

Navigating Bisexual Identity in Baby Reindeer: A Queer Content and Narrative Analysis.

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ABSTRACT

Sexual identity is influenced by personal experiences, social norms, and cultural expectations. Although research on LGBTQ+ issues has increased in recent years, stories about bisexual men who have experienced trauma remain limited and underrepresented. This study explores how the Netflix series *Baby Reindeer*, based on the real-life story of Richard Gadd, presents the complex journey of discovering sexual identity through trauma and emotional struggle. Using qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis guided by queer theory – particularly the ideas of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler – this research focuses on three key episodes to examine how power, identity, and social pressure affect the main character, Donny. The findings reveal that Donny’s struggle illustrates how bisexual identity is shaped by shame, silence, and the need for acceptance. *Baby Reindeer* offers a meaningful portrayal of queer male experiences and serves as a powerful example of how media can challenge stereotypes and foster deeper understanding of sexual identity.

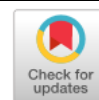
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INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is a complex aspect of human experience that includes sexual emotions, behaviors, identities, and orientations. It differs among individuals and societies and is influenced by biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors (Hyde & DeLamater, 2017). Furthermore, sexuality is dynamic; it manifests through desire, intimacy, and behavior, which are governed by cultural norms and historical context (Weeks, 2009). Judith Butler (1999) says that sexuality and gender are not natural traits, but rather created through repeated actions and modified by social norms and expectations. This emphasizes that identities are not fixed, but rather emerge within specific discursive and cultural frameworks. Foucault (1978) similarly argues that sexuality is socially constructed through discourse and power relations, not simply a natural biological phenomenon. He highlights how modern institutions – such as medicine, religion, and law – have not suppressed sexuality, but rather generated knowledge about it, making it a subject of regulation and control. His notion of “biopower” illustrates how sexual norms become tools for governing populations. Butler (2004) extends this by asserting that gender and sexual identities are constituted through repeated performances constrained by dominant norms, which dictate what kinds of lives are considered “intelligible” or livable.

The LGBTQ+ acronym refers to a spectrum of non-heteronormative identities, including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning individuals. Each term captures a different orientation or identity outside binary frameworks (Savin-Williams, 2005). According to Bailey et al. (2016), attraction to people of the same sex, both sexes, or the opposite sex is referred to as sexual orientation. These attractions can be directed at people of the opposite sex or gender, the same sex or gender, both, or neither, resulting in a variety of orientations such as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, and others. Because sexual

behavior and identity can be constrained by cultural contexts, most researchers focus on self-reported patterns of attraction to better understand orientation. Recognizing the diversity of these orientations is critical for appreciating the complexity of human experience and refusing to box people into rigid identities. Butler (1999) critiques rigid identity categories, proposing instead that queer identity is a site of resistance – one that disrupts normative assumptions and embraces fluidity and ambiguity. In this view, bisexuality falls within the queer spectrum, as it challenges binary thinking about desire and gender.

Heterosexuality, by contrast, is often socially constructed as the default orientation. It is deeply embedded in institutional structures and privileged through the ideology of heteronormativity, which assumes heterosexuality as the natural and preferred state (Herek, 2007). Butler (2004) describes heteronormativity as a cultural fiction that operates to define which identities are socially acceptable. Those who do not conform to this standard – such as bisexual or transgender individuals – are often rendered invisible, deviant, or unintelligible within dominant social discourses.

In the Netflix series *Baby Reindeer*, Donny, a struggling comic and bartender, offers kindness to a woman named Martha, unknowingly triggering a traumatic and obsessive relationship. The show – written and performed by Richard Gadd – narrates his real-life experiences of being stalked and sexually abused. Beyond the events themselves, *Baby Reindeer* interrogates the intersections of trauma, masculinity, and sexual identity, particularly through Donny's efforts to make sense of his bisexuality amidst unresolved abuse and public scrutiny. These narratives resonate with Butler's (1999) assertion that queer identities often emerge under conditions of constraint and surveillance, shaped by normative pressures rather than liberated choice.

In the second half of the show, particularly beginning in episode four, *Baby Reindeer* shifts its narrative focus to reveal the deeper psychological and emotional layers of Donny's character. Through a series of flashbacks, the audience is introduced to his past relationship with Darrien, a male mentor-turned-abuser who exploits Donny's ambition and vulnerability under the guise of professional support. This relationship culminates in repeated sexual abuse, creating a traumatic link between desire, success, and victimization. The narrative places in tension Donny's search for identity with his need for validation and control, emphasizing how trauma distorts the development of a coherent sexual self.

Media representation becomes a crucial space in which these identities are negotiated. As Foucault (1978) emphasizes, discourse – including that of mass media – is a central mechanism through which power is implemented and norms are produced. *Baby Reindeer* functions as a counter-discourse, providing visibility to a bisexual male protagonist whose experiences challenge the boundaries of traditional masculinity and heteronormativity. The raw portrayal of Donny's vulnerability and identity confusion not only humanizes queer trauma but also destabilizes rigid societal definitions of gender and desire.

Representation of LGBTQ+ identities in media plays a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes, validating individual experiences, and promoting mental well-being. Numerous studies have shown that exposure to positive and authentic portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters contributes to self-acceptance, identity formation, and social inclusion (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Media can serve as a powerful site of identity negotiation, particularly for individuals whose sexual identities are often marginalized or erased in public discourse. This is particularly relevant for bisexual individuals, who often experience “double discrimination” from both heterosexual and gay communities (Flanders et al., 2016). The underrepresentation and mischaracterization of bisexuality in media often perpetuate harmful stereotypes, such as indecisiveness, promiscuity, or invisibility (McInroy et al., 2016). Therefore, examining complex and layered portrayals of bisexual identity in contemporary media is essential to advancing a more inclusive and accurate understanding of queer experiences.

Central to this narrative is the process of coming out – an act that Butler (2004) frames as a negotiation between visibility and vulnerability. Coming out is never just a personal revelation; it is shaped by cultural scripts that determine whether a person's identity can be recognized within the normative social order. Donny's hesitation to disclose his bisexuality,

even to those close to him, reflects this tension between the need for authenticity and the risk of rejection, misunderstanding, or violence. According to Cahill and Tobias (2006), when individuals from queer communities come out, they not only face rejection from broader society but also risk being rejected by their own ethnic community, leading to even greater isolation.

This vulnerability is compounded by structural heterosexism—social systems that privilege heterosexual relationships and marginalize non-normative sexualities (Herek et al., 2009). Donny's internalized shame and reluctance to seek help are not just personal struggles; they are symptomatic of broader societal mechanisms that invalidate queer suffering, especially when experienced by men. Institutions often fail to acknowledge queer male victimhood, reinforcing gender norms that define men as invulnerable and dominant.

In addition, public and family-related policies affect the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ people throughout their lives. According to Foucault's idea of *biopolitics*, governments and institutions control people's lives and identities through rules and systems, including family policies. These policies often treat the heterosexual nuclear family as the normal or ideal way of living (Cahill & Tobias, 2006). Donny's experience of feeling emotionally and socially isolated reflects how these systems often ignore or exclude queer individuals, showing that LGBTQ+ identities are still seen as outside the mainstream idea of what a family should be.

Finally, the formation of sexual identity is not a linear or wholly personal process. It is embedded in social interaction, cultural meaning-making, and psychological development. According to Graber, Brooks-Gunn, and Galen (1998), the integration of sexual feelings, behaviors, and social roles constitutes a developmental challenge, particularly for queer youth, is crucial and requires supportive interventions. In *Baby Reindeer*, Donny's trauma distorts this developmental path, as he struggles to differentiate between the origins of his desires and the effects of his abuse. Butler (1993) notes that homophobia often operates through gender policing—labeling gay men as “feminine” or lesbians as “masculine”—thereby linking sexuality with failed or deviant gender performance. Donny's experience highlights this dynamic, as his bisexuality is not only stigmatized for disrupting sexual norms but also for exposing emotional vulnerability and nonconforming masculinity.

Recent studies on media representation and queer identities highlight the importance of authentic portrayals in shaping societal attitudes and individual self-perception. Suen et al. (2020) emphasize that sexual and gender minority individuals often feel misrepresented or erased in mainstream media, leading to marginalization and internalized stigma. Similarly, Mohr and Fassinger (2003) argue that self-acceptance and disclosure among LGBTQ+ individuals are closely linked to how their identities are reflected—or distorted—in public discourse.

Research by Savin-Williams (2005) challenges earlier “deficit” models of queer development, suggesting that contemporary queer youth navigate identity with increasing fluidity and agency, though still within the constraints of heteronormative structures. Hall and Hall (2011), meanwhile, explore how trauma—especially sexual abuse—can complicate identity formation, often leading to confusion, shame, or disassociation. These findings resonate strongly with Donny's experience in *Baby Reindeer*, where past abuse deeply shapes his understanding of desire, self-worth, and identity.

Bohan and Russell (1999) describe the process of discovering one's identity as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person is often depicted in popular and academic literature as a journey of discovery, a view that aligns with Butler's (2004) theory that recognition is essential for the emergence of a “livable” identity. This involves uncovering aspects of oneself that have always been there, despite being concealed, rejected, or disregarded. Most people think of “coming home”—that is, discovering who they truly are—or “finding their true self.” Some authors have claimed that individual variances in personality and life circumstances can have a profound effect on individuals' capacity and motivation to navigate the hurdles connected with the coming out process (Cass, 1996). Meanwhile, Herek et al. (2009) emphasizes that structural stigma and heterosexism continue to deny LGBTQ+ individuals' equal visibility and

legitimacy. These studies collectively underscore the need for nuanced media narratives – like *Baby Reindeer* – that reflect the intersecting realities of queerness, trauma, and social constraint.

Recent scholarship in queer theory and media studies has increasingly addressed the intersection of trauma, gender, and sexuality, yet depictions of bisexual men – particularly as victims of abuse – remain scarce and often misrepresented. As Meyer (2003) outlines in his Minority Stress Model, LGBTQ+ individuals face unique psychological stressors due to systemic discrimination, stigma, and internalized homophobia, all of which impact identity development. Donny's portrayal in *Baby Reindeer* exemplifies these dynamics, as his struggle with self-acceptance is shaped by both external rejection and internalized conflict.

Studies on male sexual victimization further reveal how cultural scripts around masculinity hinder disclosure and support (Javaid, 2015). Male survivors, especially those who are queer, are often silenced or disbelieved due to prevailing heteronormative beliefs that men are inherently dominant and invulnerable. Javaid (2018) notes that male rape myths – such as the idea that “real men” cannot be raped – are rooted in hegemonic masculinity and contribute to the systemic invisibility of queer male victims. Donny's experience illustrates this tension; his victimization is compounded by shame and a fear of emasculation; themes echoed throughout the series.

In media studies, Gill (2007) critiques the “postfeminist” media environment for its tendency to co-opt vulnerability while still reinforcing normative gender expectations. When applied to queer narratives, this framework helps explain how *Baby Reindeer* disrupts conventional tropes by placing a bisexual male character at the center of a story about trauma and identity. The series refuses to render Donny's experiences in simplistic terms of empowerment or victimhood; instead, it embraces the messy, contradictory processes that shape queer subjectivity.

Another significant contribution comes from Herman (2015), who argues that trauma recovery requires both the private act of remembering and the public act of witnessing. Donny's confessional monologues function as acts of self-narration and resistance, pushing against social silence. His story invites the audience to bear witness to queer pain that is rarely acknowledged in mainstream narratives, aligning with Butler's (2004) notion that certain lives and experiences remain outside the bounds of cultural legibility.

This article will therefore explore how *Baby Reindeer* represents the complexities of navigating sexual identity through the lens of trauma, social regulation, and queer resistance. By applying Foucault's and Butler's theories, the analysis aims to uncover how power, discourse, and performativity shape the construction – and deconstruction – of queer subjectivity. By analyzing specific scenes and character dynamics, the study aims to uncover how the series challenges or reinforces heteronormative frameworks, and how queer identity is constructed, constrained, and performed on screen. To explore these questions, a qualitative approach rooted in queer theory and discourse analysis is employed, with Foucault's and Butler's concepts guiding the interpretation of data drawn from selected episodes.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach, using content analysis and narrative analysis to examine the representation of sexual identity, trauma, and gender performativity in *Baby Reindeer*, a Netflix series. The qualitative method was chosen for its ability to explore the psychological, social, and symbolic dimensions of identity as depicted in visual narratives. Rather than relying on numerical data, qualitative research emphasizes a deep understanding and interpretation of human behavior, motivation, and lived experience (Kothari, 2004). This approach is particularly well-suited for analyzing complex and socially embedded issues such as gender, sexuality, and trauma within media and literary texts.

Content analysis involves systematically examining the visual and textual elements within the series, such as character dialogues, actions, and key scenes, to identify recurring themes and patterns. This method allows researchers to interpret how these elements construct meaning about sexual identity and trauma, focusing on the symbolic and social

dimensions of these issues in the narrative. Content analysis is particularly useful for identifying patterns in the depiction of the protagonist's emotional and psychological journey, especially in how sexual identity and trauma are portrayed through the series' key scenes and dialogues (Krippendorff, 2018). As Kothari (2004) explains, content analysis allows researchers to analyze texts, media, or other content types to derive meaningful insights, especially in qualitative studies where the focus is on depth rather than numbers.

Narrative analysis, on the other hand, is used to analyze the overall structure and progression of the story. This method examines how the episodic sequencing and unfolding events in Episodes 4, 6, and 7 contribute to the thematic development of sexual identity, masculinity, and trauma. Narrative analysis helps in understanding how the plot structure, including the use of flashbacks, character interactions, and plot resolution, shapes the protagonist's psychological growth, vulnerability, and identity formation. This method is particularly concerned with how the narrative's construction of events creates a cohesive story that reflects broader social and psychological themes (Riessman, 2008). Narrative analysis is useful for exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences through storytelling and how these narratives reflect and challenge societal norms (Polkinghorne, 1995).

To narrow the scope of analysis, purposive sampling was employed. While the series consists of seven episodes, this study focuses specifically on Episodes 4, 6, and 7. These episodes are selected because they provide a concentrated representation of the core themes explored throughout the series. Episode 4 introduces key conflicts related to the protagonist's sexual confusion and internalized trauma, Episode 6 intensifies the narrative by highlighting vulnerability, abuse, and identity crisis, and Episode 7 brings resolution to these themes through confession, familial interaction, and thematic closure. The focus on these episodes allows for a more focused, in-depth analysis without losing thematic comprehensiveness, as they capture the protagonist's psychological journey and thematic development, especially regarding trauma, sexual identity, masculinity, and societal judgment.

The primary data consist of *Baby Reindeer* series itself, along with key theoretical works: Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978), and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1999) and *Undoing Gender* (2004). Foucault's theory of power and surveillance is applied to analyze how societal norms regulate sexuality, while Butler's theory of gender performativity is used to explore how sexual identity and gender are constructed through repeated performances rather than being fixed or innate.

Secondary sources include research studies, journals, and articles related to sexuality, trauma, queer theory, and media representation. The data analysis followed a systematic process, beginning with a thorough viewing of the series and a focus on dialogues, actions, and scenes that address themes of sexual identity, trauma, and societal perception. The script was reviewed to identify key textual elements related to these themes. After collecting the data, it was refined and filtered to focus on significant elements—particularly scenes, actions, and dialogues—that depicted sexual identity and its complexities. These filtered data were then organized into thematic categories, which helped identify recurring patterns and connections related to sexual identity, trauma, and societal influences. The conclusions drawn from this data analysis were carefully aligned with the research objectives, ensuring that the findings were valid and well-supported by the selected data.

The theoretical framework for this study, grounded in Foucault and Butler's theories, guides the interpretation of how the series represents sexual identity. The analysis explores how *Baby Reindeer* critiques normative constructions of masculinity and sexual trauma by placing a male character in a position traditionally associated with feminine vulnerability. Additionally, queer theory is employed to examine the non-normative representations of sexuality in the series, providing a deeper understanding of how the show challenges or subverts traditional norms surrounding sexual identity. This comprehensive, methodical approach offers a nuanced understanding of how sexual identity is portrayed, performed, and navigated in *Baby Reindeer*.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Repression and Sexual Identity Conflict



Figure 1. Donny Started to Question About His Sexuality

Min 00:37:06 (Episode 4)

In Fig. 1, Donny begins to ask serious questions about his identity and sexuality. He wonders whether his sexual feelings have always been part of who he is – something natural and present since birth – or if they were shaped by outside factors like his environment or past trauma. This personal conflict is clearly shown in his monologue: *"I could never tell whether these feelings were because of him or whether they always existed deep down."* The "him" Donny refers to is the man who raped him.

Donny finds himself stuck in a confusing and painful mental state. Even though he had chances to walk away from the situation, he feels trapped in a cycle he cannot escape. This scene shows how hard it is for him to understand what he truly feels. He even begins to question whether, on some level, he felt some form of hidden pleasure from what happened. He asks himself: did I enjoy being touched by another man? This moment highlights how complicated and unclear sexuality can be, especially when trauma is involved. It also reflects how people may struggle to understand their own desires when those desires do not fit into what society sees as normal. Repressive societies, especially those rooted in conservative or heteronormative values, often perpetuate harmful myths about sexuality.

This confusion connects to Judith Butler's (1999) idea that gender and sexuality are not fixed but shaped by repeated social expectations. Donny's identity is not clearly "natural" or "learned," but something shaped by personal and social experiences. Michel Foucault (1978) also argues that power shapes how we understand sexuality. In Donny's case, living in a conservative society makes it even harder for him to understand and accept himself.

Donny's emotional struggle also reflects what trauma studies have found—survivors of abuse may sometimes confuse their body's automatic reactions, like unwanted arousal, with feelings of consent or pleasure. This can make it harder for them to understand what really happened and can deeply affect how they see themselves and their sense of control (van der Kolk, 2014). It raises important ethical and psychological questions about how individuals come to understand their sexuality in the aftermath of violence.

Foucault's (1978) theory of biopower further supports this by explaining how sexuality is regulated not merely through repression but via institutional discourses—such as law, medicine, and media—that define what is "normal" and "deviant." In Donny's case, growing up in a society where rigid expectations of masculinity and heterosexuality prevail forces him to camouflage his authentic self. This creates a dangerous dissonance between who he is and who he is expected to be, a psychological tension that manifests in shame, silence, and confusion.

Navigating sexuality in a repressive society involves negotiating not just personal identity, but also the fear of social exclusion, stigma, and internalized shame. As Sedgwick (1990) suggests in *Epistemology of the Closet*, queer individuals often face an existential burden to explain or justify their identities in terms legible to a heteronormative society. Donny's internal conflict is amplified by the expectation that his bisexuality be either hidden, denied, or explained through trauma. As Ahmed (2004) notes, emotions such as fear and shame

become “sticky” in these contexts—they attach to queer bodies and identities, reinforcing marginalization through affective control. These pressures make authenticity not just difficult, but emotionally dangerous (Seidman, 2009).



Figure 2. Donny Felt Confused About His Sexuality

Min 00:36:50 (Episode 4)

Donny: *“I started to feel this overwhelming sexual confusion crashing through my body.”*

Donny: *“I thought it might pass, but it became an insecurity, which grew into a raging madness within me.”*

In Fig. 2, Donny's emotional confession reveals the intense inner conflict he's been enduring. He experiences overwhelming sexual confusion and insecurity, unsure whether these feelings were always a part of him or a result of the abuse he faced. As Diamond (2016) and Savin-Williams (2017) note, such internal questioning is common among individuals with fluid sexual identities, particularly when societal narratives frame queerness as something “caused” by deviance or abuse. These cultural views undermine fluid or non-normative identities and strengthen harmful myths, increasing internalized stigma.

As shown in Fig. 2, Donny talks about his sexual confusion, saying, *“I started to feel this overwhelming sexual confusion crashing through my body.”* This moment reflects the struggle of understanding one's identity in a society that controls how people express their sexuality. Donny's “raging madness” represents the emotional confusion that arises when societal expectations clash with internal truths. As McCormack (2012) observes, young men in repressive environments often experience anxiety when navigating non-heterosexual desires, particularly when there is limited language or support for these experiences.

The internal conflict Donny has to face in embracing his bisexual identity illustrates how societal constructs—particularly heteronormativity and moral conservatism—restrict personal expression and authenticity. Donny's experience reflects this instability; he repeatedly negotiates his identity based on shifting contexts and internalized fear. His journey aligns with the performative nature of sexuality and gender, revealing how personal truth is continuously reshaped under cultural and interpersonal pressures (Butler, 1993; Zimman, 2019).

The fear of being “made” into something undesirable through trauma is common among survivors. As Ahmed (2006) suggests, emotions like shame and fear do not just reside inside us but circulate within relationships and structures, shaping how we orient ourselves in the world. Donny's shame is both personal and collective—it is born of trauma but amplified by a society that views queer identities as suspicious, unstable, or damaged.

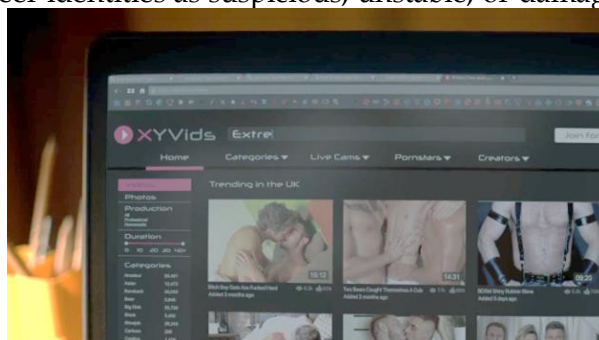


Figure 3. Donny Tried to Discover His Sexuality

Min 00:37:49 (Episode 4)

Navigating Bisexual Identity in Baby Reindeer: A Queer Content and Narrative Analysis.

Donny: "So after months of hate and anger and confusion,"

Donny: "I was left with no choice."

Min 00:38:01 (Episode 4)

Donny: "I orgasmed quickly, in such a way that there was no denying my desires were shifting."

Min 00:38:12 (Episode 4)

Donny: "I felt confused. I felt angry. I felt like I was going through puberty all over again."

In this significant scene, Donny actively seeks to resolve the uncertainty surrounding his sexual identity. He begins by watching gay pornography and masturbating, and to his surprise, he experiences repeated orgasms and derives considerable pleasure from it. However, he also finds heterosexual pornography equally arousing. This ambiguity propels him into a phase of sexual experimentation, during which he engages in consensual sexual encounters with individuals of various genders – men, women, and transgender persons. He finds these experiences pleasurable, ultimately leading him to the realization that he is bisexual. Yet, despite this clarity, Donny continues to struggle with self-acceptance. He is unable to fully embrace this evolving identity due to internalized shame and fear. His feelings of being "tainted" and his anxiety about social rejection reveal a deep-seated internal conflict.

Donny beginning to accept that his desires are not fixed. The physical response he experiences forces him to confront the possibility that his sexuality might not be fully heterosexual. His description of this shift as "going through puberty all over again" suggests confusion, vulnerability, and a sense of rediscovery – feelings often experienced by queer individuals in repressive social environments.

In repressive societies that promote heteronormativity, sexual exploration – especially outside the heterosexual norm – is often met with silence or stigma. According to Diamond and Rosky (2016), sexual orientation can change over time and is influenced by context, but society still expects individuals to remain fixed in rigid categories. Donny's bodily experience, however, challenges this binary framework.

Donny's struggle to understand his bisexuality reflects what Rodríguez, Lytle, and Vaughan (2013) describe as *minority stress*, a psychological burden experienced by individuals whose sexual identities do not align with dominant social norms. Their study highlights how bisexual and questioning individuals often face invalidation and marginalization, both from heterosexual society and within LGBTQ+ spaces, leading to confusion, emotional distress, and isolation. In Donny's case, his bodily responses signal a shift in desire, but instead of clarity, it brings fear and shame – reactions shaped by the heteronormative and gendered expectations around him.

In addition, research by Thompson and Morgan (2008) highlights how late adolescent or adult sexual exploration, especially among men, can lead to confusion and emotional distress when it occurs without support, visibility, or community affirmation. Without positive representation, these individuals may feel isolated or pressured to conform to rigid sexual categories. This is even more difficult in cultures where queerness is silenced or sexual fluidity is misunderstood.

Donny's reflection that his orgasm "proved" something to him reflects how personal identity formation can be tied to moments of physicality – moments that are often ignored in clinical or theoretical frameworks of sexuality. Yet, his fear of what that change might mean socially underscores how queerness is often framed as immaturity or crisis in heteronormative contexts (Frost & Meyer, 2009).



Figure 4. Donny Is Stuck in a Society Full of Heteronormativity

Min 00:39:15 (Episode 4)

This fear is powerfully illustrated in a later scene, where Donny finds himself in the company of a group of hypermasculine, heterosexual men as portrayed in Fig. 4. In a monologue, he reflects: *"Now I was stuck surrounded by pilsner misogynist so heteronormative. I could do nothing but crave their approval."* This moment reflects the oppressive influence of heteronormativity—the cultural assumption that heterosexuality is the default, "normal" mode of sexual orientation (Warner, 1991). Donny's longing for validation from this group, despite his evident discomfort, underscores the social pressures faced by those whose identities fall outside normative expectations. His compulsion to conceal his sexuality and perform heterosexuality is a survival tactic in a society that stigmatizes non-heterosexual identities as deviant.

Donny's decision to "pass" as heterosexual can be seen as a form of coerced performance shaped by fear of marginalization. Furthermore, Goffman's concept of stigma (1986) helps contextualize Donny's internalized fear of being perceived as "other." His bisexuality, while self-acknowledged, is socially unlivable in the homophobic and misogynistic space he inhabits. Donny's internal struggle captures the tension between personal authenticity and social conformity. His experience is emblematic of how queer identities are often negotiated within, and constrained by, the boundaries of heteronormative structures. This highlights the need for broader societal shifts that validate and protect diverse expressions of sexuality without fear or shame.



Figure 5. Donny's Confession to His Parents

Min 00:04:00 (Episode 7)

As seen in Fig. 5, Donny also tries to balance his need for understanding with his fear of rejection or judgment. This moment shows how vulnerable it feels to share deep pain with loved ones, especially when dealing with societal stigma and personal shame. According to research on family dynamics and trauma disclosure, confessing difficult truths to parents often stirs up mixed emotions, because individuals hope for support and validation, while simultaneously fearing misunderstanding or dismissal. Pachankis et al. (2020) report that "disclosure stress is related to expectations of rejection," which is amplified in families rooted in conservative or repressive values. Donny's struggle mirrors this duality. As he lays bare his feelings, his hesitation and rawness reveal his internal conflict. This aligns with Brené Brown's concept of vulnerability as both a pathway to connection and a source of profound discomfort (Brown, 2012).

Moreover, studies show that parental reactions can significantly shape how individuals process their experiences and self-perception. This scene also emphasizes the importance of family responses to trauma disclosure. Supportive responses foster healing and self-acceptance, whereas dismissive or negative reactions increase feelings of shame and isolation. Donny's confession underscores the stakes of these interactions, as he exposes himself to both potential comfort and emotional harm.

Trauma and Power



Figure 6. Donny Shares His Heartbreaking Experiences to the Audience

Donny's experience of trauma profoundly influences his sexual identity. The abuse and stalking he endures create a sense of confusion and self-doubt about his bisexuality. This aligns with Foucault's idea that personal identity is shaped by societal forces and past experiences. The series portrays how trauma can complicate the journey toward self-acceptance, particularly in environments where being openly bisexual is stigmatized, further illustrating the complex interplay between trauma and the formation of sexual identity.



Figure 7. Donny Talks About Martha, the Stalker

Min 00:27:22 (Episode 6)

Donny: *"That's what abuse does to you, you know?"*

Donny: *"It made me this... sticking plaster for all of life's weirdos."*

Donny: *"This open wound for them to sniff at."*

Audience: *[Uncomfortable silence]*

Donny: *"I knew she was mad, and I knew she was dangerous, but she flattered me, and that was enough."*

In Fig. 6 shows Donny admitting, *"That's what abuse does to you, you know?"* followed by, *"It made me this... sticking plaster for all of life's weirdos. This open wound for them to sniff at."* These metaphors express a deep sense of objectification and loss of control, common among trauma survivors who feel emotionally exposed or used. His statement, *"I knew she was mad, and I knew she was dangerous, but she flattered me, and that was enough,"* underscores how trauma impacts decision-making and the need for external validation. This aligns with studies showing that trauma survivors often develop a distorted sense of self-worth and seek approval or affection—even from unsafe sources—as a way to fill emotional voids left by the trauma (Hall & Hall, 2011; Courtois, 2010).

They may rely on external validation to fill the void left by their pain, even when it comes from harmful or unsafe sources. For Donny, the flattery he receives overrides his awareness

of danger because his trauma has conditioned him to accept any form of attention as meaningful.



Figure 8. Donny Broke Down in Tears After the Realization Hits Him
Min 00:38:29 (Episode 4)

Donny: "I started having reckless sex with people of all genders in this desperate pursuit of the truth... Like if I'm passed around like a whore, then I might at least shed this idea that my body is part of me somehow... But it mattered. It mattered because this is what he wanted. This is what he saw in me all along"

This moment reveals how deeply trauma distorts Donny's understanding of his body, desire, and identity. Instead of exploring his identity with confidence or curiosity, Donny uses sex to try to rationalize or undo what happened to him. But instead of healing, it leads to more shame and confusion. This reflects what Herman (2015) calls *traumatic reenactment*—a behavior where survivors unconsciously recreate aspects of their trauma in a desperate attempt to gain control or meaning.

Donny's detachment from his body — *"I might at least shed this idea that my body is part of me somehow"* — shows how survivors often separate from their physical selves to cope with psychological pain. Donny's risky behavior is not because he wants pleasure, but because he is trying to make sense of the abuse. This is consistent with van der Kolk's (2014) findings that trauma creates a split between body and mind, making it hard for survivors to feel safe within their own bodies.

Furthermore, Donny's search for identity through these encounters highlights how trauma complicates sexual self-understanding. Research by Widanaralalage et al. (2022) emphasizes that male survivors of male-perpetrated sexual violence often experience identity confusion, feelings of shame, and internalized stigma, particularly when their victimization challenges dominant norms of masculinity and sexuality. For Donny, bisexuality is not a discovery—it becomes entangled with guilt and self-disgust.

His final line — *"It mattered because this is what he wanted. This is what he saw in me all along."* — is a devastating realization that he feels trapped in the identity his abuser assigned to him. This supports Foucault's (1978) theory that power shapes subjectivity; Donny's sense of self becomes constructed through the gaze of violence and domination, not through autonomy.

This scene demonstrates that sexual identity is not always developed through freedom or curiosity. For trauma survivors, it may form through pain, confusion, and survival. Therefore, understanding queer identity must also consider how trauma and power distort the path to self-recognition. Ultimately, *Baby Reindeer* portrays how trauma complicates the journey toward self-acceptance, especially in environments where being openly bisexual remains stigmatized.

Vulnerability and Identity Performance

The series challenges the stereotype that men cannot be victims by portraying Donny as a male survivor of stalking and abuse. Despite his suffering, society often dismisses him because he is a man, reflecting a bias that minimizes male vulnerability. Foucault's concept of power dynamics is evident here, as traditional gender norms dictate who is allowed to be seen as vulnerable. *Baby Reindeer* critiques these norms, demonstrating that male survivors, especially those with non-heteronormative identities, are often overlooked and marginalized.



Figure 9. Donny's Being Paranoid

Min 00:37:24 (Episode 4)

Donny: "I would feel like everyone who looked at me could see what I was going through. Like they were peering into my soul, seeing the rape and the doubts and the confusion. Like my eyes were these windows onto the most tightly-held secret of my life."

In Fig. 9, Donny describes the intense feeling of being emotionally exposed – like everyone who looked at him could see the abuse he had experienced, along with his doubts and confusion. This moment powerfully illustrates how male survivors of sexual violence often carry a deep sense of visible shame, even when nothing is openly said. His metaphor of his eyes being “windows” onto his secret reflects how trauma can feel like a permanent mark on one’s identity.

Traditional gender norms expect men to appear strong, emotionless, and in control (Mahalik et al., 2007). When a man like Donny is traumatized, he may fear being seen as “less of a man” or being judged for showing pain. This can lead to silence, isolation, and internalized shame – common responses among male survivors (Javaid, 2018).

Research shows that men are less likely to report abuse or seek help because of the stigma that surrounds male victimhood (Easton et al., 2016). Donny’s fear of being seen, judged, or exposed reflects this cultural problem. The silence around male vulnerability doesn’t protect men – it harms them by denying their pain the recognition it deserves.

Judith Butler’s (2004) theory of gender performativity helps explain this. Because masculinity is socially constructed through repeated behaviors, men who deviate from this script – by being vulnerable, emotional, or victimized – are often seen as “failing” to be men. Donny’s confession shows the emotional weight of trying to perform masculinity while carrying deep trauma.

This scene is crucial for understanding how trauma affects not only personal identity but also how people move through the world under the pressure of social norms. It reminds us that visibility can be terrifying when society refuses to make space for male pain.



Figure 10. Donny Shares His Heartbreaking Experiences To The Audience

Min 00:26:51 (Episode 6)

Donny: "Is my self-respect so fucking low, is my lust for success so fucking high, that I will repeatedly go back to this man's house and let him abuse me for a little peep at fame?"

Donny: "Oh, you're a victim. You mustn't blame yourself."

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Donny: "Good sentiment, but let's be honest, the fourth or fifth time you've passed out and woken up with your dick in his mouth, you should probably think about not going back."

Audience: [Gasps]

Donny: "But no, I just had to keep going. I just had to get fucking raped."

Audience: [Silence]

In Fig. 10, Donny's confession can be categorized as a moment of emotional vulnerability. As the researcher observed Donny's appearance and behaviour during the confession, viewers may have been struck by his hesitation and raw honesty. His tone fluctuated between self-awareness and self-loathing, making it unclear whether he sought redemption or simply needed to be understood. The scene presented Donny's inner conflict, with his words feeling almost like a breakdown, as if he was confronting the weight of his actions for the first time. This emotional rawness was amplified by the tension in the room, leaving viewers captivated yet unsettled by the gravity of his confession.

When Donny opens up, he's met with silence from the people around him. This silence shows how society often ignores or doesn't know how to deal with male vulnerability. Many men who go through trauma or abuse don't speak out because they fear they won't be believed or that people will see them as less manly. The dismissal of men's emotional struggles can make them feel even more isolated, as if their pain doesn't matter. Turchik and Edwards (2012) found that men who experience sexual trauma are less likely to report it due to the stigma surrounding male victimhood. Donny is not just facing his own shame but also the harsh reality that society doesn't give men the same support when they are victims of abuse. This silence in the scene highlights how male vulnerability is often overlooked or misunderstood, leaving men to deal with their pain on their own.



Figure 11. Donny's Confession To His Parents

Min 00:05:15 (Episode 7)

Donny: "I just feel so fucking embarrassed, and I guess I never wanted you to know because I didn't want you to think less of me, you know..."

(sniffles, voice trembling)

Donny: "...as a man."

(Pauses for a moment, visibly struggling to keep it together.)

Donny: "I just feel less of one, having let something like that happen to me."

In Episode 7 of *Baby Reindeer*, Donny's confession of his sexual identity to his father serves as a poignant moment of vulnerability and emotional connection. This scene is further deepened when Donny's father, in response, confesses his own past trauma. Their shared honesty creates a raw and powerful exchange, highlighting how personal pain and unresolved issues can transcend generations.

In this scene from *Baby Reindeer*, Donny's confession shows how men's vulnerability is often ignored or dismissed by society. When he says, "I just feel so fucking embarrassed, and I guess I never wanted you to know because I didn't want you to think less of me, you know... as a man," Donny reveals how ashamed he feels about being vulnerable. His fear of being judged as weak because of his emotions is something many men experience when they face trauma or pain. Research by Jakupcak et al. (2003) indicates that traditional masculine norms often discourage

men from expressing vulnerable emotions, leading them to suppress emotional responses in order to maintain a sense of control and avoid appearing weak.

Donny's next line, *"I just feel less of one, having let something like that happen to me,"* reflects how many men feel like their masculinity is questioned if they are hurt or victimized. In many cultures, men are expected to be strong and in control, and showing emotions or weakness is seen as a failure to live up to those expectations. So, when men like Donny go through something painful, they often feel embarrassed or like they're less of a man, just because they're being vulnerable (Connell, 2005).

This idea connects to the theory of gender that Judith Butler talks about, where masculinity is something that society expects men to "perform" in certain ways, like being tough and unemotional. When Donny admits to being a victim, he feels like he's breaking the rules of that performance, which makes him feel even worse. The fear of being seen as weak is so strong that it's hard for him to express his pain. As Butler (1999) suggests, gender performance is not an innate identity but a socially constructed act, and deviating from expected norms, especially in terms of masculinity, can lead to shame and self-rejection.

Donny's confession not only reflects his struggle for self-acceptance but also the weight of societal expectations that often silence such admissions. Studies on family dynamics suggest that when parents respond with openness to their children's vulnerabilities, it can foster stronger emotional bonds and mutual understanding. In this case, Donny's father's revelation demonstrates how one person's courage to speak their truth can encourage others to do the same, breaking cycles of silence and repression.

Moreover, this moment captures the intergenerational nature of trauma. The unresolved trauma in one generation can influence the emotional well-being of the next. Donny's father's confession reveals the lingering impact of his own experiences, suggesting that his silence may have shaped the environment in which Donny struggled with his identity. By sharing their vulnerabilities, both Donny and his father take a step toward breaking these patterns, fostering a space for healing and understanding.

Media Visibility and Queer Representation

Baby Reindeer emphasizes the importance of diverse media representation in breaking down harmful stereotypes. By portraying a bisexual male protagonist struggling with trauma, the series challenges societal expectations and fosters greater empathy. Such representation is vital in promoting acceptance and inclusivity, demonstrating the power of media to challenge societal norms and support the well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Gillig et al. (2018) argue that narrative exposure to LGBTQ+ storylines in media—particularly through television—can positively shape viewers' attitudes towards queer individuals. This occurs through processes such as narrative transportation and character identification, where audiences become emotionally absorbed in the story and begin to empathize with the characters portrayed. McInroy and Craig (2015) propose that media—especially online platforms—serve as crucial spaces for exploration, affirmation, and validation of queer identities. Media environments provide access to diverse representations and community support that may be lacking in offline settings. These spaces help LGBTQ+ individuals understand, articulate, embrace their sexual and gender identities, and reduces social prejudice.

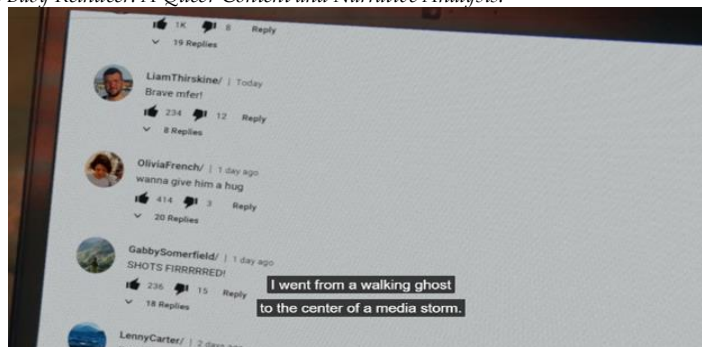


Figure 12. The Comment Section Below The Viral Video Of Donny

Min 00:00:31 (Episode 7)

Donny's journey reveals how the media can play a crucial role in challenging societal stereotypes, particularly around sexuality and identity. Throughout the series, Donny's interactions with the world around him expose how deeply ingrained stereotypes can shape the way individuals perceive themselves and others.

Donny's confession about his trauma and sexuality reveals how societal expectations often dictate how one should behave or feel. Media representations of sexuality, especially when they focus on marginalized groups, can reinforce or challenge these stereotypes. The portrayal of Donny's personal journey serves as a counter-narrative to typical media depictions of bisexuality, trauma, and masculinity. By giving voice to a character who is vulnerable, flawed, and seeking understanding, *Baby Reindeer* pushes back against the traditional media stereotypes of the "strong" or "perfect" hero, offering a more authentic and humanized portrayal of someone navigating their sexuality and trauma.

Donny's shift from a "walking ghost" to the "center of a media storm" highlights how media visibility can reshape public identity and perception, especially regarding masculinity. After a clip of his stand-up performance is uploaded to YouTube without his consent and goes viral, Donny is suddenly flooded with public and professional attention. He says, "It was so overwhelming that I almost didn't notice that Martha had stopped emailing." His sudden fame reveals the media's powerful role in constructing narratives that can transform someone's social status overnight.

Michel Foucault's theory of *bio-power* (1978) helps explain how media functions as a mechanism of control—not through force, but through the creation and spread of norms. Donny's unexpected fame subjects him to new forms of surveillance and expectation. Once the media frames him as a symbol of trauma or confession, his private identity is reconstituted in public terms. The viral video doesn't just share his story—it redefines him in the eyes of society, revealing how media becomes a tool of normalization and visibility.

At the same time, Judith Butler's (1999) concept of gender performativity shows how the media spotlight forces Donny to perform a version of masculinity that the public finds palatable. Media exposure amplifies this pressure: Donny is suddenly seen, interpreted, and judged through a gendered lens. His vulnerability becomes a spectacle. He is no longer just a man dealing with trauma—he is performing the role of "the male victim," a category often overlooked or misunderstood within traditional masculinity.

Thus, while the media appears to offer Donny visibility and success, it also reinforces subtle expectations about how he should embody masculinity and process pain. His public identity is no longer entirely his own—it is mediated through digital platforms and audience perceptions. This dynamic reflects how media can simultaneously challenge and reinforce gender norms, shaping not just how society sees individuals, but how individuals are allowed to see themselves.



Figure 13. Donny Started Gaining Public Recognition

Min 00:00:57 (Episode 7)

The impact of Donny's video confession reflects on what feels like the peak of his career – something he worked hard for after many years of failure as a comedian. He enjoys the attention and recognition because it gives him the validation he has always wanted. This longing for recognition was once even promised by Darren, a figure who ultimately violated that promise by drugging and sexually assaulting Donny. Although Donny now feels a sense of release from the trauma of that past event, his video confession has exposed his identity and history to the public. Yet surprisingly, this exposure leads to a major change in how people see him, bringing sympathy and support that dramatically transforms his life.

Donny's experience underscores the complex interplay between trauma, queer identity, and media representation. In recent queer and media studies, scholars have noted how digital media can serve both as a site of vulnerability and as a platform for agency and healing. Queer confessional narratives, especially those disseminated online, have the potential to reconfigure public discourse and offer transformative visibility for marginalized individuals (Raun, 2018). In Donny's case, the viral spread of his story becomes a double-edged sword: it reveals his most intimate traumas but simultaneously provides a new avenue for acceptance, recognition, and perhaps even empowerment.

The role of digital media in reshaping personal narratives and social trajectories is particularly significant in queer contexts. As Couldry (2000) argues that media is not just a channel of communication but a site of symbolic power. His concept of the "witnesses of the media age" highlights how individuals like Donny are not only narrators of their stories but also subjects constructed by the media gaze. Donny's identity becomes both his own and one mediated by how others see, comment on, and circulate his image and story – demonstrating how media visibility can both empower and constrain.

In addition to these theoretical insights, empirical research by Sawansukha and Tushir (2023) confirms the media's crucial role in challenging stereotypes related to the LGBTQIA+ community. Their study reveals that positive media representations significantly improve awareness, empathy, and acceptance of sexual and gender diversity among young adults. Donny's overnight transformation from a figure of despair to one of hope exemplifies this dynamic. The public response to his confession does not merely provide him with visibility; it reaffirms his value as a person, giving him a renewed sense of purpose and the belief that a brighter future is possible.

Thus, *Baby Reindeer* operates not only as a symbolic intervention but also as part of a broader cultural and psychological shift, highlighting the media's ability to transform societal attitudes. This case also highlights the media's capacity to mediate queer identities, particularly in societies where heteronormativity continues to dominate public consciousness. Rather than remaining a private, internal struggle, Donny's navigation of his sexuality becomes a collective narrative – both shaped by and shaping the socio-cultural terrain in which queer lives unfold.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows how *Baby Reindeer* represents the journey of navigating sexual identity through the lens of trauma, societal expectations, and queer resistance. By applying Foucault's and Butler's theories, it reveals how bisexual male identity is shaped by power and social norms. The series gives an important voice to queer male experiences that are often ignored. These findings help improve understanding in media and gender studies by showing why honest and diverse stories matter. These findings underscore the importance of inclusive representations and reaffirm the interconnectedness of identity, trauma, and power as revealed throughout the analysis.

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