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**“You’re All My Little Monsters”
How Born This Way Connected A Fandom**

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TENDAI JOSHUA MADZIVANYIKA
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Members of the Examining Committee:

Roy Huijsmans
Farhad Mukhtarov

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Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the International Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

Inquiries:

International Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands

t: +31 70 426 0460
e: info@iss.nl
w: www.iss.nl
fb: <http://www.facebook.com/iss.nl>
twitter: [@issnl](https://twitter.com/issnl)

Location:

Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands

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List of Acronyms

LG	Lady Gaga, Gaga
BTW	Born This Way (album, single and Foundation)
LM	Little Monster(s)
GGD	Gagadaily

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LADY GAGA'S BRAVE SPEECH AT THE MONSTER BALL

“My name is LADY GAGA! Welcome to [Monster Ball location]. I feel so blessed you have no idea. I grew up 20 blocks from here, and I watched every name go up on that marque, year after year – month after month. I used to dream that one day I’d see my name in lights.

You know I didn't use to be brave, in fact I wasn't very brave at all. But you have made me brave little monsters...so now I'm going to be brave for you. Tonight, I want you to forget all your insecurities. I want you to reject anyone or anything that's ever made you feel like you don't belong, or don't fit in, or made you feel like you're not good enough or pretty enough or thin enough, or can't sing well enough or dance well enough, or write a song well enough. Or like you'll never win a Grammy, or you'll never sell out...you just remember that **YOU'RE A GODDAMN SUPERSTAR AND YOU WERE BORN THIS WAY.**

May tonight be your liberation of all those things...” – Lady Gaga (2011)

Abstract

Fandom studies has continued to evolve as internet use grows globally and our social identities merge with our virtual profiles. Fandoms are places for discussion of canon and fan-related work and have a potential to function as communities. Prominent figures like Lady Gaga use their celebrity to spread awareness on issues around LGBTQ+ rights and Mental Health. I investigate the metaphors within the Born This Way album and how they expose issues that affect queer persons around the world. I look at how fans (Little Monsters) interact with her, with each other within safe spaces and outside the fandom. I use an autoethnographic style of writing and an inductive reasoning approach within my analysis. My main finding is that fandoms can transcend the negative stereotypes associated with them, by mirroring the feedback loop they have with the artist, with the one they have with each other. By so doing members support and give each other mutual recognition.

Relevance to Development Studies

In the past 20 years (2000-20) internet use has increased globally and more people have started using social media platforms to engage with issues affecting different groups. Our social/physical lives continue to merge with our virtual identities and discussion forums around creative art and entertainment have contributed to the beginning of critical discourses around policy, rights, equalities and inclusions. At the time of writing this the Covid 19 pandemic has shaped how people view these issues and the importance of support, mental health and care. Unfortunately, little is being done to alleviate the undiagnosed and often overlooked behavioural patterns (e.g. depression, cyberbullying) that have made their way into the digital space. In short: How do we remedy real problems via a space that has been perceived as a “unreal” or not serious?

Keywords

LGBTQA+, Little Monsters, Lady Gaga, Born This Way, Mental Health, Community, Activism.

Chapter 1

An overview of the paper

A journey into fandom studies

The concept of fandom studies has been rooted in the investigation of people and how they interact with objects and persons of interest. In the existing literature there seems to be a tendency to focus on how to pathologize fans, seeing their behaviour under a psychoanalytical microscope. Earlier studies, for example, looked at American exceptionalism as cultural belief that American society has a hero/saviour complex and thus assign themselves superheroes of the world (Jewett and Lawrence, 1977). This shifted to views of exclusions and misrepresentation within fandoms, showing that fandom aren't complete sets. The idea of stepping away from analysing grand products/people to a more community centric view. Stuart Hall in his essay *Notes on Deconstructing the Popular*, looks at popular culture as a potential nexus for groups to exercise collective agency. He saw pop culture as expanding beyond the realm of media, however as a portal looking at power relations as complex intersections of institutions and their objects, essentially pop culture offers a platform of engagement and critique of these intersections (Harsin and Hayward, 2013, pp. 201–207).

Feminist fan studies come into the picture; an example is how it attempted to identified ways in which women created spaces for themselves e.g. kitchen parties and Bridge clubs, while dealing with social norms within patriarchal structures. Feminists researching fandoms argued that researchers should represent vulnerable groups by looking at the instruments and materialistic conditions that they live in. The aim became to expand on ideas of resistance and agency, starting a discussion on how to address inequalities within public policy (MacRobbie, 1991).

In the evolution of the study of fandoms, Henry Jenkins considered how early understanding of popular culture can be merged with the rising awareness of the existence of virtual communities, his focus was to position himself as an 'aca-fan' - as both the academic and the fan. In his 1992 book *Textual Poachers* he uses an autoethnographic and ethnographic approach to bring to light the need for researchers to see virtual activities as similar/ forms of social activity. In his work he gives a voice and soul to the fandom by grounding it in personal and intrapersonal experiences.

“When I write about fan culture, then, I write both as an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture, certain bodies of critical and ethnographic literature) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community). My account exists in a constant movement between these two levels of understanding which are not necessarily in conflict but are also not necessarily in perfect alignment.” (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 5–6)

Jenkins chronicles the pathways in which fandom studies has shaped our understanding of pop culture, vice versa, and he looks at the struggle's scholars have in positioning aspects of community in a digital landscape with no fixed geographical focus, with a diverse user base.

In my research for this topic I found articles and papers that discussed different contentious viewpoints within fandom studies. Gender representation (or lack of) within fan cultures. I found the work of Anita Sarkeesian, a pop culture critic. She's the creator of the YouTube channel Feminist Frequency and makes videos that argue how female characters are portrayed as less than their male counterparts within video games. She postulates that game developers create storylines that place female characters in the damsel-in-distress position, alternatively creating a male centric gaming community. Alternatively, YouTubers like Thunderf00t and CosmicSkeptic, argue that Anita's view is one sided and they look at how both male and female characters are written as one-dimensional. In his video Thunderf00t addresses Anita's claims by arguing how male gamers don't inherently seek out/promote games that exclude women; however, they play games that are interesting and pose a challenge. Problems with sexism spring from the perceived ideas of members within different gaming communities. (Thunderf00t, 2014).

I chose this example to draw light on how fandom studies in the past decade have focused on bringing out exclusions within works in which the creator's intentions at the time of production there was no evidence of exclusion in mind. Another noted example is the exclusion of characters who identify as queer or minority representation or persons living with disability within the Harry Potter folklore (Elise, 2020). These voices have created pressure on content creators to produce more inclusive pieces, even if it means changing established canon e.g. J.K Rowling adding characters or changing the sexualities and ethnicities of characters long after publication.

In this research I see the LM community as a mirror into larger discussions around segregation and exclusions. I chose to focus on some of the common challenges LGBTQA+ people face and how fandoms like the LM community enable them to seek support. I look at the work of LG as a vital element in enabling the conversation to involve more people in or outside the LM community. I acknowledge that I'm a queer male writing about a largely queer dominated space, thus the issues I will address are the one that I see largely affecting LGBTQA+ people within the LM community. In conducting this research, I chose to focus on queer members of the community, however that is not to erase the existence of members who don't identify as queer.

In addition, I would like to take a similar position as Jenkins, looking at my involvement with the Little Monster community as well as my research into how the relationship between Lady Gaga (LG) and the Little Monsters (LMs) further shapes our understanding of fandoms in the digital age. This work is deeply personal and thus might come across as overly autobiographical, carrying certain bias and at times leaning away from the idea of objectivity within research.

What are the gaps?

As fandom studies continue to evolve in scope and subject matter, it's important to note how negative characterizations of fan culture remain persistent within social media discourse today. voices from and outside fandom studies make mention of phenomena like fan toxicity, cancel culture and stans, as aspects that underpin all fandoms. It's unfortunate that some members of fandoms do exhibit these views/behaviours, thus giving corrupting the fandom's narratives to the outside looking in. The LM community isn't immune to these types of members, in my research I uncovered posts and messages that go against the premise of the community, actions that are enough to put off any potential new fans. On many occasions LG has chastised these users and encouraged LMs to spread positivity – it doesn't stop the spread of harmful content on the internet by it does reflect the involvement LG has with her community.

Despite the exist of toxicity within the LM community, I look at the overwhelming good the fandom has on LMs. I draw from my own experiences, meeting kind and supportive LMs, opening about my own struggles and listening the struggles of others. I see the LM community as more than a collective of pop music fanatics or a horde of internet trolls ready to fight anyone who attacks our queen. The LM community prides itself as being close to LG, either through direct communication, artwork and/or some mystical telepathy. But doesn't every fan feel close to the object of their affection in some way? What makes the LMs more important?

The answer brings out different complexities, especially when trying to have some level of objectivity without sounding like a serious fanboy. When you have been in a fandom for 12 years you grow closer to other fans and get to know them beyond the usernames, they become familial. One phenomenon I noticed within the LM community that I argue makes it unique, is the willingness for users to openly talk about personal aspects from their lives. Some of the topics discussed confront sensitive issues around mental health e.g. depression, suicidal thoughts and pain etc. This form of oversharing with strangers, I would like to believe is what unites LMs – the idea that you don't suffer alone. I argue that the culture of sharing started with LG opening about her own struggles, this would have a ripple effect on her LMs, thus creating making it easy for people to talk about sensitive topics. LG's image has roots in punk and heavy metal music, an aesthetic that evokes an air of rebelliousness and resistance. The meticulous visual narrative is representative of the desire to break free from systems of oppression, thus she appeals to an audience that sees themselves as misfits and has an innate desire to break free from whatever form of oppression they find themselves in.

The second reason why I chose to study this is the unwritten value that comes from virtual communities. Fandoms are accepted to offer a certain level of comfort to members however these spaces are also quickly demonized and seen as toxic or cult-like. In my experience with the LM community I hear about real world problems that users face and how the

community gives them a temporary form of escape. I believe that fandoms can serve a higher purpose than the current diminutive view critics place on them.

Lastly when looking at LG's work, she aims to spread love and bravery through her music, a message she continues to share with LMs over a decade after she hit superstardom. On her site ladygaga.com LG states:

“Pop culture is art. It doesn't make you cool to hate pop culture, so I embraced it and you hear it all over *The Fame*. But, it's a sharable fame. I want to invite you all to the party. I want people to feel a part of this lifestyle”

The lifestyle she refers to is her journey through making art that she and her LMs can appreciate (Corona, 2013, pp. 725–744). In interviews LG is no stranger to speaking humbly about her relationship with her LMs. She became an outspoken activist and philanthropist for the LGBTQA+ community, her activism has made strides for equality and mental health awareness. The fact that she is one of the few artists that has turned celebrity-fan relations into a fine art is in my belief an interest venture.

Research Question

In this research I aim to dissect the LG – LM relationship and uncover some of the unique features that enhance the relationship. I focus on moments within and around the BTW era and answer the following research question:

- How do themes explored in *Born This Way* facilitate the creation and curation of the Little Monster Community?

Sub-questions

1. How does the BTW album bring out themes that explore different socio-political discourses?
2. How do LMs engage with each other and with BTW? How can we account for this relationship?

How I approach this study

This research contains three main chapters that each attempt to answer one of the sub-questions. The next chapter conceptualizes the research and gives examples within the LM community where these interactions occur. The following chapter looks at the album as a piece of work, looking at the artistic style and direction LG takes in making the record. I look at the production, promotion and voice within the album – how Gaga's philosophy of brav-

ery addresses topics like inequality and mental health. In the last chapter I look at the elements that make LMs a community, its links with the album LG. This offers a look into nexus between fandoms and development studies.

Data Sources:

Lyrics and videos – I chose to focus on the songs within the album, and only two music videos: Born This Way and Judas. The decision for the two was based on how strongly I felt the videos tackled the LGBTQ+ issues in thought provoking ways.

Secondary qualitative data, Social media user posts. I chose Gagadaily as a primary source of information is because:

- I have been a member since 2011
- LG is a member and she regularly observes the interactions.
- It's not entirely about LG, users talk about a variety of current and past events.
- The number of members is unknown however currently on the GGD twitter account there are 499 500 followers. I can assume that many these users are also active on the website.
- It's a collective of artists and creatives who actively upload their pieces.
- The membership guidelines and penalties are clearly laid out.
- The environment is welcoming, and forum moderators actively enforce the rules.

I make references to Twitter posts that are specific to Gaga or from verified users.

I also briefly mention some of LG's noteworthy interviews and newspaper article citing other people she's worked with.

Methodology

When starting this research, I know I wanted to do the following:

1. Focus on LGBTQ+ identifying members of the LM community as I am one of them and I feel the discussions around rights and freedoms are central to Gaga's work.
2. I wanted to follow an inductive reasoning approach, I initially struggled finding literature, however the more I interacted with social media posts the more I found relating theories and works.
3. I knew that LG's work is riddled with metaphors and complex imagery thus I decided to use the following mode of analysis.

Metaphors were purely literary devices following a specific structure, they impose two superficial elements together within a single context. Metaphors are used to draw emphasis to specific expressions. It was (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) who queried the ways in which our minds perceive metaphors around us. They identified different ways in which metaphors are used in language – both in text and speech.

Metaphor Analysis

For metaphor analysis I use principles by (Steger, 2007) to look at the visuals within the music videos and the lyrics in the album. In a later chapter uses some elements to discuss how LMs often dress up to attend concerts and each era has a visual aesthetic assigned to it. These visual expressions can be considered as identification markers or metaphorical parts of armour.

For the BTW and Judas music video I used the three-step metaphor analysis method and interlaced it with interpretations I and some LMs on YouTube have. The difficulty was to do an expansive analysis of the music videos as they contain intricate and numerous metaphors within the visuals. Currently there is no definitive answer to what a metaphor should be, thus I relied on the following: 1) Identifying the metaphor – within this stage Steger suggests indicators that could help narrow down the search. Below are the indicators and examples of how I used them.

Table 1
Indicators to help identify metaphors

Indicator	Example
<i>Repetition</i>	Images of fertility in BTW and religious symbolism in Judas
<i>Elaboration</i>	in both music videos LG uses commonly known metaphors e.g. in BTW the birthing scenes plays on Gaga's title as mother to her LMs
<i>Relatedness</i>	Judas [character] is both an analogy and metaphor about betrayal
<i>Contrasts</i>	in BTW the choreography = freedom and joy, however it's all done in a dark room = secrecy
<i>Emotion</i>	Breakdowns parts in both songs, LG literally speaks about acceptance and love.

I followed with 2) General Metaphor Analysis – it's important to note that metaphors also reflect different contexts and in the case of BTW I try to discuss the similarities in issues faced by LGBTQ+ people in the United States and around the world. I discuss issues around homelessness, resilience, homophobia and access to health care in subsequent chapters. Steger gives six tools (pp. 7) that direct the process of metaphor analysis and I try to touch on some of them in my paper. Below are some examples:

Table 2
Tools for general metaphor analysis

Tool	Example
<i>Comparisons</i>	The lyrical and visual similarities of Gaga's work with other existing pieces e.g. BTW Manifesto and 90s sci-fi movies voiceovers
<i>Associations</i>	How symbols like the pink triangles are synonymous with pain and joy
<i>Dimensions</i>	The multi-layered religious metaphors within the Judas music video e.g. the lipstick gun

<i>Categories</i>	N/A
<i>Concepts</i>	I discuss concepts like identity in the thematic analysis of BTW (album)
<i>Idioms</i>	Not significantly known idioms however contributions to queer lingo e.g. Born this way, lipstick gun, edge of glory.

Step 3) Text-Immanent metaphor Analysis, in my case its Lyrical-Immanent. In the section on themes I discuss the inherent meanings that Gaga infers within her lyrics and the interpretations LMs on YouTube and GGD share in relation to some of the lyrics. Steger offers five tools however he argues that its not a guaranteed method to successfully explore metaphors. Below are these tools and how I expressed the findings in my paper.

Table 3
Tools for Lyrical-Immanent Analysis

Tool	Where its explored in the text
<i>Individual Comprehension</i>	This part includes Gaga's vision for BTW and the messages she sends out in each song. Parts of this is hidden in the auditory production of tracks e.g. choirs or church bells while singing about "sinful" acts like promiscuity.
<i>Individual Background</i>	I write about LG's sexuality and her struggles with mental illness as tools she uses to make herself more relatable and human in the eyes of LMs
<i>Intentions</i>	I argue that LG's intension is to create emotion driven music that has strong messages. In BTW the intension was to talk about issues affecting LGBTQ+ people
<i>Individual Path</i>	LG's unique strategy to separate herself from her contemporaries e.g. active participation in political activism
<i>Self-concept</i>	I write about LG's anti-pop, misfit, punk/metal image. How she uses strong aesthetics to shock.

Findings

My key finding was that online communities and fandoms have the potential to transcend into real life and that the feedback loop between them and the artist is just as important as the feedback loop between them and themselves.

- LM and non-LM views on music videos – there are many complex metaphors in LG's music videos, thus many interpretations from viewers.
- The LM community isn't immune to echo chambers and polarizing views, however its just one of the many examples of
- LG will be subject to comparison with other female pop artists past, present and new
- The LM online community (the one on GGD) exists for three main reasons 1) the comfort within a community and friendship structure 2) all news about LG and other diverse topics, 3) seeking support and care.

- LG has strategic ways in which she incorporates LGBTQ+ issues and mental health awareness within her artwork, business and activism.

Limitations

- There is limited established research on the effects Lady Gaga's work has on Little Monsters.
- I have a limited understanding of music theory thus in some elements of my musical analysis I couldn't go further.

Ethics

- I use quotes from LMs and to ensure the protection of their identities I left out parts of their usernames, using an asterisk (*) where I felt appropriate.
- I discuss sensitive subject matters in this research that could affect readers. I try to hedge my statements and avoid glamorizing individual's internal struggles and coping mechanisms.
- As a LM I acknowledge my own positionality as a potential bias during this inquiry and I have tried to look at varying opinions around issues.

Recommendations

- Further studies need to be done to address the role mental health care service providers can play within the realm of digital fandoms.
- Further research in the mitigation of fandom toxicity and fragmentations to build more resilience, well rounded communities.
- This opens up an avenue to talk about the impact virtual support networks have on individuals.

Who is Lady Gaga?

Lady Gaga is a multi-talented woman, allow me to fanboy and gush over her talent. She is a singer, songwriter (co-written every song she sings), actress, performer, visual artist, record producer, musician, businesswoman, author and film director. She is a mega-superstar and an unstoppable force in music, all her live performances are well thought out and spectacular. Since her debut in 2008 Lady Gaga has worn the title of misfit, she thus has attracted people who also identify as this or similar. She has a large digital presence and following in 2011 Lady Gaga had 15 million followers on Twitter this has grown to 81.3 million in 2020. Her YouTube channel has 15.8 million subscribers and her music videos have 8.9 billion views. On platforms like Facebook and Instagram, where she posts photographs and promotional images, have 58 million and 41.2 million followers, respectively.

At the time of writing this paper she has a total of 326 awards and 754 nominations. Film and music critiques have been largely been positive in the last five years following her debut acting role in *American Horror Story: Hotel* (2015) and her ballad enriched album *Joanne* (2016). I would like to travel back to 2010 when the critiques weren't as positive and Gaga's art was received with more questions than appraisal. I hope to investigate what was/is Gaga's mission? I believe that the philosophy she lives by is a strong pull factor that draws LMs from all around the world to her.

Futurist Brian Solis wrote a paper *Influencer Grudge Match: Lady Gaga verse Bono*, the aim was to see whether popularity or influence would make a more successful influencer/celebrity. Solis was sure that Bono wielded more influence than LG, thus he would have greater impact. According to Solis "Gaga started to convert popularity into influence with her stance on the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy". He acknowledged that, unlike other celebrities at the time that would endorse a charity through a tweet or donation, she [Gaga] had an ability to cultivate a fanbase, she used her activism and influence to fight for LGBTQ+ issues. LG isn't a just one-time deal, her constant activism changed the way we see celebrity activism – Solis says she "worked overtime and engaged" (France, 2011).

Gaga has always been an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, I would argue that her public form of activism started at the 2009 Much Music Awards, where she accepted the award for International video of the year for *Poker Face*. In her acceptance speech she says "Thank you to my fans ... To God and the gays" These two phrases would be repeated throughout her career.

Gaga cannibalizes herself, exposing every aspect of her life. LMs like any other fandom rely on the creator to release new content, however in-between the album releases and the tours LMs get extra, they get a front row seat into the life of Mother Monster. Gaga in an interview says:

"Everyone knows what my breasts look like, who I'm sleeping with, what my real hair looks like, and when I'm wearing wigs' all the information is out there... But somehow there's an ambiguity that hovers."

In a way LG, closes the veil separating the fake and the real, in interviews when asked who is the person behind the image of Lady Gaga, she would shrug it off and maintain that she is LG in every aspect of her life. Her quest isn't about finding herself through the music, she exudes a strong aura of self-awareness, which LMs feel drawn to her (Stein and Michelson, 2017)

Karley Adney's article *Shock Performance and Human Rights*, looks at how Gaga's over-the-top, theatrical presence has made her memorable and cemented her presence in our collective consciousness. From dressing up in plastic to performing on a piano on stilts to

bleaching her hair with heavy products, Gaga aims to entertain and create a memorable performance. The article likens Gaga to other shock performers like Ozzy Osbourne (known for biting the heads off bats) and Till Lindemann of Rammstein (uses gratuitous uncensored sex and violence in his music videos). What makes LG different is that she uses her performance to advocate and educate the audience (Korol-Evans, 2013, pp. 204–205).

the first time I watched a Gaga show (a recording of the American Music Award), she performed Bad Romance, got up after the number, smashed a glass cube with a piano and started singing Speechless. The piano was on fire and she smashed bottles all over the keys as she continued to sing and play. Apart from the shock value added Gaga was telling a deeper message in the performance. The song was written when her father had surgery and he thought he wouldn't make it. LG sings about the dangers of dependence, she uses alcohol as a metaphor for love. Asking what happens when it [love/a person] is gone? The way she makes the message intense is by breaking the glass (symbolizing the pristine idea of a happily ever after), breaking the bottles (making the alcohol metaphor in the lyrics a reality on stage). Overall, it's a ballad addressing grief and LG, shows her grief in a theatrical way.

LG has a high work ethic; on stage she performs to the best of her ability. There are well documented instances on YouTube of her collapsing on stage, falling and in 2013 the famous incidence rumoured to be the instance she completely fractured her hip, while performing Scheiße (Lewis, 2013). Through it all, she powers through, sings and dances, almost as if nothing happened and this is another reason why her LMs revere her. Some of the YouTube comments said:

“That's called extreme exhaustion!! Bless her heart! This makes me so sad. But she never stops singing. That shows how much she cares about her fans. Go GaGa!!” – Sum**!

“My mama is such a brave soul. I cannot believe that she finished this performance. She was in so much pain!” – K*ah P**an

Moving away from the performance stage, Gaga takes her brand different arenas. In 2009 she took the stage at the Gay Rights Rally (Washington D.C.), where she spoke about the need for equality and policy that enforces it. I remember seeing the video clip of the speech (CNN, 2009), in awe at how composed and eloquent she was. Dressed in simple white blouse and black trousers, she was a different Gaga from the one I saw on stage. Adney writes about how this was another part of shock performance, Gaga's poise and emphasis drew listeners in. Bearing in mind that on that stage she was talking to LGBTQ+ US citizens and not a stadium full of LMs, thus I would assume that this was her way of 1) creating an approachable image and 2) showing that her dressing shouldn't distract from the importance of her message/words.

Why I refer to this particular moment is LG directs her message to the then president, Barack Obama saying “Obama, I know that you're listening...” Lady Gaga had a following, a presence and influence and she wasn't afraid to use it. The next line of her speech was in

true theatrical Gaga when she screams “ARE YOU LISTENING!?!... We [Gaga and the queer community] will continue to push you and your administration to bring your words of promise to a reality.” This was the first time a celebrity with a rising physical and digital audience put the president to task and in later interactions with Gaga, he was listening (Clary, 2009). Lady Gaga would later go on and fulfil her promise to continue her advocacy by wearing the iconic Meat dress at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards, protesting the US military’s don’t ask, don’t tell policy that promoted non-discrimination in the military while barring opening out citizens from enlisting.

LG’s commercial appeal comes from her public involvement with brands. The first clue we get when looking at Gaga’s use of influence is her hands-on approach and how she fuses her own ideas with the product she’s endorsing. One example from 2020 is her involvement with Valentino in their Voce Viva perfume campaign, LG in an interview says “I felt strong and alive... It reminded me of my freedom and how I get to experience magic, a freedom and magic I wish everyone to have”. The slogan for the advert was based on the concept designed by LG, of the voice being alive and powerful (Rosenstein, 2020). The advert was praised for being inclusive as it had a diverse range of models all joining Gaga in a sing alone, no doubt an idea LG promoted as we see similar emphasis on inclusion in her own makeup line Haus Laboratories.

In summary her mission is to spread kindness, bravery and love to anyone who will listen. She incorporates these messages into every public or virtual platform she has, also in other non-performance opportunities she gets. One LM in Germany says on GGD:

“If you say, “We were not ready for Gaga.” Well, she is the reason we are ready. She changed style, music, fashion, love, happiness, confidence, she inspired millions to come out as gay, she gave people the confidence to become famous, to express themselves, she changed art, she made people be different, she made the world grow up, if it weren't for her we would be stuck on black eyeliner. music would be irrelevant; gays would still be outcasts. The world would be a different place, many artists would not be famous. Gaga changed the world, one sequin at a time.” – O**he**ctions

LG’s Inspiration

LG herself has cited artists like: Marilyn Manson (whose body bizarre and harsh industrial metal can be traced in music videos like *LoveGame* (2009), Alejandro (2010) and the theatricality in her live performances), Whitney Houston (similarities within the vocal styling of *Born This Way* (2011) and the many ballads from the soundtrack of *‘A Star is Born’* like *I’ll Never Love Again* (2018), Bruce Springsteen (whose emotional lyrics and memorable sound inspired songs *Million Reasons* (2016) and *Ayo* (2016). LG’s craft references all these influences intertwined in a boisterous performance, she makes mention that she isn’t planning on (re)inventing pop music, she uses different styles to show her dynamic sound and inevitably it attracts different audiences. (Trzcinski, 2019).

“He’s been my mentor for a long time,” Gaga said to Apple Music’s Zane Lowe, referring to Elton John and their friendship. She added that John played a supportive role in her recovery after fracturing her hip in 2012 and showing her how to love and care for herself while living in the spotlight. Gaga added that earlier in her career she craved for a mentor within the industry, who would guide her and potentially help her understand the pressures of fan - Elton John filled in that role. Elsewhere in the interview she extends the same courtesy to upcoming pop musicians. LG’s philosophy of love and support extends outside the LM community and into the larger terrain of the pop industry (Krol, 2020).

LG has inspired stars like rapper, Cardi B. in a tweet Cardi wrote: "When I was a teenager Lady Gaga changed my life, she inspired me to be myself & be different." She uploaded a video performing LG’s song Bad Romance at her high school talent show (Oswald, 2019). Cardi B and Arianna Grande (one of LG’s collaborators and friends) are just some of the many stars who cite Gaga as an artistic influence. Singer-songwriter Sam Smith says,

"I was 15 when *The Fame* came out and I was obsessed with Lady Gaga...She gave me complete permission to be myself and to be proud of my queerness. It was a form of expression, but it was also weirdly a form of protection."

A statement I fully relate with – they [Smith] felt empowered to stand up against bullying and embrace queerness (Rice, 2020).

In 2012 LM, Helen Green became the first LM to join the Haus of Gaga (LG’s own creative team) after a chance encounter with LG at a BTW Ball. After receiving news directly from LG, she took to her Twitter page and wrote: “I didn't think my work would eventually create impact like this. I am seriously honoured. Lady Gaga, thank you so much” (London, 2012). Helen’s story confirms to LMs that LG acknowledges their creativity and also created an opportunity for creative LMs to continue sharing more of their fan art. In looking at music LMs like pop artist Lemon Lord (@iamlemonlord on Instagram) come to mind, her 2020 single *Queen*, is a body-positive, provocative anthem which references Gaga’s BTW era. There is a section in GGD where fans regularly upload fan art and Gaga musical remixes/mashups, a culture I have seen over the years throughout each era.

Chapter 2

Broader Concepts: Monsters and their Mother

Origins of Little Monsters (My story)

To start, I am a proud Little Monster. I have been strongly declaring that, since 2009 when we officially got the name, however, I knew I was going to be a strong Lady Gaga (LG) fan from the beginning. I remember in 2007, I was ready to go to high school and I was stuck because I didn't know which high school I wanted to go to. I had applied to several different places around Zimbabwe, I wanted a place where I would be safe, one where I would be comfortable.

I remember in December 2007 it was my last holiday before high school started in January. I was with my sisters. One evening, and we were watching TV and I was thinking about how my days were numbered my days of freedom, hiding, being able to just be in the shadows were almost over. One evening, my sister mentioned there was a new music video coming out. She turned on the channel that was airing (we only had one music channel). I felt an out-of-body experience when I heard a very distinct electronic sound, half computerized, half real – little did I know the instrument was a keytar. The song that started it all was *Just Dance*, (LG's first commercial single from her debut album, *The Fame*. That night, the message hit me immediately. I always like listening and dancing to music, however, I never really thought of music as an emotional, purposeful mode of expression capable of reaching out and emoting.

When LG sung, "*Just Dance. You're going to be okay*" I Immediately I knew that it was the universe/ fate giving me a message that I'm going to be alright. Wherever I go, whichever school I'm going to go to, all I need to do is just hold my head up high and move,

It's easy being gay in Zimbabwe, where being queer isn't a topic to be spoken of nor is it seen as something that exists. It was hard coming to terms with the fact that I was going to be away from home. Many parents hope that by sending their children to boarding school, they would mature and grow up with their peers. I quickly realized that I had no contemporaries... I was just a 12-year-old, 'teaching' myself to be gay in a heteronormative setting.

Going through the ups and downs, being called a 'fag', being called a 'fruit', being looked at weird. I reminded myself, every day to just dance. It was temporary, it wasn't going to last forever – even though at the time it felt so overwhelming. I hit rock bottom in 2011, my senior year. I assume now that I was struggling, like most around me, with the pressures of high school. It was the time when students were frustrated and needed an outlet for their anguish: they needed a target. Unfortunately, I became the target. I wouldn't say I was bullied

harshly, however; I was bullied. I spent a long time living in fear, I knew the people who I learnt with, and I knew what they were capable of doing.

In May of 2011, *Born This Way* came out and for the first time, in a while I heard another message from LG. It was directed at me - at that specific time in my life. On social media platforms one sees sentiments and comments like mine. Music has a mystical appeal that draws the listener in and in the case of BTW, LG's work is riddled with this energy—no matter the era—messages that makes us want to stand up proud. When I listened to *Born This Way*, I reaffirmed what I knew - that it was okay to be me. I wasn't a mistake, even though everyone around me, made me feel it. I felt I disappointed so many people. I had disappointed my teachers who had given me positions of authority, who spoke highly of me to juniors. I felt like I disappointed my parents who would hear of all my good grades but at the same time I knew that I had this 'unwanted lifestyle'.

Several songs began to stick out, like *Judas* reminded me of the friends that I thought I had in high school and I lost, for LMs like Mateusz Kalinowski it reminded him of his "scum ex-boyfriend". When I fully came out and accepted myself, I was rejected and betrayed. *Hair* reminded me how I love my hair, how it's part of my identity. There's a spectacular rendition done by Vice Ganda, a gay Filipino comedian as a tribute to youth diagnosed with cancer. It's an intimate performance showing how hair (and hair loss as a symptom of an illness) change the way we see our identities (*Vice performs Lady Gaga's Hair in It's Showtime Magpasikat 2019!*, 2019). Every new school term I had to get a haircut, and that shattered me. I wanted to have long hair, that I could style in different ways. Sadly, I was in a heteronormative all boys school that had this military-esque mindset. I had to shave my head, every three months. Songs like the *Edge of Glory* reminded me that every time is a moment worth living. I am always on the edge of my insecurities, of my happiness and my fears. LG mentions in an interview that her inspiration came the eve of her grandfather's passing and she wanted to comfort her family and remind them of the amazing life he had lived (Capretto, 2017). *Government Hooker* appealed to the inner wild child, exploring his sexuality and sex life, yearning for an intimate moment with someone else—a forbidden passion.

BTW, has helped me over the years. Every time I listen to it, be it in 2011, or in 2020. The songs are relevant to me, I flashback into those hard moments and I'm filled with such gratitude. They awaken something in me and remind me the potential of where I could go in life. I felt happy and liberated despite knowing that Zimbabwe's attitude towards queer people hasn't changed. My journey as a LM didn't end with *Born This Way* in 2011, every album is an era, and each brings its own set of messages.

Music and Emotions

In this paper I discuss about themes and messages from LG's work and the emotional impact it has on queer identifying LMs. Emotions are hard to measure and generalize how-

ever its largely accepted that music can evoke emotional responses. In an article in Psychology Today, Shahram Heshmet, acknowledges that people use music to relieve stress, enhance mood and diminish fatigue. When music is pleasurable dopamine neurotransmitters are released that make the body feel pleasure, thus making the song more likable. He argues that we appreciate music that more complex and shifts in sound or tone create bodily responses like chills or increase heart rate – both pleasurable stimuli. Briefly listing some of his other arguments:

- We attach specific memories to songs and memories are important because of the emotional links we assign to them.
- Music makes us behave and feel a certain way. A four-on-the-floor beat can make you tap your feet and a slow ballad can make you feel calm or sad.
- Music is a powerful tool for identity formation. Music we grow to love, helps us construct aspects of ourselves. These identities can be group identities e.g. Fandoms or personal elements to our expanding understanding of the self (Heshmat, 2019)

Fandoms

In the subsequent chapter of this research I discuss the origins of the LM name, revealing how this nomenclature sparked a unique trend among western artists. Arguably LG facilitated a new blueprint for other artists – paving the way for further and deeper connections with their fans. Fan names have existed in different genres and industries, Gaga happened to be able within the limited time of her debut to cultivate a fandom on a large scale. Different fandoms also dubbed themselves creative names, these names have a direct relation with the artist i.e. a pun of the artist's name (Swifties for Taylor Swift or Beliebers for Justin Bieber). Other names carry connotations that suggest a specific behaviour. Little Monsters are the rabid ones – just like fictional monsters, Beyoncé's BeyHive functions like a literal beehive, protecting and serving their queen and for BTS their A.R.M.Y (Adorable Representative MC for Youth) is arguable one of the most fierce fandoms on social media – basically fulfilling the role of armed troops fighting against perceived treats. Whatever the origins are fandoms within music continue to evolve as the artist and their platforms continue to change. Why name in the first place?

An article in *The Cut* suggests that we name things mainly because 1) We are trying to convey ownership – inanimate objects that hold significance or value to us tend to get names rather than objects we use regularly. 2) We are unconsciously relieving loneliness – living creatures like pets and children are source of comfort when we call upon them to come to us (Bucklin, 2017). Naming is a “constructive achievement” (Rako, 2018) and it legitimizes its existence as separate from other things/entities like it (Popova, 2015). Naming be a building block of everything we do. We see examples in folklore/histories e.g. Adam naming all the creator or Rumpelstiltskin losing power when his name is mentioned (Dunn, 2018). These are some of the reasons why naming is important to the originator, when we reverse the gaze that names evoke a stronger reaction to the named i.e. the fandoms.

Debates about fandoms

Henry Jenkins argues the importance of audiences with the lifecycle of the product, from creation to distribution. Through his own involvement with fandoms he sees fans as engaging in participatory culture, referring to them as ‘textual poachers’ – the title of his 1992 book. He focuses on how texts take a physical manifestation when consumers attach new meanings to it. He uses the analogy of a boy and his toy – the significance the boy attaches to the toy is unknown and unanticipated by the creator of the toy. Through use and a level of emotional attachment the value of the toy is greatly amplified (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 51–52). Jenkins looks at five levels of engagement and these overall allow fans to immerse themselves in the mental universe the content exists in and/or create their own content through inspiration.

- 1) The way fans receive content – he argues that fan is ambivalent when canon is added, they feel emotionally drawn to it while also approaching it with a critical lens. LMs do the same when a new era begins. Social media traffic becomes euphoric and forums on sites like GGD start comparing and reflecting on promotional material.
- 2) Interpretations – fans establish links between canon and the creator or themselves. LG mentioned BTW was born from a dialogue she was having with LMs, thus songs on the album are relatable. Lyrics and videos become a look into LG’s thought process – thoughts that further the conversation.
- 3) Engagement – Jenkins uses an example of a movie franchise where fans voice out their concerns to media outlets, producers and creators. In the case of LMs, they engage with LG directly through social media
- 4) Cultural practices – this is when members of a fandom create their own alternatives. Within the LM community, GGD members create new artwork Gaga inspired or original, there are song contests like the *GGD Original Song Contest* (Tomshes, 2020).
- 5) Other communities – formation of subgroups or groups that physically meet or meet using another platform

Jenkins argued that fans are active participants rather than passive recipients, they create, discuss and potentially influence the creator to alter new canon (theory, 2019). He’s interested in how fandoms can use their presence to contribute to democracies, social justice movements and change.

In writing this section I realized that much of my writing about LMs has been about the emotional links they develop with each other and LG. Rachael Lefler gives a simplified definition for good and toxic fandoms. Essentially good fandoms are healthy, collaborative and appreciative. Toxic fandoms apart from being the opposite are fuelled by a persecution complex that manifests in purity tests aimed at identifying ‘true fans’ (Lefler, 2020).

Within fandom studies we notice that sub-fandoms exist within online echo chambers – an ecosystem where a person or likeminded group encounter information that reflects their own beliefs. This displays of confirmation bias around specific issues creates tension among sub-groups of the same fandom. These spaces tend to become hotbeds for strong opinions and an unbreakable form of loyalty. Critics to fandoms would refer to these as toxic fandoms and use their existence to generalize the entire fandom (Fuschillo, 2020, pp. 347–365).

This concept relates to that of Stans vs ‘True fans’ and the blurry lines that divide them. The definition of a stan is largely dependant on whom you’re talking to. As a slang term it just means someone who like something – vaguely, a fan. It can be used to refer to a fan who is loves their favourite artist and can’t accept any slight criticism about that artist (Foley, no date). I would argue that stans exist in echo chambers – their understanding of the source material is the only one they see as correct. “Fandoms become toxic when the voices of certain people or groups silence the voices of other who see things as maybes” (Squad, 2019).

Rabid Fans

In an interview with Larry King, Lady Gaga narrates how the name Little Monsters came to be. She mentions that while she was working on her second album i.e. *The Fame Monster*, she had realized that every song reflected a fear she had encountered on her journey to fame. Songs like *Alejandro* related to her fear of men, *Dancing in the Dark* - her fear of loneliness, *Speechless* – the fear of death (on which she later dedicated to her friend and designer Alexander McQueen after his suicide), *Monster* was linked with her fear of sexual intimacy (Streams, 2019). These fears presented themselves as monsters whose viciousness had been amplified by the fame and attention she was receiving. In subsequent interviews, Lady Gaga has mentioned these insecurities as still present and she uses them as fuel to write new records.

During her tour in 2009 she noticed how her audience was euphoric and excited whenever she performed a new song. In the same interview she would say “...they were salivating... they were rabid”. One on night she said, “You’re all my little monsters...” and that’s how the name of her most loyal fans came into existence.

Many countries around the world have oppressive laws against individuals who don’t identity with the heteronormative structures of society. These people get branded as misfits and at times become pariahs within their communities. Gaga gives people a platform to escape and explore who they want to be. Overtime what started out as a fandom became a form of community.

The idea of Monsters

The etymology of the word monster is believed to originate from potentially three Latin words 1) *monstrare* – to demonstrate/show, 2) *monstrum* – something unnatural and 3) *monere* – to warn. In umbrella terms monsters are expressive and demonstrative entities (Lawrence, 2015). I would like to journey into the ideas of what monsters are and hopefully piece together the reasons why the name Little Monster is distinctively known across the music industry.

Historically the idea of a monster has been associated with fright, fear as a result of some malfunction of the perceived natural order. Classical myths showed monsters as a mismatch of human and animal parts, the modern era introduced us to man-made monsters made from science or magic. In the twentieth century the narratives on monsters became more sympathetic (e.g. monsters on the children's show Sesame Street), the monster became misunderstood and a reflection of the devastating impact humanity's intolerance has (Marsden and Nesbitt, 2018).

Leo Braudy identifies 4 broad archetypes of monsters and relates them to our human need to both vilify and explain the aspects of ourselves that we are afraid to accept (Altschuler, 2016). His initial look is into the monster of nature e.g. King Kong. Representing the perceived power nature must fight back against human civilizations.

He next refers to the created monsters like Frankenstein – who represent how human civilizations through the advent of science and technology have created objects with the potential to 'enslave' humanity. Alternatively: LMs are an product of LG's creation, through her music LMs celebrate all their uniqueness and through accepting diversity and intersectionality.

The next archetype mentioned is the Monster from within e.g. Mr Hyde. These are defined as the perverted aspects of our personalities that we try concealing from the people around us. The monster within becomes analogy of how repressed feelings and frustrations, overtime, grow/swelling up, inevitably bursting out from the tiny glass jars we placed them in. Most noticeable examples of this monster are famous serial killers – who are initially perceived as well adjusted or 'regular' individuals, but they hide much more nefarious secrets. Similarly, many queer individuals grow up with an array of social norms they struggle to follow. The struggle to reconcile the seemingly opposing aspects of one's identity turns into its own psychological monster.

Fig 1: A comment I interacted with on a Lady Gaga video on YouTube



Hybrid** 2 years ago

Here I'm alone and I'm crying every night because I'm feeling insecure and I'm afraid of being what I'm . From past 4 months my day became my night and night became worst nightmare because of who I'm. I love myself but I can't be brave enough to tell who I'm. Thank you for one and all .

The last monster Braudy mentions is from the past - these include demons, deities, djinn etc. They exist around the central idea that there are older, more powerful entities that can control humans, at times, for their own amusement. The central idea of these myths and legends is that there are forces/beings that have existed for a long time (some predating human civilizations). I remember when I was 10 years old listening to the stories of mermaids that had the ability to bestow magic on young children they kidnapped and deemed worthy. However, the same mermaids could kill and eat those they found unworthy of those gifts. Oral myths like this exist in every society in the world, they served as reminders of our fragile will and how we are at the mercies for these immortal monsters – all we can do is accept our fate.

Lady Gaga revealed that her second album *The Fame Monster*, was based on 8 monsters/ fears she encountered on her journey to fame, at the time these were the untreated and undiagnosed monsters that caused her to spiral into depression (Bein, 2020).

In a discussion forum on GGD LM discuss why being a little monster is important to them. My initial idea was to find out what other reasons apart from a loyalty to LG, would make them stay in the fandom. Below are some of the quotes that struck out to me for a variety of reasons.

“Being a Little Monster to me means loving an amazing woman and everything she does. She means so much to me and has made such a huge impact on my life and to SO many others, and it warms my heart when I think of her. Everything she stands for and all that she has done for so many communities of people and minorities is just indescribable and I am so proud of her and to be her fan and support her is the smallest bit that I could do to thank her.” - Yes T** He***n

LG continues to play a significant role in the lives of LMs like this user and I. Through her music and messages, we each find fragments of inspiration that appeal to our personal circumstances. Small actions of support (e.g. buy the CD, merchandise, posting fan art, retweeting posts etc.) are ways in which we express our gratitude to LG.

“Trying to deeply understand and appreciate her artistry and being able to fundamentally connect with her on a human level while celebrating her work with a multicultural community” – Hybrid**

LG's artistic choices, especially within music videos and stage performance are layered in metaphors and the abstract. Her references aren't targeted at a specific audience (e.g. white, US citizens), however, they can be interpreted and translated into a multiplicity of understanding. LMs from all around the world can have mini shared experiences with each other based on some stylistic aspects LG uses. One clear example is how LG uses different languages and specific tones that non-speakers of that language can understand. This speaks to the notion of transnational diversity on digital platforms.

Transnationalism

LG's rise to fame was catalysed by her rising popularity on the internet, radio and television. She like many other western artists gained listeners around the world, the airtime inevitably turning the listeners into fans. Coupled with the rising popularity of the internet, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This meant that listeners could search for information on their favourite artists, get content related news and follow their respective social media pages.

Little Monsters are a social group that can be described as a transnational community because they interact and engage with each other primarily online, within public domains. Transnationalism looks at connectedness across borders. because of its links with a process, it's hard to pin a correct definition using a deductive approach, thus it's more beneficial to look at how it's used and who are involved in the processes (Tedeschi, Vorobeva and Jauhiainen, 2020). It was a challenge finding quotes from LMs around the world, most interact with each other without referring to their countries of origins. The forums where they do (Polish, Hispanic and Asian fanbase) are few and far in-between. In Chapter 4 I discuss some of the interactions LMs from around the world have shared.

In some track in BTW Gaga uses different languages, the effect is to emphasize specific messages and to add to the bigger conversation. BTW (album) is to date LG's most multilingual record, I argue that this is an intentional attempt to reach a larger audience and deliver her message of love and acceptance of all. In the breakdown of the title track she rap-sings:

"No matter gay, straight, or bi / Lesbian, transgender life / I'm on the right track, baby / I was born to survive / No matter black, white, or beige / Chola or orient made / I'm on the right track, baby" [l.48-54]

The mention of different ethnicities/races and sexual orientations in her first single frames the album as a transnational artwork, directed at a global audience. Let's narrow it down to specific tracks on the album.

Lyrics in different languages and potential meanings

Track	Language	Original lyric	Translation and comment
Born This Way	Italian	Mi amore vole fe yah [l.37]	Love cannot exist without truth
Government Hooker	Italian Spanish Japanese	Io ritorne, io ritorne [l.3] (Ay, mi papito!) [l.37] (Iku, Iku!) [l.34]	"Ritorne" doesn't exist in Italian (I'm Italian), but I've never really figured out what she says there, maybe "Io ritornerò" means I will return? " – Matt (GGD) Be my daddy – sexual reference To orgasm
Americano	Spanish	Mis canciones son de la revolución / Mi corazón me duele por mi generación	My songs are from the revolution / My heart aches for my generation
Scheiße (means 'Shit' in German)	A mix of German and Spanish sounding words	Ich schleiban austa be clair, es kumpent madre monstère	"I want to be clear, you speak/deal with mother monster." – Mr Ricky (GGD) "I am mother monster in spanish/german" – Vidar (GGD)
Bloody Mary	French	J'veux pas mourir toute seule [l.23]	I don't want to die alone

Chapter 3

Born This Way (Album)

Announcing Born This Way

In the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards Lady Gaga won the award for Video of the Year for her song Bad Romance (a part of the Fame Monster record). Upon receiving the award, she announced her next album i.e. Born This Way, by singing the chorus of the title track. That same evening Lady Gaga arrived at the event with a group of uniformed soldiers, later she would wear, what is regarded as her most iconic look i.e. the meat dress.

Fig 2: LG at the MTV VMAs in 2010 – red carpet look (left and meat dress (right)



Source: MTV.com

Using these striking images Lady Gaga was able to start a new wave of discussions around LGBTQ+ matters within the entertainment industry. The announcement of BTW proved that the record would be a direct love letter to LMs from Lady Gaga, one written in the hopes to empower and foster tolerance. Filled with club ready songs and upbeat tempos the album was a celebration of queerness, freedom, equality and love. As part of her career Lady Gaga has used her voice to speak up against injustices within and around the LGBTQ+ community. She did this by performing in events like the 2011 Europride Gay Rights March in Rome and television talk shows – like the Ellen DeGeneres show, the Alan Carr show and Watch What Happens Live with Andy Cohen – that are known to be queer-lead spaces.

The Production

The production of *Born This Way* started in 2010. Lady Gaga teamed up with producers like DJ White Shadow, DJ Snake, Fernando Garibay and RedOne. In an interview Fernando Garibay mentioned that the writing was entirely done by LG and she would credit the other producers if they altered any lines or words (Halperin, 2011). In promotional interviews LG would go on to say that BTW came out of a dialogue she was having with LM. Receiving letters and social media messages expressing their inner selves, thus she wanted to create a response to those messages (Fuse, 2012).

BTW was influenced by different genres and artists. Stylistic similarities can be found from Whitney Houston, Bruce Springsteen, Queen, Iron Maiden and Madonna – some similarities causing controversies between fandoms. The compositions and tonality reference genres like, rock, jazz, plainsong and opera. There is a general dose of elements that make a Lady Gaga record truly gaga, these include screams, made up words, sexual references and church bells.

The Beginning

“This is the manifesto of Mother Monster:

On GOAT, a government owned territory in space, a birth of magnificent and magical proportions took place. But the birth was not finite, it was infinite. As the wombs numbered and the mitosis of the future began it was perceived that this infamous moment in life is not temporal, it is eternal. And thus, began the beginning of the new race; a race within the race of humanity; a race which bears no prejudice, no judgment but boundless freedom. But on that same day as the eternal Mother hovered in the multiverse another, more terrifying, birth took place: the birth of evil

And as she, herself, split into two, rotating in agony between two ultimate forces, the pendulum of choice began its dance. It seems easy, you imagine, to gravitate, instantly and unwaveringly, towards good but she wondered, “How can I protect something so perfect without evil?” – Lady Gaga (*Born This Way*, Official Music Video)

A manifesto is a public declaration usually made by a candidate before an election or a sovereign. Following one of Steger’s steps I can draw comparisons of this statement with introductions used in 90s sci-fi movies, the purpose of both is to lay out objectives, opinions and or intentions the piece to follow seeks to achieve (Steger, 2007, pp. 3–23). LG’s first single *Born This Way* opens with this statement and its purpose is both to entertain and set the scene for a political analogy. Within the LM community LG is regarded as a queen and at times a divine entity. Its common place for many pop music-based fandoms to refer to their beloved artists as queens. By so doing they attach a label that suggests a form of sovereignty within the community.

“First I was here to stan our queen LADY GAGA. BUT (and there's a BIG BUT), I am coming back every hour to discuss with all of you monsters cause for the first ****ing time in my life I am feeling myself, part of a community (and I do hate communities because I think it separates people more), but I am proudly announcing that I do ****ing love you all monsters and that I found my place in this mother****ing world. I love GGD so much, I love you all monsters so much, and even if I am being too lovely, or too kind, I DO NOT CARE BECAUSE I WAS BORN THIS WAY BABY.” (France, 25)

Like this user many LMs start of as fans – overzealous and obsessive fans of a celebrity. They hold LG and her work in high regard. In starting the album off with a manifesto LG affirms her position as Mother Monster/a queen – one she knows she has earned from the validation of LMs around the world. The manifesto can be taken literally as LG’s intention of establishing a transnational community. She says “the new race; a race within the race of humanity” – words commonly used to denote nation building. I would interpret it as her way of seeing all LMs as one ‘race’: human.

Born This Way Music Video

Creating G.O.A.T

The establishing shot (00:01 – 00:21) is a black background this an inverted pink triangle, inside the triangle we catch a glimpse of a unicorn silhouette against what appears to be a city behind it. Immediately there is another pink triangle that cuts onto the first and we see a non-humanoid form with outstretched legs. The pink inverted triangle was used by the Nazi’s to distinguish gay Jewish/non-Jewish men, in order to establish that they were the lowest within the concentration camp hierarchy. The pink triangle has been reclaimed as a symbol of power and strength – while remembering the thousands that suffered horrific treatment during the holocaust (Waxman, 2018). The idea that the triangle is used on one hand, as our gateway into Gaga’s fantasy world and on the other, a gateway back in time to remember the oppression queer people faced.

Zooming into the triangle the camera pans around the figure showing what we thought was another figure was the back of LG’s head. The instrumental accompanying the shots of the unicorn start with a high-pitched tone, with a small yet increasing rhythm, by the shots of the alien-hybrid-Gaga the rhythm is now quicker and more anticipated. The instrumental signifies two aspects 1) A nostalgic reference to space opera themes e.g. John Williams’ 1977 Star Wars saga opening theme or Carl Orff’s cantata – Carmina Burana – O Furtuna. Both used in cinema to foreshadow an anticipated tension and create the backdrop for an epic adventure. LG uses a similar technique to set tension around the video. 2) The change from a more sentimental, mythical tone (with the unicorn) to a more menacing, masculine tone – paired with the image of a hybrid version of LG, shows the viewer that nothing is as it seems. The unicorn – a creature associated with magic and light is replaced by a more terrifying

image of a chained alien. I would interpret this as LG's way to start a bigger social discussion by creating a tense atmosphere.

The next shots are particularly significant in the establishment of LG as Mother Monster. (00:32) – a constellation of stars showing the female reproductive system, (00:37) – LG on a throne with her arms and legs spread open showing the female reproductive system, (00:40-42) – a spiral of flowers from her throne descending to the earth. Flowers are a symbolic metaphor of female sexuality, initially associated with virginity then later with motherhood/childbirth (Frownfelter, 2010, pp. 2–52).

The song starts at (02:21) with an overhead shot of LG in a dark room walking between dances, one thing to note is they're all barefoot and in varying states of nudity with LG in black brassiere and underpants. I would interpret this dance sequence as a form acknowledgment that everyone is born into this world naked and we equal. I like the analysis made by the YouTube channel Pop Video Meanings, they suggest that the dance is symbolic of LG joining the LMs in their suffering, entering the dark space with them and leading them in joyous a dance – this echoes sentiments LG made in interviews that BTW is a dialogue she has with LMs (PopVideoMeanings, 2011). At the (04:21), (05:35 - 05:40), (06:23 – 06:36) we see LG and the LMs huddled together, covered in black and gold slime. The slime is a creative representation of amniotic fluid, making literal the metaphor of birth within the song. Interestingly, amniotic fluid serves as both a cushion for the foetus and a conduit for the exchange of nutrients and water. I would argue that LG as the Mother is making a promise through this illustration, to protect LMs, provide them with the emotional support they need through an exchange of mutual respect.

Childbirth

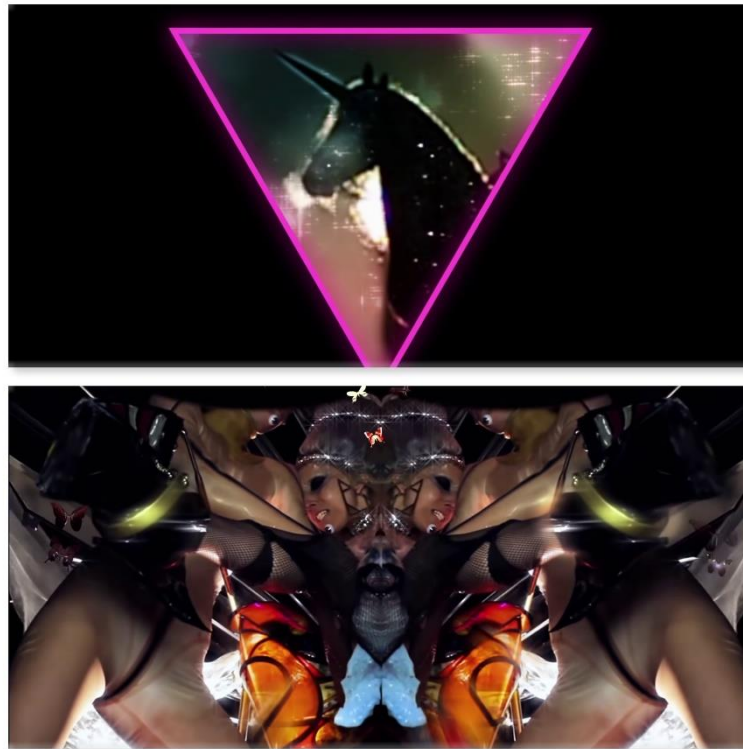
Linking the metaphor of sexuality, specifically childbirth in two scenes. Between (00:44-01:08) LG is seen being aided by two other beings birthing/laying spherical heads. The camera zooming out to see shelves filled with these heads, all resembling LG. Within the monologue she says "...a birth of magnificent and magical proportions took place. But the birth was not finite, it was infinite." This is a clear reference to the LMs who's exact number is unknown however are a large group of individuals. This entire birthing scene gives a deeper more artist expression of the relationship between LG and the LMs. I would interpret the similarities in the heads as symbolic of the shared commonalities between LMs with each other and with LG. Another view would be to look at the heads as a symbolic of the LMs desire to impersonate their idol, when observing concerts and tours LMs dress up like LG. I would argue that this is a purely superficial way to see things, even though there are visual similarities between LMs and LG during performances – I would interpret it as visual statements that acknowledge the common while celebrating difference.

(01:15 - 01:50) The scene changes to a much darker atmosphere – set somewhere in the BTW multiverse. The images of the earth are replaced by a black glossy planet, citizens of

that planet transforming into a red skull. LG is now in leather clothes sitting on a lightning shaped throne gives birth to a machine gun. The gun is a symbol of violence and protection. A debate that has affected the social fabric of many US states, surveys showing that mixed views arose after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting and the 2016 Orlando gay club shooting (News, 2019). LG in her monologue talks about a birth of evil and how she as the mother must protect her children from this evil. The evil in question I would assume are the laws and policies that harm the lives of minority groups. In the real world LG gave a speech *The Prime Rib of America* where she questioned senators on unchecked policies that have led to many LGBTQ+ persons being mistreated and some murdered because they're made to feel unequal (Staff, 2010). This was one of many times where Lady Gaga used her voice as a gun to provoke social awareness on LGBTQ+ issues, I see it as her way of addressing deep-rooted, systemic ideas of right and wrong (the evil). On the BTW Ball she took her message of equality to Russia, Indonesia, Italy, South Africa among others, showing that queer LMs around the world face similar and simultaneously unique battles and they need a moment of empowerment.

These lines between reality and the fictional universe of BTW overlap when LG brings to the forefront issues around queer recognition, religious intolerance and invisible sexualities, she knows affects her LMs - her 'children'. She takes up the role of Protector – unfiltered speeches about equality, Nurturer – empowering concert goers and Caregiver – ensuring the safety of concert goers during her show and philanthropy with her BTW Foundation. All the mentioned elements are popular attributes of a good mother (Greenberg, 2012). Overall, the image of Mother Monster is brilliantly well crafted in performance and her public persona.

Fig 3: (Top) the triangle and unicorn symbols of past and present LGBTQ+ people, (Bottom) Mother Monster giving birth



Source: YouTube

Judas Music Video

Judas: A Metaphor for Betrayal and Freedoms

The music video for Judas is set in a reimagined Jerusalem, the opening sequence shows a biker gang and Gaga riding motorcycles down a highway. At (00:33) we see the names of the twelve disciples on each bikers' leather jackets, a precursor of the events to follow. This scene was edited using the Sin City effect – the isolation of one colour [red] and/or subject [Gaga] against a monochrome fore and background. It draws the audience to LG's elaborate costume – purple lace and a jewelled, gold head piece. Those familiar with the strong of Jesus can immediately position LG as playing Mary Magdalene within the story. I would like to argue that LG's costume suggests she is a queen, betrothed to Jesus – the 'king of the Jews'. (00:48-00:55) Gaga sings Judas' name into Jesus' ear as she embraces him, it's a glimpse into the entanglement her version of Mary has with Judas.

The choreography is done in the Electric Chapel – a temple or church. At (01:37) Gaga dances outside the chapel wearing dark red lingerie with a see-through half skirt and the dances in grey-brown bandage-looking pieces. At (01:39) she's dancing inside the chapel, wearing black lingerie, however with a leather jacket, thigh-high boots and stockings, the dancers in black t-shirts. I would interpreted this dance scene as a glimpse of Mary's before and after meeting Jesus, outside she is the town harlot with the 'undesirables' of society (those would be the beggars, ill or disabled) and then inside the chapel she's got a new image

however the similarities in costumes suggests she's still the same person after her encounter. Tying it back with sexuality, LG questions if it's possible to change one's sexuality after a spiritual encounter?

The music video is a metaphor that represents a larger aspect of queer identity, particularly, the need to reconcile sexuality and religious belief. An article in the Guardian mentions that religious belief and affiliations still play an important role in about 84% of the world's population, with Christians making about 31.2% of the total population (Sherwood, 2018). Most major religions are based on a heteronormative doctrine, the idea that a higher power ordained heterosexuality as the only form of natural union. Anti-LGBTQ messages are shared within the religious communities and these messages stop a unknown number of queer people from disclosing their sexualities. Like Gaga they enter the chapel/church trying to hide a large part of their identities, those that fail to hide need more intervention.

States like Florida, United States have a catalogue of Christian centric organizations that offer forms of Conversion therapy (FFPC, 2020). In Africa evangelical preachers all claim to be able to exorcize homosexuality. Seeing it as a demonic phenomenon can be traced during colonial times, when colonial administrators codifies homosexuality as sinful both through policy and religion, of which the impact can still be seen today (Dugmore, 2015). Growing up in a religious home I felt the pressure to hide who I was, and I know globally more queer people have similar pressures with varying degrees. By admitting or acknowledging any other desire outside of the heteronormative narrative, it meant there's something wrong with you. This demonisation of non-heterosexuality either by oneself or by others around creates a trauma that affects many queer identifying people even after they come out. Gaga through her analogy of a love triangle, questions how queer identities can create harmony between their spirituality (represented by Jesus) and their sexuality that should be celebrated yet is vilified (Judas).

At (02:50) there's a fight sequence and the choreography: raised clenched fists and quick dance kicks add another layer to the discussion on freedom. The energetic and violent movements are symbolic of the desire to break free from, in this case, religious oppression.

Fig 4: (Left) LG and dancers punching the air, Dancer Yang (Jason) Wang in China doing the same choreography as a sign of protest



Source: YouTube

Gaga's portrayal of Mary as a rebellious harlot can be viewed as a feminist critique on dominant Christian discourses that aim at subjugating women. In [l.30-31] she acknowledges herself as a prostitute and wench, beyond repentance, LG's character is both unapologetically provocative and empowered (X and Catherine, 2016). Another idea proposed by some Christian writers is that Mary is representative of humanity's constant shift to and away from God (Hale, 2011). A chief example, seen between (03:19-03:40), LG is dressed in a papal inspired costume, protects Jesus with a golden gun (aiming it at Judas) inside of a bullet, lipstick comes out and she applies on Judas. Showing how easily humanity sways between right and wrong.

I would like to draw attention to a part in the music video where the music stops and there's an unnecessary amount of water. Between (03:45-04:19) there are jump cuts to three scenes 1) Mary washing the feet of Jesus and Judas, 2) Jesus being led to his trail while people cheer and 3) Mary being caught in a flood. The first time I watched the video I thought the flood was a metaphor for an orgasm, while a Queerty article interpreted the water as a symbol of purity and the flood an act of baptism i.e. "a symbolic burial with Christ" (B, 2011).

The Backlash

The music video was released a few days before the Easter holidays and gained polarizing views. Within the Christian community reviews were either praising Gaga or slamming her artistic expression. In one review it was interpreted as a positive message about the importance of faith and forgiveness packaged within artistic liberty (Hale, 2011), while others Bill Donahue of the catholic League said "She's trying to rip off Christian idolatry to shore up her talentless, mundane and boring performances... Is this the only way to jet up her performance?" (Powers, 2011). The true depth of the controversy can be seen in the comments section of the YouTube video.

For some the video is attached with fond memories

“I love this song, and the first time it was performed was in Guadalajara, Mexico, where I am from.” E****iel A*tes

“This video made me realize I was gay when I was 9 years old. Thank you Gaga!” K**na Pi***an

For some it ushered in religious driven chaos:

“If I remembered correctly, Priests and bishops from the Philippines prevents GAGA from doing a concert here in the Philippines just because of this song. LOL, crazy times” **a*n

While in others it inspired rebellion:

“I remember singing this song aloud in the street along with my roommates while going to church.” No*as **n

“Changing the lyrics from Judas to Jesus back when I was 15 because I was scared Jesus was gonna be mad at me for singing this song” Go**oy

Themes in Born This Way

My Approach

Music is an outward expression of an inward emotion and listening to music requires a level of emotion connectivity from the listener. In describing a piece of music to someone who is unfamiliar with it, we use emotional markers like “sad”, “bold” or we talk about what it makes us do, like dance, sway, smile etc. Conveying in words what music expresses comes with difficulty, however, that doesn’t mean we can’t justify the effects as real. Not all music is emotional however, I argue that a piece is only as strong as the emotions it calls out to or it invokes from the listener. In writing this section I understand that using the realm of emotions to prove the significance of music is a tricky endeavour.

The themes I identify within the lyrics will start off with my own personal interpretation in comparison to other LMs interpretations. I analysed the lyrics more in depth to see if I could engage some of the conversations LMs have around them. The whole production of the record carries heavy emotional tones that are reflected throughout the album. To understand the impact a work of art has Wayne Booth mentions we need to identify the implied author – the voice within the body of work, in the case of the research: the themes in the lyrics. Next is to identify the real life author – the artist’s life and motivations: Lady Gaga’s vision and thought process (Nussbaum, 2001).

Similarly, to Martha Nussbaum, I approach these themes as an amateur music lover and discuss some psycho-emotional meanings within the lyrics that I feel stand out. I use the word “feel” because I experience *Born This Way* as an emotional product. A limitation to this section is I was unable to synthesize all the themes each LM identifies within BTW thus I narrowed it down to themes I identified, corroborated by a few blog posts from a GGD thread on the same topic.

I used a six-phase thematic analysis tool developed by (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 77–101), focusing on each phase and the process that lead me to the results.

- 1) Familiarize yourself with the data – Transcribing the lyrics into a spreadsheet. I used Genius.com and AZlyrics.com to access lyrics, occasionally crosschecking with what I hear in each song.
- 2) Generating codes – Focusing on parts that appeared more interesting and the metaphors that I felt were present. Below is an example of this stage.

Table 5
Initial codes as I listened to the album

Song	Lyric	Initial Code/Thoughts
<i>Born This Way</i>	A different lover is not a sin Believe capital H-I-M (Hey hey hey)	Against the idea that homosexuality isn't a sin
<i>Judas</i>	Forgive him when his tongue lies through his brain	Betrayal - from friends or a lover...(cheating)
	I'll take you out tonight, say whatever you like Scheiße, scheiße be mine, scheiße be mine.	Cycle of abuse? Is it weakness to accept ill-treatment?
<i>The Edge of Glory</i>	But I got a reason that you-hoo should take me home tonight I need a man that thinks it right when it's so wrong	Sex – sexual tension and climax as a metaphor?

- 3) Searching for the themes – after developing a long list of codes and initial interpretation. I began to narrow down to overarching themes and sub-themes.
- 4) Reviewing themes – Braun and Clarke suggest combing all the instances in the same text where the theme appears to see patterns and then juxtapose the same themes with all the other texts in the body of work (pp. 91).
- 5) Defining and Naming – in this stage one questions the “essence” of the themes. I decided to cross-reference these themes with posts of Twitter and GGD. I found a forum on GGD where user listed themes they felt BTW brings out. I include these themes in the final stage:
- 6) Reporting – I condensed the themes I found into six core themes and the themes mentioned by users on GGD that I found similar or diverse to mine. The final table is below.

Table 6
All Themes (colours indicate presence of theme)

TITLE	Acceptance	Religion	Identity	Resilience	Resistance	Politics	Other
Marry the Night							Prostitution
Born This Way							Patriarchy
Government Hooker							Sexuality
Judas							
Americano							Patriotism
Hair							Patriarchy
Scheiße							Coloniality
Bloody Mary							
Black Jesus + Amen Fashion							Race
Bad Kids							
Fashion of His Love							Patriarchy
Highway Unicorn (Road to Love)							Patriotism
Heavy Metal Lover							
Electric Chapel							
The Queen							Empowerment
You and I							
The Edge of Glory							Sexuality

Theme by theme analysis

In BTW Gaga replies to the existing dialogue she was having with LMs who would write about their challenges and struggles, through interviews we can infer that these include, but are not limited to, depression, drug and substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, sexual assault etc. Her lyrics touch psychological concepts, and this is Gaga's first attempt to sympathize with her audience and comfort them with music. Below are some of the key themes I found in the album.

Acceptance

Humanist psychology argues that self-acceptance is an important step in alleviating human miseries/pains, it stimulates personal growth and builds strong character. Major religions and alternative practices encourage people to be holistically aware of their strengths and pitfalls, this self-knowledge enables them to transform negative cognitions to positive thoughts. The “self” part is central to the meanings drawn from BTW. Many of the listeners that adore the album have experienced some form of misery. This attacks their self-esteem, questions their self-worth and or facilitates the creation of self-deprecating behaviour. Synonyms for the word “acceptance” include embracing, tolerance and endurance (Bernard, 2013, pp. 1–3). Throughout BTW, Gaga discusses the concept of acceptance in different ways, below are lyrics that discuss the ideas around self-dispositions and personal circumstances.

Lyrics addressing self-image, focusing on the body as a source of discomfort and anxiety. The main messages of BTW [song] is accepting people regardless of the bodies they inhabit or the bodies they're attracted to. The title and lyrics emphasize the lottery of birth and accepting our inherent inequalities as diversity.

Born 'This Way: I'm beautiful in my way / Cause God makes no mistakes [l.12-13], Whether life's disabilities / Left you outcast, bullied, or teased / Rejoice and love yourself today [l.44 – 46]

Hair: And on Friday, Rock City High School dance / I've got my bangs to hide that I don't stand a chance [l.28, 30]

Scheiße: (I) I wish I could be strong without somebody there / (I) I wish I could be strong without the scheiße, yeah [l.23, 25]

Bad Kids: Don't be insecure [l.24]

When I was a teenager, I always wanted to be one of the 'cool kids', to be like everyone else around me and later as I started dating, I wanted my body to fit into a certain category. These were different moments in my life however they express a similar notion: my unhappiness with my self-image. When BTW came out I was 15-year-old, I was bullied and teased, I was insecure, and I thought I could change how I feel about myself by changing the outside. I remember times when I wouldn't eat enough because I thought I could be skinner. At the same time there was a contrasting voice, albeit small, encouraging me to accept myself. Gaga explores these two voices and how we innately have the potential to empower or shatter our self-image. The overall idea I get when listening to the album is that my negative thought processes develop at an early age and are best remedied by correcting how I see myself.

Religion

Throughout the BTW era Gaga was outspoken about her creative liberties when it comes to using common religious symbols in Christianity. It's her over-the-top use expressions that sparked polarizing debates globally, to LMs she was a creative genius and to some Christians she was a heretic and blasphemer. There is a certain allure whenever religious elements are used within consumer media, I assume it's the product of mixing something revered as pure, with something provocative. What LG does in BTW, we have seen before in Heavy metal, Rock and Punk rock artists, who saw religions as suppressive instruments that denied people the right to express themselves. While LG, herself claims to be a Christian she uses similar tactics to express the injustices religious groups commit against LGBTQ+ identities.

In an MTV exclusive interview promoting BTW, Lady Gaga mentioned working with producer Fernando Garibay on the record. He [Garibay] worked on creating the perfect album for her and the LMs. To him the LMs were like a cult, showing immense loyalty and belief in Lady Gaga (Halperin, 2011). Having worked on the Fame Monster album and toured with Lady Gaga, he noticed the effect she had on LMs and vice versa. In coming up with the tone of the album he leaned towards the notion of LMs as a cult and used religious like features within the music.

Track 1 – Marry the Night, starts with electronic church bells – traditionally church bells were used to summon worshippers to the church for prayer. The use of church bells was suspected to have started after 604AD, as the pope at the time wanted to announce times

for daily prayers. Over the centuries the use of bells has evolved, for example, in the 18th–20th century they were used by communities to alert people of danger or summon them for and activity. The church bell overall is a call to move (Smyth, 2019).

In *Born This Way* she emphasizes that God created all people regardless of sexuality, a direct response to the heteronormative doctrines taught to Christians, that condemn all other sexualities beyond the confined of a male-female relationship. In *Judas* Gaga brings to light betrayal using the biblical story of Jesus' betrayal by Judas, a beloved disciple. She sings "I'm just a Holy Fool, oh baby, It's so cruel, but I'm still in love with Judas, baby" [l.17-18]. The term Holy Fool – means someone who doesn't conform to social norms as a deliberate choice or mental illness. LG rejects the idea that the betrayer [Judas in this case] should be vilified, she wants to forgive him. Judas reminds me of all the friends I lost when I came out as gay, a phenomenon many queer people around the world go through.

The message of forgiveness continues in the lyrics of *Bloody Mary*: And when you're gone/ I'll tell them my religion's you/ I won't crucify the things you do [l.4-5, 16]. Unlike Judas that was about a friendship this is about a fail relationship. A clever nod to the story of Mary Magdalene who grieved when Jesus died and Queen Mary I of England (nicknamed Bloody Mary) who had experienced failed engagements and was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Protestants (Editors, 2018). The backup vocals of the all-male Gregorian chant-inspired choir creates a haunting sound.

Messages of Resilience

The definition of the term stem from the Latin 'resilire' (to leap back) and thus several disciplines use this element in their definitions. Each referring to an internal protentional for a person/system to readjust when faced with a stressor. Within Developmental psychology the concept of resilience is linked with cognitive capacity aiding adaptation despite a difficult circumstance (Windle, 2011, pp. 3–4). The concept of resilience is rooted in the optimist view that individuals carry their own potential to overcome the challenges they face.

In *BTW*, Lady Gaga explores her own ability to bounce back through challenges. In *Marry the Night* the first verse starts with: I'm gonna to marry the night/ I won't give up on my life [l.1-2]. This gives the listener an interpretation of what resilience means for Lady Gaga – her ability to embrace and accept the undesirable aspects of the problem. In the opening lines she sings about a desire to fight a personal battle. She sings phrases like warrior queen [l.3], I'm a soldier [l.7], Im a winner [l.8]. Each noun is a role linked with a form of status or power gained through ability. I would argue that this means that Lady Gaga has gained the ability to revolt against her challenges through learnt experiences by confronting the metaphoric night.

Similar emotion is conveyed in other songs in the album like:

Born this Way: I was born to be brave! [l.55]

Hair: I am my hair [l.13]

Scheiße: When I'm on a mission/I rebuke my condition [l.18-19]

The underlying message to LMs is that each one carries the tools they need to survive trauma and pain. As a LM, these songs continue to charge up my mood when I feel depressed or under an immense amount of stress. As an open African gay man, I navigate my society, being constantly reminded of the stigma attached to my orientation – I could easily become the princess trapped in the tower or I could affirm my resolve and charge through glances of disapproval.

The arrangement of the opening verse starts with Cooke in his 1959 study (as cited in (van Leeuwen, 2012, pp. 319–328) refers to as Chromatism – a technique used by western musicians when composing ballads. This constitutes the use of downward progressing, small steps within the tempo and tone, the aim being to create sentimentality. Often in this arrangement stings and pianos are often used to emphasize the effect, however, Lady Gaga starts off with an electronic church bells synthesized to mimic an organ/piano. The tempo changes into a full dance-pop and electronic rock frenzy from the chorus to the rest of the song. Cooke describes this as quick, ascending, energetic steps that are typical with heroic music. The story I get from the arrangement is that of a damsel in distress turned heroine, fighting to save herself.

Resistance and Empowerment

The intro of Bad Kids is Gaga leading a protest, her voice coming from a megaphone declaring a need for a social reform. Bad Kids: Don't tell me I'm less than my freedom / Pump your fist if you would rather mess up than put up with this [l.4, 27]

Other songs echo similar sentiments, encouraging the listener to stand up for themselves and fight for their freedom. The lines I extracted could easily be turned into slogans for a protest or one-line affirmations of confidence.

Born This Way: A different lover is not a sin [l.34]

Hair: I scream, "Mom and Dad, why can't I be who I wanna be?" [l.8]

Bloody Mary: I'm ready for their stones [l.7]

Heavy Metal Lover: Let's raise hell in the streets, drink beer and get into trouble [l.13]

Lady Gaga's dynamic vocals, particularly within the bridges coupled with bass heavy instrumentals has a profound uplifting effect on the listener. In the apex of songs like *Hair*, *Scheiße*, *Electric Chapel*, *You And I* and *The Edge of Glory*, LG belts out words/lyrics that carry intense emotion, conviction and a sense of purpose. Where her contemporaries take the time to showcase their range through vocalization, LG runs to articulation, as if not wanting to waste an opportunity and I strongly feel that that's one of the reasons why the album is highly successful.

Identity

In this paper I use the word queer interchangeably with the term LGBTQ+ as queer is used as umbrella term for those who don't identify as heterosexual. The term queer used to be a derogatory name for gay men. In the 1500s the term queer used to mean strange or peculiar, nothing denoting sexual activity. By the 1940-60s the word was used as a slur within the political conservatist camps to emphasise how unnatural the act was. During the gay rights movement and the AIDS epidemic (1980s), pro-gay groups began reclaiming the word as an identity marker for both non-heterosexual men and women. This was an act of defiance to the oppressive narrative that queer/homosexual meant unnatural. By reclaiming a word that was used to incite violence, it was a way to essentially disarm the homophobic discourse.

In the same light other reclaimed words such as: fag, queen, fruit carry a similar psychological and cultural effect. Lady Gaga does some acts of reclamation within the BTW album. In Government Hooker she sings: I'm your hooker [l.13], in Bad Kids: I'm a bitch / I'm a loser / I'm a jerk / I'm a brat / I'm a selfish punk [l.5-7,9-10].

After reading *Music Autoethnographies* which is an anthology of stories that revolve around how people interact with music. In chapter 15 Jodie Taylor writes about how she learnt about gender issues through music. From a listener to a budding gender historian studying how "particular music has marked gender, signified the feminine and aroused sexual suspicion" by looking at how music is intimately linked with our understanding of the sexual and gendered self (Bartleet and Ellis, 2009) . Though observing LM posts and interactions I could see how queer bodies experience BTW. Lady Gaga's lyrics reflect on concepts like Body Politics and sexual identity, among others. In music of the BTW era LG wear skimpy clothing, the intention wasn't to create sexual arousal, however, to raise awareness on how bodies play in integral role in shaping our social and political identity.

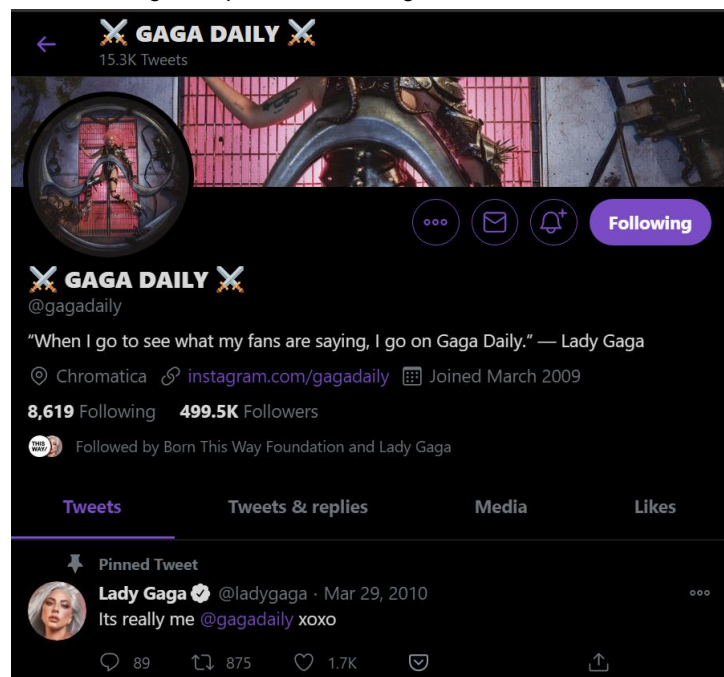
Chapter 4

LM INTERACTIONS

“Gaga Hears Us”

The LM fandom isn’t one dimensional. Its purpose and function changes based on how the users interact within it. There are some LMs that are active around the time LG is releasing new information, some are more vocal about their opinions and others lurk in the shadows watching as the fanbase grows. The feedback loop LG establishes with her monsters is I believe, key to the success of the fandom. By being accessible, Gaga grows with the community.

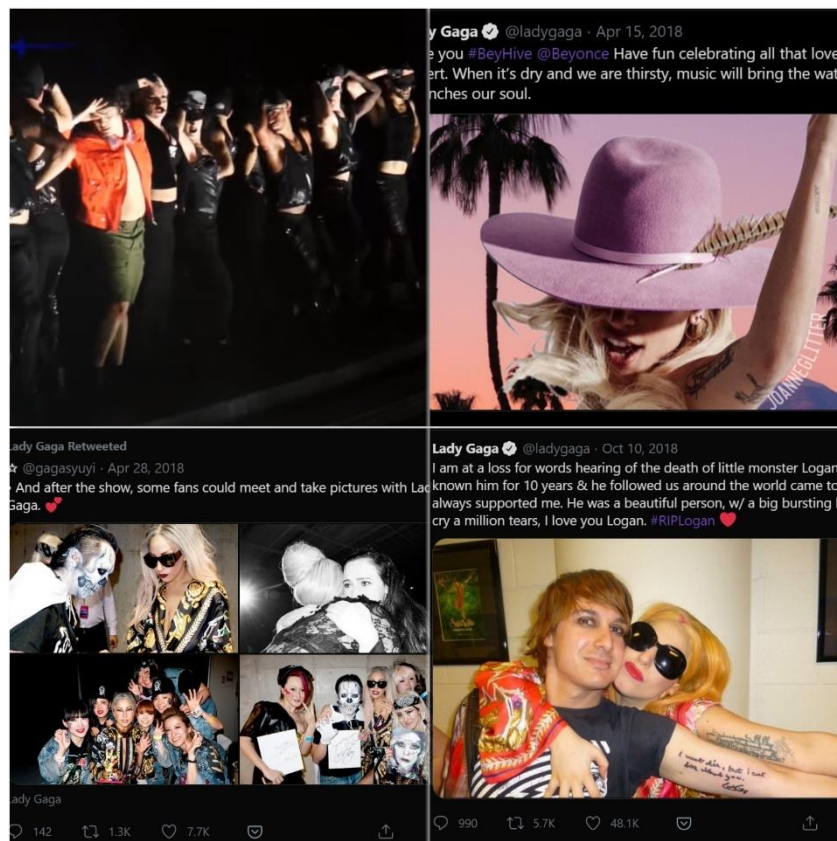
Fig 5: A quote and message from LG on GGD



Source: Twitter

The mutual recognition LG has with LMs can be seen during shows when she receives their gifts and letter, on her twitter account as she retweets stories and art LMs share and LG continues to feel the community her philosophy of kindness and community. The fandom isn’t left to its own devices, its continuously nurtured by both mother and monster. Let’s go deeper into this relationship.

Fig 6: (Top Left) LG dancing with LM @atticuslite on stage, (Top Right) LG thanking other fandoms for their support, (Bottom Left) LG sharing pictures with LMs, (Bottom Right) LG mourning the loss of a LM



Source: Twitter

Dani's Letter

During concert tours LG reads out fan letters in between her setlist. These letters are often thrown on stage, along with gifts, flowers and pride flags, LG picks up one letter and reads it out loud. Most letters can be found on uploaded clips on YouTube, however for the purposes of this paper I will refer to one published by CTV News. This letter was written by seventeen-year-old Dani Arnolds, who had scored a VIP package thus was close to the stage. In the letter Dani introduces herself and mentions she was a LM since she was 9 years old. The first thing I would like to point out is that fans within many fandoms vary in age groups, particularly within the pop music scene, where female bodies are sexualized and artists like LG, Britney Spears, Madonna etc, present themselves in graphic videos that carry age restrictions. However, fans like Dani and I were able to access these videos at an early age and form a bond with LG beyond the provocative presentation.

In the letter Dani writes thanking LG for the strength she's given her over the years through tough times and challenges – a sentiment that is expressed many other letters LG reads aloud. Dani makes mention of her and her mother's struggles with mental health. For Dani LG's music helps[ed] her build resilience and by being a LM she feels like she can relate with LG. this brings me to the second aspect I would like to draw out of this letter: LG's

willingness to openly share her problems, flaws/weaknesses with LMs makes her more relatable and thus they feel closer to her. After reading Dani's letter LG got off stage and hugged her – at times if the LM is too far into the crowd Gaga requests them to get onstage. This form of fan appreciation isn't unique to LG, throughout the music industry musicians have gone into the crowds to interact with adoring fans, at times sing to them, however, what makes this specific case interesting is the effect this interaction had on Dani and not the act itself. In an interview Dani said:

“It makes me feel good that she's actually listening and it's not just an act. A lot of people say that about her, that she's sucking up to her fans. (But) this proves to me that this is not true. She really does care about us and she made that apparent to me last night.” (D'Amore, 2017)

This statement brings me to the third thing I would like to briefly discuss. Dani like most LMs know that LG listens to their messages, this could be verified through the in-person interactions between them and LG, through interviews LG has with different entertainment reporters or through works like BTW that reflect the dialogue between LG and LMs.

Chosen Families

Belongingness hypothesis – states that all humans have a strong drive to form and maintain interpersonal bonds. Bonds are qualified by two criteria 1) the presence of frequent and pleasant interactions and 2) a demonstration of mutual care for each other. These carry emotional connotations as the concept of belonging or not rests heavily on the individual's relationship with the people around them. The positive effects of belonging can be seen as one feels joy, happiness and a sense of fulfilment. This further solidifies the individual's attachment to the person who makes them feel that way. The negative effects stem from the idea of losing the other person, the individual feels lonely and helpless. These feelings produce anxiety and the idea that the individual fails to make a connection because they lack something within themselves (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, pp. 497–529)

The idea of chosen family is arguably one of the core pillars of the Queer community, it's a concept that has become fundamental in how LGBTQ+ people gain support and love they wouldn't likely get from their biological family. For a myriad of reasons queer people may be forced to leave their homes or be denied recognition within their household and thus they seek out other people they have formed interpersonal bonds with, the stronger the bond the more they take up the mantle akin to family. Chosen families play vital roles that biological families don't have the capacity to fill. These can be based on fundamental needs like food and shelter or they can be more emotional roles around problem solving, mental health and guidance on other issues. In my discussion on the BTW music video I discuss LG's role as a mother figure to LMs. For many queer LMs she volunteers herself to fulfilling the emotional roles stereotypically assigned to mothers. Her role extends to building connections e.g. LM to LM or in the case of the BTW Foundation LM to Service provider.

I displaced queer youth. I prefer to use the term displaced, rather than homeless as I think the term homeless carries a heavy social stigma and the idea of a loss of a 'home'/'family' structure. The definition and scope of homelessness varies location by location (Selassie, 2018), however one conclusion is that these are people who have been displaced from their permanent residency and living elsewhere: whether unsheltered or sheltered.

As I was looking for specific resources referencing displaced queer youth around the world and many of them are statistics in Europe and the USA. Homelessness among LGBTQ+ youth is a large concern in the US, an estimated 300,000 and 600,000 reported annually (Coolhart and Brown, 2017, pp. 230–238). Some of these youth are adopted into “Houses” within what is known as the “Kiki Ballroom Scene” where LGBTQ individuals (under the guidance of a House Mother – male or female) use dance and art to raise awareness on certain issues and raise money to fund their house (Wong, Benjamin and Arnold, 2020, pp. 444–458). Lady Gaga has functioned in a similar way to House Mothers, she gives her children a platform to express themselves and grow in their fields. Proof of this is in the large number of artwork and gifts that LMs create for Gaga and themselves. In 2009, Lady Gaga signed her first partnership with Virgin Mobile, they would pledge to donate up to 5000 US dollars to local LGBTQ homeless shelters in each city LG had a tour in.

Lady Gaga makes mention in a promotional video that hundreds of LMs had pledged time and supporting, working in homeless shelters throughout the USA. Her commitment was to ensure that each of those LMs was given free tickets to her shows and she would match the donations.

The Armour We Wear

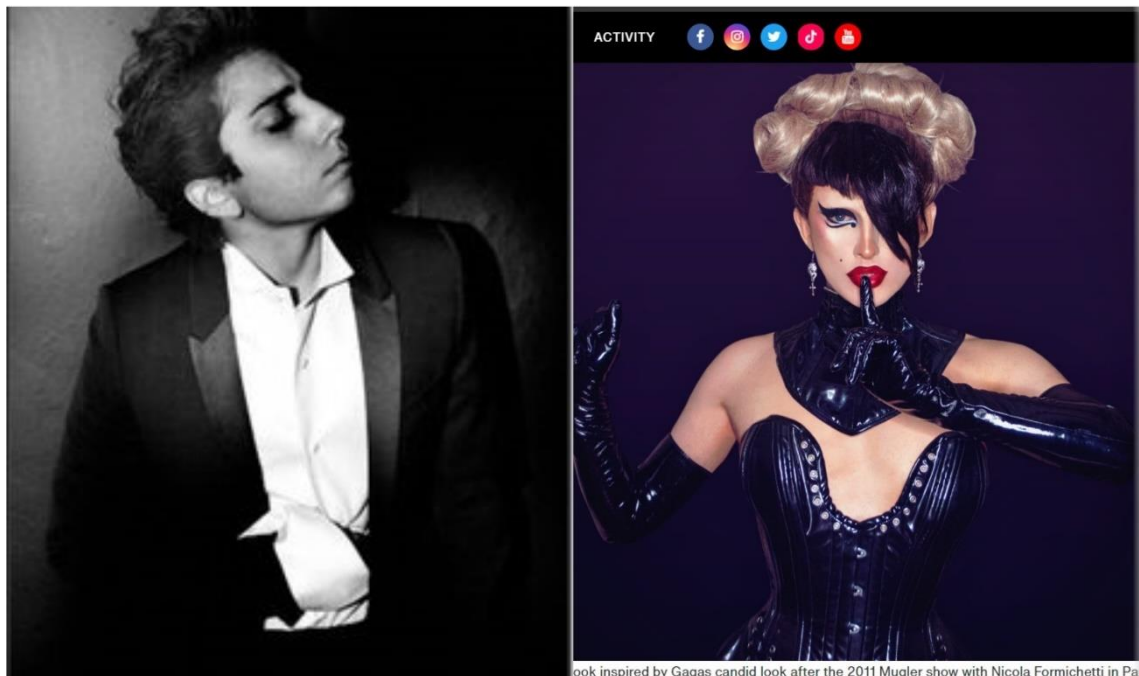
LG when in public presents herself as a tough, rough and at times rowdy, her punk-esque metal inspired demeanour, especially in the BTW era has inspired many LMs. Her looks range from wearing black leather jackets to over the top fringed bodysuits. Many of these pieces are created to go against the templates of fashion. In a sense a rebellion of the ideals of how clothes should be worn. In music festivals people dress up to escape the everyday, the transformation helps them to think and see themselves as a different person (Chaney and Goulding, 2016, pp. 155–165).

Similarly wearing makeup is seen as a form of gender politics and as a powerful form of self-expression. In some cases, the use of makeup is an expression of masculinity e.g. drag queens and kings both use makeup to enhance different gender expressions. The use of makeup isn't limited to only masculine and feminine presentations, it's an artform, a part of a personality or even a tool to discover one's place in a society (Journal, 2019).

In BTW (song) LG says: Don't be a drag – just be a queen [l.27] Its a creative play on the word of drag, celebrity impersonators and entertainers who won't be a 'drag' (boring) at an event and who are empowered through their artform, thus using the title 'queen'. In the music video LG uses facial prosthetics to make herself look more alien-like, the lyric and visual presentation both reference the elements within drag culture. LG link many drag queens may appear as synthetic, unreal and unrelatable based on the extravagance attached to their performances, however its these hybrid/unreal forms expressions that attract people.

I would extend this thought into my own personal life. LGs visual representation drew me in, I wanted to dress-up like her, do as many creative things with my wardrobe, however I was in a household where tearing up jeans and gluing beads to my face was going to be appreciated. I decided to live vicariously through LG and the casts of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, imagining myself as the creator, model and judge of these pieces. Watching these personalities on the television made it possible for me to gain the courage to express my creativity in different and unique ways, chiefly, through my experimental hairstyles over the years. Gaga herself has appears in drag in the video for *You And I* she transforms into her drag-king identity Jo Calderone, she actively participates in her monsters' realities. She has influenced other LM to get into the art of drag. LMs attend LG concerts dressed up and paint their faces into artistic pieces that celebrate their icon and their individuality at the same time.

Fig 7: (Left) LG as Jo Caderone in 2011, (Right) a LM on GGD sowing off a new LG inspired look.



Source: Gagadaily

Born This Way Foundation

The Born This Way foundations (launched 2012) has dedicated resources to research, learn and develop programmes that “support youth and empower them to create a kinder and

braver world”. The foundations aim is to use both a community-based approach and collaborative approach. This enables them to link people with specific service providers, they wouldn’t normally be able to access. By 2015 the foundation through *The Bravest Map Ever* – an online resource linked 150000 youth to over 50 non-profit providers for a variety of youth related issues from bullying in schools to mental health problems (Germanotta, 2015, pp. 2–4).

The co-founders are LG and her mother Cynthia Germanotta, this intention partnership reinforces the concept of maternity as a bond that encourages growth, something LG as Mother Monster does for her LMs during shows. During the shows LG travels with the Born Brave Bus – a mobile help centre with trained counsellors created for any concert goers that need immediate psychological support. By providing a safe space for youth, the BTW Foundation hopes to enable more youth to develop skills associated with self-acceptance, self-awareness, resilience and compassion (pp. 14-16).

Positive Psychology Interventions address negative cognitive thoughts by promoting activities that boost positive self-regard for overall good mental wellbeing. In a study conducted by the BTW Foundation findings showed that of the >20000 youth (13-25 years old) of participants that visited the Born Brave Bus were more likely to refer others to the service or similar as their perception about mental health changed. On another light they found that many youths prefer to use text messaging or internet-based services rather than call help lines (pp.15). A similar study done on adolescent in Sweden showed similar results. The pilot study with 352 participants indicated that mental health service providers should consider mobile phone-based interventions to reach a wider audience (Thomas and Bendtsen, 2019, p. e12396).

These results are important because 1) in the past decade (2000-2020) the number of internet user has increased. User involvement and innovations close the divide between real life and a virtual identity, making interactions on both plans of existence equally meaningful to users. 2) The internet and virtual spaces are becoming a preferred platform for engagement therefore studies around fandoms can create tailor made initiatives for users that experience life’s pains within the digital ecosystem. 3) most fandoms (especially the LM community) exist online and some members seek support within the community. It would be more effective and cost efficient for mental health care providers to provide services online to members.

Through BTW Foundation LG and her mother has been able to collect and curate stories of kindness and community in their first publication *Channel Kindness*. The book is a collection of 51 essays from young people, each tells a story and tackles subject matters a light-hearted as ‘Kindness in Sports’ (pp. 34), to serious issues like depression and pain in ‘Lupuschick’ (pp. 188). One essay that stood out to me was by Scarlett Lewis, a mother of one of the children that died in the Sandy Hook shooting. She was told that her 6-year-old son had courageously gestured his classmates to run to safety while he stood by his teachers’

side, where he died. Lewis reminds us that choosing courage is the best in any situation (Germanotta and Gaga, 2020, pp. 55–59).

My interactions outside the LM community

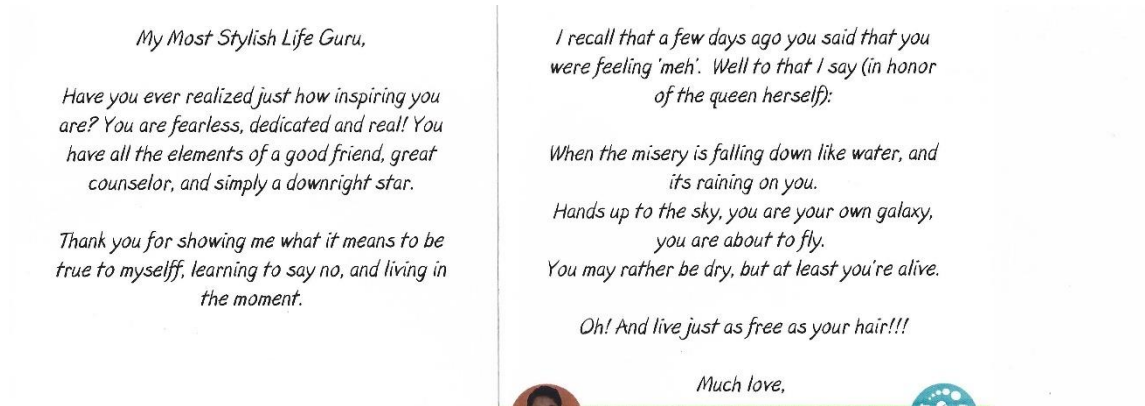
Reaction videos by popular YouTubers like Zach Campbell (Campbell, 2018), Wouter Ver-togen, Two Gay Matts and ... have entertained me throughout the eras. Their on-camera reactions reflect how some LMs like me experience new music from Gaga. In the past three months leading to this papers submission, I enjoyed the reactions by two YouTubers, 1) Canadian Eddie from the Channel Newfie Reactions, he started with one reaction video in March 2020 and spiralled into a colourful journey into Gaga's discography. I wouldn't like to refer to him as a Little Monster, however his videos (while wearing a t-shirt written *Ob My Gaga*) remind me of the bemusement I had the first time I listened to a LG song – I was instantly converted!. I specifically enjoy how Eddie makes assumptions purely based on what he sees and knows from other artists. His simple, at times ignorant interpretations are sharp and point out creative elements seasoned LMs could overlook (Reactions, 2020). On the other side of the reaction wheel is 2) Michael Murray from the UK, a self-identifying LM and Gaga loyalist. His reaction videos capture a unique blend of euphoria, curiosity and excitement many LMs like me experience with every new album. Murray isn't shy to talk about his love for Gaga and his views about past eras (Murray, 2020). His reactions show the unabashed bravery LMs aren't afraid to express to family and those around them, no matter how awkward or weird they're perceived to be.

I had no initial desire to conduct an interview, however as I spoke to some of my friends across different majors, they expressed their own interactions with Lady Gaga's music. I decided to include this part as it shows my interactions as a LM with other people who are familiar with Lady Gaga. Below are the memories, I paraphrased them to the best of my ability.

- ❖ I remember listening and dancing to Lady Gaga songs with my friends but at the time I didn't realize what the lyrics meant. – *Unknowing Monster* (East Africa)
- ❖ I bonded with a group of 10-year-old girls over Lady Gaga at a camp I volunteered at – *Ms. Coolantro* (North America)
- ❖ Paparazzi is the best LG song! My conservatist mom never allowed me to listen to LG, she said I was going to hell. Recently my straight brother played LG on the radio as we drove to our rural village, I was surprised. – *A Queer Auntie* (Middle East)
- ❖ I'm queer but I never really liked LG, I think she only appeals to gay men. – *Zero Left Feet* (Latin America)
- ❖ I went home and I found an old iPod that had Lady Gaga's music – Not Shakira (Middle East)
- ❖ "I remember a group of us in ***'s room last year for her birthday, singing *Bad Romance* at the top of our lungs, drumming on the furniture, while **** accompanied

on acoustic guitar. It was so much fun, and we were all still happy and hopeful then.”
– Mrs. Backroll Eleganza (North America)

Fig 8: A card I received from a friend I met at ISS coded with Lady Gaga lyrics



Overall, I feel lucky to be writing about the experiences I have within and outside the LM community. The people I met at ISS allowed me the opportunity to shared my story and how it relates to LG

Chapter 5

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