others, in which case I will default to the acronyms or labels they use (LGB, LGBTQ, LGBTQ+, etc.).

I recognize that audio dramas are a small subgenre within the emerging medium of podcasts and, therefore, these shows are not reflective of mainstream media trends. Streaming services like Netflix have canceled a number of popular shows with LGBT representation prematurely (Mussen). In a study of young adults and their opinions on LGBTQ representation in traditional media, television and film are shown to repeatedly “represent LGBTQ people as

one-dimensional and stereotypical” and “ignore... many LGBTQ sub-groups,” like asexuality and non-binary individuals (McInroy and Craig, “Perspectives” 32). Though not the case in all instances, queer representation is either overly simplified or erased altogether time and time again in mainstream media. However, that does not lessen the importance or the influence of representation in these audio dramas.

Studying these queer characters shows the work currently being done, as well as the respectful approach that is taken to portray them, which is not always afforded to marginalized groups in fictional media. These shows depict situations in which the identity of a queer character is not an overwhelming part of their personality and is not turned into a spectacle or plot point; these characters are who they are and they are not made to feel any different from other characters based on their identities. This is a type of representation that other media forms have struggled to show, which is “indicative of ‘the values, fears, and intolerance of program developers and producers,’” so this makes audio dramas even more important to analyze (qtd. in McInroy and Craig, “Perspectives” 42). It is less to see *how* audio dramas are able to achieve this normalization, but rather to show that this normalization is possible and that creators are actively and successfully doing so without any underlying motives for their actions other than to tell a story. This is especially true since the majority of audio drama creators do not earn much money from their shows (if they earn any at all), and if they do, it is primarily through advertisements and crowdfunding.

Studies have looked at the relationship between queer audiences and media, specifically television and film, at length. Many queer people often turn their attention to media sources to see queer characters “largely due to the absence of any interpersonal resources willing to provide information, validation, or support,” an unfortunate and harmful result of the systemic

oppression of queer people in society (Bond, "Portrayals" 38). In one of Bradley Bond's studies, he builds upon previous research, which suggests that "exposure to depictions of sexuality in the media may influence the well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adolescents," by further exploring the relationship between LGB adolescents' exposure to mainstream and gay- and lesbian-oriented media, self-discrepancies, and well-being (Bond, "The Mediating Role" 51). In this context, gay- and lesbian-oriented (GLO) media is specifically targeting LGB audiences and features LGB characters. Bond concluded that exposure to GLO television is positively associated with the well-being of LGB teens, and suggests that increased exposure to GLO media could decrease a perceived difference between their actual and ideal selves; mere exposure to GLO media helps adolescents feel less isolated and ostracized. GLO media that aims to normalize LGB identities can benefit LGB adolescents in helping to validate their sexualities. Though it can be argued either way whether these podcasts could be considered GLO media, they do feature queer characters and seem to have a significant number of queer listeners, as will be discussed in "Fan Responses On Social Media." Therefore, exposure to some of the podcasts can benefit queer audiences in providing positive depictions of queer characters, alleviating some of the loneliness and isolation queer fans might be experiencing, as well as aiding their sense of well-being and identity formation.

In another study, this one conducted by professors Lauren B. McInroy and Shelley L. Craig, participants ages 18-22 years old who self-identified as LGBTQ were interviewed about their opinions on the portrayals of LGBTQ young people in the media. The LGBTQ adults in this study reported that they found comfort and identity validation from portrayals of LGBTQ people in film and television. However, in the face of poor and rigid representations in traditional media, some of the participants instead turned to new media (mostly online platforms) for

creative endeavors and as spaces where they could interact with other LGBTQ young people (McInroy and Craig, “Perspectives” 41). New media, like online blogs and social media, feature more user-generated content and allow for online spaces where LGBTQ communities can form; these spaces provide LGBTQ users with interconnectivity and on-going conversations with others, as well as support, information, and role models. This interconnectedness will also be discussed as I analyze fan opinions in further detail in “Fan Responses On Social Media.” In general, podcasts can also be considered new media, and these audio dramas serve as spaces for queer communities where fans can interact and support each other based on the commonality of being fans of the same show.

Queer audiences have come to (sometimes begrudgingly) consume any form of queer representation in different media because meaningful and accurate media representations and real-life role models are few and far between. Though the number of queer characters in mainstream media, like broadcast, cable, and streaming shows, is increasing every year (however marginally) these characters are often still lacking in critical depth and diversity (GLAAD Media Institute). Traditional media have proved to be lacking in positive queer representation, which has harmful repercussions on queer audiences, who are unable to see themselves reflected realistically in addition to having few in-person queer role models.

Unlike traditional media, the audio dramas I will examine feature diverse identities in an array of plotlines and lifestyles. These queer characters are multidimensional and have personalities and purposes outside of their sexual identity or gender. Audio dramas like the ones I will analyze show the easy normalization of queer identities in a number of situations. This is not to say that bigger media corporations will immediately adopt this practice because it has been shown to be possible since they have historically been slow to adapt to change and

diversification, but it shows a triumphant success for queer audiences and movement in a positive direction for the community. This idyllic representation normalizes queer characters and shows that people can have different sexualities and gender identities without it becoming an ordeal or something to focus entirely on. Especially for the younger audiences listening to audio dramas, normalized representation shows a hopeful future for queer listeners of complete acceptance, which is increasingly important in a world that still refuses to fully acknowledge and embrace the existence of queer people.

Qualitative Observations

Constant Comparative Methodology

My examination of these podcasts is based on sociologist Barney G. Glaser’s constant comparative qualitative analysis method that he developed in 1965. The method encourages simultaneous coding and analysis to systematically generate a conclusive and integrated theory based on the data studied. I chose the constant comparative analysis for its use in “generating and plausibly suggesting... many properties and hypotheses about a *general* phenomenon,” yet, “no attempt is made to ascertain either the universality or the proof of suggested causes or other properties” (Glaser 438). These elements are useful considering the sheer number of audio drama shows, the lack of existing literature on them, and the diversity of their characters. Audio dramas tend to differ greatly in premise, length, cast, and plot, so using the constant comparative method allowed me to consolidate common themes that arose throughout my research — themes that are substantiated by these specific shows, but which might not be the case for all other audio dramas with queer themes. The goal of my research was to find commonalities in a select amount of shows as a sample of the industry and to contextualize these themes within the greater discourse of queer representation in media. Seeing as how little work has been done on content analyses of audio dramas in an academic context, I was limited to my own novel discoveries and conclusions.

I chose these seven podcasts while considering both my familiarity with them as well as metrics that helped me infer their popularity, such as Twitter followers and the number of listener ratings on Apple Podcasts. Over the past several years, I have come to listen to nearly all of them in some capacity. In my own experience, these shows tend to garner overlapping fan bases — that is to say, if you are a fan of one of these shows, there is a good chance that you have at least

heard of another one of these shows, be it through word of mouth, social media or online forums. As previously mentioned, these shows vary greatly in their content, yet a clear through line is their inclusion of queer characters.

In studying these shows, I used my prior knowledge and revisited select episodes, noting any and all aspects of queer characters: how many appeared in each show, (how) was their sexuality discussed, was the character a stereotype, is the character in a relationship, etc. From these detailed examinations, I then started looking for common elements between shows and ultimately settled on the following themes: explicit and implicit mention of sexual orientation or gender identity, prominence of a character's identity or queer relationship to the plot, and discussion of a character's sexuality or gender with another person and their reception.

Podcast Show Summaries

Here, I provide brief summaries of each show I studied. These summaries are basic and are by no means entirely comprehensive of the plot or key characters — for the sake of brevity since some shows have close to two hundred episodes — but they give enough context for a general understanding of each show's premise. The summaries are derived from the descriptions each show puts on its website or another online platform.

Welcome to Night Vale is one of the first independent audio drama shows to break into the mainstream and capture public attention. *Welcome to Night Vale* is set in the style of a radio show hosted by Cecil Palmer, who reports the weather, announcements, and news for the strange desert town of Night Vale. Carlos, a scientist whose move to Night Vale is news in the first episode, eventually becomes Cecil's long-term partner (*Welcome to Night Vale*).

Alice Isn't Dead, produced by the same team as *Welcome to Night Vale*, follows Keisha, who uses her job as a truck driver to search across the United States for her presumed-dead wife, Alice. Throughout her travels, Keisha encounters strange towns, inhuman murderers, and a conspiracy greater than her missing wife (“Alice Isn't Dead”).

The Bright Sessions explores Dr. Joan Bright's therapy sessions for her patients, categorized as “atypicals,” who all have unique superhuman abilities — Sam can time travel, Chloe can read minds, and Caleb is an empath. The show follows the patients' struggles and triumphs with their abilities (*The Bright Sessions*).

ars PARADOXICA follows Dr. Sally Grissom when a science experiment goes wrong and she is sent back in time from the present to the Cold War era. Grissom's sudden appearance lands her a job conducting physics and spacetime projects for the US government, and her audio recordings document both her work as well as the inevitable and dangerous consequences of altering time (“ars PARADOXICA”).

King Falls AM focuses on King Falls, a small mountain town, and its late-night radio talk show. Co-hosts and best friends Sammy Stevens and Ben Arnold air their show nightly, discussing all of the strange, and possibly paranormal, events and inhabitants of the town (“King Falls AM”).

The Strange Case of Starship Iris takes place in 2189 after Earth narrowly won an intergalactic war against extraterrestrials. Biologist Violet Liu finds herself aboard a spacecraft full of smugglers after her research vessel was destroyed in a mysterious explosion. Violet adjusts to life with her new crewmates, including Arkady, Brian, and Krejhh, as they traverse the universe in search of answers (“The Strange Case of Starship Iris”).

The Magnus Archives is a horror anthology relaying stories from the Magnus Institute, which specializes in documenting esoteric and unusual occurrences. In cataloging and following up on statements of strange events, head archivist Jonathan Sims, and his co-workers, including Martin Blackwood, uncover unsettling connections between statements and the greater, terrifying picture those connections create (“The Magnus Archives - Horror Podcast”).

Thematic Commonalities

Explicit Mentions of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

This first theme is the explicit mention of any sexuality or gender identity label. There is importance, and sometimes a necessity, in outright naming some specific sexualities and gender identities in the media. From my observations, I found an interesting trend of sexualities that were explicitly stated: across three different shows, asexuality and bisexuality were each mentioned twice and were the only notable sexualities to be stated. For gender identities, there was only one instance of a character stating that he was a transgender man.

<i>ars PARADOXICA</i>	<u>Sally</u> : “I’m asexual, I get it.” (“Greenhouse”).
<i>The Bright Sessions</i>	<u>Chloe</u> : “But you know how rare it is for me to really fall for someone. And then there’s the whole ace thing - some people don’t want to sign on for that.” (“Chloe”).
	<u>Sam</u> : “I know that Mark is bisexual.” (“September 24th, 2016”).
<i>The Strange Case of Starship Iris</i>	<u>Violet</u> : “So no matter how many times my team pretended not to understand my directions, or moved stuff I needed to shelves I couldn’t reach, or made comments they knew I could overhear, part of me was always asking, ‘Are they trying to force me to quit, or is it all in my head? Is this really about — you know, racism, classism, sexism, biphobia, some or all of the above — or is it about me?’” (“Parallel”).

	<p><u>Brian</u>: “I mean, it was the same week I came out to my friends and family as trans, so. At that point, stress-wise, you’re kinda grading everything on a curve?” (“Phone Home”).</p>
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Some conclusions can be drawn from these three identities — asexual, bisexual, and transgender. They are difficult to portray in an audio-only medium without being explicitly stated; there are ways to code for them, such as having a bisexual character show attraction to multiple genders over time, but the identities are most clearly depicted when they are outright said. Additionally, according to a study researching discrimination and alienation within the LGBTQ+ community, individuals who are asexual, bisexual, and transgender tend to face marginalization and exclusion from both society and the LGBTQ+ community (Parmenter et al. 2, 8). Though these identities have limited mentions in their respective shows, and minimal conversations surrounding them, the overall inclusion and visibility of these identities is a hopeful and positive sign, especially considering the non-stereotypical portrayal of these characters.

In the case of asexuality, there is not much representation or discussion of it in fictional media, academia, and the daily lives of many people. In academia, “Very little has been studied about asexual individuals,” specifically in the psychological sciences (Parmenter et al. 11). In a study that surveyed the social and communal lives of asexual individuals, some older participants felt distance and disconnect, noting that “People who identify as asexual today seem to be very young and their community is online” (Rothblum et al. 89). Asexual communities seem to be localized and heavily marginalized, as they are repeatedly excluded and erased not only from society but occasionally from the LGBTQ community as well (Parmenter et al. 8, 11-12). For a wider, less informed audience, there is value in having asexuality explicitly mentioned and explained in a piece of media since many people do not fully understand what asexuality means

or that it exists in the first place. For asexual fans, they get to see their identity clearly represented as prominent, fully developed, and complex characters, who are not defined by their sexuality and have several healthy, nonsexual relationships: Dr. Sally Grissom is a physicist who learns to successfully navigate the paradoxes of time travel with co-workers and friends during the Cold War, and Chloe is an art student who can hear others' thoughts and is the one to pull together other characters, not only to use their abilities to help Dr. Bright but also eventually as a group of friends.

Bisexuality faces a similar issue of misconceptions and erasure by both the LGBTQ community and greater society. Much of the discrimination "is fuelled by stereotypes" that bisexual people are confused about their sexuality or that they are so hypersexual that one partner is not fulfilling enough (Bishop and Pynoo 1, 2). The systematic exclusion and misrepresentation of bisexual individuals are harmful, bringing these people ongoing stress that can have serious consequences on their mental and physical health, as concluded in a 2017 study about the health effects caused by the stigmatization of bisexual individuals over time (Feinstein and Dyar 47). Although Violet only briefly mentions her experience with biphobia, that she talked about it at all reveals its prevalence in her life by listing it alongside instances of sexism, classism, and racism. Like how Sally Grissom and Chloe subvert stereotypes surrounding asexuality, Violet and Mark do the same regarding bisexuality. Throughout the ten episodes of *The Strange Case of Starship Iris*, Violet only shows a romantic interest in Arkady, and the two women later enter a monogamous relationship without any questions or invalidations of Violet's sexuality. Mark also has a monogamous and long-term relationship with Sam, a fellow "atypical" who can time travel, and their relationship undergoes all of the normal pressures of relationships that do not feature a bisexual person.

Though depictions of transgender characters are on the rise, they are still a minority compared to other queer identities (GLAAD Media Institute). Within the LGBTQ community, like asexuality and bisexuality, transphobia and the rejection of non-cisgender individuals exist (Parmenter et al. 8). Carrie Davis, a social worker and human rights advocate, explains that transgender people are often stereotyped as “sex workers, mentally ill... and as unlovable” (Davis 16-17). Brian, however, is a linguistics expert who is engaged to one of his crewmates, Krejjh. Brian’s role in *The Strange Case of Starship Iris* as a key member of the crew is in line with positive representations of transgender people, in which the characters are “more fully integrated into storylines and less tokenistic,” a trait that several LGBTQ participants emphasized in their discussion of transgender representation in both online and offline media (McInroy and Craig, “Transgender Representation” 612).

Implicit Mentions of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

I use this category primarily for characters who are in or have been in same-sex relationships, yet have not explicitly discussed the nature of their sexuality — their presence in these relationships lends itself to conclude that they are not heterosexual. I also include characters who are non-binary or who use gender-neutral pronouns but do not discuss their gender identity any further.

<i>Welcome to Night Vale</i>	<u>Cecil</u> : “[Carlos] grinned, and everything about him was perfect, and I fell in love instantly.” (“Pilot”).
<i>The Strange Case of Starship Iris</i>	<u>Arkady</u> : “What <i>are</i> ...you saying?” <u>Violet</u> : (deep breath) “Will you go out with me?” <u>Arkady</u> : “What.” [...] <u>Arkady</u> : “We just heisted a cloud, Liu, I think we’ll manage.” <u>Violet</u> : “Well. Cool.”

	<p><u>Arkady</u>: “Just to be clear, you mean ‘dating’ in the romantic sense, right?” <u>Violet</u>: (laughs) <u>Arkady</u>: “Right?” <u>Violet</u>: “Right. Totally right.” (“Off the Air”).</p> <p><u>McCabe</u>: “It’s RJ McCabe.” [...] <u>McCabe</u>: “And, uh, I use ‘they’ and ‘them’? Hi.” (“Off the Air”).</p> <p><u>Arkady</u>: “I’d say, across the board, the only real difference between us and them is the numbers, the purple skin and, I don’t know, some cultural stuff, like I’ve never met a Dwarnian who didn’t find the whole gender binary thing really frickin’ funny.” <u>Krejjh</u>: “Pardon me, sir or madam, but I simply <i>must</i> know what gender you are! There’s <i>two whole options</i>, and I can’t really explain why but somehow it’s <i>very</i> important! (laughs)” (“In The Deep”).</p>
<p><i>The Magnus Archives</i></p>	<p><u>Melanie</u>: “Right, well... the jury’s still out on Elias. And <i>anyway</i>, Martin’s always been lovely to <i>you</i>.” <u>Basira</u>: “Hmm. I don’t know, I mean, you should have seen him when I turned up last year. I think he thought I was trying to steal his precious Archivist [Jon]”. [...] <u>Basira</u>: “That boy needs to relax.” <u>Melanie</u>: “Or at <i>least</i> find someone else to fuss over!” <u>Basira</u>: “Yeah, he’s got it <i>bad</i>.” <u>Basira</u>: “Do you know if he and Jon ever...” <u>Melanie</u>: “No clue, and not interested! Although... according to Georgie, Jon <i>doesn’t</i>.” <u>Basira</u>: “Like, at all?” <u>Melanie</u>: “Yeah.” [...] <u>Melanie</u>: “Well, she [Gerogie] and Jon, they dated...” (“Matter of Perspective”).</p>

In light of a lack of clear explanations, we must infer why these characters choose to not disclose or explicitly state their sexualities and gender identities. Disclosure is not necessary and should not be expected of a queer person, but it is worth considering some possible reasons behind these instances.

The primary reason for implying one's identity rather than explicitly naming it is the inherent fluidity of queer identities. Shoshana Rosenberg, an academic researcher focusing on gender and sexuality studies, underscores this with the concept of "coming in," which complicates and challenges the notion of "coming out." "Coming in" accounts for the complex and on-going process of someone discovering and understanding their identity and thus their place in society; it takes into consideration that "a significant aspect of the journey of queer-identified people is not simply to come out to others, but rather to come into a place of acceptance within oneself" (Rosenberg 1806). The experience of being queer is not and should not be defined by a culminating moment of disclosing one's identity to the world; instead, it is an ongoing and nuanced process of self-discovery and pride independent of others and self-disclosure to them.

Another reason could be the attempt to avoid the extensive social stresses to explicitly name one's identity. This could be the case for RJ McCabe and Jon; McCabe only makes their pronouns known once they leave their strictly regimented government job and Jon frequently deals with the dangers and fears that come with having one's secrets exposed and the ceaseless search for knowledge, no matter the cost to oneself or others. In their 2015 study, research scientist Jennifer D. Rubin and psychologist Sara I. McClelland interviewed queer women of color in their late teens about their disclosure and expression of their sexuality online. For many of their participants, depending on their familial, social, or professional situation, "to be queer is one thing, to claim it publicly is another" (Rubin and McClelland 8). Publicly stating one's identity can have several consequences, especially in oppressive and unaccepting environments, so the choice to not explicitly disclose one's identity and manage their visibility is a calculated and protective decision (Rubin and McClelland 2). Additionally, many people come out to others

several times in their lives, whether it is because they meet new people or because they selectively choose who they come out to. In the example pulled from *The Magnus Archives*, the reasoning for non-disclosure could also simply be attributed to the fact that neither Melanie nor Basira know firsthand how Jon chooses to identify; they only have information about Jon's actions they received from other people and thus are left to speculate about Martin and Jon's sexual and romantic identities.

Queer Relationships as Integral to the Plot

Most mainstream queer media focus directly on their queer characters and foreground their identities over their relationships with others. Looking at these characters and plotlines reveals that these three shows prioritize exploring the intensity and passion of a relationship rather than the fact that it is a *queer* relationship.

<p><i>Alice Isn't Dead</i></p>	<p><u>Keisha</u>: "I thought you were dead, Alice. I really did. I know that there is no evidence for it, but...I couldn't think of another reason you would vanish like that. Just <i>gone</i>... I mourned you, Alice. I've never loved anyone so hard." [...]</p> <p><u>Keisha</u>: "So, my wife wasn't dead. That's good to know. That's new information... I started to look through your things. I had left them alone; didn't want to get tangled in the memories just yet. But now they weren't memories. They were evidence. Clues to a story you had failed to tell me." [...]</p> <p><u>Keisha</u>: "This job [transportation services] takes me all over. Which is where you are. All over." ("Part 1, Chapter 2: Alice").</p>
<p><i>King Falls AM</i></p>	<p><u>Sammy</u>: "I wake up, and the first thing I think about is about finding Jack, and the last thing I see before I go to sleep is Jack asking me, begging me, to come to this town I'd never heard of called King fucking Falls." [...]</p> <p><u>Sammy</u>: "But you don't get it, <i>everything</i> is about <i>him</i>! It <i>always</i> has been!" [...]</p>

	<p><u>Ben</u>: “You followed Jack to King Falls.” (“The Best Imitation of Myself”).</p>
<p><i>The Magnus Archives</i></p>	<p><u>Archivist/Jon</u>: “...I thought you might be lost.” <u>Martin</u>: “Are you real?” <u>Archivist</u>: “Yes! Yes, I-I-I am. Come on, we’ve got to get out of here.” <u>Martin</u>: “No. No, I don’t think so.” <u>Archivist</u>: “<i>Why?</i>” <u>Martin</u>: “This is where I should be. It feels right.” <u>Archivist</u>: “Martin, don’t say that.” <u>Martin</u>: “Nothing hurts here. It’s just quiet. Even the <i>fear</i> is gentle here.” <u>Archivist</u>: “This isn’t right. This isn’t <i>you</i>.” <u>Martin</u>: “It is though. (wry laugh) I really loved you, you know?” [...] <u>Archivist</u>: “Listen, I know you <i>think</i> you want to be here, I know you think it’s safer, and well — well, maybe it is. But we need you. <i>I need you</i>.” <u>Martin</u>: “No, you don’t. Not really. Everyone’s alone, but we all survive.” <u>Archivist</u>: “I don’t just want to <i>survive!</i>” <u>Martin</u>: “I’m sorry.” <u>Archivist</u>: “Martin. Martin, look at me. Look at me and tell me what you see.” <u>Martin</u>: “I see... I see you, John. (incredulous chuckle) I <i>see</i> you.” (“The Last”).</p>

Hollywood films have systematically censored and suppressed queer narratives and characters for decades. Films in the 1920s and 1930s either did not show overt instances of same-sex attraction or only depicted it in an unappealing manner. In 1934, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America enforced a new regulation that banned sexual perversion in films, which many interpreted to include queerness; though the production codes became more lenient when they were restructured under the Motion Picture Association of America in 1966, their rating policies for films that are based on how suitable a movie is for children “marginalize and stigmatize LGBTQ characters and stories, making them less accessible” to LGBTQ youth (Drushel 184). The production code also applied to television shows. Historically, queer stories

have been silenced and erased for mainstream audiences and when they were told, they were heavily stereotyped and ridiculed. In the past, queer characters were rarely ever shown to be in romantic relationships (Raley and Lucas 25). More modern queer characters are given the same stereotypical storylines and are one-dimensional, facing either very positive or very negative outcomes (McInroy and Craig, “Perspectives” 34).

Understanding the suppression of queer narratives in mainstream media is necessary to highlight the importance of how queer relationships are portrayed in these three podcasts. In these instances, a character’s romantic relationship is the motivator for the progression of the plot. In all three, one character is in search of their partner in an attempt to find and rescue them from some outside antagonist. Their love is the driving force that brings them across the country, to strange towns, and into liminal supernatural spaces. What is important to note is that the *relationship* is the focal point of the plot, not the character’s sexuality — each character in these instances just also happens to be in a same-sex relationship. In many mainstream narratives, queer characters are stereotyped and thus their sexual identity becomes the overly simplified focus of most of the characters” (McInroy and Craig, “Perspectives” 40). Shifting the focus away from their identity and instead toward their complex and dedicated relationships indicates respectful depictions since they “go beyond the socially acceptable stereotypes” often given to queer characters, like comedic relief or a flamboyant gay man (Raley and Lucas 24-25). The “respectful” portrayal of minorities is what communications scholar Cedric C. Clark describes as the final stage an ethnic group undergoes when shown on television — the first three stages are non-recognition and exclusion, ridicule rooted in stereotypes, and regulation of the minority group by placing them into socially acceptable roles (Clark 19-21). Though Clark’s analysis in 1969 pertains to ethnic minorities on television, the outline can easily be applied to the portrayal

of the queer community across media. Though the premises of these three relationship plotlines have a surprising amount of overlap, despite how different each show's world is, they show that compelling queer narratives that do not only focus on a character's queerness can be told, giving queer characters depth and complexity that they might otherwise lose. Focusing instead on relationships and love rather than prioritizing their "LGBTQ identity as the defining feature of characters' identities may be particularly welcome" as a shift away from overused, one-dimensional narratives — a much-welcomed change for queer audiences (McInroy and Craig, "Perspectives" 43).

General Discussion of Sexuality: With Whom and Their Reception

For this theme, I am only looking at reactions from both parties when one person discusses their sexuality or gender, either explicitly or implicitly. These interactions can have either positive, neutral, or negative reactions from either party. I classified the positive interactions as primarily supportive and a willing disclosure on the part of the queer individual; neutral discussions featured a character stating their queer identity simply as a fact or receiving mixed responses to their disclosure; and a negative discussion was marked by an unwilling disclosure or discussion of queerness in a demeaning manner.

Positive	<i>ars PARADOXICA</i>	<p><u>Esther</u>: "When we were in New York, we met for drinks, and one thing led to another... But when it was done, she told me that's why we didn't stay together. I've been thinking about it a lot, and I'm not ashamed of wanting things for myself. And if that means I'm losing friends... Well, that's sad. It's unfortunate. I hope... I hope we can stay in touch like this."</p> <p><u>Sally</u>: "She, huh?"</p> <p><u>Esther</u>: "...What?"</p> <p><u>Sally</u>: "You just said she."</p> <p><u>Esther</u>: "No— no I didn't!"</p> <p><u>Sally</u>: "You did."</p> <p><u>Esther</u>: "I said he, I—"</p>
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		<p><u>Sally</u>: “That explains... a lot of things.”</p> <p><u>Esther</u>: “You can’t tell anyone, Sally. Please, <i>please</i> don’t tell anyone.”</p> <p><u>Sally</u>: “Relax! You don’t have to worry about that with me. I’m asexual, I get it.”</p> <p><u>Esther</u>: “You’re a what?”</p> <p><u>Sally</u>: “Okay. You know how most ladies you meet are really into men? But you, obviously, are into women. I’m not really into anyone.”</p> <p><u>Esther</u>: “Really? So, sex—”</p> <p><u>Sally</u>: “It’s never really done it for me. Like, it’s nice, or whatever, but... I’ve got bigger stuff to think about, you know? But that means I’m an outlier. Outside of the traditional system. So I get what it’s like. And it also means I don’t care who you wanna get it on with.” (“Greenhouse”).</p>
	<i>The Bright Sessions</i>	<p><u>Sam</u>: “You are relentless. I swear, you’d matchmake the entire world if you could.”</p> <p><u>Chloe</u>: “I can’t help it, I love love.”</p> <p><u>Sam</u>: “And yet you are incredibly picky when it comes to your own love life.”</p> <p><u>Chloe</u>: “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.”</p> <p><u>Sam</u>: “I wasn’t saying there was. I just don’t want you to be focused so much on everyone else’s happiness that you forget your own.”</p> <p><u>Chloe</u>: “I won’t, I promise. But you know how rare it is for me to really fall for someone. And then there’s the whole ace thing — some people don’t want to sign on for that.”</p> <p><u>Sam</u>: “Which I think is dumb—”</p> <p><u>Chloe</u>: “No, I get it. You can’t make a relationship work if what you both want out of a relationship is fundamentally incompatible.”</p> <p><u>Sam</u>: “Yeah, I guess. I think that person is out there for you, though. Someone that you’ll feel all those warm fuzzy feelings for and who will love you for who you are.” (“Chloe”).</p>
		<p><u>Dr. Bright</u>: “You know, Caleb, it’s okay if you and Adam like each other in that way, it’s perfectly—”</p> <p><u>Caleb</u>: “I know it’s okay. But, it’s just. I don’t think I’ve ever had a friend like this. Not really. I don’t want to fuck that up with a bunch of other stuff.” (“Patient #11 (Caleb), Session 13”).</p>
Neutral	<i>Alice Isn’t Dead</i>	<p><u>Keisha</u>: “You [Alice] were not my first, but you were close. I dated Mindy Morris in high school. Mindy and I were friends, and then we knew we were more than friends, and we didn’t</p>

		<p>know what to do about that, and then we did know. I wanted to keep it a secret, she didn't. We kept it a secret. I think a lot of people knew anyway. I thought my parents for sure had no idea. Eventually, I learned that they knew and were mostly OK with it. Later they would be completely fine with it. In between, there was an adjustment. Not everything can be alright all at once." ("Part 2, Chapter 10: Why Am I Alive?").</p>
	<i>The Strange Case of Starship Iris</i>	<p><u>Violet</u>: "You transferred right before finals? Must've been stressful." <u>Brian</u>: "Mm, probably." <u>Violet</u>: "Probably?" <u>Brian</u>: "I mean, it was the same week I came out to my friends and family as trans, so. At that point, stress-wise, you're kinda grading everything on a curve?" <u>Violet</u>: "Wow, uh. Busy week. Also, to change schools, you would've had to move to a different planet--" <u>Brian</u>: "Which felt, like, kinda uncomfortably metaphorical while I was packing." <u>Violet</u>: "Yeah. Jesus, that's rough." <u>Brian</u>: "Mm, I don't regret it, though. My parents and most of my friends were great about the whole "coming out" thing, but sometimes you want a clean slate, you know? Plus, Wexler had way more support for trans kids." ("Phone Home").</p>
Negative	<i>King Falls AM</i>	<p><u>Greg</u>: "Don't. You. Hang. Up. On. Me." [...] <u>Sammy</u>: "Okay, that's enough. Ben, hit the button or I'm gonna come around and do it for you." <u>Greg</u>: "Maybe mind your gay-ass business and shut the hell up and let me continue, Sammy!" <u>Sammy</u>: "I'm sorry, what the fuck did you just say?" [...] <u>Greg</u>: "I said, mind your gay-ass business, Stevens. Listen, we've all heard it, everyone in town knows that if you stopped poking your nose in other people's business, <i>maybe</i> you'd have time to find your missing boyfriend, Jack, oh boohoo. (mocking)" [...] <u>Ben</u>: "Who you love is who you love, man, you don't choose that... I will stand by your side through anything. And that has absolutely nothing to do with who you love or who loves you. You are a good man, a good friend. That's <i>all</i> that matters... I love you, Sammy, no matter what." ("The Best Imitation of Myself").</p>

I came across a range of “coming out” and self-disclosure stories — notably, most of these conversations were brief and had either a positive or neutral tone. Except for one instance of a negative conversation, the characters were revealing and discussing their gender and sexual identities to someone they trusted. This aligns with a 2012 study of participants’ varying sexuality disclosure within different contexts which indicates that queer “individuals disclosed [their sexuality] most to friends” compared to other areas of their lives, such as religious communities, school peers, and family (Legate et al. 148).

The positive interactions were highlighted by support and solidarity with the character discussing their sexuality. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, both of these characters — Dr. Sally Grissom and Chloe — are talking about their experience of being asexual with a friend. Sally’s coworker and friend, Esther, accidentally outs herself, but Sally is quick to reassure Esther and reveal her own sexuality to underscore her acceptance of Esther’s identity. Sally soothes Esther’s distress, which is understandable during the Cold War era, by willingly disclosing her own identity to Esther, someone Sally trusts. The conversation between Chloe and Sam indicates that Sam is already aware of Chloe’s sexuality with how casually Chloe mentions it; Sam shows her support for Chloe’s sexuality with her confidence that Chloe will one day meet someone who does not have a problem with her asexuality. This conversation shows how asexual people can, and do, still desire and pursue romantic relationships, which is not negated by their relationship with sexual attraction. Caleb’s discussion with Dr. Bright, his therapist, is also one of support and encouragement as Caleb tries to navigate the romantic feelings he has for his friend, Adam. Caleb is unsure how he should proceed and is anxious about potentially losing his friend if he reveals his feelings, but Dr. Bright helps him sort through his emotions and come to a conclusion.

The neutral interactions were characterized by some sort of struggle with a character's sexuality, but ultimately overcoming and moving past it — in the cases of Brian and Keisha, they faced some unacceptance about their identities when they first came out but gained acceptance and understanding from others over time. Keisha reflects on her first girlfriend while making recordings addressed to her wife, Alice, and how her family, though “mostly” accepting at first, eventually grew to be completely accepting of Keisha's identity. Similarly, Brian comments on how “most” of his friends supported him and that he transferred to a more supportive school. He also focuses on the stress that came with his coming out which is the reality for most queer individuals when disclosing their identity to others. Both Keisha and Brian's conversations reflect the mixed responses one can receive when they come out to friends and family — it is not always the case that everyone is either emphatically supportive or entirely dismissive, but most queer experiences land somewhere in the middle of that spectrum.

The only negative interaction was overwhelmingly so in comparison to the other examples. Sammy is publicly outed by Greg, a minor antagonist, in a demeaning way live on the radio; Greg not only uses “gay” as an insult but also belittles Sammy's relationship with his missing partner, Jack. Sammy is then pulled into an intimate conversation about his sexuality and why he hid his identity by his co-host, Ben. Sammy reveals the shame and guilt he feels by not telling Ben about his relationship and how he had kept his relationship a secret from nearly everyone in his life. Sammy also alludes to his hesitancy to make his sexuality known in a small town that is quick to make judgments of others, concerned about the risks of being publicly queer in a possibly unaccepting environment, like rejection and stigmatization (Legate et. al 145). Ben is overwhelmingly supportive, trying to comfort Sammy and reassure him that his identity will not affect their friendship. This episode has the longest and most involved

discussion of a character's identity by far when compared to all of the other shows I researched — Sammy and Ben's conversation lasts nearly twenty minutes. This is classified as a negative discussion because Sammy's choice to self-disclose his identity to others at his own discretion was taken away from him. Additionally, Sammy shows evidence of being suicidal in the following episodes, due to a combination of being outed as well as his hopelessness over ever finding his missing partner, Jack. However, Sammy's friends, fellow townspeople, and regular listeners of his radio program show an outpouring of support for him, both in response to him being outed and to help him find his partner.

Fan Responses On Social Media

Audio drama fan communities overwhelmingly tend to exist on social media sites, specifically Tumblr and Twitter. It is difficult to make broad generalizations about the demographics of these communities since the fandoms are vast interconnected networks only tied together by the show and not a common forum, and because many fan profiles, especially on Tumblr, are relatively anonymous and do not disclose any personal demographic information unless it is voluntarily given. However, Tumblr's function as a "virtual counterpublic," a discursive space where marginalized groups can congregate outside of the dominant public gaze, does make it an especially appealing site for marginalized and queer youth — the use of the site is explored in Dr. Olu Jenzen's ethnographic research of transgender youth and their experiences online (Jenzen 1633, 1634). Thus, I have collected a small sample of posts made by listeners of *Welcome to Night Vale*, *King Falls AM*, and *The Magnus Archives* from Tumblr and Twitter to begin to examine fan reception of and interaction with these shows.

Welcome to Night Vale

Welcome to Night Vale is not only a foundational show for the audio drama community as a whole but is also, for many queer fans, an important early piece of media featuring a queer protagonist. The show rose to great success among all podcast genres in mid-2013 "With the help of an outpouring of fan support on... Tumblr," which helped the show gain "2.5 million downloads in July 2013 alone and another 5.8 million downloads that August" (Bottomley 179). Not only was the fandom dedicated enough to exponentially increase *Welcome to Night Vale*'s listenership, but the show's rise in popularity also meant its narrative became much more accessible and visible to those who were not already familiar with it.

Several fans noted their nostalgia for the show, as they began listening to it when they were younger, and the impact Cecil as a queer character had on them. One fan, on the blogging website Tumblr, commented on the value of “the personal connection i (and many other fans) feel w cecil bc he was one of the first gay characters i saw in the media” (Mcrdyke666). Another fan reflects on nostalgia they have for the first episode in particular:

nostalgia for who i was when i first listened to the first year of episodes, 18 and confused about my sexuality but for some reason deeply deeply needing to see cecil’s feelings for carlos requited, tucked away in the corner of a vacation cabin... so i wouldn’t have to talk to my family who absolutely didn’t approve of cecil and carlos or maybe of me.
(Aleatoryw)

In line with previous studies, media “is often the first place that individuals — including young people who subsequently identify as LGBTQ — encounter LGBTQ identities,” and characters can provide the “comfort and inspiration” to fans that is important to the development of their queer identities, as based on interviews of young LGBTQ people (McInroy and Craig, “Perspectives” 33, 35). Especially for queer fans who have not come out yet, or who are not in accepting environments, they can find comfort in shows like *Welcome to Night Vale* as a form of escapism that portrays queer characters without also including instances of homophobia. Tumblr user Mcrdyke666 points out that, in *Welcome to Night Vale*, “homophobia has never been a factor — there’s never been any drama or people reacting badly because they’re gay” (Mcrdyke666). To not integrate homophobia into the storyline and neither foreground nor erase Cecil’s queerness increasingly sets *Welcome to Night Vale* apart from other mainstream media.

Fans also commented on their appreciation of how the show portrays Cecil’s queerness.

One Tumblr user talked about how the show

handles queer representation in the most effortless way i’ve ever seen in my search of lgbt media... He also has a family and... a life that doesn’t revolve around being gay. In later series, he and Carlos start a relationship and it is the most wholesome thing anyone has witnessed, there is no drama between them no love triangles and their love progresses at a normal pace. (Casualtreeflower)

This user also notes Carlos's role and that "he has more than on one occasion saved Night Vale at the risk of his own life... he is not just there to be someone's love interest he is his own person and he has his own story" (Casualtreeflower). These comments are made in relation to how many queer characters are often depicted in mainstream media, with their queer identity being the focal point of their characterization and storyline. Oppositionally, Cecil and Carlos are written as multi-faceted characters who also happen to be queer.

King Falls AM

In contrast to Welcome to Night Vale's casual handling of queerness, King Falls AM has a specific episode, "Episode Sixty-Eight: The Best Imitation of Myself," in which the main character, Sammy Stevens, talks about his queerness, fiancé, and experience being closeted at length, which was discussed at the end of the last chapter. This episode aired nearly three years after the show began and left many fans in awe, not only because of the reveal of Sammy's queerness and personal history but also because of the long, heartfelt conversation Sammy has with his coworker and friend, Ben, in the wake of being outed. Many fans talked about this episode in particular, and it is commonly regarded in the fandom as one of the most popular and significant episodes of the show. *King Falls AM* leans heavily into its comedic side, so this more serious episode stands out to fans not only for its subject matter but because fans saw a vulnerable part of Sammy that he had hidden for the two and a half years of the show's duration at that point.

Fans, again, showed their appreciation for the show's depiction of queerness. One fan showed gratitude to the writers on Twitter for "creating such great dynamic characters. The representation means a lot, and the show handled it well" (@justallietv). Another Twitter user

remarked how “the gang [the writers and cast] made an exceptionally brave move that I could not have anticipated” (@GejWatts). This is reflective of how long the writers waited to reveal that Sammy is queer; until only a few episodes prior, listeners knew very little about Sammy’s history before the events of the show, and this revelation was widely unexpected. It is interesting to note that this user mentions that Sammy’s queerness was a “brave move,” implying that many other sources of media actively shy away from having queer protagonists and telling stories about queer relationships.

The Magnus Archives

The Magnus Archives stands out to fans for its treatment of its protagonist, Jon, as a multi-dimensional asexual character who is in a romantic relationship with his partner, Martin. One Tumblr user talks about the prominent subsection of the *Magnus Archives* fandom that is full of asexual fans, who fully lean into Jon’s identity, as well as discuss “their own ace experiences, both with and without relation to jon. it’s just a whole bunch of cool ace people who have gathered together and built this community within this fandom where we get to have a well-written, canon protagonist who is asexual” (Dickwheelie). Another fan remarked on how “not only is TMA creating this incredible myth-level heart-wrenching love story, but it’s with an asexual character at its heart and come to think of it, almost all of the development and progression as a canon, requited thing [Jon’s relationship with Martin] took place AFTER jon was confirmed as asexual,” as well as how asexual fans are “used to being told [in the media] that our love is empty and a waste and a nuisance, rather than it being portrayed as an earth-moving, reality-bending thing that can stand up against the gods themselves” (@datheneth).

These comments reflect the frequent erasure of asexual people in society and the LGBTQ+ community discussed in interviews with LGBTQ+ people about discrimination and oppression within the community (Parmenter et al. 8). Thus, Jon as a well-rounded asexual character has even greater importance, and the fandom gives asexual people an opportunity to create an accepting community for themselves, especially as “a group that is typically excluded/erased from parts of society as a whole” (Rothblum et al. 89). A fan on Twitter even wrote that “the magnus archives have been spoonfeeding me casual representation to the point that i sort of don’t know what to do with feeling so seen all the time,” indicating the extreme lack of the casual representation of diverse identities in other media (@tarantulapaws). In an interview-based study of how LGBTQ participants used social networking sites as informal learning environments while developing their sexuality, some asexual participants explained “that social media is the main way asexuality awareness proliferates” (Fox and Ralston 638). These posts indicate that, at least within the fandom for *The Magnus Archives*, asexual fans have found each other and have created a flourishing and welcoming community. This speaks to the power of positive and quality media representation, for without it, these fans would not come together or see a part of themselves in a show quickly growing in popularity.

Annually, Tumblr releases a series of lists ranking the most popular topics in a range of categories. This year, *The Magnus Archives* rose seven spots to be second on Fandom’s official “2020’s Top Web Series, Webcomics and Podcasts” on Tumblr and the fifteenth topic overall in the site’s “Top 20 of 2020” (“2020’s Top Web Series”; “Tumblr’s Top 20”). Even though the show began airing in 2015, its popularity is currently at its greatest.

Summary

Though these social media posts are individual and do not serve as comprehensive representations of fan opinions as a whole, they provide valuable information and insight as to what these shows mean to fans and what fans think of how they handle queer representation — in these cases, fans view the shows' representation in an overwhelmingly supportive light.

Looking at these examples highlights the communities and visibly queer personae that the three shows provide. The characters serve as role models, despite being fictional, which can help negate feelings of isolation, alienation, and identity invalidation in queer audiences (McInroy and Craig, "Perspectives" 38). Many queer fans thus form parasocial relationships with queer characters, feeling that they have close relationships with and understandings of characters even though they are fictional. In Professor Bruce E. Drushel's study on the limited accessibility of recommended films that could help LGBTQ adolescents build a positive self-image of themselves, he drew the connection that "real-life queer role models may be particularly scarce," so queer role models can positively impact queer youth as "they explore their sexual identities" (Drushel 179). Online communities and fandoms give queer fans a connection to other queer people they might not have in real life as well as "access to interpersonal networks of support and sociability in safe and anonymous online spaces," as seen in interviews with Australian queer young people about their engagement in online communities (Hanckel and Morris 883).

This discussion of online communities and role models lends itself to the potential parasocial relationships fans create with characters. Bradley J. Bond's 2018 examination of LGB adolescents and the parasocial relationships (PSRs) they create with media personae (both real and fictional) is quite revealing on this matter. First, "LGB adolescents are more likely to develop PSRs with LGB media personae than heterosexual adolescents" (Bond, "Parasocial

Relationships” 472). Additionally, “LGB adolescents perceived their favorite media personae to be useful sources of information about their romantic relationships; heterosexual adolescents did not... LGB adolescents reported the desire to learn about romantic relationships from their favorite media personae instead of any real-life relational other beside their friends” (Bond, “Parasocial Relationships” 475). Therefore, the positive queer characters in audio dramas can serve as role models for young queer listeners who lack those relationships and models in their real lives and show them the various and numerous relationships and lifestyles queer people can have; stereotypical portrayals would only serve to negatively influence LGB adolescents, so having multidimensional queer characters and plotlines is affirming and beneficial.

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Concluding Remarks

Discussion

Audio dramas are a niche subsection of the greater podcast medium. Though these fictional shows are often produced by independent creators and have relatively small fanbases, they are replete with queer representation that rivals that of major mainstream media outlets like television and film. I analyzed seven popular audio dramas using Glaser’s constant comparative method under four thematic categories, as well as some online posts made by fans of three of the shows.

The first theme was that of **explicit mentions of queer identity** — a character clearly stating a queer label for either themselves or another. Interestingly, these mentions centered around characters who are asexual, bisexual, and transgender, and were part of a passing discussion of the character’s identity. Not only are these identities difficult to fully portray in an audio-only medium without clear mention, but they also tend to be marginalized identities in society as well as the queer community. Therefore, the clear inclusion and non-stereotypical handling of these identities is a welcome deviation from the norm, whether that be inter-community and social discrimination or erasure altogether.

Alongside this theme was the theme of **implicit mentions of queerness**, when it was implied that a character was queer, usually through the character being in a same-sex relationship or making comments about gender or pronouns. There were no clear or common reasons for why identities were never mentioned; however, two possible reasons were explored. The first, based on academic researcher Shoshana Rosenberg’s concept of “coming in,” is that coming out is not a singular and culminating moment of a person’s journey through their queerness, which is constantly in flux, so an explicit naming of identity to others is not always necessary, possible, or

important to identity development (Rosenberg 1806). The second reason reflects the anxieties and dangers that come with disclosing one's queerness publicly, as explored in Rubin and McClelland's 2015 study of young queer women of color and their discussion (or lack thereof) of their sexuality on social media in interviews (Rubin and McClelland 2).

The theme of **queerness as a storyline** was initially meant to focus on narratives in which a character's identity was a central part of their existence in the show, such as in the "coming out" narrative which is evident in so many mainstream queer stories, as explored in Professor Bradley J. Bond's content analysis of sex and sexuality in LGB entertainment media (Bond, "Sex and Sexuality" 100). However, I found no instance of that, and instead focused on three shows in which a queer relationship was at the root of the show's plot. In all three storylines, the protagonist's same-sex partner goes missing due to unseen or supernatural forces, and the protagonist's love for them drives the protagonist on a search, thus driving forward the plot. Foregrounding the power of queer love and dedication between partners is a refreshing approach not often seen in television and film.

The final thematic trend was that of **general discussions of sexuality**. The conversations were categorized under labels of positive, neutral, or negative based on the atmosphere of the conversation as well as the reception. While the vast majority of conversations were either positive or neutral and were all relatively short, there was one negative instance. This was from *King Falls AM*, in which Sammy is outed on the radio in a malicious manner. Though he is shown overwhelming support by his best friend immediately after, and by his friends and other community members in the following episodes, Sammy's ability to disclose that side of himself was taken away from him, and he discusses at length the shame he feels about hiding his

sexuality. The conversation between Sammy and Ben was significantly longer than the other examples, lasting about twenty minutes.

Lastly, I looked at social media posts made by fans of *Welcome to Night Vale*, *King Falls AM*, and *The Magnus Archives*. The posts, collected from Tumblr and Twitter, showed how important visibly queer characters are to fans, especially seeing these characters written in such a positive and normalized light. When considering representation in film and television, many LGBTQ young adults “stated that these portrayals, however flawed, gave them a sense of possibility simply because they were seeing LGBTQ identities depicted” (McInroy and Craig, “Perspectives” 38). In depictions that are much less flawed and one-dimensional, the impact of queer characters is even greater. Some fans pointed out that these characters even helped them in their own queer identity development, supporting the finding that “LGB adults (25-50) report that comfort and inspiration received through the media portrayal of role models are particularly important for their identities” (McInroy and Craig, “Perspectives” 35). The shows also gave fans a core around which they have centered queer communities that they struggle to find elsewhere.

Limitations

This analysis is, admittedly, not a complete representation of the audio drama genre nor an exhaustive exploration of these podcasts in particular. The seven podcasts I chose to look at have a total of over six hundred episodes combined. Inevitably, there are queer plotlines and characters I was not able to include in my analysis, and though I focused on highlighting the most significant queer aspects of each show, I might have overlooked smaller and less positive representations. As well, I chose some of the more popular audio dramas that I knew for certain

had significant queer characters; however, there are still countless other shows with prominent queer characters that I did not take into consideration or of which I was unaware.

Also, since four of the seven shows are still running, I was unable to look at the long-term progression of queer characters, their plotlines, and their relationships with others over the span of the show. Though some of the queer relationships in the longer-running shows have developed significantly since the pilot episode, specifically Cecil and Carlos in *Welcome to Night Vale* and Jon and Martin in *The Magnus Archives*, I was hesitant to make definitive analyses, seeing as how the shows continued to update as I conducted my research. These shows could also introduce other significant queer characters in the future as well.

The fandoms of these shows are quite extensive. Though I was able to find relevant social media posts for three of the shows, those are merely a glimpse into much deeper and more complex online communities. Since I am not immersed in these fandoms, there are inter-community conversations, trends, and phenomena that I was unable to find in my research. Most of the posts I found had tagged the show they mentioned, and I searched for posts using these tags — therefore, I missed any posts that did not have the show tagged, which is a significant amount.

Future Research

There are several avenues that future researchers can explore regarding sexuality in audio dramas and the value of audio dramas for minority groups and representation, especially considering how little work has been done on the genre thus far.

The most continuous route from the current analysis would be to look into other popular audio dramas for the queer characters they depict. Some shows include *The Penumbra Podcast*,

Girl in Space, *EOS 10*, and even *Wolf 359*, which all have characters with different sexual and gender identities who vary in prominence to the show's storyline — for example, *The Penumbra Podcast* seamlessly includes a host of identities while *Wolf 359* has a character offhandedly mention that he is attracted to men in a single sentence and then it is never discussed again.

A deep analysis of a single show, rather than an overview of several, would also be beneficial considering how some audio dramas have anywhere from ten to two hundred episodes. *The Magnus Archives* follows the format of an anthology for the majority of its nearly two hundred episodes, so the individual stories told could have material for analysis, like the mention of a same-sex partner, aside from the queerness of its protagonists, Jon and Martin. Delving into more shows or a specific show can also reveal any less-than-positive instances of queer representation, such as reused plotlines (“coming-out” being the culminating moment for a character's storyline) or stereotypical or one-dimensional characters (like the only non-binary characters being non-human).

Also, as mentioned in the limitations, the majority of the shows I looked into are still running — analyzing the development of queer relationships over the course of a completed show would also prove to be enlightening.

There is also the phenomenon of characters who are not explicitly stated to be queer but who the fans imagine being so, either in fan fiction or general discussions online. This process of making “headcanons” — fan interpretations or beliefs that stem from the source material but are not part of the canon — is encouraged by many audio drama creators. Since what is known about a character is only disclosed through dialogue and sound effects, fans are only given a finite amount of canon information about characters, and some creators purposely make their descriptions of characters vague to create room for fans' interpretations. Fans then have the

opportunity to imagine characters in an infinite amount of ways, such as whether the character is transgender, a person of color, or disabled, it also takes away from explicit or implied queer representation. Fans are known to do this with any show, regardless of how many queer characters are canonically present, so the phenomenon of diversifying the given piece of media even more is worth examining.

Audio drama fandoms are very active online and serve as a community for listeners, especially those who are queer. Analyzing fandom dynamics, community structure, and what fans talk about is sure to be revealing about not only who is listening, but what they take away from the show and deem important. Additionally, most audio drama creators are quite active on social media as well and are accessible to fans and possibly future researchers to talk about their work, like why they decided to include queer characters in their show and tell their stories in such ways.

Conclusion

Though audio dramas are a small part of a growing medium, they are immensely valuable, not only for academic purposes but for the people who listen to them. As one Tumblr user aptly and humorously puts it, “podcasts are gay culture” (Another-dead-intern). Though blunt, this post points to how podcasts and audio dramas have become a part of “gay culture” for many younger queer people, due in large part to the variety of respectful queer representation they provide that is hard to find in other media forms. It speaks to how many young queer people tend to gravitate toward these shows because of their high amount of quality queer characters.

The goal of my analysis was to provide an overview of several different elements surrounding the portrayals of queer characters. Ultimately, these aspects come together to show

how audio dramas are making good and positive representation possible based only on the creators' desires to tell meaningful stories — the creators have no monetary incentive to make these shows and are not guaranteed to gain a massive following, seeing as how most of the shows in this analysis have only a few thousand followers on Twitter. Yet the fans are dedicated and deeply invested, as some of the social media posts in the last chapter only begin to show.

Audio dramas and their significance to queer people are something to keep an eye on. With the rise of the podcast medium also comes the increase in both the number and popularity of independently-created audio dramas. At its core, “Representation is... visibility, and degree of visibility tends to reproduce itself in hierarchies of power... those who are relatively powerless are kept that way through the relative invisibility imposed on them. Systematic efforts to keep the marginalized invisible amounts to symbolic annihilation” (Drushel 185). The independent aspect of these audio dramas is what seems to set them apart from mass media like television and film; without overhead pressure to appeal to the masses in an outdated and heteronormative way, audio dramas are starting to disrupt hierarchies of power that keep queer people at the margins of fictional storytelling. Audio dramas are creating growing communities and setting an example for the healthy variety of queer representation that is possible. In the wake of the failures of traditional media, the most popular among these independent shows are setting a precedent of quality queer characters and narratives that will hopefully be maintained into the future and cause more significant change over time.

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