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# LGBTQ+ Representation in Fictional Podcast Series

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**ABSTRACT:** The article offers an analysis of the frequency and quality of LGBTQ+ representation in fictional podcasts. I examine how frequently and with what intent LGBTQ+ characters are included in this medium. This research aims to fill the gap in academic work on LGBTQ+ representation in podcasts. Though scholars note an increase in representation in mainstream media, LGBTQ+ media consumers, especially young people, still look to other sources for validation of their identities. Many LGBTQ+ people look to fictional podcasts as a source of quality representation, especially because podcasts are small-scale and rely on the funding, and thus the opinion, of listeners (Bottomley, 2015). In this paper, I analyze four fictional podcast series for LGBTQ+ inclusivity. I note how many LGBTQ+ characters are included and in what proportion. I assess the quality of representation in four ways: diversity, depth, and the frequency and type of stereotypical LGBTQ+ tropes. My findings show a high frequency of LGBTQ+ characters and diversity of personalities and backgrounds, opportunities for these characters to express their sexual and/or gender identities as well as LGBTQ+ trope subversions. Thus, we see that fictional podcasts, as a medium that sustains itself by listeners' patronage, present stories that their audience can relate to. As a result, fictional podcasts create more niche stories that make connections with smaller demographics of media consumers.

**KEYWORDS:** LGBTQ+; representation; podcasts; new media; niche audience; patronage

## Introduction

This study quantifies LGBTQ+ representation in fictional podcast series and analyzes its quality. First, I count all recurring, canonically queer characters in each studied fictional podcast series as well as how many episodes they appear in. I then compare these numbers to those of straight or unconfirmed queer

recurring characters in the show. Finally, I find any instances of perpetuation or subversion of popular queer tropes in the media. By focusing on podcasts, I show how LGBTQ+ representation differs in media that rely on listener support, compared to representation in mainstream television and movies. Also, my research on LGBTQ+ representation in fictional podcast series offers a new perspective in the academic discourse on representation in media overall. The increased and higher-quality LGBTQ+ representation in podcasts offers an alternative to larger-scale media saturated with heteronormativity, homophobia, and queerbaiting. The ease of access and plentitude of podcasts is important so that people listening, LGBTQ+-identifying or not, can be exposed to a variety of positive queer stories and characters.

Smaller scale forms of media tend to include more LGBTQ+ representation. For example, 35 percent of 'Art House' films, produced by small studios as opposed to feature film studios, were LGBTQ+-inclusive. With the exception of 20th Century Fox, these 'Art House' films outnumber those made at any of the other major studios (Stokes 2019). Studies show that streaming services produce the most representation-dense and diverse content compared to broadcast and cable television, though the latter still make significant strides, to mention only FX's *Pose*, which "features the largest number of transgender series regular characters on a scripted U.S. series ever" (Stokes 2019: 4), and CW's introduction of a transgender superhero, Nia Nal, in *Supergirl* (Ellis 2019).

The niche medium of podcasts provides a variety of LGBTQ+ representation. Bottomley's case study of *Welcome to Night Vale*, a radio drama that stars a gay main character, shows an independent podcast's success amongst those made by professional media producers like affiliates of the NPR public radio and celebrity entertainers. Within a year of its airing, the show was listed in the Top 20 Podcasts on iTunes. Its popularity is unprecedented primarily because the creators eschew advertising in their episodes. Instead, they support themselves and the podcast through "crowdfunding, merchandising, live performances, and select premium or bonus content" (Bottomley 2015: 181). Despite being a radio drama, a format that thrived from the 1930s through the 1950s, and adopting LGBTQ+ themes, this podcast boasts a niche audience and long-standing popularity. Furthermore, there are many other podcasts available that cater to LGBTQ+ fans. Because these smaller, independent podcasts rely on funding from their fans, creators are motivated to make them feel heard (Bottomley 2015).

While some may argue that any representation, even if stereotypical, is progressive in that it achieves greater exposure for marginalized groups, McLaughlin notes that while more exposure is linked to more identification with LGBTQ+ characters, there was "no significant relationship between exposure to homosexual television characters and levels of prejudice" (2017: 15). Thus, it is vital that representation in media is humanizing and accurate, as exposure as such is not enough. Quality LGBTQ+ representation provides a larger, more accurate, and diverse image of the community, free of hypersexualization, two-dimen-

sionality, stereotyping, and disproportionate misfortune for two main reasons: educating people who would not otherwise interact with LGBTQ+ people, and providing role models, sources of pride, and reassurance for those who are realizing their identities and debating coming out (Gomillion, Giuliano 2011).

Creating more numerous representation of better quality is also important as it may help people define and feel more comfortable with their identity. According to a survey distributed at a Pride festival asking for participants to identify influential LGBTQ+ media, more gay men recalled *Will and Grace*, and more lesbian women named *The L Word* (Gomillion, Giuliano 2011), showing how people most easily identify with characters like themselves. Even with some LGBTQ+ representation, people of color, transgender people, bisexuals (especially bisexual men), asexuals, and those with disabilities are unlikely to see themselves in mainstream media (Ellis 2019). As stated by Crisler, “some LGBTQ individuals use media as a coping mechanism to escape from the realities of discrimination” (2019: 4), and still cannot find any acknowledgement or validation of their existence in the media. Though there has been a wave of academic research evaluating LGBTQ+ representation in some media, the same cannot be said about fictional podcasts. Bottomley muses that “there is certainly still space in podcasting for independent, non-hegemonic voices and perspectives” (2015: 182). This article aims to correct this lack of research.

### **Methodology**

Four fictional scripted podcast series that include LGBTQ+ representation of some kind (especially of underrepresented subgroups) have been chosen for analysis. All selected fictional podcasts series have at least 10 regular episodes. Since some of the studied podcasts have a large number of episodes, each title has been assigned a sample size. The first 20 episodes of podcasts that, on average, are less than 20 minutes long have been studied, while for podcasts with longer episodes only the first 10 episodes have been studied. I have counted the LGBTQ+ and cis straight characters in each podcast, as well as their number of appearances. To determine the quality of this representation, I have looked at how well developed a character is (flat, static character versus well rounded, dynamic character, with a backstory, motivation, personal characteristics, etc.), how many LGBTQ+ tropes (positive, negative, or neutral) apply to the story or characters, whether LGBTQ+ characters are in non-platonic relationships, are able to express attraction, or are able to display affection, what good or bad things happen to these characters, and what good or bad characteristics these characters possess. Because “good” and “bad” or “positive” and “negative” are so subjective, these categorizations will be taken in context of the story, setting, and other characters.

Podcast Name	Sample Size of Episodes
<i>Welcome to Night Vale</i>	20
<i>The Strange Case of Starship Iris</i>	10
<i>The Penumbra Podcast (Juno Steel)</i>	10
FRUIT	20

Figure 1: Sample Size of Episodes

### ***Welcome to Night Vale* (WTNV)**

*Welcome to Night Vale* has been selected for this study because of its unusual success. Despite being an independent, surrealist horror, resurrected radio drama podcast with prominent LGBTQ+ representation and no ad revenue, WTNV has consistently ranked highly in podcast charts nearly since its inception. However, the story-telling structure of WTNV is also unusual, and thus, difficult to apply to the determined methodology as it is.

The show mimics the presentation of community radio, where only the radio host and the rare guest speak. Thus, few characters make “appearances” (have speaking roles). Of these few characters with appearances, Night Vale Community Radio host, Cecil, is the only recurring character. As follows, given the formulation of methodology for the present text, Cecil would be the only character investigated for the study, while the existence and actions of the rest of the characters living in and passing through Night Vale as reported by Cecil would be ignored. To fix this issue, for this podcast only, characters mentioned repeatedly the been included in the count. The purpose of counting was to observe how many LGBTQ+ characters are speaking, appear in more than an episode, and otherwise have more than a fleeting presence in the story. However, in the podcast’s first twenty episodes, with the exception of Cecil and his crush, Carlos, WTNV is composed entirely of fleeting characters with no speaking roles or plot significance. Thus, LGBTQ+ characters without speaking roles in the show are not necessarily less significant than non-canonically-LGBTQ+ characters. The classification is blurred, and the inclusion of several other characters in the count has been decided on a case-by-case basis, but generally, for this podcast, characters who have been included in the count are intelligent individuals with recurring appearances or mentions in the show. Thus, of the 39 characters who qualified, only two are confirmed members of the LGBTQ+ community: Cecil and Carlos the scientist. Still, of these two, one is the main character and the other is the main character’s love interest and the character with the third most mentions/appearances in the first 20 episodes.

The first impressions of Cecil are based on his classic, low-toned radio voice. Since a lot of his dialogue consists in reading pre-written news, announcements, and advertisements, most of Cecil’s characterization comes from his delivery, his comments on and interpretations of information he has just read out, and his occasional digressions about his personal life (i.e. his crush on Carlos).

Side characters are characterized by basic identifiers (i.e. Telly the barber, Old Woman Josie out by the car lot, etc.), what they are reported to have done, and how they chose to deliver their own reports. These details are scarce, making most characters in this podcast, LGBTQ+-identifying or not, very flat and static. One of these characters, Carlos, is a newcomer, a Latino scientist with a “perfect and beautiful haircut”, “a square jaw”, “teeth like a military cemetery” (*WtNV* 001), and also the object of Cecil’s affections. With the exception of a voicemail where he warns about time slowing in *Night Vale* that is played over the radio, Carlos’ antics are reported by Cecil. Thus, the image of Carlos delivered to audiences is far more biased (though more in-depth) than those of other characters.

While this podcast does not feature an abundance of canonically LGBTQ+ characters, a gay man leads the story, a less-frequent-than-desired occurrence in mainstream media. Cecil expresses his attraction towards Carlos to the podcast listeners as well as to his community on public radio within the first minutes of the first episode. Thus, at least in *Night Vale*, the setting is tolerant enough that Cecil is comfortable with openly expressing attraction to another man. Any restraint he expresses in later episodes is in the name of professionalism rather than fear of homophobic backlash. The writers revealed Cecil’s sexuality very early in the story, subverting the “ambiguously gay” trope in which writers include a queer-coded character and either take a very long time to or never confirm their identity. Both this trope subversion and *WTNV*’s classification as horror, a genre that is favored more by LGBTQ+ audiences than the straight ones (Stokes, 2019), make it clear that this podcast caters specifically to the LGBTQ+ community.

### ***The Strange Case of Starship Iris (TSCOSI)***

*The Strange Case of Starship Iris* is a short podcast about a group of outlaws on a spaceship who rebel against an intergalactic regime, a popular trope in dystopian science fiction. *TSCOSI* took and adapted this trope to include more diverse characters than had been done before. It has recurring, intelligent, individual characters that are not human due to the story taking place in space, after first contact with aliens has occurred. However, because these characters have large, plot-relevant, speaking roles and interact with other human characters as equals, their inclusion in the count of characters is unambiguous. In this podcast, there is a very high percentage of canonically LGBTQ+ identifying characters. In other words, the characters in this podcast just happen to be queer. Every recurring character, whether they were in the main ship crew or not, appeared in a great majority of episodes, perhaps due to budgeting of a small independent podcast. This allowed significant time for the development of each of the characters.

The listeners are first introduced to Violet Liu, or Vi for short. She is a biologist, working for the Republic, when she finds herself marooned on a malfunctioning ship (the *Starship Iris*). Vi manages to connect to someone on another

ship who introduces themselves as Kay Grisham. Even though they quickly bond, Vi remains skeptical of Kay and through clever conversation is able to uncover that the woman she is speaking to is lying about who she is and what her motivations are. Still, with few other options, Vi is rescued onto the other ship, Rumor. The first episode paints Vi as smart and level-headed, a flattering depiction of the podcast's main, lesbian character. The Rumor is a smuggler ship with a crew of enemies of the Republic, or of what they like to call the Regime. There, Vi meets Arkady Patel (first shipmate, con-artist, hacker, registered subversive, army deserter, and crew muscle) who was pretending to be Kay before. There are also Sona Tripathi (ship captain, ex-mechanic and leader of the uprising on Crestwin Landing), Brian Jeeter (ship translator and cook), and Krejhh (pilot and ex-Dwarnian-soldier). Of these crew members, Arkady and Vi share sexual tension, Brian identifies as a transgender man, Krejhh as a nonbinary alien, and Brian and Krejhh are in a romantic relationship, engaged to be married.

Arkady is the only character that has a "tragic backstory." The uprising that Sona led was on a prison colony planet that Arkady was born and raised on. Now, Sona tries to be attentive to Arkady's needs and emotions, aware of the effects of her past experiences as well as the mental toll of mostly being useful to the crew as someone capable of inflicting harm on foes. Throughout the ten episodes, Vi and Arkady grow closer to each other, hinting at a possible relationship. Even though they got along when they first met, Arkady's dishonesty set them back. Also, Vi still had to unlearn Republic (Regime) propaganda before she was in a position to be more understanding of the plight of the crew on the Rumor, particularly Arkady's. Throughout the story, they grow close by being emotionally supportive of each other and sharing common interests (i.e. Vi being a biologist and Arkady keeping an herb garden on the ship). At the end, once everyone narrowly escapes after successfully infiltrating the Regime, Vi and Arkady finally exchange awkward, but affectionate confessions and become a confirmed couple.

The already established relationship between Brian and Krejhh is also good representation. Transgender and nonbinary people are already barely represented in media, not to mention the presence of healthy romantic relationships involving either. Both characters are skilled and smart people with their own independent and in-depth characterization. Jeeter is soft-spoken, emotionally intelligent, and good at making gentle jokes. He has done an advanced study of linguistics and is working to become fluent in his spouse's native language. Krejhh is a Dwarnian, an alien race that waged war on the humans several years ago. They were a pilot who fought in the war, but later defected. They came from a good upbringing and are cared about by their family, even if their family may not understand their decision to be in a relationship with a human. Krejhh is bubbly, loud, and self-assured, making them an easily lovable character. Together, Brian and Krejhh are very publicly in love. They openly

flirt, encourage, and spend time with one another. This is unusual because even when healthy LGBTQ+ relationships appear in media, they are often portrayed as chaste and private.

Agent McCabe (using they/them pronouns) is a wide-eyed rookie working for the Republic to investigate and catch the Rumor and its crew. Even though transphobia does still exist, Agent McCabe is accepted in their place of work. Agent McCabe shares a lot of similarities with Vi before she came aboard the Rumor. Like Vi used to, they still believe the propaganda that the Republic has fed them and fear what would happen if they questioned anything, especially after their coworker gets taken away for interrogation. Agent McCabe and their coworker, Agent Park, later defect and join the crew on the Rumor at the end of the tenth episode.

In the world of *TSCOSI*, there is an alien race called the “Dwarnians” that do not abide by the gender binary. Thus, the three Dwarnian characters (Krejhh, Thasia, and Eejjhgreb) all identify as nonbinary. However, this may be seen as reflecting a trope whereby nonbinary characters are equated to being inhuman. Thus, nonbinary characters tend to be aliens, monsters, robots, or other non-human entities. The creators of *TSCOSI* listened to this criticism and addressed it in later episodes by introducing a human nonbinary character, Agent McCabe. *TSCOSI* also consistently subverts the “ambiguously gay” trope. Relatively soon in Vi’s first monologue of the pilot episode, she muses about another woman she was attracted to back in college. Later, Arkady Patel (then going by Kay Grisham) openly flirts and expresses attraction to Vi. However, because Arkady was lying about her identity and directing the conversation to get Vi’s trust, the transactional nature of the flirtation with covert motivation disqualifies this interaction as canonical confirmation of Arkady’s sexuality. Regardless, in the next episode, once everyone’s intentions are revealed and discussed, Arkady’s sexuality is properly confirmed. The fact that Dwarnians, within the confines of the English language, identify as nonbinary is swiftly addressed after Vi’s first in-person meeting with Krejhh. Agent McCabe is in the habit of saying their pronouns as a part of their usual introduction. Finally, although Brian Jeeter waits until the fourth episode to explicitly say he is transgender, this statement still comes relatively early in the story, as soon as Vi has built enough trust with Brian for him to offer up the information. Thus, these characters’ gender and sexual identities do not feel like they are being withheld from the audience. There are two opposing sides in *TSCOSI*: the crew of the Rumor and the government agents under the Republic trying to investigate and catch them. Both groups include characters that openly identify with the LGBTQ+ community and are accepted by others within their respective groups, removing any moral implications of their gender and sexuality. Sexism and homophobia are still referenced as being very real, albeit relatively detached from the story at hand. Most instances of this kind of discrimination have occurred in past events and in different settings.

### ***The Penumbra Podcast (Juno Steel)***

*The Penumbra Podcast (TPP)* is a podcast that features several, separate LGBTQ+-character-dense stories ranging from a single episode to several seasons in length. For the purpose of this study, I focus on the storyline that follows Juno Steel, a prickly private investigator living in Hyperion City on a terraformed Mars, far in the future. Juno Steel solves cases over 2–3 episode arcs, while he deals with overarching corruption, ancient Mars artifacts, his personal demons, and tumultuous romance. While Juno Steel’s story is set on a different planet, where Martians were rumored to have once existed, there are no alien or otherwise non-human characters in the show. Thus, when counting recurring characters, the “intelligent” qualifier has no longer been needed and has not been considered in this count.

Juno Steel’s story is modeled after case-of-the-week detective noir shows, which typically showed hypermasculine characters and settings. Thus, by making most characters canonically queer, including the main character, and making many other characters queer-coded, the podcast writers are not only adding more characters that just happen to identify with the LGBTQ+ community, but also intentionally trying to subvert the hypermasculinity once inherent in these kinds of stories. Most recurring characters only appear for one arc (2–3 episodes). Some return in future episodes, especially the main love interest, Peter Noreyev. However, for the first ten episodes, the focus falls on Juno Steel and his trusty assistant/sidekick, Rita.

Juno Steel is a jaded private investigator. He uses he/him pronouns, but identifies as a lady, classifying himself as nonbinary. He carries a lot of emotional baggage from being raised in an abusive household where his brother was killed by his mother in a fit of rage during his childhood, growing up in a poor and dangerous community, getting kicked out of the police force, and all his subsequent failed PI cases. Juno clearly takes these events to heart and is self-loathing and depressed as a result. His mental illness causes him to be largely pessimistic and distance himself from others by working cases alone and being rude to everyone. Juno Steel also possesses a lot of negative personality traits, which sometimes begets negative behavior. These traits make for a poorly represented queer character, at first glance. However, Juno Steel is the protagonist and framed so that he is still likeable. Thus, Juno is written as one of the most famously complex types of characters, the antihero.

Rita is Juno Steel’s assistant who is addicted to watching reruns of bad soap operas and eating snacks on the job. She gets excited easily, is susceptible to going off on tangents, speaks with a thick accent, and operates as Juno’s tech support while he works his cases. Rita is quoted as describing herself, when asked about her sexuality, as “ain’t choosy” (*TPP* 011), implying bisexuality or pansexuality. Rita acts as a constant source of support and encouragement to Juno for all except the last story arc, where Juno breaks contact to go on an investigation with his love interest, Peter Noreyev.



Peter Noreyev is first introduced in the pilot, under the pseudonym Rex Glass. He poses as a Dark Matters agent sent to assist Juno Steel with a case concerning an ancient Martian artifact that he actually intends to steal. Peter Noreyev is a skilled thief and the embodiment of the trope “be gay, do crime”, a counter to the queer-coded villains trope that results in making villainy look appealing. Peter is a fun, likeable, and intelligent character that is attracted to Juno Steel, letting himself be lured into a kiss at the end of the case and almost getting caught. Peter Noreyev is largely absent for most of the remaining studied episodes, leaving Juno to process his feelings for Peter, until the ninth episode where they agree to work a case together again. After a particularly tumultuous case, they confess their feelings for each other and agree to start their relationship properly. However, because of Juno’s mental state, he promptly walks out on Peter and returns to Hyperion City to process his trauma.

An important area of focus for the writers of *TPP* consisted in the effects of mental illness and its slow healing process. Juno Steel lives with a large amount of ignored trauma that prevents him from being emotionally available to Peter Noreyev by the end of the tenth episode. Yet, Juno Steel’s story is far from over. There are dozens of episodes dedicated to Juno’s healing and later rekindling with Peter. While Juno has not been granted a happy ending by the tenth episode, he is still supported by his close friend, Rita, with the promise of further development.

As mentioned when discussing the LGBTQ+ character ratio earlier, the writers of Juno Steel’s storyline in *TPP* intentionally subvert the hypermasculine undertones of detective noir stories. This is achieved not only by including more LGBTQ+ characters, but also by creating a futuristic society where gender norms, heteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia, racism, etc. are no longer relevant. While this may seem like a utopia, moral depravity, political corruption, and late-stage capitalism are still rampant, providing plenty of work for Juno Steel.

Juno Steel’s storyline in *TPP* is, surprisingly, the only one of the four podcasts studied that featured a majority of confirmed recurring queer characters, most of whom had their identities confirmed at their introduction or, at the latest, by the end of their first 2–3 episode arc. Still, queer characters are the majority by a small margin. In the first listen of the podcast, when the characters had not yet been counted, the original impression was that the vast majority of the characters were canonically queer, when in actuality, upon closer inspection, many are just queer-coded, but never confirmed. This may qualify as the “ambiguously gay” trope. However, when considering that heteronormativity is no longer present in this society, straight and cisgender persons are no longer the default and any unconfirmed characters cannot be assumed as such. Either way, most unconfirmed characters are only present for a single arc, and their sexuality or gender identity is simply not relevant enough for their characterization in such a short period of time. Also, there are no confirmed cisgender, heterosexual characters.

In this world, bad things happen and bad people exist, but they do not occur because of a character's gender identity, sexuality, race, or ethnicity. The targeting of LGBTQ+ characters is not intentional, but with so many canonically queer and queer-coded characters in the show, instances of LGBTQ+-identifying characters as villains or of LGBTQ+-identifying characters being mistreated and/or having unfortunate things happen to them are bound to occur relatively often. This is especially true because the genre necessitates evil-doers to exist and unfortunate events to occur in order to bring about the cases that the protagonist must investigate.

### **FRUIT**

*FRUIT* is a podcast within the sports genre, less popular amongst LGBTQ+ audiences, which is about the coming-out journey of X, an anonymous NFL player. This podcast is the only one of the four studied podcasts with no transcripts available, limiting its accessibility to certain audiences and making it difficult to study. There are four canonically gay male characters in the show. Besides the protagonist, all other gay characters are either a love interest or a mentor to the protagonist. While the percentage of canonically queer, recurring individual characters is low, it makes sense when considering that the hypermasculine environment that professional football can produce is not conducive to having multiple openly gay characters.

X is a rookie professional football player trying to become popular while privately investigating his possible homosexuality and uses the pseudonym "X" to conceal his identity in the recordings. The podcast is a recorded testimonial, which at the end is revealed to have been prepared for a news story after X publicly comes out as gay. X is a Black man raised by two Princeton professors, later graduating from Princeton himself and getting drafted into the NFL. X's identity as a Black man and a Princeton alumnus is noticeable in the mix of formal and colloquial language he uses and the way he chooses to tell his story. X is clearly an introspective person, paying attention to his emotions and motivations as events transpire. X is a well-rounded character who, by being a Princeton-educated, professional football player, subverts tropes of gay men as well as Black men. Initially, X struggles a lot with confusion and internalized homophobia. Still, he forms a romantic relationship with Gerard, who is patient with his inexperience and trepidation. At the same time, he maintains a casual romantic relationship with his friend, Siya, while accidentally falsely making her believe that there is something more between them.

Gerard is a furniture designer who gave X his number at a club. While at first patient, he realizes that any future relationship with X would either be secretive or under a scrutinizing eye as he would become the boyfriend of one of the first openly gay football players in the NFL. As a result, Gerard breaks off the relationship, leaving X in a vulnerable emotional state. Gerard is a relatively flat character. He does still exercise his own agency when he considers his needs compared to X's and subsequently ends the relationship. There are

enough details provided to make Gerard seem like a real person, but he largely only exists in the story to advance X's realization of his sexual identity and to be a secret that X must work to conceal even after their breakup.

Siya is a sports agent who struggles to work her way into the gentlemen's club that is the sports industry. She is characterized as hard-working, intelligent, and independent. Black female characters are often characterized this way. While on the surface it is not inherently negative, stereotypes can contribute to viewing a group as a monolith rather than a diverse array of people. While Siya wants to be taken seriously at work, she still craves emotional support in her personal life and she seeks it out in X. Unfortunately, X's lack of emotional availability causes turmoil and confusion even after they eventually break up. This confusion motivates Siya to investigate the root of X's distance, where she finds out about Gerard. In the final episode, Siya confronts X about this, hurt by his dishonesty and gives him ultimatums concerning his sexuality.

Before either relationship ends, X is sent a threatening text message containing photographic evidence of him and Gerard kissing. After further investigation, it is revealed that the mystery sender was actually Siya's assistant, Luke, who is also gay, and who claims to have done so as a warning to be more careful. While his methods are questionable, causing panic in X for several days, Luke is honest in his intentions and later becomes a platonic mentor, helping guide X through accepting his sexuality. Luke is also a very flat character who exists only to guide X through his coming out journey. However, he is an outwardly gay man, openly expressive of his identity even in the professional football industry, albeit just as Siya's assistant. Still, it is valuable to see his success in such an environment for both X and the audience.

Finally, Hugo Alexander is the President and founder of the Alexander Group, the sports agency that Siya works for and X is signed onto. After a scandal arises that requires Hugo to come into the office personally, he meets X, who catches his eye. For a while, Hugo invites X to big parties and fancy dinners that lead to sex. After the break ups with both Gerard and Siya, X is excited about the novelty of this relationship. However, Hugo soon cuts ties with X without much hassle, revealing Hugo's exploitative intentions. X feels used and deeply hurt by this turn of events.

Most of the adversity that X encounters as a gay protagonist causes him a lot of stress and emotional labor. However, the blackmail from Luke, the ultimatums given by Siya, and the sexual exploitation by Hugo are all particularly malicious. Most of the negative actions that X has perpetrated have been due to his confusion, indecision, or obliviousness. Still, multiple characters have been negatively affected by his actions.

The world where this story takes place is nearly the same as the one we are in now, with the same social issues. The professional American football industry is known for being very hypermasculine, if not actively perpetuating toxic masculinity. Thus, it is a particularly suffocating work environment for someone other than a large, strong, masculine, aggressive, and unfeeling man. X differs

because of his sexuality. His Princeton upbringing and education is also unusual for professional football players, especially those from Black communities, which is noticed by fellow teammates and held against him. Other characters also struggle in this environment due to being different in the NFL. Siya, as a woman, keeps getting talked over and passed up for promotions at her place of work. Craig Laurelson, a fellow professional football player, suffered severe hazing at a spring training camp several years ago, and has been ostracized and discredited for trying to speak out against his harassment and the lack of accountability for the hazers and the higher establishments responsible ever since. The mental toll he suffered from this treatment leads to his public suicide and calling out the actions of the Alexander Group, which is covered up soon after. This is not just a story about a gay person in a homophobic environment. There is intersectionality between homophobia, toxic masculinity, sexism, racism, and classism. After all, if a space is not safe for queer people, it is likely not safe for other marginalized groups, either. The issues are not separate from each other and this has been exemplified well in *FRUIT*'s story, setting, and characterization.

*FRUIT* is a social critique of sexuality and its social politics. Thus, X is made to suffer because he is gay. While this is an honest portrayal of actual experiences of closeted queer people, it is important to note that difficult coming out stories seem to be a favorite for queer representation in feature film and mainstream television industries. Perhaps some skepticism is due as regards the necessity of this kind of story and the intentions of the people producing it. *FRUIT* focuses on the emotional labor of questioning one's sexuality and figuring out how this identity may fit in an unwelcoming environment. However, while the ending implies that X has eventually come out publicly, the point where the story is left off lacks the closure of many well-written coming-out stories where the protagonist has achieved a level of self-acceptance, and, ideally, acceptance from family, friends, and their community. X has been left with a strained relationship with his best friend in addition to two consecutive rejections by male romantic interests, all while he was still in an exploratory stage of questioning his identity. With no news of a third season in sight, the ending fails to give a conclusion that does not leave the protagonist, a gay man, in a worse state than when the podcast started.

## Discussion

Counting the characters in two of the studied podcasts has resulted in very low ratios of recurring canonically queer characters: *Welcome to Night Vale* and *FRUIT*. The other two have close to 50-50 ratios, with *The Penumbra Podcast* taking the slight majority. None of the podcasts have canonically queer characters taking a large majority, but all have queer relationships with different degrees of public openness, healthiness, and explicitness. Cecil from *WTNV* repeatedly talks on community radio about his crush on Carlos. In contrast, X from *FRUIT* has been in two brief, secret, sexual relationships, one of which has included a significant power imbalance.

All podcasts have well-developed queer main characters. However, the same could not be said for all characters in all the podcasts. In *WTNV*, Cecil is the only well-developed character, and he is still arguably very static as the unchanging, vague, disembodied, newscaster voice he is supposed to be. Because of the case-of-the-week structure of Juno Steel's storyline in *TPP*, the show features many flat characters that serve to advance the plot of the episode and then be forgotten about, whether they are canonically queer or not. All the gay men in *FRUIT* other than the protagonist, X, are flat characters that are either his love interest or his mentor. In other words, they only exist to advance X's character development.

No recurring, canonically LGBTQ+ characters die in any of the studied podcasts. However, when considering the spirit of the "Bury your gays" trope rather than its letter, only Juno Steel from *TPP* and X from *FRUIT* appear to be enduring more negative conditions than the other characters in the story. Still, because there are no straight characters in the story to compare to, Juno Steel cannot suffer more because of his sexual and gender identity. X in *FRUIT*, alternately, is purposefully made to endure a lot more stressors than his fellow straight professional football players.

*TSCOSI*, Juno Steel's storyline in *TPP*, and *FRUIT* all have canonical or queer-coded villains/antagonists. Agent RJ McCabe works for the Republic in *TSCOSI*, but they are more a cog in the machine than an actively malicious character. In fact, by the end they defect from the Republic. Also, there are non-binary characters on the "good" side, too. Thus, being nonbinary is not linked to villainy. As for *TPP*, when nearly all the characters are at least queer-coded, some will have to be the perpetrators of the crime and some – the victims. Hugo from *FRUIT*, who is intentionally written as a bad person (e.g. sexually exploitative, promotes a toxically masculine workplace that dodges accountability in the name of making money), is only able hurt X because he is gay.

Most of the selected podcasts are either Horror or Science Fiction, the two genres that LGBTQ+ fans are more likely to select as favorites than straight audiences would (Ellis 2019). In fact, when searching for fictional podcast series with LGBTQ+ representation, most resulting shows fit in those two categories. *FRUIT* provides diversity in the data pool with respect to genre. It is also unique as the only podcast including negative attitudes towards homosexuality in the story. *FRUIT* contains no reference to any LGBTQ+ identity besides that of a cis, gay man. Perhaps this is why sports fiction stories are less popular amongst the LGBTQ+ community. They are too closely tied to an unwelcoming reality.

The literature review references an article that discusses the strange phenomenon that is *WTNV*'s sustained success, despite its niche genre and its method of fund-raising. Many other podcasts have forgone the inclusion of advertisements, opting for *WTNV*'s model of sustaining themselves via the support of a small, but committed fanbase, *TSCOSI* included. Thus, in order to ensure success, *TSCOSI* writers must be aware of the audience they cater to and

make them feel like their wants and criticisms are being heard and addressed. An instance where this occurred was after they had aired their first couple of episodes and it was revealed that Krejjh was an alien who identified as non-binary. Even though Krejjh is otherwise a well-developed character, listeners critiqued that making Krejjh nonbinary followed the trope that nonbinary people are inhuman. Listening to their audience's commentary, the writers added a new recurring character in the next episode by the name of Agent RJ McCabe, who is a nonbinary human. This event exemplified the influence listeners may have on the content creators make, allowing them to push for better representation that they can easily identify with.

### Conclusion

LGBTQ+ representation in the media is growing. This has prompted academic research into what LGBTQ+ representation can be found in media, how much, and what is its standard of quality. The purpose of this article has been to conduct an initial study of LGBTQ+ representation in fictional podcasts, a medium that appears to have had virtually no attention from the academic community. In the literature review, a trend has become apparent whereby larger scale productions tend to be less inclusive. Thus, the hypothesis for this study has posited that due to podcasts being smaller, cheaper and easier to produce, it is less risk-averse and even beneficial for their creators to include more diversity. This study has involved four case studies of queer fictional podcast series. For each podcast, the number of canonically LGBTQ+ recurring characters has been counted and compared to the overall number of recurring characters. Then a qualitative analysis has been conducted, finding any tropes the shows perpetrated or subverted, as well as gauging the amount of development and relevance the featured LGBTQ+ characters in the story have been given. All podcasts tell strong interesting stories with well-developed queer protagonists. None of the podcasts have been able to uphold a golden standard in which all queer characters are well-developed and dynamic, are no worse people than their cisgender straight counterparts, endure no worse than their cisgender straight counterparts, avoid reinforcing old tropes, and even subvert some of them. However, most of the podcasts do not transgress so much that they are no longer enjoyable and are difficult to identify with. The podcast *FRUIT* is questionable due to the protagonist suffering more misfortune than his straight counterparts because of his sexuality.

The most significant limitation of this study has been the small sample size. Even though *The Strange Case of Starship Iris* and *FRUIT* are short enough to be studied in their entirety, only fractions of Juno Steel's storyline in *The Penumbra Podcast* and *Welcome to Night Vale* have been studied. Thus, the protagonists' personal and romantic development have not been fully explored within the confines of the study.

Even though this study is restricted to fictional podcast series only, LGBTQ+ representation exists in a variety of genres in podcasting. There are role-

playing game (RPG) podcasts like the *Adventure Zone* and *Critical Role*. Also, in nonfiction, there are LGBTQ+ slice-of-life, confessionals, history, and news podcasts, podcasts where examples of LGBTQ+ media are discussed, and podcasts with queer hosts. Hopefully, future researchers may see the potential for queer representation in podcasting and study its quality across the range of genres.

The other limitation of this study is that this research does not focus on the impact of the availability and easy accessibility of these inclusive and well-written stories to LGBTQ+ and questioning listeners. The impact of LGBTQ+-inclusive fictional podcast series to me personally is what has inspired me to pursue this research question. Perhaps future research will quantify how pervasive LGBTQ+-inclusive podcasting's influence is.

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