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Reading Between the Blinds: The Reproduction of Sexuality Binaries in Celebrity Blind Items

A Dissertation

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Abstract

Blind items, anonymous celebrity gossip narratives, represent an under-researched yet increasingly popular aspect of the digital world. The stories have a habit of speculating on stars' sexual orientations; this study investigates the ways in which they do this, reproducing binary understandings of sexuality in the process. Utilising a queer theoretical lens, the research combines a social media analysis of thirty blog posts with two focus groups, conducted with young people aged 18-26. Findings demonstrate that the binaries of gay/straight, secrecy/disclosure, and masculinity/femininity are all reflected in the blind items and their respective comment sections. Firstly, the posts apply a strong pressure for celebrities to 'come out,' using the closet metaphor to convey that queerness must be declared, rather than implicitly understood. Secondly, bisexuality – especially for men – is consistently ignored, misinterpreted, and stigmatised in the stories, revealing broader monosexist and gendered societal beliefs. By investigating this specific style of gossip, *Reading Between the Blinds* establishes how sexuality binaries are maintained and reproduced. Ultimately, this research project argues that by reducing queerness to a form of scandalous entertainment, blind items function as a tool for policing identity that is overlooked, but extremely *powerful*.

Table of Contents

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Chapter One – Introduction

The higher a celebrity rises, the harder they fall. And the gossip industry? It watches and waits at the bottom, ready to capture every minute detail of their decline. From social media debates to tabloid exposés, audiences are granted what feels like behind-the-scenes access to the façade of celebrity life. In the glamourous world of gossip, the private lives of stars are meticulously dissected, with relationships, affairs, and sexualities all shamelessly exposed. Speculation about who is gay, straight, or closeted is turned into a mystery for readers to solve. As Gross (1993) establishes, this speculation is not new. But in the digital age, celebrity gossip has evolved into a unique format: the blind item.

A blind item is a "scandalous story in a gossip column," but the catch is that they do not "reveal the names of the people being discussed," (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). Cryptic aliases and ambiguous hints are offered to the audience instead, encouraging them to collaborate and guess who the narrative is about. Celebrity gossip is often dismissed as trivial, but by judging public figures, its readers reproduce cultural norms surrounding behaviour and identity. Blind items convey LGBTQ+ orientations as scandalous, the relentless speculation reinforcing heteronormative beliefs. The stories, therefore, are more than just entertainment. They are sociologically relevant, requiring critical academic attention.

This dissertation aims to exemplify how celebrity blind items reproduce binary understandings of sexuality. Binaries are, as Chambers and Carver (2007, p. 26) explain, "dualistic ways of thinking" that divide society into opposite categories. Queer theory has long critiqued the confinement of binaries, and a text that is renowned for doing so is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). She argues that the homosexual/heterosexual binary functions as a "master term" in shaping how other divides are understood, including secrecy/disclosure and masculinity/femininity – all of which are embedded in the blind items this dissertation examines (p. 11). In

this aspect, binaries are not only tools for categorising identity. They regulate how it is policed and performed within the wider society.

To exemplify these patterns, the dissertation draws on a two-step qualitative research design. The study first analysed social media texts, sampling thirty blind item posts and their respective comment sections. This was followed by focus groups conducted with young people aged 18-26; they represent the gossip's intended audience. The mixed-method approach made it possible to trace recurring patterns across both data sets. The binaries appeared in the original posts *and* the audience responses to them.

The first idea generated by the thematic analysis is the pressure exerted on celebrities to 'come out' and disclose their sexualities, framed through the persistent closet metaphor. Throughout blind items, queerness is conveyed as a secret that celebrities must expose, cementing it as different from heterosexuality, which remains unquestioned. The second theme spotlights bisexuality; how it is erased, disbelieved, and condemned within the discourse. Both focus group participants and online users observed that it was almost entirely absent from the posts. Whenever bisexuality did happen to appear, it was dismissed as invalid or a mere phase, especially with male celebrities. This finding reveals how sexuality binaries are not isolated but instead intersect with gendered assumptions.

This piece offers an original insight into both queer media studies and the broader discipline of sociology. While previous research has considered how traditional media outlets convey gender and sexuality, very little attention has been given to blind items. This dissertation is one of the first sociological investigations into this gossip style, examining how queerness is represented and policed in popular culture.

The chapters that follow establish the groundwork for my research, beginning by unpacking the existing scholarship on celebrity gossip, outing, and sexuality binaries.

Potential gaps and limitations of the pieces are also raised and critiqued. The methodology chapter then provides an overview of the data collection process and any ethical concerns that arose when conducting the fieldwork. The findings are divided into two intersecting themes: the demands to disclose one's identity, and the prejudice against bisexuality. The final chapter reflects on the research as a whole, suggesting avenues for future study. It reiterates why exactly this piece matters: for those in the public eye, celebrity gossip restricts how queerness is allowed to exist. It may seem trivial, but its impacts are the complete opposite. Celebrities should be allowed to keep the private details of their identities, private. After all, there is a real person under the star's persona. To get this conversation started, the next chapter will ground the study by considering literature on gossip, outing, and binaries.

<u>Chapter Two – Literature Review</u>

In the spectacular world of celebrity culture, private lives transform into public property. Gossip catalyses this process; rumours and speculation serve as entertainment, even when they blur the boundary between publicity and privacy (Ortner, 2013). This literature review explores the existing scholarship on celebrity culture and sexuality binaries, contextualising my investigation into blind items. Drawing upon a range of interdisciplinary sources from media studies and queer theory, this review maps the current research landscape in which my dissertation will be situated. The chapter is categorised into three sections and will begin with a deep dive into celebrity gossip, introducing blind items as a unique, digital example of this. The next section will consider celebrity outing and the ethical dilemmas that continue to emerge from the discourse surrounding them. Finally, sexuality binaries will be explored, establishing exactly what they are and how the media reproduce them. This body of work highlights a research gap within our discipline: blind items are extremely underexplored. However, they serve as cultural artefacts that reflect broader societal attitudes, making them worthy of scholarly attention. I will give them that attention, applying a queer theoretical lens to do so. The review begins by tracing the history of celebrity gossip to see how it has evolved into the blind items we see on blogs and social media platforms today.

<u>Celebrity Gossip and Blind Items</u>

A star is not born. Instead, they are carefully curated through the construction of public personas. Celebrities, in a plethora of variations, have existed for centuries (Inglis, 2010). They are not a new phenomenon. Riley (2010, p. xiv) defines fame as an "intense interest in an individual's personal life," desiring knowledge on "what the celebrity is 'really like.'" Whether they are shared through magazine articles or blog posts, the scandalous stories of the rich and famous are what keep their stardom alive and shining. Wilson (2010, p. 28) investigates the popularity of physical celebrity gossip magazines. She explores that readers are actively invited to judge a star's behaviour, decoding clues about their private lives and measuring their actions on a morality scale.

However, in the digital age, the print format of celebrity magazines is getting phased out. McNamara (2011) chronologically considers the digitalisation of celebrity culture. The growth of the relentless paparazzi industry, she argues, led to a simultaneous rise in celebrity-orientated websites – including blind item blogs. These spaces thrive on "disrupting the stable image" of a star (p. 522). Similarly, Jerslev and Mortenson (2018) explore how social media has amplified the lack of boundaries afforded to celebrities, shifting how fans interact with their idols and vice versa.

Celebrity gossip blogs are frequent sites for sociological research (Petersen, 2009; Meyers, 2013; McNealy and Mullis, 2019). Specifically, Fairclough (2008) samples a range of websites to understand the impact that online gossip has had on celebrity culture. She investigates the idea that scandal reinforces societal norms, policing the actions of famous people to advise the mundane audience on how *not* to act, similar to Wilson's findings, too (2010). Whilst Fairclough's (2008, p. 3) study does focus on gender binaries, the piece briefly notes that some websites make "attempts to 'out' celebrities," believing that stars should not "claim the right to remain 'in the closet' when living in the public sphere." This perspective evokes queer theoretical critiques of outing, as it is a heteronormative practice. LGBTQ+ identities are positioned as hidden truths in need of exposure, while straightness remains uninterrogated. While gossip blogs have received considerable amounts of attention in academia, blind items have not. The sole study on the phenomenon is by Ortner (2013), who examines the dynamics prevalent when creating and consuming blind items. Each story acts as a "puzzle" for those "familiar with the celebrity universe" to solve (p. 1). By obscuring who each story is about, these anonymous narratives become collaborative, transforming readers into co-conspirators in speculating on a celebrity's image. This mysterious aspect is what sets it apart from other forms of gossip.

Anonymity emboldens people to "say or do anything without reprisal," or fear of repercussions (Curlew, 2019, p. 7). The majority of Ortner's conceptual framework surrounds privacy and anonymity, deriving from Solove's (2007) work on digital reputation and online gossip. Solove argues that the so-called "norm police" are in full

force online as a result of speculation, judging how people should act and behave. The impacts this monitoring can have are heightened within digital spaces, as stories can spread more rapidly and without context (p. 6). Moreover, by not revealing who they are or who they are writing about, blind item authors hide behind an impenetrable layer of anonymity. If no one *truly* knows who a story is about, the author cannot face any ramifications for publishing it. This becomes especially troubling, however, when gossip turns to identity or sexuality, as invasive claims can be shamelessly circulated. Ortner (2013) recognises these patterns in their research. The stories would repeatedly discuss "the sexualities of stars, especially male ones," encouraging closeted celebrities to come out (p. 16). Whether intentionally or not, this practice is harmful to the people being discussed as it takes something intrinsically private and spins it into a public narrative. Despite identifying the pattern, Ortner does not fully interrogate the heteronormative implications it raises. This lack of attention is troublesome and risks reinforcing the same binary logic. It is a critical blind spot in their work that this dissertation seeks to behold.

While Ortner's (2013) study provided an invaluable framework for academic research on blind items, it is worth noting that I was unable to locate any other scholarly pieces on the topic. Thorough attempts to find related work, including Ortner's subsequent publications, were unsuccessful. While often dismissed as harmless fun, blind items reinforce wider societal attitudes towards identity, particularly sexuality. This dynamic becomes especially visible in the practice of outing, which the next section explores.

Celebrity Outing and the Ethics of Speculation

Attempting to 'out' celebrities is a controversial practice long found within the gossip industry. Not only does it reinforce societal pressures of labelling, but it raises ethical concerns about the extent to which a public figure is allowed privacy. The phenomenon can be traced back to print magazines in the 1990s. Gross (1993) explores one of the earliest collective efforts to out celebrities: the weekly *Gossip Watch* column, found in New York's *OutWeek* magazine. It would list countless names of supposedly closeted celebrities, disclosing their sexualities without consent. This was allegedly done in the name of activism, without any supposed malice, making the statement that "anyone

can be gay," (p. 252). Gross' (1993) book extensively explores the ethics of outing celebrities and concludes with the argument that it is a complicated matter but if any journalists do go through with it, their integrity is truly called into question.

One of the celebrities that *OutWeek* targeted was Jodie Foster, the case study behind Bobker's (2015) research paper. At an award show in 2013, Foster 'came out' without explicitly labelling herself, "affirming her right" to control her narrative (p. 33). The media, however, criticised her for doing it too late. As there had been speculation about her sexual orientation trailing back to the 90s, the press believed that she had squandered "her special opportunity to model gay pride" by not addressing it sooner (Bobker, 2015, p. 33). Bobker unpacks this very example to dissect the pressures placed on celebrities to come out, exploring how the media fuel this. Foster's decision drew both praise and criticism, highlighting that disclosure is a deeply personal, but contentious, ordeal. This piece establishes that outing is a common thing within the gossip industry. And as Ortner (2013, p. 15) notes, similar pressures appear in a "myriad of [blind] items." Sexuality speculation is therefore identifiable in celebrity gossip.

Within academia, there have been lots of ethical debates surrounding the practice of outing somebody else's sexuality. Chekola (1994) and McCarthy (1994) build upon one another's work when discussing this dilemma. They both argue that while forced disclosure may be justified when exposing hypocrisy, context and agency are key; this is comparable to Gross' (1993) concluding stance. Although the texts shape broadly similar attitudes on the matter, the pair do have contrasting opinions. Chekola (1994, p. 74) argues that public figures have "waived entitlement to much privacy," whilst McCarthy (1994) recognises that public outing can be both an act of liberation *and* an exposure to discrimination. The articles conclude by reinforcing the importance of context, suggesting it should be judged on a case-by-case basis. It is worth noting that while Chekola, McCarthy, and Gross' studies all add to this discussion, their arguments largely reflect the pre-digital contexts in which they were crafted. They are all from approximately the same time frame, which may be why their arguments align. This does limit their applicability to online sexuality speculation, however, and this is a

limitation to consider. Despite the influx in digital studies, recent scholarship addressing online outing remains surprisingly limited. Perhaps it is an outdated practice, or perhaps it is being overlooked within contemporary queer media studies.

Outing is a paradoxical act. It challenges heteronormativity by making queerness visible, yet simultaneously, it reinforces the very binaries it aims to disrupt. When sexuality disclosure is framed as a requirement, queerness is treated as in need of justification. In celebrity culture, this pressure is amplified. The expectations uphold the binary logic of the 'closet' – being in or out of it, with no room for ambiguity. The following section will explore how binaries shape depictions of sexuality in the media, particularly relating to disclosure and bisexuality, scrutinising the discrimination faced by men who identify as such.

Sexuality Binaries

Within the media, sexuality is rarely ever interpreted as a spectrum. It is instead sorted, labelled, and policed through the existence of binaries. Binaries are oppositional ways of thinking, but they are not proportional – one position is often emphasised as normal over the other (Chambers and Carver, 2007, p. 26). Sedgwick (1990) identifies the binarised opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality, going further to establish it as a framework that affects the categorisation of an entire network of divides. These include secrecy/disclosure and masculinity/femininity. Binaries are not merely used to describe sexualities; they segregate society into distinguishable groups, with no affordance of a purgatory state. These splits continue to be privileged in Western cultures, overlooking the entire spectrum of other possibilities.

Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) is a crucial queer theoretical publication that can be applied to celebrity sexuality discourse. There is an "ideological binary between those who are 'in the closet,' and those who are 'out,'" (Davis, Zimman and Raclaw, 2014, p. 8). Sedgwick (1990) argues that "coming out of the closet" reinforces heteronormativity, as it positions queer identities as abnormal. The secrecy/disclosure binary that she recognises maintains a restrictive divide that can be especially worrisome if applied to celebrities. For them, the stakes of disclosure are

much higher; it is considered an expectation, not a choice. Reading blind items and speculating on sexuality is a normalised everyday activity for consumers. Sedgwick's (1990) infamous work illuminates that this practice reinforces sexuality binaries and introduces a voyeuristic entitlement to knowing a celebrity's personal identity. In Reschke's (1991) review of the book, he praises Sedgwick's insight into how definitions of sexuality shape societal understandings. However, he does note a limitation to her study; the emphasis she places on the experiences of gay men over other queer identities. He writes that this should not be used to "diminish Sedgwick's contribution" to LGBTQ+ studies but must not be ignored as a shortcoming of *Epistemology of the Closet* (p. 573).

Despite being published over thirty years ago, Sedgwick's work continues to remain relevant, as seen in Draper's (2012) application of her ideas. Draper's research introduces a case study of singer Adam Lambert, exploring how the rampant media speculation on his sexuality coerced him to come out. Lambert described the experience as "out of [his] control," (p. 205). This reflects the invasiveness of celebrity gossip; the mainstream media feel entitled to know everything about a star. Viewers of *American Idol* were encouraged to "track down additional information" on the contestants, in search for "the 'hidden truth' about them," (Draper, 2012, p. 207). This echoes the very logic of blind items, which rely on hints that the audience decodes. Although Draper's piece was compelling, its reliance on a single case study can limit its generalisability; the press may not target every celebrity in the same way. Draper's work does, however, critique the media's fascination with gay male celebrities, a pattern that Ortner (2013) also identified in blind items. They argue that this focus perpetuates gender stereotypes and heteronormative assumptions. This connection between gender and sexuality reinforces Sedgwick's (1990) argument that binaries intersect and are entangled together in a web, creating ways of describing and regulating identity. Gossip surrounding queer men often feminises them, equating queerness with a deviation from masculinity. The tabloids "overwhelmingly depicted" Lambert as a closeted gay man because of how he appeared and performed, "without allowing for the possibility" that he could have been bisexual, straight, or simply

unlabelled (Draper, 2012, p. 208). This reflects binary thinking. Any ambiguity is boxed into strict labels to make them easier to comprehend.

The binary logic of gay/straight shapes dominant understandings of sexuality, leaving little room for plurisexual identities, such as bisexuality. The binary is underpinned by notions of monosexism, the assumption that everyone should be "attracted to no more than one gender," (Eisner, 2016). As a result, bisexuality is often conveyed as a "phase," "invalid," or "for sexual titillation," (Nelson, 2020, p. 71). Nelson's study critiques this and raises a key sociological research gap: while bisexual representation has increased in academia, it continues to be shaped by narratives pertaining to whiteness, class privilege, and female experiences. Male and trans bisexuality, as well as queer of colour critiques, remain underexplored. While my study does not have the scope to address every intersection, it contributes to filling this gap by examining how bisexual men are rendered invisible throughout celebrity gossip. It is particularly absent in blind items, where queerness is openly speculated upon but pushed into fixed binaries.

Capulet (2010) explores how bisexual female celebrities are sexualised by the media. While the examples used are rather dated, the study is relevant in revealing how celebrity bisexuality is reduced to a mere spectacle, rather than considered to be a valid identity. His point about the overwhelming media focus on bisexual women is vital. Even when male public figures come out using the label, they are largely ignored or met with suspicion (p. 297).

This dynamic is further evident in newspaper coverage of British athlete Tom Daley's coming out journey (Magrath, Cleland and Anderson, 2017). Despite stating at the time that he was attracted to women but currently dating a man, Daley was consistently labelled as gay by the press. This binary view erased bisexuality as a "legitimate sexual orientation" for a male public figure to use, particularly one working in a hypermasculine domain, such as sport (p. 300). In blind items, this same assumption is perpetuated; the possibility of bisexuality is scarcely entertained. In general, this literature has demonstrated how binaries, particularly relating to the

secrecy/disclosure and gay/straight divides, continue to shape how sexuality is understood. Despite this, there is still a lack of academic work interrogating this phenomenon. There have been no focused attempts to tie blind items to gender or sexuality norms. This is an integral gap but my dissertation will consider it.

Research Gaps and Limitations

While there is an extensive amount of literature on celebrity culture, certain aspects continue to fly under the radar, particularly concerning identity. Although several pieces touch on celebrity sexuality within the gossip industry (Fairclough, 2008; Ortner, 2013; McNealy and Mullis, 2019), these tend to be surface-level observations or literal footnotes. Ortner's (2013) study does identify outing as one of blind items' recurring themes but falls short of interrogating the practice and the heteronormative binaries it reproduces. Additionally, a lot of the existing literature on celebrity outing focuses on individual case studies rooted in traditional media, such as television or newspapers, rather than considering online – or anonymous – spaces. Digital platforms amplify the effects of speculation due to the larger reach the discussions can have (Solove, 2007). Expanding on the research state to include the online world is therefore crucial. Despite their popularity, blind items remain almost entirely unacknowledged in academia, perhaps because gossip is so often dismissed as trivial or unserious. But I will challenge this perspective.

This literature review has traced the transformation of celebrity gossip, from print tabloids to anonymous digital blogs, highlighting how these spaces reinforce norms about sexuality. Three intersecting themes emerged from the literature explored: the digitalisation of celebrity gossip, the ethics of outing, and the persistence of sexuality binaries that divide queerness from straightness. While previous research has identified these dynamics, I will expand on and combine them in greater depth. Using queer theory, I examine how blind items reproduce the secrecy/disclosure, gay/straight, and masculinity/femininity binaries. They reflect wider dilemmas about privacy, disclosure, and fluidity. My research question is, thus: *In what ways do celebrity blind items reproduce sexuality binaries?*

Chapter Three – Methodology

Blind items, with their layers of gossip, secrecy, and anonymity, are complex cultural texts to comprehend. Thus, they required a methodological approach that was both detailed and rigorous. The research needed to expand on Ortner's (2013) foundational study by establishing how *sexuality-specific* blind items materialise. It also had to contextualise the ways in which audiences interpret them in everyday life. In simpler terms, the piece sought to investigate how blind items are *written* and how they are *read*. Therefore, a research sequence that combined social media analysis with focus groups was fashioned. The two methods operated in tandem: the online research grounded the study in examples, but it was the focus groups that truly brought it to life, animating the research with lived experience. This chapter opens by unpacking the research design in greater depth, followed by an explanation of the data collection and ethical considerations for each method. A reflexive account of my positionality as a researcher concludes the chapter. My identity and own perspectives shaped the research process; it is imperative that I recognise how it did.

Research Design

The absence of scholarship on blind items justifies the use of qualitative methods to unpack them further. Qualitative research is particularly effective when investigating how "experiences, meanings and perspectives" are sociologically understood (Hammarberg, 2016, p. 499). Since this study examines sexuality binaries – examples of meaning systems – this style of research best fits the analysis. Considering the scope of the research I wanted to conduct, alongside the fact that it had only been investigated once before, a sequential design was the most suitable choice. First, I carried out social media analysis to ground the dissertation in examples of blind items, identifying the recurring patterns they include. This mapped out the ways that sexuality and queerness are discussed, hinted at, and blatantly speculated upon in the practice. These findings directly informed the second phase: focus groups, where participants personally engaged with examples taken from the social media research. The two methods were therefore not separate, or inconsequential. They operated as one. As Doyle, Brady, and Byrne (2009) note, when qualitative methods build upon one

another, they deepen the scope of the findings. That was the exact intention here. The focus groups would not have been possible without returning to the source first and sampling social media texts.

Social Media Analysis

Step one was to examine how blind items convey sexuality. To do this, I accessed a high-traffic, established blog that is dedicated to providing gossip of this nature. Posts were sampled from January 2022 to September 2024, to keep the study as contemporary as possible. The site is a well-known space for anonymous stories, with active comment sections. However, due to ethical guidance from the British Sociological Association (2016), the source will be entirely anonymised throughout this piece. Privacy is a fundamental component for maintaining safety in the digital world, thus "URLs and 'links' to the forum website should not be provided within the piece (p. 16). The blog will remain unnamed and unidentifiable.

To locate well-suited posts for the study, I used purposeful sampling, a strategy designed to identify "information-rich" examples in qualitative research (Patton, 2002, as quoted in Palinkas *et al.*, 2013, p.534). Using the *find-on-page* function, I searched for posts, typing in a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to refine the results. Useful phrases included "gay," "lesbian," "LGBT*," "closet," and "beard." The technique allowed me to identify approximately five posts per month that discussed sexuality, eventually narrowing this down to 30 blind items for my study. Selection was based on appropriateness; the blind items had to speculate on sexuality in some way but could not include explicit content or inflammatory language that would be harmful to read. Although the sample was larger than anticipated, it ensured richer data and greater thematic variety for my research, and I adhered to the BSA's (2016) guidelines at every turn.

Although I made thorough attempts to search for more blind items about other gender identities – searching with keywords such as "women," and "transitioning," – the vast majority of the stories were written about men. This imbalance is extremely telling. It reflects wider norms in gossip culture, as male homosexuality is fixated upon yet

frequently disrespected. Meanwhile, other identities are erased or fetishised. This pattern was first identifiable in the literature review. It played out, yet again, in the data collection. To accompany each blind item, I sampled a range of comments, the number of which was adjusted depending on the levels of engagement each post sparked. I took care to avoid any that guessed specific names or included harmful language. Celebrity names *have* to be redacted in the sample; it is non-negotiable. I truly do not want to prematurely out anyone, even if it is not true and even if it is a celebrity that will never find out. Bruckman (2004, p. 299) suggests that when working with web data, researchers need to incorporate a "continuum of possibilities" in the level of disguise given to sensitive information. Following this, each post and their respective comments were screenshotted and meticulously anonymised using a digital redaction tool. In the findings chapter, all examples were paraphrased to avoid traceability, adhering to the BSA's (2016) suggestions. As the website is public, and the author and users are all anonymous, I did not seek consent before sampling. The British Sociological Association (2016) states that direct consent is not required when analysing public data, provided that the following aspects are considered: anonymity must be maintained, direct quotations should be avoided, and researchers must take careful steps to reduce harm. I put each and every one of these suggestions into practice. One concern, however, was that the forum could include material written by minors. No demographic information on who visits the site is available, and this is a limitation of online research that Markham and Buchanan (2018) recognise. But because no demographic information is available, it is impossible to know for sure. My study did not rely on identifying the users, and thus, no personal material was sampled.

The first phase of data collection laid the groundwork for all that followed. By identifying themes about how sexuality was depicted, the social media analysis allowed me to ground the focus groups with real examples of the blind item phenomenon, sparking meaningful and extensive conversations.

Focus Groups

Gossip is a social act. Someone will tell a story, others react and pass it on further, evolving the narrative at every turn. For a study on blind items, focus groups were the natural choice as they reflect this dynamic. They offer a space where participants do not only respond to the material but to each other. As Kitzinger (1994, p. 116) argues, the method is particularly indispensable for studying "attitudes, priorities, language, and understandings." The technique enabled me to examine how readers share their views, formulate meaning together, and even discover how their opinions develop over the course of the discussions.

I conducted two focus groups: one with three participants and another with four. All were aged 18 to 26, as this demographic is the typical target audience for online celebrity culture and gossip. Recruitment was completed using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is often employed when accessing "everyday, mundane and mainstream" participants, making it suitable for a study such as this one (Parker, Scott and Geddes, 2019, p. 4). I sought out individuals who were familiar with the celebrity landscape, but they did not have to possess expert levels of knowledge.

Diversity was a key factor in the focus groups. I aimed to include participants with varied sexual orientations, gender identities, and levels of familiarity with gossip culture. Some participants were frequent readers of blind items; others had never even heard of them before. While this range of people was achieved, scheduling conflicts meant that a fully intersectional sample could not be realised. Particularly, racial and class diversity were more limited than hoped. This is a shortcoming in my research that could potentially be rectified if expanded on in the future.

The structure of the focus groups was as follows: after informed consent sheets were signed, participants were given a sample of paraphrased and anonymised blind items to individually annotate. These examples were drawn from the social media analysis that was conducted prior. The participants were thus able to reflect privately and collect their thoughts before we came together and discussed as a group. The

annotations not only provided me with more material to analyse, but they streamlined the conversations and helped to reduce the impact of social desirability – the tendency to withhold opinions in a group setting due to fears of being perceived unfavourably (Larson, 2019). Participants wrote down what they wanted to say whenever they did not feel comfortable verbalising it. After the annotations were complete, the group discussion began. I used a topic guide to facilitate the conversation, asking open-ended questions such as: "Were there any patterns you noticed when reading the blind items?" and "How is sexuality portrayed here?" The prompts were flexible, and the participants often took the conversations in their own directions as a result of this. But my role as a researcher was to lightly guide what was said, not control it.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, especially when discussing sexuality and outing, ethical considerations were vital. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and were reminded that all identifiable data would be anonymised during transcription. Everyone received a participant information sheet in advance and was briefed on what the focus groups would entail before they began. The atmosphere was respectful and welcoming, as mutual trust plays a big role in what people feel they can comfortably share with others (Kitzinger, 1994).

Focus groups do have the ability to generate rich and insightful data, but they are not without their challenges. They run the risk of being dominated by one or two participants, leaving others to feel as if they have less to contribute (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007). I attempted to mitigate this by keeping the groups small and managing the flow of conversation when necessary. The array of views and opinions collected in the focus groups were not just useful to my study; they were *imperative* when conceptualising the research findings.

Data Analysis

While approaching the data from the social media analysis and focus groups, I used thematic analysis to interpret and code what was found. Thematic analysis is a technique designed for "reporting patterns within data," and was therefore suitable for identifying sexuality binaries (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 76). For the online analysis,

I coded the texts based on how queerness was framed, looking for patterns of speculation, language, and humour. In the focus groups, I analysed both what was said and how it was conveyed, including any hesitations, agreements, and changes of opinion. I coded the data manually, without software. While digital methods can streamline handling large datasets, they cannot interpret tone and context, which are both essential elements of this study (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). I returned to the data multiple times to refine the themes that now structure the findings chapter.

Positionality as a Researcher

I was not a distant observer when approaching this project. As someone in the same age bracket as the participants, with a great interest in celebrity culture and digital media, I embraced the data collection process with a sense of familiarity. This allowed me to build a strong rapport within the focus groups, relating to their discussions and answering any questions that the participants had. As Berger (2015) argues, personal investment in a topic can enhance a researcher's understanding. But reflexivity is always key. I paid close attention to how my assumptions influenced the way I read a post or interpreted a comment. I coded the data more than once and let the participants' responses challenge and expand my interpretations. I listened to people's voices fairly, even when they expressed views that contrasted with my own. This self-reflection has allowed me to maintain a stance when approaching my research that is both careful and critical.

This chapter has outlined the methodological design of the study: a sequential, two-part process that combined social media analysis with focus group discussions. By blending detailed data collection, careful ethical consideration, and reflexive analysis, the approach made for a robust understanding of how blind items operate. With the groundwork now laid, I turn to the themes that surfaced within the data collection: the pressure to come out, and the erasure of bisexuality.

Chapter Four – Findings

Celebrity blind items thrive on judgement – of behaviour, of identity, and of who the unnamed star at the centre of a narrative is. Sexuality speculation is one of the most invasive manifestations of this practice. To answer the research question – *In what ways do celebrity blind items reproduce sexuality binaries?* – I conducted a thematic analysis. Two dominant patterns shape the findings. First, there was a relentless pressure for celebrities to come out, often symbolised through the metaphor of the closet. Across the social media posts and reader comments, coming out was framed as an obligation for public figures, rather than allowed to be a personal choice. This pressure reflects heteronormative sexuality binaries that separate those 'in the closet' from those 'out,' maintaining the secrecy/disclosure divide. The second theme explores how bisexuality – for males, in particular – is misrepresented or erased within blind item discourse. While queer identities are consistently alluded to, the labels they use often default to monosexist, binary frameworks of sexuality, with no space for fluidity. These themes work together to convey the argument that although blind items may be interpreted as harmless gossip, they are also cultural mediums that shape how queerness is discussed, speculated on, and commodified within the celebrity world. The following sections unpack these topics in depth, starting with the pressure placed on stars to step out of their closets before it is done for them.

"Can He Please Just Come Out and Save the Tabloids the Trouble?": The Closet, Outing, and Forcing Celebrities to Disclose

One of the most transparent patterns that arose from the thematic analysis was the constant pressure placed on celebrities to come out, underpinned using the ever-present closet metaphor. At its core, pushing LGBTQ+ individuals to disclose their identity labels is a manifestation of heteronormativity. A concept fundamental to this discussion, heteronormativity refers to the belief that being straight is the normal way to be, in turn positioning queer identities as "deviant" forms of existence (Oswald *et al.*, 2009, p. 45). The expectation that individuals must loudly and proudly announce who they are maintains a strict social divide. As Sedgwick (1990) argues, the closet

reproduces a binary, dividing society into a default straight population and a secret queer one.

Within the blind items, the closet metaphor was not just present. It was *everywhere.* Out of the 30 sampled posts, the words "closet" and "closeted" appeared in 24 of them. The metaphor carries connotations of secrecy:

> *Inside the closet is very dark, with no windows. And then you go outside, into the light. But that insinuates that what you're coming out as is something to be ashamed of (FG2: Participant 5).*

Rather than acknowledging the "unsafe space" that the metaphor perpetuates (FG2: Participant 5), the blind items refer to it in a humorous light. With phrases such as "putting a whole foot out of the closet," (Blog Post 10) and "deep, deep, deep in the closet," (Blog Post 22), the author tries to turn a profoundly personal matter into an entertaining punchline. These snappy "buzzwords" are utilised to lure readers into the stories (FG2: Participant 6). By repeatedly and nonchalantly invoking this notion, blind items uphold the expectation for people to come out, emphasising the binary of secrecy/disclosure. As Godfrey (2014) puts it, "As long as the illusion of the closet exists, so too will a lingering reluctance" for countless LGBTQ+ people to embrace who they are.

Since blind items are an emergent form of celebrity gossip, the discussion needs to be grounded in examples of what the stories look like. Many posts followed a formula similar to this one:

> *An A-list actor, who usually plays the love interest in romcoms, is about to get thrown out of the closet (Blog Post 29).*

The stories avoid names but instead offer clues about the celebrity's career or level of fame to incite reader speculation. And speculate, they do. This blog post accumulated over 200 responses. Some comments guessed the identity of the actor; others

questioned the ethics of doing so. A variety of responses can be found throughout the website. Frequent comments range from statements from readers that they would respect the celebrity more if they "just come out," (Blog Posts 12, 20, 29), and pleas for the author to "leave people alone" instead (Blog Posts 6, 21). These discussions, regardless of stance, kept the closet alive as a cultural concept, transforming it into a source of entertainment.

While the majority of the sampled blind items focused on exposing same-sex relationships, a few also speculated on gender identity:

> *Before landing the role of a lifetime, this A-list actor was undergoing a slow transition to become a woman (Blog Post 9).*

> *A boy band member recently uploaded an image of himself that appears to be one step forward in finally transitioning and coming out (Blog Post 5).*

Here, undergoing gender reassignment is framed as a plot twist to the narrative, rather than acknowledging that such a journey would be highly personal and private. One group member wrote down that the word "finally" suggests that the author was waiting for this, eagerly anticipating the fallout and scandal that would come from such a reveal (FG1: Participant 1). Participants also noted that this type of outing was especially "dangerous," given the current "political conversations around trans people," (FG2: Participant 4). Others, across the two groups, echoed this sentiment, recognising that while all of the speculation in blind items can be harmful, the risk of outing trans people are especially unsettling.

Unlike the earlier, more neutrally-written examples, some blind items are voiced in particularly disdainful ways, directly pressuring celebrities to come out:

> *I'm not sure why this former A-list NFL player doesn't just completely come out of his closet now. We all know he wants to (Blog Post 16).*

The language adopted here is noticeably intrusive. The word "completely" assumes that coming out is a singular, final act. In reality, it is a "continuous or lifelong" process, requiring people to repeatedly affirm who they are (Emetu and Rivera, 2018, p. 2). The story was met with considerable backlash, both online and offline. One user wrote:

> *Why is this newsworthy of a blind? Does anyone really care? Stop trying to 'out' people (Blog Post 16).*

The focus group participants critiqued the sentence "we all know he wants to," interpreting it as "insensitive" and "inconsiderate," (FG1: Participant 2, FG2: Participant 5). One individual wrote down that the post was harmful as it "assumes sexuality is a binary, not fluid," (FG1: Participant 3). By claiming that everyone already knows, the blind items position the author – and thus, by association, the audience – as gatekeepers of the truth, demanding confession. But as one online user noted, "celebrities do not owe you anything," (Blog Post 25). This range of responses reflect Khuzwayo's (2021) suggestion that LGBTQ+ individuals should not be expected to come out to the heteronormative society that marginalises them. Instead, they should be given the grace to be able to invite others in, on their own terms.

Moreover, blind items perpetuate disclosure pressures through the speculation of specific names. The stories thrive because they are interactive, generating a sense of curiosity that makes it feel almost "natural" to guess who the piece is about (FG1: Participant 2, FG2: Participant 4). Even the focus group participants, who all agreed that speculating on a celebrity's sexuality was invasive, still engaged in the guessing process themselves, working together to solve the clues. One confessed that guessing was "the first thing that came to mind" after reading the examples (FG2: Participant 7). Under the guise of entertainment, the audience is invited to participate in surveillance culture, blurring the line between publicity and privacy.

Harmless speculation does have the capacity to turn into something much more sinister. Participants in the first focus group discussed how guessing can have real consequences once the blind items are shared beyond the original blog:

> *It's one of those worries where if someone makes a guess, even if they've got a really weak argument, it still spreads like wildfire. What happens if it ends up on other social media, reaching whoever they think the celebrity is? (FG1: Participant 2).*

The movement of blind items from anonymous blogs to high-traffic platforms such as TikTok and X increases the chances that the speculation will become visible to the very people being discussed. What starts as vague stories can solidify rumours. Rumours can then underpin entire belief systems. Once the Internet accepts something, it can be incredibly difficult to dispel it.

Speculation is not just a harmless aspect of gossip culture; it is a mechanism through which queerness is policed. As Warner (2014, p. 52) argues, "being publicly known as a homosexual is never the same" as being straight, where one's identity "goes without saying." Blind items exploit this dynamic by enacting a sense of surveillance and demanding for LGBTQ+ labels to be explicitly stated. Focus group participants grappled with the ethics of speculation:

> *I almost see it as harmless, yet I need to remember that this might affect someone if it gets out there and people figure out who it is about. But I look at the blind items and immediately get sucked in (FG1: Participant 2).*

This quote reiterates the seductive lure that the blind item format has on audiences. By being framed as an entertaining guessing game, the stories hide the fact that they are reproducing binary ways of perceiving queerness.

The speculation that blind items encourage can be harmful, especially when they become widespread and risk outing someone without their consent. Reviewing the blind item comments chronologically revealed growing awareness of this harm. In 2022, most readers engaged with the sexuality-specific stories uncritically, merely guessing who they were about. Of the ten posts sampled from that year, only two

sparked ethical debates on whether or not this type of content should be published. But by 2023 and 2024, the tone shifted. More readers, now in 11 of the 20 remaining posts, began to question the morality of the practice, with some strongly reprimanding the blog:

> *Outing someone is cruel. Please, do not out anyone. Even if you think you are helping them, you are not. To someone that is famous, it can be especially damaging because now billions of people have their own opinions on the matter (Blog Post 25).*

The change in reception suggests there is a growing discomfort with how queerness is being discussed in gossip spaces. This shift may reflect a wider increase of LGBTQ+ awareness or perhaps it simply comes from reader fatigue with the repetitive outing narratives. The recurring use of the closet metaphor and speculation upholds the notion that queerness must be validated to be real. Identity becomes commodified, instead of being approached with privacy or care. The presumed right to know, and the belief that everyone already does, places a significant amount of pressure on those being written about. This reinforces binary logics of in/out and secrecy/disclosure, separating 'normal' heterosexuality from 'abnormal' homosexuality. But what happens to those who reject the strict categories of gay and straight? The next section explores how blind items depict sexualities that blur those lines. More specifically, bisexuality, and how it is misrepresented, trivialised, and forgotten within the texts.

"Why Is It Always Black and White With You? He Could Be Bi": The Erasure, Misinterpretation and Stigma Surrounding Bisexuality in Blind Items

A persistent sense of ignorance towards bisexuality was another noticeable theme across both data sets. While blind items do speculate on the sexualities of celebrities, the labels they use are rigid: gay or straight. There is no affordance of a grey area, which reproduces monosexist ideas that people are only really attracted to one gender (Tatum, 2013). The focus group participants recognised this pattern and problematised it, drawing attention to the harmful ramifications that this way of thinking

can have. This theme explores bisexuality in three overlapping ways: its erasure, disbelief in its legitimacy, and the gendered stigma that bisexual men face.

The way that bisexuality was depicted in the blind items was simple: it was not. Across all 30 sampled posts, the term bisexual only came up once. Even when it did get mentioned, it was only in the context of a male celebrity being accused of pretending to be gay, allegedly coming out as bi to soften the backlash. Bisexuality is therefore not even taken seriously the one time that it comes up. Instead, it functions as a dramatic twist used to 'catch out' a celebrity, rather than being respected as a valid identity label.

The total lack of bisexual visibility within the posts was highlighted both online and in the focus groups. One reader interrogated the website author:

> *Why is it always black and white with you? Gay or straight? He could be bi. Bisexuality is much more common than people realise (Blog Post 23).*

A participant also echoed this frustration, arguing that all of the examples they read "assume that sexuality is a binary, when these people could just be bisexual, queer, or pansexual," (FG1: Participant 3). Erasure was a topic of conversation in the second group, too. Upon being asked, "Where do you think bisexuality fits within this narrative?," one individual instantly replied with: "Literally nowhere. Bisexuality never comes into the conversation," (FG2: Participant 4). By refusing to even acknowledge the existence of plurisexual identities – people attracted to more than one gender – blind items reinforce the rigid binary of gay/straight, expecting celebrities to fit into either mould. Not both, *never* both. This erasure contributes to the ongoing marginalisation of bisexual-identifying individuals, who are so often overlooked or outright disbelieved in society.

Another pattern in how bisexuality was represented in blind items was how it was so frequently framed as not being real. Coming out using the term is repeatedly interpreted as temporary, rather than a valid identity. The sexuality is often presumed

to be rooted in feelings of "confusion" or "instability," taken as a sign that someone is not ready to admit the full truth of who they are (Pollitt *et al.*, 2019).

This disbelief was especially prominent within the online comment sections. Under a post, one user stated that the celebrity in question was "definitely gay and not bi," claiming that "closeted gay men label themselves as bi when they aren't fully ready to come out," (Blog Post 10). Not only does this invalidate the identity, but it turns it into a gendered dichotomy, which will be unpacked later.

Another reader described the star as "bi now, gay later," reducing his sexual orientation to a humorous quip. Even people who acknowledged the harm of forced outing still implied that bisexuality was not real:

> *Outing is the worst. However, he should take this moment to properly come out, though (Blog Post 10).*

The word "properly" speaks volumes by itself. The assumption is clear: bisexuality is a phase, an excuse, a *lie*. This disbelief was probed further within the second focus group:

> *When male celebrities come out as bi, people aren't satisfied. They see it as a stepping stone. For some people, it can be. But the assumption that it always is really does erase bisexuality (FG2: Participant 4).*

The idea that the orientation operates as a mere 'halfway house' between the closet and being openly gay upholds the binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality. It suggests that whenever someone is coming out as bi, it is a "transitory" label (Scherrer, Kazyak and Schmitz, 2015). They are perceived as simply testing the waters before they plunge into either identifying as gay or lesbian. This logic leaves zero room for fluidity, delegitimising bisexual identities altogether. In this aspect, blind items and their online responses not only erase bisexuality but deliberately dismiss it as a real or legitimate label that people adopt.

Alongside the erasure and disbelief previously explored, the final section of this theme considers another dimension of the discourse: a *gendered* one. There is a distinguishable stigma against male bisexuality, in particular. While bisexual women are still likely to experience fetishisation or stereotypical prejudice, blind items treat male bisexuality as *impossible,* believing that these people do not, or should not, exist.

To contextualise this dynamic, it is important to ground it within celebrity culture more widely. Any time a famous man rumoured to be LGBTQ+ steps out with a woman, gossip media writes their relationship off as a "bearding" one. Bearding refers to a manufactured partnership between an opposite-sex couple, staged for publicity. These are designed to conceal queerness (Maskell, 2024). This trope emerges in blind items:

> *It looks like this former A+ list movie actor won't be coming out of the closet after all. We will see another bearding relationship instead (Blog Post 21).*

In reality, the celebrity could be bisexual and is now in a valid relationship with a woman. That is, quite literally, the very definition of bisexuality: attraction to more than one gender (Pollitt and Roberts, 2022). But, of course, this possibility is never entertained. These posts instead remain entrapped within the binary logic of gay and straight. Some readers have noticed this distinction:

> *It's definitely easier for women to be bisexual than men in society, in my opinion. One of the few times where that actually happens (Blog Post 11).*

This reflection suggests that there is a hierarchy at play. Female bisexuality is at least believable, whilst, for men, it is utterly implausible. Focus group participants across the two sessions articulated this divide:

> *The media are much more open to bisexual women than men. I think people are more okay with a female kissing another female in a music video, for*

example, and having it mean nothing. But if a heterosexual male kisses another man, they straight away assume he's gay, even if he has had loads of girlfriends in the past (FG1: Participant 3).

If a guy is bisexual, people think: 'Oh, he just wants to be with a man.' If a girl is bisexual, they also think: 'Oh, she just wants to be with a man.' It's such a male-orientated thing (FG2: Participant 4).

The assumption here is striking. Regardless of who someone is attracted to, male desire is considered to be the default. This not only marginalises bisexual men but reveals the patriarchal structures at play. It is deeply gendered.

As the conversations continued, the participants from the first focus group joined forces to conclude that masculinity was the central power impacting this prejudice. Several of them linked the stigma back to a wider discomfort of men being 'feminine.' One noted that it always ends up "linking back to heteronormative and hypermasculine ideals," (FG1: Participant 1). Another person agreed, pointing out that queer women are often afforded more freedom of expression, while LGBTQ+ men are immediately entrenched within binaries:

For some women, they can get away with queerbaiting or kissing another girl and being like, 'No, I'm straight.' But if a man were to do that, it would be the end of the world (FG1: Participant 2).

This double standard reveals who gets to be more fluid and who must be categorised, as a result of patriarchal forces. Masculinity becomes a prison, where bisexuality is not just denied, but seen as a threat to the order of society. This binary way of thinking assumes that masculinity and femininity are direct opposites that cannot overlap. Any expressions of femininity in men are inherently considered to be gay. Therefore, bisexual men defy conventional masculine expectations. The part of them that is attracted to women is viewed with suspicion. Their identities are dismissed as unstable.

Another participant brought up the topic of fetishisation, drawing upon this to explain the difference between the perception of bisexual men and women:

> *There is a lot of sexualisation at play. I've even heard of guys liking the idea of their female partner being bisexual, and it's not pleasant. There is definitely a different mentality towards men (FG2: Participant 5).*

Their point illustrates how bisexual women are often allowed to exist, albeit only in the name of male desire. They are sexualised and consumed. Meanwhile, bisexual men are conveyed as undesirable, deceptive, or simply, not real. Both forms of stigma are inherently harmful. In this aspect, blind items do not just reinforce sexuality binaries but gendered ones, too. They convey wider societal beliefs about secrecy/disclosure, being gay/straight and masculinity/femininity.

This theme explored how blind items go beyond the erasure of bisexuality. They actively strengthen the grip that binary understandings of queerness have on the media, and this is harmful. LGBTQ+ celebrities are pressured to come out using a single, stable identity label. Bisexuality, especially for men, is not deemed suitable. The assumption that everyone must be gay or straight upholds the binaries explored in the previous theme, but here, the gendered double standards intensify their reach. Together, these findings reveal that by framing sexuality through rigid logics, blind items do not just reflect heteronormative ideals. They directly work to reproduce and sustain them.

Chapter Five - Conclusion

By delving deeply into the scandalous world of celebrity blind items, this dissertation has established how they internalise and reproduce sexuality binaries. While these online texts can be perceived as a mundane aspect, and inevitable downside, of fame, this analysis has highlighted how they are also embedded with cultural meanings surrounding identity and queerness. Devised as entertainment, blind items can circulate invasive rumours about stars; there is little to no accountability held to them for this. A qualitative thematic analysis of the posts themselves and the focus group discussions formed the basis of the dialogue, with two integral ideas emerging as a result: the pressure to come out and the prejudice against bisexuality.

The first theme demonstrated how blind items use the closet metaphor to coerce celebrities into disclosing who they are. Coming out was demanded, with no respect given to these people and their right to privacy, refusal, or fluidity. Focus group participants evaluated this, recognising that the speculation that blind items encourage is inherently harmful. In the social media analysis, there was a sense of tension echoed throughout the comment sections. A growing number of readers were beginning to question the ethics of speculating on something so personal, but many still joined in regardless. Nevertheless, the closet metaphor lived on, positioning heterosexuality as the expected norm, while queerness needed to be justified and voiced. This reinforces a clear binary opposition between expectations of those who are gay/straight and between notions of secrecy/disclosure. These divides reinforce such deeply rooted ideas about what it means to be queer.

The attention then shifted towards bisexuality. As a sexual orientation, it was substantially misconstrued, neglected, or even entirely erased within blind item culture. Sexuality may be a frequent point of conversation throughout the website, but the celebrities were only really believed to be gay, straight, or *lying*. Focus group participants picked up on this absence, whilst online comments reproduced the binaries further. They described the identity as a stepping stone or an excuse. This practice therefore reflects larger societal narratives that deny the existence of

bisexuality, a monosexist perspective that erases the label that so many people use to express who they love.

The study also cemented that bisexuality stigma is highly gendered. Broadly speaking, in the media, bisexual women are more visible, but this comes at the cost of being stereotyped or sexualised. Bisexual men, on the other hand, are treated as if they do not exist. Blind items about male celebrities in relationships with women repeatedly label their partnerships as fake, refusing to consider bisexuality as a possibility. Participants recognised that this ignorance is deeply rooted in patriarchal understandings of gender. Sexual fluidity is the antithesis of masculinity. This very dynamic reveals that blind items do not just reinforce sexuality binaries, but overlap with gendered ones, too.

This piece has offered original insights into an understudied aspect of gossip culture. By analysing anonymous blog posts and audience responses, it is evident that this particular speculation creates and circulates normative ideas. In this case, those ideas are about LGBTQ+ sexualities. There were, however, limits to what this study could explore. While the sample size was more than sufficient for a study of this scale, it cannot capture the phenomenon of blind items entirely; I only drew posts from a single website, after all. While the focus group participants offered extremely valuable insights into how the stories were interpreted, their opinions cannot be generalised to everyone. Future research could build upon this study to expand onto other websites. Studies could also be conducted to figure out how blind items depict other identities. I would recommend a deeper dive into how gender identities are conveyed, giving a sensitive yet extremely important topic the attention it deserves.

Blind items are not just a form of gossip. They are cultural texts that reproduce restrictive, normative ideas about behaviour, namely sexuality. Under a veil of anonymity, they reinforce the belief that queer celebrities must reveal themselves, while heterosexuality is taken for granted. Blind items sustain sexuality binaries: gay/straight, secrecy/disclosure, and masculinity/femininity. Binaries such as these go beyond just describing sexuality – they constrain it. As celebrities rise and fall, blind

items stand ready to constrain and police what they do, pulling the bindings tighter and tighter with every post. But this piece is not just about blind items. It is a call for action – or inaction. In the confusing, cathartic, and beautifully frustrating world of sexuality discovery, leave public figures alone. If one were to remove a celebrity's façade, what they would find beneath would be a real, genuine person.

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Appendix 1

Excerpt from Focus Group One Transcript

Interviewer: Yep, there are comment sections.

Participant 1: So, the fact that we were all, I was thinking it as well…

Participant 3: Guessing, yeah.

Participant 1: That we were all guessing, that is just so interesting.

Participant 3: I'll tell you what is so harmful about that in particular, I spotted this a lot. There's two things that stuck out to me. Number one, the use of 'forced out the closet,' that phrase, which I think is just so harmful, anyway. And they make sexuality and this navigating coming out and accepting who you are so difficult. And they make it playful and comedic, being like 'oh, you're being exposed to the world!' And I just feel like that shouldn't be like speculated about, but it also shouldn't be like, you're gay, come out of the closet. I feel like that's so harmful.

Participant 1: I feel like forced was something I highlighted as well and it kinda made me think, are there, these forums contributing to that in that sense that-

Participant 3: Yes!

Participant 1: They are discussing these people's sexualities, are they contributing to that person feeling like they may need to come out.

Participant 3: Me personally, as someone who is gay myself, I've never, not gonna lie, I hate the concept of having to come out. I just don't think it is something that needs to be a thing. It should almost be like, if you talk to someone, you just talk to them. It shouldn't be like, 'oh, I'm gay!' 'I'm straight,' straight away, it should be like you get to know someone. If you want to straight away explain, then great. I just don't think it should be necessary. I noticed that straight away. In all of them, the forced out.

Participant 2: Yeah, the constant like closet, all of them had closet, besides one. All of them had like coming out of the closet but it's just like, it's feeding into this idea

that gay people or people that don't fit into heterosexuality, have to come out. And it's this idea that you have to be able to come out. And it is all done in like a comedic, funny way. Like 'one whole foot out of the closet.' And it's like… what was another one? Oh, they're gonna come out of the closet and it's like, it's all these different things of like, making it quite funny. But it's not a funny matter though.

Participant 1: It's like taking the severity out of it.

Participant 3: And also, I think it makes people not want to come out as well, like people that are grappling with and navigating their sexuality because it is a mocking matter. Sexuality shouldn't be joked about. But the other thing, what we all said about guessing. I tell you what's really harmful, 'this former superhero.' That could be anyone, so now you're speculating. You could be saying, I reckon 'Oh, that's **REDACTED**.' You reckon that could be like, I dunno any other superheroes' names.

Everyone laughs.

Participant 3: But like you get what I mean. Guessing superheroes. And it is so harmful, not only for the person themselves, bless them, who is being speculated about being gay. But for someone else who might not even be gay and could be in a happy relationship, people could be on social media trending their name. They're like 'oh, what have I done now?' and it's because people think they're gay. Which obviously, there is nothing wrong with being gay but then it's like why are we speculating everyone's sexualities? We shouldn't be doing that.

Participant 2: Coz like I also highlighted, some of these are so vague. Like a former superhero, a former NFL player, A-list actor. These could be like literally anyone. It's one of those things where it's like how harmful is it, when, in my head I'm thinking oh it could be this person, that person. And then like if that gets translated on social media, cause that's where it normally does.

Participant 3: And you actually do, though. I see the comment sections and someone goes, oh it's this person and I go 'OH! It must be!' And then you, like, believe it. Yeah.

Participant 1: I think like picking up on, we've kind of mentioned the superhero. I kinda highlighted how superhero, NFL player and boyband are kind of like these, I don't know how to phrase it, but these heteronormative and hypermasculine ideas.

Participant 2: Yes.

Participant 3: Very true.

Participant 1: And I thought that was really interesting how these, especially that makes up quite a big majority of the ones you've selected [male blind items]. And that's really interesting that that seems to be the focus on theorising like who is gay or straight. And one thing I picked up on as well, is that most of these I'm assuming are about men. There was only one that mentioned the pronoun 'her'. And that's really interesting. Because I'm not really well-versed in blind items but I'm well-versed in gossip columns, just through the media and things. And it's usually men that you see gets questioned for their sexuality in the celebrity world. It's not often that it's women. So that was really interesting as well here.

Participant 2: Yeah, like even with the…coz I picked up on the majority of these are male, besides the one.

Participant 1: Yeah.

Participant 2: But all of the male ones, it's like coming out of the closet. It's all done in quite a like, compared to the female one where it's like 'in her latest visual,' she might as well just come out.

Participant 1: Yeah.

Participant 2: Speculating, like there's already speculation of her, maybe.

Participant 3: And I think it's so harmful as well because I feel like they all assume that sexuality is a binary as well. Because these people, for example, could just be bisexual. These people could be pansexual. They just assume in every single one of these people are lesbian or gay, firstly, which I think is an issue itself. Like sexuality is so complex, like it's not as straight forward as you're heterosexual, you're homosexual.

Participant 1: It's like a spectrum at the end of the day. And they are putting that binary in.

Participant 3: Yeah.

Participant 1: I also thought the word 'finally,' that got repeated twice. And that was really interesting. I guess that kinda reemphasised the whole, like hierarchies of speculation of people coming out and I just thought that was a really interesting word choice that they had there.

Participant 3: One word I had, I really like, I don't know if you guys know the term of what a 'beard' is?

Participant 2: Yeah, I picked up on it, but I wasn't sure what it meant.

Participant 3: So, a beard is like someone who, for example, might get a relationship with someone. You're seen as each other's beards, so you both or one of you, could be gay or bisexual, and you are covering each other up. You're masking them, yeah. And I feel like that is so common, especially in Hollywood, because there are so many PR relationships. People like, fake a relationship, they fake doing this, they go on like first dates to get papped, coincidentally. Like they know what they are doing.

Everyone laughs and agrees.

Participant 3: It's so, which I think that's an issue with Hollywood. Like management and people in charge of people almost control these celebrities' lives. And make them, like, hide who they are.

Participant 1: Yes! Coz like one of them literally says 'his team decided he should wait.' And I instantly picked up on like there's such a structure in Hollywood where there's like control of the celebrity almost. Where they can't actually express who they are. Which is just heartbreaking, really.

Interviewer: So blind items aim to create a sense of mystery. So, how do you feel about this? Do you think it makes it more engaging; do you think it makes it more trivialising, what do you think about the mystery kind of angle of it?

Additional Appendices

Excerpt from Focus Group Annotations (FG2: Participant 5)

Interview Two – March 2025

Please fill out the following information (but feel free to skip any questions):

Gender Identity: Female   she/her

Sexuality: Straight

Age: 21

Blind Item Examples:

1. "This former superhero was about to come out of the closet, and bam, something must have spooked him back in, with a beard as well."

   a fall from this "title"
   big, violent in terms event vs impact
   trying to hint at a possible identity → narrowing down possible people

2. "A member of this boyband, known for his interaction with male red carpet interviewers, seems to be one step closer to finally transitioning and coming out."

   again hinting of who it is
   long awaited? more waiting for confirmation, so it is suspected for a while

3. "I'm not sure why this former A list NFL player doesn't just come completely out of the closet. We all know he wants to."

   tries to get attention← grab it
   again into on the person
   inconsiderate of their own decisions and is presumptuous to know their wants / feelings
   rude & impatiently
   pride tone?
   partially is then
   impatient?

4. "This married permanent A list actor took a very large step out of the closet this week. He came as close as he ever has to coming out."

   insinuates scandal and seems emphasized
   asks why & was it ???
   nothing they do will remove this title → almost untouchable
   suggests has made hints or smth before
   again like 3. doesn't consider their decisions
   respect perhaps
   or is it in support? idk?

5. "It looked as if this foreign born A- list actor was going to finally come out of the closet. His team decided he should wait."

   speculation
   controlling them → sad & not happy abt this
   disappointing this is the case → not free to express
   nepo baby
   long awaited?
   why important? More into for identification
   insinuates not a relationship

6. "This former Disney actor is going to be forced out of the closet by a co-star he hooked up with while filming recently."

   think about history of this company and the impact on other celebs.
   (→ said be controlling & environment not good at times)
   forced "categories"
   no longer - older person?
   info on person = hinting
   time stamp
   non-consensual
   inconsiderate & mean perhaps? or was it unwitting?
   how do they know?

7. "This A+ list singer keeps putting her toes out of the closet. I would even go as far to say with her latest visual, there might be a whole foot out of the closet."

   there are ones
   v. small hints
   → gaining courage / people inferring things
   getting more confident
   half yay more (→ be comfortable)
   half nay be seems like all their actions are watched and scrutinised
   → attention
   → some ppl get scared / hurt by media

Please write any notes here: