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Renee Middlemost

University of Wollongong, reneem@uow.edu.au

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Keywords

cultures, internet, babashook:, iconography, gay, babadook

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Middlemost, R. "Babashook: The Babadook, gay iconography and Internet cultures." *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 8 .1 (2019): 7-26.

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Renee Middlemost, University of Wollongong

Abstract

Upon its 2014 release, Australian film *The Babadook* gained critical acclaim worldwide. While the film gathered high praise, its domestic release was impeded by a lack of marketing support, and ongoing debate about the quality of Australian horror films. By 2015, *The Babadook* was available to stream on Netflix in the US, and one would imagine, to gradually fade from view. Yet a seemingly innocent categorization error on Netflix in 2016, which listed *The Babadook* as an LGBT interest film resulted in a revival of the film's popularity as a cult film, and the emergence of the Babadook as 'a frightening, fabulous new gay icon' (Orbey, 2017). This article will trace the production history of *The Babadook* from its theatrical release through to its Netflix premiere and the evolution of the Babadook as a gay icon. Using Jenkins, Ford, and Green's (2013) work on spreadable media, the influence and spread of internet content will be highlighted against the backdrop of contemporary political movements. In turn I will propose a number of categories essential to gay iconography, and explore how internet cultures continually refine and expand these categories for widespread dissemination. The case study of the Babadook's representation at American Pride Month in June 2017 will be used to illustrate the ability of internet cultures to appropriate popular culture for political impact in marginalised communities.

Keywords:

The Babadook;

gay icons;

spreadability;
popular culture;
paratexts;
fandom.

'If it's in a word, or it's in a look, you can't get rid of the Babadook'

This article will trace the production history of *The Babadook* from its theatrical release, through to its Netflix premiere, and the evolution of the Babadook as a gay icon. In 2016, a seemingly innocent categorisation error on Netflix which listed *The Babadook* as a 'LGBT interest' film led to renewed interest in the cult film, in addition to the emergence of 'Babadiscourse' where fans claimed that the Babadook was not only a separate character, but a 'gay icon'. Using this incident as a case study, I will explore and propose a number of categories essential to gay iconography online, and demonstrate how fan generated paratexts such as gay Babadook refine and expand these categories. Jenkins, Ford, and Green's (2013) work on spreadable media reiterates the potential of fan-generated paratexts to influence contemporary political movements. This article focuses on two key questions which are central to the reframing of the Babadook as a gay icon: how do gay Babadook memes illustrate the spreadability of fan produced paratexts? and, what features are central to gay iconography online? The case study of the Babadook's popularity as a gay icon is thus used to demonstrate the ability of marginalised communities to appropriate popular culture for both social inclusion, and political impact.

The release of director Jennifer Kent's debut feature, *The Babadook* (2014) garnered critical acclaim for its sophisticated reworking of horror tropes in an Australian

setting. The film centres around the relationship between single mother Amelia (Essie Davis) and her son Samuel (Noah Wiseman). Amelia is portrayed as a woman on the verge of falling apart, torn between memories of her husband Oskar (Ben Winspear), who died driving her to the hospital to give birth; and cultivating a healthy relationship with their precocious son Samuel. Amelia's grief is a barrier inhibiting her relationship with Samuel, who is portrayed as troubled and constantly seeking Amelia's attention. Like many small children, Samuel fears monsters who emerge at night, and his behaviour escalates after a mysterious pop-up book entitled *Mister Babadook* appears on his bookshelf. Amelia quickly realises the power of the book, which portrays her likeness committing monstrous acts; she destroys it, only for the book to reappear, taped together with additional pages. As Samuel's fear of the Babadook escalates, a series of strange events take hold of their home, as Amelia and Samuel become increasingly isolated from family, school, and work. The stress of Samuel's disturbed behaviour, coupled with grief and exhaustion leaves Amelia vulnerable, and she is possessed by the Babadook. Only when she acknowledges the creature, who is expunged by Samuel's expression of love, is she able to contain the Babadook once more. The film concludes with the restoration of the family unit and tolerance of the Babadook. The monster retreats to the basement where he is safely confined, visited and fed by Amelia once a week.

This simplistic plot summary belies the complexity of *The Babadook*'s narrative, and the subsequent range of interpretations that scholars such as Kidd, 2014; Quigley, 2016; Balanzategui, 2017; Briefel, 2017; and Buerger, 2017, have articulated relating to monstrosity, motherhood, and the reframing of horror tropes. As Dowd (2014, n.p.) observes:

Believe it or not, though, the *real* horror of this superb Aussie monster movie has almost nothing to do with the title fiend and everything to do with the unspoken, unspeakable impulses he represents. Remove the Babadook from *The Babadook*, in other words, and something plenty terrifying remains.

In particular, there has been widespread agreement that the Babadook is a manifestation of Amelia's grief. As such, the Babadook is not read by critics and scholars as an independent character; an interpretation that the 'gay Babadook' reading defies. Fan-generated paratexts representing gay Babadook diverge from scholarly readings of the film in favour of a more personal reading that 'speaks lovingly' (Telotte, 1991, 7) to the LGBT audience.

While *The Babadook* was widely praised, despite the critical acclaim it endured a limited cinema release on only 13 screens around Australia. A variety of industrial challenges contributed to its limited Australian release, as documented by Tan (2014) and Balanzategui (2017). Central to these challenges was the issue of how to market the film, as multiplexes shunned it for being 'too arthouse' and lacking widespread appeal (Hardie, 2014, n.p.). In the U.K., *The Babadook* had a nationwide release accompanied by a substantial (estimated by UK Distributor Umbrella Entertainment at 1 million pounds) marketing budget, taking more at the box office in one weekend (\$633,000) than its entire six-week Australian theatrical run (\$256,000) (Tan, 2014, n.p.). *The Babadook* was also very successful in France and Thailand (Tan, 2014) and has moved into the top 10 Australian films for international box office success (George and Rheinburger, 2017).

Balanzategui (2017) analyses *The Babadook* as part of the Australian horror canon, and makes a compelling argument about the link between the limited domestic release of the film, and the ongoing dismissal of horror by Australian film critics:

... the divide between what has become known as “Ozploitation” and the “Australian Gothic” muddies academic and critical discussion about domestic horror films. [This divide] has presented a barrier to the kinds of robust scholarly and popular recognition horror enjoys outside of Australia, and also influences the outdated devaluing of “genre” that remains entrenched in discourse about Australian film (Balanzategui, 2017, 19-20).

In interviews about the film, director Jennifer Kent also highlights the discrimination her film faced as part of the horror canon: ‘... I think horror is extremely underrated. Sometimes when I’d say I was directing a horror, people would look at me as though I was directing a porno. Their faces would drop’ (Riskier, 2017, 16). Despite its international success, and subsequent release on DVD and streaming platforms, it is reasonable to expect the visibility of *The Babadook* to fade given it is now four years post cinema release. However, the unexpected categorization of the film as ‘LGBTⁱ interest’ on Netflix America, and the subsequent production of fan paratexts illustrates how the long tail of the film can be extended by internet communities, and how fan produced paratexts allow for the ongoing cultification of the text.

‘Babashook’: Netflix, and online ‘Babadiscourse’

Four years post release, it would be reasonable to expect *The Babadook*’s impact to fade. However, *The Babadook*’s addition to American Netflix led to a ‘second life’ for the film as a cult text which ‘... seems to speak meaningfully (or lovingly) to a select group’ (Telotte, 1991, 7); in this case, the LGBT community. For Shane Kaminski (a drag performer known for his Babadook routine) ‘... the power of the eponymous film creature [is that] he refuses to be suppressed no matter how hard people around him try’ (Rodriguez, 2017b, n.p.). The second life of *The Babadook* within the LGBT community centres around the reading of the Babadook as a character independent from Amelia, as film critic Alan Kelly (in Rodriguez, 2017a, n.p.) notes: ‘While the Babadook is obviously a symbol of the mother’s grief, it could

just as equally symbolize belonging, or the need to belong'. Thus, the Babadook has '...become a symbol of resistance for a group often pushed aside and discarded' (Young, 2017). The second life of the Babadook as a gay icon has been attributed to Tumblr user ianstagram, who in October 2016 posted: 'Whenever someone says the Babadook isn't openly gay it's like?? Did you even watch the movie??? It's canon basically. I mean he created a pop-up book of himself for the drama of it all???' (ianstagram, in Triscari, 2017). When challenged on this interpretation by other users occupying a dominant reading position (that the Babadook is a metaphor for Amelia's grief), ianstagram continued:

No, the Babadook was a man who fearlessly and proudly loved other men in spite of society telling him that his love was wrong – like watch the movie?? ... A movie about a gay man who just wants to live his life in a small Australian suburb? It may be "just a movie" to you but to the LGBT community the Babadook is a symbol of our journey. The B in LGBT stands for Babadook. Everyone knows this (ianstagram, in Triscari, 2017).

This tongue in cheek debate received over 100,000 replies, and despite this playful discussion (or 'Babadiscourse') about the Babadook's sexuality occurring in a relatively niche corner of the internet, it gradually spread to other platforms such as Instagram and Twitter (Anderson, 2017). This exchange dramatises the shifting reception of *The Babadook* among LGBT fans, where the Babadook is deliberately reframed as a separate character rather than a manifestation of Amelia's grief, in opposition to the interpretation of most film critics and academics. The 'Babadiscourse' that emerged from Tumblr became officialised as 'fan- non' (fannish canon) by a further incident that further legitimised the attribution of homosexuality to the Babadook by LGBT fans. In December 2016 a screenshot emerged (Orbey, 2017) of *The Babadook* filed in the category of 'LGBT interest' on Netflix America. While it is possible that this was a genuine error (and equally plausible that it was a

fan generated hoax), this event solidified fan speculation that the Babadook was indeed gay, with jubilant proclamations that they were ‘Babashook’ⁱⁱ that their theory had been ‘proven’ correct (Triscari, 2017).

The events that followed this minor incident demonstrate Jenkins, Ford and Green’s (2013) notion of ‘spreadable media’. Memes, gifs, video remixes and fan art began to spread across Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram depicting the Babadook resplendent in a variety of rainbow and Pride themed outfits, or waving a rainbow flag. On June 10, 2017 Netflix acknowledged the spread of the gay Babadook meme by tweeting ‘Be the Babadook you want to see in the world’ (Bradley, 2017). The spread of Babadook images inserted into a Pride context reached its apex with a huge presence at marches across the U.S. in June 2017. Across the country, participants cosplayed the Babadook, claiming his top hat and splayed (jazz) hands as evidence of his fabulous nature.



Figure 1: Muffinpines, Get Ready to be Babashook, 2017, drawing. USA.
Babashook, Kylie O’Neil, 2018.

The best-known meme of this period by MuffinPines (see Figure 1), featured the Babadook without his trademark coat, in ‘party’ mode – wearing a cropped t-shirt

with the words ‘get ready to be Babashook’, rainbow suspenders and badge on his top hat, a lilac feather boa, and pink novelty flamingo sunglasses, his splayed hands pointed upwards in ‘jazz hands’ position. The text ‘It’s his first Pride, re-blog if you support him’ appeared underneath the image. Soon after, the ‘Babashook’ meme began to appear on t-shirts and other unofficial merchandise being sold on forums such as Etsy and Redbubble. Such was the viral spread of gay Babadook that Massachusetts Attorney-General Maura Healey tweeted a picture of a rainbow flag waving Babadook with the caption, ‘We believe in equal rights for everyone, and we mean everyone. Happy #Pride2017’ (Healey, 2017). Popular YouTube celebrity Miles Jai also cosplayed the Babadook at the Season 9 finale of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (see Hunt, 2017) in a nod to the circulation of several memes and clips inserting the Babadook into the workroom of the popular reality television show (see Jacob, 2017; djmikeypop, 2017). The merging of *The Babadook* and *RuPaul’s Drag Race* increased the reach of the Babashook meme, and other Babadook paratexts, as the huge popularity of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has brought drag culture, and the program’s contestants, mainstream visibility (see Bernhardt, 2018; Thomas, 2018).

When considering the key features of a gay icon, it is important to consider the Babadook as not merely a character, or image, of a gay icon that exists distinct from the film’s narrative. The images of gay Babadook which have spread online emphasise his ‘fun, fabulous nature’ and his commitment to conquering adversity by coming out and being seen. However, if the Babadook is a separate character, this creates a discordance with the implied narrative, that the Babadook is part of Amelia. When read in this way, the Babadook as an independent character can be problematized as a symbol of gay iconography, and thus the question – is he an

‘appropriate’ gay icon? *The Babadook* has been widely acknowledged as a comment on grief, and motherhood (Kidd, 2014), and as Buerger argues, while the trailer for the film focuses on the monster as the source of terror, what the monster exposes about Amelia is far more frightening (2017, 34). In the context of the narrative the Babadook appears as the manifestation of Amelia’s grief, and only when she acknowledges her grief does it cease consuming her, and she is able to begin a ‘normal’ relationship with Samuel. The narrative concludes with Amelia visiting the Babadook in her basement, where he is now safely contained, only to be looked upon, and fed a bowl of worms, once a week. It is this part of the narrative that problematizes *The Babadook* (Sage, 2015); and it is possible to take this critique a step further by questioning the Babadook as a gay icon. While much of the Babadiscourse has praised *The Babadook* for helping fans to feel ‘seen’ and ‘acknowledged’ in the context of family life (Orbey, 2017) the conclusion of the narrative becomes troubling if the Babadook is read as a character independent of Amelia. If the Babadook is a separate, gay, character he is locked back in the basement (closet) only to be seen when a white, heterosexual woman decides to give him an audience. As Orbey (2017) suggests, ‘Some have pointed out that the fervent efforts to roust the Babadook from a traditional family unit recall homophobic campaigns like the McCarthy-era lavender scare’ – perhaps reflecting the contemporary political environment, where acceptance is often conditional.

While the appropriation of the Babadook as a queer icon is timely in the context of the oppressive American political environment, the timing is also significant due to the debate about marriage equality prior to the voluntary Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey (see Orr, 2017). When the survey was announced, gay Babadookⁱⁱⁱ

featured on protest placards and unofficial merchandise as a symbol of changing attitudes and the need for acceptance (Connellan, 2017). Articles on the spread of the gay Babadook memes were published in popular forums such as *The New Yorker* (Orbey, 2017), *Junkee* (Triscari, 2017), before spreading further to feature in *The Guardian* (Hunt, 2017) and *The Independent* (Stolworthy, 2017). The spread of gay Babadook memes was further enhanced with the September 2017 release of *It* (2017), and the subsequent internet coupling of the Babadook and Pennywise the clown (Schwartz, 2017). Extensive amounts of fan art (rather than memes) depicting the coupling began to circulate on social media platforms, however by the end of 2017, the prominence of both icons began to decline; this is indicated in Figure 2, measuring Google searches for ‘The Babadook’ (Google Trends, 2018).

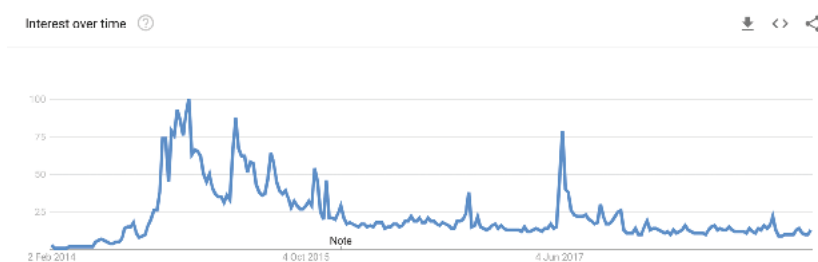


Figure 2: Google Trends Search, The Babadook, 2018. Source: https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&q=%2Fm%2F0_04s3m. Accessed 30 October 2018.

The conflict between character and narrative informs my assumption that ‘Babadook as gay icon’ has been driven by prioritising the character’s image. By poaching the Babadook to form paratexts meaningful to the LGBT community rather than a close reading of the implied narrative, the Babadook can exist independently as a gay icon, rather than merely a manifestation of, or metaphor for Amelia’s grief. Separating the character from the original narrative, and from Amelia, allows for the production of new paratexts and meanings to be embedded among the online community. Eco

(1987) speaks to this tendency when he stresses that the structure of cult films, and consumption of these texts in parts, allows new meaning to be produced. This style of reading is enabled by the internet, where fan created memes are able to give the original text new meaning by acting as Derrida (1976) proposed, as a supplement – something that ‘...comes to serve as an aid to something original...’ (Reynolds, 2017, n.p.)

When considering the fan-driven poaching of the Babadook as a gay icon, Shifman (2011) has highlighted the diverse purposes and reading strategies audiences bring to memes. While the ‘... viral metaphor tends to focus on the mechanism of delivery and scale of audience, [it] often overlook[s] cultural and social aspects, as well as human agency’ (Shifman, 2011, 190). Research on meme culture and spreadability also submits that once memes go mainstream, or have think-pieces written about them, they die (Jackson, 2017). However, as Jackson (2017) observes, these think-pieces exist because the topic of the meme has ‘... reached a certain critical mass that makes it worth writing about’. She believes instead of blaming ‘mainstream interest’ for meme death, when attempting to understand the circulation of memes, it is more accurate to compare them to the life cycle of jokes – as one can consider memes to be ‘just in-jokes between people on the internet’ (Jackson, 2017, n.p.).

The espousal of the Babadook as both a separate character, and a gay icon also impacts upon debates regarding authorial intent – director Jennifer Kent is evidently aware of fan conjecture about the Babadook, however she has not commented publicly on her intent for the character when producing the film. Creator and Illustrator of the Babadook, Alexander Juhasz suggests of Kent’s response:

She's going to love it because it's such a bizarre manifestation of like, the zeitgeist, of when you throw art into the world . . . It's beyond the control of the creator. It's out there, taking on its own life. And it's not unlike the Babadook to have done that. He's out, he's free. He's doing his thing! (Fitzpatrick, K., 2017)

Here, Juhasz also ascribes the Babadook as a separate identity with a mind of his own – as someone who has ‘taken on [his] own life’. As Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) have observed, there are a multitude of reasons for why people share content, and these reasons shape, and create unique, and often unintended meanings: ‘As people listen, read, or view shared content, they think not only – often, not even primarily – about what the producers might have meant, but about what the person who shared it was trying to communicate’ (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, 13). By examining the queering of the Babadook, we can observe how fan-generated paratexts add new meaning to the original text, separate from the presumed intent of the original.

Building upon the case study of gay Babadook memes, the remainder of this article focuses on two key questions: how do gay Babadook memes epitomise the spreadability of fan produced paratexts? and; what features are central to gay iconography online? The interrogation of these questions is essential to clarify the elucidation of the Babadook as a gay icon.

Spreadability, political impact and fan activism

The case study of *The Babadook* illustrates the concept of spreadability, as outlined by Jenkins, Ford, and Green:

“Spreadability” refers to the potential – both technical and cultural – for audiences to share content for their own purposes . . . The participatory logic of spreadability leads to audiences using content in unanticipated ways as they retrofit material to the contours of their particular community (2013, 3- 6).

Spreadability is emphasised as a vital feature of participatory culture in the networked world. The practices of fans involved in creating paratexts and spreading content emerges from Jenkins' early (1992) research on fannish practices such as writing fan fiction. Spreadability evolves from early research concerned with online commerce which contended that the 'stickiness' of content was a measure of its success. Coined by Gladwell (2000), in Jenkins, Ford, and Green's iteration, stickiness describes '... the aspects of media texts which engender deep audience engagement and might motivate them to share what they learned with others. In short... sticky content is material that people want to spread' (2013, 4). The impact of spreadable content is not only dependent on vastness of the audience; equally meaningful is the impact that material has for niche communities (ibid, 22). The spread of gay Babadook memes and artwork typifies both traditions, via the appropriation of the original text to create fan paratexts that speak meaningfully to the LGBT community.

The ability of popular culture texts to be used for civic and political purposes has been highlighted by Brough and Shresthova (2012), Hinck (2012), Jenkins (2012), Jenkins and Shresthova (2012), and Kligler-Vilenchik (2013). In particular, the impact of The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) has been theorized for its spreadable fan-generated content, and ability to impact mainstream society. HPA leader Andrew Slack has dubbed this process 'cultural acupuncture' – '... a conscious rhetorical strategy mapping fictional content worlds onto real-world concerns... [where] dispersed members of fannish communities are connected into a networked public capable of coordinated action' (Jenkins, 2012). The HPA has been recognised internationally for the impact their fan campaigns have had on issues such as the mandatory use of free trade chocolate in all Harry Potter branded confectionary (Rosenberg, 2015). This

campaign relied heavily on the spreadability of fan produced videos explaining what Harry Potter meant to them, and why they were supporting the campaign. The spreadability of fan-produced videos in turn, encouraged the participation of other fans, as a call to arms. As the extensive research on fan activism highlights, popular culture has the power to mobilise communities by using popular texts to stimulate debate, and motivate fans to act on social issues:

... understanding spreadability will allow audiences and activists to form new connections and communities through their active role in shaping the circulation of media content. ... spreadability also gives these groups new means to mobilize and respond to decisions made by companies and governments in ways that challenge decisions that adversely effect them and to exploit gaps in the system which may allow them to serve their own needs (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2013, 23).

The increased frequency with which popular culture is remixed and reappropriated in an effort to celebrate the queer community is enabled by the spreadability of content online. Sullivan's (2003, 189-190) reading of Doty (1993) deftly explains the transformative potential of mass culture texts if read as containing 'queer elements', rather than purely heteronormative in scope. For Sullivan, these:

... 'queer moments' ... could be described as moments of narrative disruption which destabilise heteronormativity, and the meanings and identities it engenders, by bringing to light all that is disavowed by, and yet integral to, heteronormative logic. ... queerness does not reside in the text, but rather is produced in and through the ever-changing relations between texts, readers, and the world (2003, 191).

The queering of the Babadook can thus be read as disrupting the narrative; and yet, rendering the Babadook as an independent character that speaks lovingly to the LGBT community renders the resolution of the narrative problematic. Instead of focusing on the narrative, the destabilisation of heteronormativity is celebrated via the remixed characterisation of the Babadook that is spread by fans. By disrupting the narrative,

and celebrating the ‘queer elements’ of the film, fan paratexts ‘prove’ the Babadook’s status not only as an independent character, but as a gay icon.

While this article has focused on *The Babadook*, the political impact of queering popular culture more generally cannot be underestimated. While the narrative of *The Babadook* may render the gay icon status of the character problematic; it is equally possible to consider the reclamation of the Babadook as a celebration of queer identity, similar to the reclaiming of the word ‘queer’. Attempts to salvage the word ‘queer’ from a pejorative, to a term inclusive of the spectrum of gender and sexual identities can be traced back to the late 1980s. Large segments of the LGBT community felt anger and frustration as the AIDS crisis and widespread homophobia continued with little decisive action. This crisis led to the formation of ‘Queer Nation’ who marched at New York Pride in 1990, and distributed a leaflet entitled ‘Queers Read This’ – a call to action, which outlined their mission to reclaim the word ‘queer’ as a symbol of liberation (Marusic, 2015).

Queer!... do we really have to use that word? It's trouble. Every gay person has his or her own take on it.... Queer. It's forcibly bittersweet and quaint at best --- weakening and painful at worst.... Well, yes, "gay " is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer. Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world.... Yeah, QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him (Anon, 1990).

The emergence of ‘Queer theory’ in academic studies from theorists such as Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick during the 1990s increased commonplace use of the term queer as a descriptor for a broad spectrum of identities. While the reclaimed use of ‘queer’ became more common, and influenced mainstream media

content with programs such as *Queer as Folk* (UK 1999-2000; US 2000-2005) and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) screening on commercial networks, the term is not universally accepted as a neutral descriptor. The debate about the restoration of the word queer is ongoing. Large segments of the LGBT community have voiced their disdain for the term – particularly those of the generation where the term was frequently wielded against them (see Peron, 2016). As the use of ‘queer’ becomes commonplace, the impact of such usage for specific stakeholders is highlighted via debate over the ‘queering’ of popular culture.

The case study of *The Babadook* illuminates the way that fan-generated paratexts are able to imbue the original with new meaning, and how these possibilities are enabled by the spreadability of content within online communities. Fan-generated paratexts inspired by *The Babadook* demonstrate the shifting focus from narrative, to character/image, allowing for the queering of the Babadook as an independent character. The following section reflects upon the shared characteristics of gay icons, and how online culture has shifted the designation of gay icon status from a focus on overcoming adversity (star narrative), to considerations of overall ‘fabulousness’ (image) .

Gay Icons

The case study of gay Babadook presents an opportune moment to reassess how we define gay icons, particularly in the online space. Gay iconography is embedded within modern media culture, with its roots traceable to the censorship enforced in Hollywood by the Production Code during the 1930’s. Sikov (2008, 86) recounts that the Production Code demanded a ‘certain sexual repression onscreen’, and this reflected the issues of ‘... secrecy and concealment, exposure and revelation [that

were] at the heart of the gay man's experience in the Twentieth Century and into the Twenty-First'. For Sikov, because gay men were forced to perform 'acceptable' versions of masculinity in their everyday life, they '...tend not only to appreciate but revel in the art of acting – performance for the sake not of transparency but of blatancy' (2008, 87). Using Bette Davis as his case study, Sikov theorises that iconography for the gay community is linked to the idea of a 'gay sensibility':

A common starting point for discussions of what constitutes a gay sensibility is the notion of excess, although the concept remains problematic because there can be no firm and final judgement as to what constitutes normativity. ... the concept of excess remains useful to describe performance style because it expresses, in however flawed a manner, the lack of transparency and naturalism (Sikov, 2008, 87)

The notion of excess, coupled with the challenge of defining the precise characteristics of gay icons offers a connection to cult film theory, which also struggles with the notion of fixed meaning and definition. Jancovich (2002, 315) offers the clearest method for approaching cult film, by identifying that it is a shared sense of opposition to an imagined 'mainstream' which unites the category of 'cult film', rather than a particular textual quality. Although it is challenging to define gay iconography, to most savvy media audiences (quoting Supreme Court Justice Stewart, 1964) 'I know it when I see it' (Gerwitz, 1996). The Babadook's excess, is variously characterised by fans in the creation 'of a pop-up book of himself for the drama of it all' (ianstagram in Triscari, 2017, n.p.) and for 'serving drama... Babadook's theatricality is central to his newfound queer-icon status. He is in Diane Keaton drag' (Varrati, in Rodriguez, 2017a, n.p.) Thus, the notion of excess is central to *The Babadook's* appeal as both a cult film, and for the creation of a 'frightening, fabulous new icon' (Orbey, 2017) in the Babadook.

When sketching a definition of modern gay iconography, it is essential to reflect on how the term has evolved over time, particularly as it, like the term ‘cult’, has become subject to extreme overuse. As Norton observed (1999, 12) ‘... now that the gay community has become mainstream, the title of Gay Icon has become – to put it mildly – slightly cheapened’. The issue of overuse must be considered in reference to the term ‘gay icon’; for this article, I have focused on gay (rather than ‘queer’ or LGBT icons), on the basis that the Babadook is framed this way by online communities.^{iv} Drawing upon existing research that examines gay iconography, I propose the following categories as central to the designation of ‘gay icon’ status. This list is by no means comprehensive; it is intended as a provocation from which to further consider the increased frequency of gay icon status within niche communities online, enabled by spreadable content. Like cult film status, modern gay iconography is not solely dependent upon word of mouth, but perpetuated by sharing content in the digital space. While there is little consensus amongst existing research, the categories below compile existing theory as a starting point from which to consider future formulations of gay iconography emerging from the Web.

1. ‘Successful, outspoken, diva’

Dyer’s (1979) seminal research informs the first category, where the performer is framed as a star – their fame is based on excellence in their chosen field, and these performers maintain both a public and private persona. As Holmes (2005) remarks, the terms ‘star’ and ‘celebrity’ are frequently interchangeable in popular discourse. Holmes observes the ambiguity of ‘celebrity’ and how it is structured: ‘... by discourses of cultural value; used to indicate a more fleeting conception of fame [or used] when fame rests predominantly on the private life of the person, as opposed to

their performing presence' (2005: 9). When describing gay icons, the 'star' is often conflated with the 'diva' persona, described as:

... a huge voice, and even bigger ego, and the balls to use it – throw in a penchant for sparkly dresses, a hint of real-life tragedy and “my man done me wrong torch songs and you’ve got a very loose definition. And only gay men can truly appreciate the nuances and humour of this image of overblown femininity. ... In a nutshell, these women are who gay men would want to be if they were born a different gender (Gage et. al, 2002, 24, in Guilbert, 2018, 4).

Singer and actress Cher exemplifies the characteristics of the 'star diva', and as Farmer (2007) contends '... the transcendent, value-adding economies of divadom have been a rich resource for the process of queer self-making and legitimation', thus her enduring appeal. Cher maintains a public persona by continuing to perform and tour, yet she also preserves a private persona due to her infrequent engagement with the media. Cher's son Chaz Bono, extends Cher's legacy and connection to the LGBT community via media appearances, and speaking publicly about his transition, and his famous mother. There is an element of the outsider in the diva performance for their unapologetic performance of the star role, which is also bound up with the 'appropriate' performance of gender. In the case of Cher, she refuses to age gracefully (see Williams, 2010) or be silenced, offering her outspoken opinion on politics via Twitter (@cher). The star diva plays by her own rules and operates as an exemplar of individuality for the queer community, ensuring their star appeal extends into the online space.

2. Overcoming obstacles

Overcoming obstacles and persisting through adversity has been frequently noted as a unifying feature of gay icons (Anon, 2009). Survival despite the odds is appealing to many in the LGBT community as various forms of discrimination persist worldwide. Gay icons have frequently overcome adversity, be it childhood poverty, near death,

addiction, or a decline in their career before the reassertion of their star status. Of the many gay icons who have overcome obstacles, Judy Garland stands apart as an enduring symbol for the gay community. As a gay icon Garland has numerous connections to LGBT history - her iconic role in *The Wizard of Oz* inspired the term 'friend of Dorothy' as a codified phrase for homosexuality; and connections have been made between the rainbow flag and her performance of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*; and the date of her funeral (June 27, 1969) directly proceeding the Stonewall riots. Garland's life was said to have been marked by abuse from both film studio executives and her husbands, in addition to a lifelong addiction to drugs and alcohol which ultimately claimed her life (Hulsey, 2016). As Walters (1998, n.p.) states:

The name Judy Garland is nearly synonymous with gayness: She is an Elvis for homosexuals – an icon who transcends music to occupy realms of sheer mythology. From the way Judy fandom once united isolated, oppressed queers to the passion stirred by her passing ... Garland's impact on gay fans is rare. ... she's a symbol of emotional liberation, a woman who struggled to live and love without restraint. She couldn't do it in her real life, of course, and neither could her fans. But she did it in her songs, and with them she brought along anyone who similarly dared to care too much.

Garland's gay iconography endures with numerous fan clubs moving online to document and celebrate her life. Her impact on contemporary stardom is keenly felt, particularly among LGBT fans, as Hulsey (2016) has documented in her research on intergenerational Garland fans.

3. Talking the talk, walking the walk

The overt acknowledgement of, and advocacy for the queer community, coupled with career stardom imbues many stars with gay icon status. George Michael, Madonna, and Lady Gaga have all become gay icons on the basis of their style, musical performance, and candid views on sexuality; but political activism and advocacy on

behalf of the gay community has solidified their iconic status. Since the release of her debut album in 2008, Lady Gaga has been embraced as a gay icon on the basis of her compelling relationship with fans (known as ‘Little Monsters’) and message of acceptance, especially for young people struggling with their identity (Jennex, 2013). Her extensive advocacy for the LGBT community includes donations to homeless youth shelters; marching on Washington for Marriage Equality; fundraising for the MAC Viva Glam AIDS fund; protests against the ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy; and the launch of her own anti-bullying Born this Way Foundation in 2012 (Bennett, 2014, 140). Gaga’s impact is summarised by her appeal to young people keen to see change: ‘Primarily, the kids that are taking to the streets are 18, 19, 20, 21, and she is their Madonna, their Cher, the next-generation diva, so to speak. She puts her time and money where her mouth is’ (Zak, 2009). Bennett’s (2014) research draws attention to the central role of social media as a space for Lady Gaga to communicate with fans and encourage their involvement in philanthropic activities which will benefit mutual causes.

4. Problematic or Monstrous

Finally, I would like to propose a fourth category contributing to the designation of stars or characters as gay icons, inspired by the Babadook – that gay icons may be problematic, or reflect a conflicting, or ‘monstrous’ element. Perhaps, as Stryker (1994, 254) has declared, the ‘monstrous’ (like ‘queer’) should be reclaimed, and: ‘Like that creature, I assert my worth as a monster in spite of the conditions my monstrosity requires me to face, and redefine a life worth living.’ The category of monstrous, or problematic gay icon is exemplified by Joan Crawford, who was known for asserting her worth throughout her career, despite her questionable private life.

Her biography and ‘diva’ status are well known: via her long running feud with Bette Davis, her fractious relationship with Hollywood as an older woman who refused to retire from the public eye, and abusive relationship with her adopted children documented in book and film adaptation, *Mommie Dearest*. As Halperin observes, the film adaptation elevated Joan Crawford to the ‘... position of camp’s High Priestess’ (2012, 177). Despite these revelations, Crawford remains an archetypal gay icon for her relentless drive to succeed, and overcome Hollywood’s prejudice towards aging women on screen – as documented in Ryan Murphy’s recent miniseries *Feud: Bette and Joan* (Gerdes, 2017). Her iconic role in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1964) opposite arch-enemy Bette Davis is widely considered to be ground-breaking for its casting of aging women in the lead roles, and their characterisation of fading glamour (Fitzpatrick, 2017). Her legacy thus becomes both admirable and problematic, as she combines stellar acting performances with the monstrous mother, and diva role off screen; or as Guilbert (2018, 49) reflects: ‘... perhaps the icon herself did not always know when to stop acting’. Like Garland, fans of Crawford have found a communal pleasure in celebrating her life online, and documenting her career through many fan wikis and tribute sites.

When considering the evolving features of gay iconography, it is important to track the shift in the types of performers that appeal: ‘Nowadays, gay icons tend to be heavier on the fabulousness factor than on the conquering-adversity thing’ (Anon, 2009, n.p.). One could attribute this shift to the popularity of visual media platforms such as Instagram as spaces to celebrate the fabulous lives of celebrities, in an intimate register. The shift towards fabulousness as the defining feature of gay icons is also relevant in light of the apparent overlap between *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and the

‘queering’ of mainstream culture (Norton, 1999; Guilbert, 2018; Nilles, 2018). As mentioned earlier, the rise of the Babadook as a gay icon overlaps with the explosion of popularity of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, with the Season 9 premiere on VH1 making the show available to an even wider audience (Megarry, 2017). In each season an episode is screened featuring the ‘Snatch Game’ in which contestants are judged on their ability to perform celebrity impersonations, inevitably featuring gay icons such as Marlene Dietrich, and Liza Minnelli. The impact of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* on popular culture (Pandell, 2018) suggests it is worth considering the categories of Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent (emphasised by RuPaul as the vital attributes of the next drag superstar), and how these may shape perceptions of gay iconography into the 21st Century. As I have suggested, gay icons emerging from the Internet share an audience assessment of overall ‘fabulousness’ primarily based on image, rather than a preoccupation with star narratives centred on overcoming adversity. This shifting mode of reception allows the Babadook to occupy gay icon status, as fan-generated paratexts imbue his character with a new-found fabulousness (as seen in the Babashook meme), in addition to poaching elements of his narrative struggle that (perhaps) speak meaningfully to LGBT fans’ lived experience.

The queering of the Babadook illustrates the increasingly blurred boundaries around texts, and the lack of fixed meaning online. Fan engagement with paratexts is a vital part of the cultification of a film, as ‘... paratexts both shape and reinforce cult status in the digital era’ (Middlemost, 2018, 9). Thus, fan generated paratexts allow for the creation of meaning significant to minority, or niche groups. As Elsaesser and Hagener (2015, 46) observe: ‘The proliferation of paratexts in the digital environment

... are testament to the multiplication of entry points that any film (potentially) provides':.

These paratexts address an audience: they prestructure horizons of expectation, and call forth promises of identification, but they may also ... affect a text by opening up a rich field of association not intended by the producers of the text. Paratexts thus indicate the semantic instability and tectonic shifts and turbulence of texts, as inside and outside are never quite stable, fixed, and their boundaries become fuzzy or jagged (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2015, 46).

In the case of *The Babadook*, fan generated paratexts not only provide new entry points for audiences, but new ways to engage with content that seems to 'speak lovingly' to select groups. The spreadability of fan-produced paratexts online subsequently increases the level of engagement for select groups, both with the text, and with each other.

Conclusion

As a case study, the transformation of the Babadook into a separate character, and a gay icon advances several key issues apropos the interpretation, creation, and spreadability of content in the digital age. By unshackling the Babadook from both the protagonist and the narrative, members of the LGBT community are able to claim the character and create paratexts that connect the Babadook to their lived experience. While queering the Babadook is potentially suspect in terms of the film's narrative that concludes with the Babadook back in the closet, this case study provides a moment in which to interrogate the characteristics considered essential to gay iconography online. I have proposed that either a problematic, or conflicting, monstrous element may feature in the designation of gay icons online, where the attribution of the status of 'gay icon' has become more frequent. The delineation between gay icon, or not, requires further research and expansion to include

interdisciplinary work on sexuality and celebrity. While the suitability of the Babadook as gay icon could be questioned in relation to the narrative, the transformation of the character through fan-produced paratexts typifies the way that content spreads online. The spreadability of fan-created paratextual content frequently depicts issues of political significance using popular culture objects which offer a visible marker, and potential entry point into philanthropy or activism. In sum, the ‘Babashook’ incident speaks to the power of marginalised communities to claim characters and texts and imbue them with meaning indicative of their lived experience. The spreadability of gay Babadook memes accentuates the potential of fan-generated paratexts to be mobilised in ways that are politically significant.

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ⁱ While I acknowledge the ongoing issue of the suitability of acronyms to describe the spectrum of sexuality, I have used LGBT throughout, in keeping with the Netflix category under which *The Babadook* was filed.

ⁱⁱ A portmanteau of 'Babadook' and 'shook'; 'shook' being surprised, or extremely shocked (Urban Dictionary, 2018)

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Gay Babadook' (memes) has been used throughout the article when describing a grouping of varied memes/artwork featuring the character.

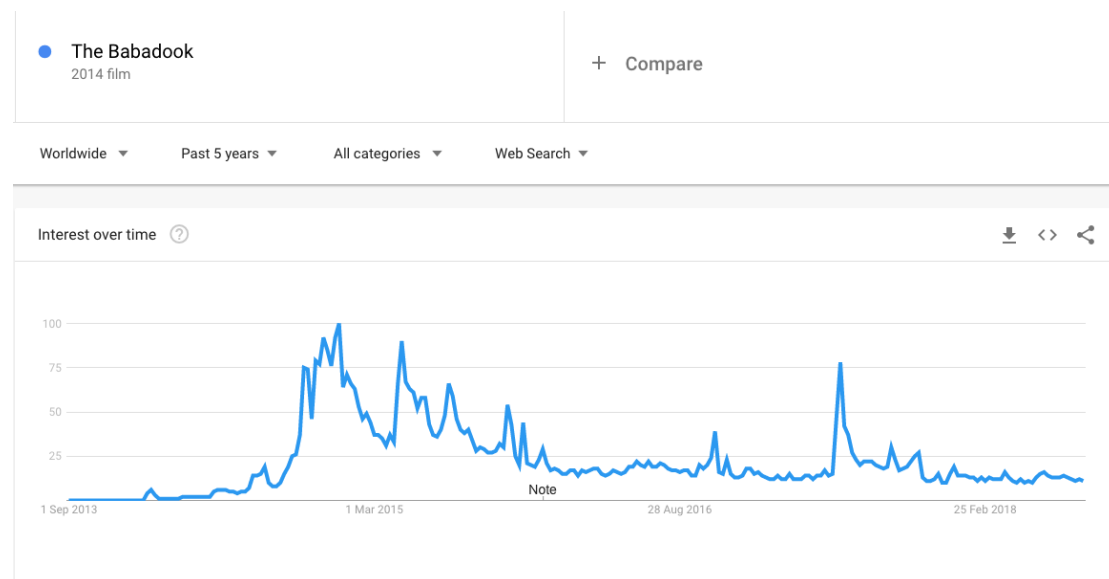
^{iv} I acknowledge that this designation may be problematic for the broader queer community, and point to this issue as one for further research and analysis.



Figure 1:

Source: <https://me.me/i/get-ready-to-be-babashook-muffinpines-his-first-pride-reblog-15167583>

Figure 2:



Source: https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&q=%2Fm%2F0_04s3m