Loverboy Rules: A Transtheoretical Exploration of Andy Bernard's Failed Masculinity

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

LOVERBOY RULES:
A TRANSTHEORETICAL EXPLORATION OF
ANDY BERNARD’S FAILED MASCULINITY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY
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OF A MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN WOMEN’S STUDIES AND GENDER STUDIES

BY
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For Ed Helms, should he ever stumble across this.
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INTRODUCTION

The situational comedy, stylized as sitcom, tends to reflect the nature of popular culture relevant at the time of airing, showcasing the ‘modern’ U.S American lifestyle while also occasionally satirizing it. The sitcom is a mode of storytelling that has been around since 1947 in the United States (Berman, 2021). Often, the shows will highlight the family and work life mode of the time. Within the 21st century, many popular, award-nominated sitcoms have created a niche in society, proving themselves to be long-lasting cultural icons even once off the air – from showing up as a reference in bar trivia nights to pop-up experiences (nbcchicago.com, 2021). As modern sitcoms tend to be centered on simple plots, comedic favor, and easy access intended for the masses. Critiques often are pushed aside in favor of shock value, exaggerated characters with goofy, odd-ball traits and wacky predicaments – such as is the case with The Office (U.S).

However, due to the popularity of the U.S American adaptation of The Office, there is much to explore with how its characters and comedy reflect societal ideals and norms. Specifically, with how The Office constructs and reinforces hegemonic masculinity. Much of the comedy reflected how society was constructed at the time with characters with differing genders, sexualities, and races as the butt of the jokes, ultimately showing the U.S American workplace as a tolerant but not welcoming atmosphere to people who were not U.S, white, heterosexual, men. More specifically, as I will argue in this thesis, The Office presents multiple adaptations of masculinity to teach viewers which of these forms of masculinity is wrong and which is right. The character Andy Bernard serves as a multi-use example of both how men should and shouldn’t be, with his start as a stereotypical angry man and his arc to try and undo his toxicity, with the show and writers forcefully feminizing him in the later seasons to send him back to his initial toxic masculine self. This sends the message to young male viewers that the only way to be a man is to
be a toxic man. It also suggests that men are unable to change and grow and conceive new ways of presenting masculinity.

In this thesis, I will examine Andy’s character arc and consider how this reinforcement about masculinity made to be patriarchal and hegemonic in ideology plays out. It will be important to also see the demographic of viewers at the time *The Office* was airing and see if there is correlation between the messaging of the show and the audience members. It will also be necessary to see what existing literature and research has been done regarding the relationship between sitcoms/comedies and gender within the United States. Using trans theory and literature discussing masculinity, from both a sociological and gender studies background, the character of Andy Bernard will be fully explored within a context of how *The Office* weaponizes men's fear of not being man enough. I hope to find out how media influences societal and individual understanding of gender identity using Andy’s arc as he tries to break free of societal expectations and influence and how *The Office* defines hegemonic masculinity.

The reason I chose *The Office*, and more specifically Andy Bernard, as the topic of exploring comedy’s relationship with promoting binary gender stereotypes, specifically their relationship to masculinity, comes from a personal attachment to Andy’s character and defense of him despite the moments where he has showcased toxic masculinity. It was not me defending toxic masculinity but often me making a case that Andy undoes a lot of how he acted in earlier seasons, with season three Andy being very different from season six Andy. People I knew were quick to dismiss his emotional outbursts as just him being a bad guy without reasoning with the ideas of why he acted in the ways he did, explained with canon events that the show used to construct Andy’s character and personality. I’ve become deeply attached to this character since my first viewing of *The Office*. I have articles of clothing donning love for him, a figurine, a
coffee mug, and I resonate with issues he’s gone through or traits he exemplifies. It feels as if I’ve been building this argument for years. By further exploring literature to help defend my position, I’ve also noticed a deficit in critique and examination of recent comedy shows and how it can reinforce heteronormative gender stereotypes. So, while there is much love and adoration for *The Office*, I believe there is also a serious lack of discussion regarding its themes and the subtle messaging within its jokes and characterizations. I hope to fill the gap in research with this in-depth discussion of *The Office*, and in particular, Andy, focusing on seasons three through nine.

When initially seeking out literature one thing became exceedingly clear – much of the research out there was dated. I want to preface this by saying it is not necessarily bad, at this point in time *The Office* itself is dated, but it makes for limited understanding in the relationship between comedy and prevailing patriarchal masculinity. Many of the comedies that were being discussed had aired between the 1950’s to late 1990’s, with a lot of them focusing on family dynamics. There was, however, the common thread of presenting the ideal, hegemonic man versus the softer, more effeminate man. In 1998, Robert Hanke published an essay examining *Home Improvement*’s stereotyping of conventional masculinity reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. *Home Improvement* starring Tim Allen as Tim Taylor, aired between 1991-1999 and focused on a nuclear family dynamics and Taylor’s ‘Tool Time’ television show that he has with co-host, Al. The show operated as an extension of Allen’s own comedy routines and stand-up humor, revolving around a ‘mock macho’ and self-ridiculing approach to discussing men and masculinity (Hanke, 1998). Within the historic and cultural moments of when *Home Improvement* was airing, women were less solely domestic people with the gender spheres becoming blurred and overlapping as women’s rights activism kept advancing during third-wave
feminism. Those blurred roles were then being explored within the show, as Allen was providing a show about domestic manhood while still advocating for traditional male roles and spaces. Where Taylor attempts to become a more evolved man – more in touch with his feelings, sensitive to his wife, a domestic problem solver – his attempts are undercut with a joke and treated in a comical manner, sending mixed messages to the audience of male and female viewers. In *Home Improvement* “a parodic mode of discourse is deployed to address white, middle class, middle-aged men’s anxieties about a feminized ideal for manhood they may not want to live up to” (Hanke, 1998, pg. 76). When Taylor is presented with critique of patriarchal masculinity from his wife’s ‘feminist friend’, he rebuts her arguments and reinforces men's adoration of patriarchal masculinity as well as pleasing young male audiences who are displeased by feminist critique and movements. Taylor’s wife, Jill, still exists as an extension of post-World War II 1950’s femininity as a housewife contained to her kitchen and home surrounded by men, which are her husband and their three sons. *Home Improvement* seems to be aiming to please male, female, traditional, and progressive audiences while never committing to one side of the argument. It exists in a gray area of both making fun of conventional masculinity while upholding it as the proper way to be a man, especially when Taylor is contrasted to his co-host Al, who is the more shy, sensitive, and cautious man deemed to be more in touch with his ‘feminine side’ (Hanke, 1998). He is the soft man that 1970’s anti-feminist men feared and the man that Taylor cannot commit to evolving into. This is demonstrated by Taylor ridiculing and insulting Al, reinforcing to Al and viewers that Taylor is the better man. Al serves as a similar function to a more recent analysis of new, soft masculinity within sitcoms, which is *Two and a Half Men*. 
In 2010, Elizabeth Fish Hatfield published an article examining *Two and a Half Men*'s relationship with hegemonic masculinity and how it utilized comedy and banter to reinforce dominant masculinity and undermine alternative masculinities. *Two and a Half Men* followed down on his luck, post-divorce Alan Harper (Jon Cryer) and his rich, bachelor brother Charlie (Charlie Sheen). The show aired between 2003 and 2015, with Sheen being replaced by Ashton Kutcher in season nine following Sheen’s public criticism of the showrunner, Chuck Lorre. Hatfield’s essay focuses on discussing the first five seasons. Hatfield’s article most closely resembles what the aim of my paper is, with her discussion of Alan’s effeminate masculinity being presented as the negative contrast to Charlie’s dominant, more aggressive masculinity. As well as the treatment of Alan’s emasculated role within the show. However, I think it misses the extra steps I hope to take in my paper by bringing in Halberstam’s trans* theory. Paralleling *Home Improvement, Two and a Half Men* sets up the discussion of the soft man, who is more domestic and displays feminine characteristics, as a “cultural ideal but not reality” in the form of Alan (Hatfield, 2010, pg. 529). In the early 2000’s, this soft man would also most closely resemble the masculinity attributed to homosexual men. This becomes a recurring bit for Alan within the show, that he is mistaken as gay, or that Charlie makes many jokes at Alan’s expense, insinuating him to be gay or gay acting. Throughout the show, Charlie’s form of confident, bachelor, and wealthy lifestyle is shown as the successful form of masculinity. Even though Alan’s struggle with money, aims for marriage, and parenting struggles represent a more typical American situation reflecting the family values and hardships of many Americans (Hatfield, 2010). This is communicated to viewers through the shows use of humor and banter, typically between the brothers, with much of the jokes being at Alan’s expense and his portrayal of masculinity being the version causing him to fail. Within visual cues of men mimicking Charlie.
This includes men copying Charlie’s form of dress to Charlie humiliating Alan in front of others, including his own son. The audience can interpret the message that they too, as young male viewers, should also act as Charlie does to assert their dominant cis-hetero masculinity onto both other men and women.

While *Two and a Half Men* does not directly center on a nuclear family, it still operates within a mode of family dynamics, as *Full House* and *Baby Daddy* do, where men still embody a pseudo-nuclear dynamic as they co-parent children. *Two and a Half Men* does this by casting Alan often in the role of the wife or mother to Charlie’s detached husband or father, despite there being a female housekeeper. While this could be presented as subversive, the show uses this emasculated role to subordinate Alan through both Charlie and Jake, who tends to mimic Charlie’s successful form of toxic masculinity rather than his own father. It is Charlie’s house that they both reside in, he is the breadwinner of the home, and “Alan contributes in ways typical of traditional women’s roles”, which undermines his position as an equal man to Charlie, despite Alan’s egalitarian approach to their living situation and his belief that he is a liberated man (Hatfield, 2010). While Alan continues to believe and attempt to assert that he is a more progressive man than Charlie, especially as a role model to his son, the narrative of the show undermines his actions to show that the egalitarian, liberated man is a myth. New masculinity is presented as a failure in relationship to the dominant, hegemonic masculinity that Charlie performs. Furthermore, because of their living situation and closeness, when they are perceived to be a gay couple, the show is implying that only Alan is mistaken to be gay. He is believably gay, to himself and others, to the point of questioning his own sexuality due to his failed ‘new’ masculinity that only sets him up as the butt of a joke (Hatfield, 2010). By placing Alan on the

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1 A spin off inspired by the film *Three Men and a Baby* (1987).
receiving end of criticism through banter and humor, *Two and a Half Men* is communicating to viewers that he is worth being laughed at, that his masculinity should be under constant scrutiny and judgement. This is most often deployed through Charlie making jokes at Alan’s expense.

The treatment of Alan is most like how Andy is presented in *The Office*, as an effeminate masculine failure, never belonging to conventional masculinity or homosexual masculinity, existing in the gender-bending between that is never presented as a legitimized third gender but rather reinforces gender boundaries, as Hatfield also wrote. There is no legitimate set up to either Alan or Andy’s bipotentiality, as any attempts to introduce a non-heterosexuality to either character is done with the intent to cause them to question their masculinity and showcase them as insecure of their manhood.

*The Office* was a departure from traditional comedy forms on television, like the previously mentioned *Two and a Half Men* and *Home Improvement*, even as it was airing alongside *Two and a Half Men*. Stylistically, it followed in the steps of *Arrested Development* (2005-2008) with a mock-documentary style, single camera shots, and an absence of laugh track, as well as talking head segments where the characters would directly talk to the camera. It was shot like this to present the show as real as possible, meaning that if some viewers didn’t know any better, it would feel like they were watching real employees at a real company (Greene, 2020). This was also the mindset of the original British *Office* series, co-created by Stephan Merchant and Ricky Gervais, as it was also directly shaped by the experiences they both had with bosses and work environments (Greene, 2020). The first airing of the U.S pilot, which aired in March of 2005, had a total of 11.2 million viewers, with the overwhelming demographic of viewers being between 18-49 (Tan, 2008). It was also noted when NBC re-aired four episodes to bring in more viewers at the end of the first season, which consisted of six episodes, that it
ranked #2 among male viewers between the ages of 18-34 and 18-49 (Tan, 2008). Another recording of viewers showed that the highest concentration of viewers was among households making $75,000+ annually (Tan, 2008). As season two began airing, the retention of audiences skewed younger with the main demographic being among adults between 18-34, typically the majority of whom were young male viewers (Tan, 2008). As Tan organized, season two was showing much more promise and success for The Office and statistically it was performing well with male viewers across all major age demographics. All these statistics were sourced from the Office Tally website, which was legitimized from show writer and creator, Greg Daniels, who recognized The Office Tally as a credible source for viewer statistics. In the age of streaming, The Office is still popular as ever. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, when people were working from home, there were 10 million viewers watching via streaming and another 11 million for episodes re-airing on Comedy Central, as well as other local stations (NCTA, 2021). Young viewers are engaging with The Office, which has now hit a decade of being off air, thanks to it being on Netflix and then Peacock, NBC’s streaming service. Articles from Vox and The Chicago Tribune examine the relationship between new, young viewers and the sitcom aimed at older millennials and Gen X’rs in the workplace attributing it to the escapism of television and the fact that most young audience members will never work a drab office job, thus it is not reflective of their real life (James, 2020 & Metz, 2009). But arguably, it does not matter where a show like The Office takes place, as even a decade later it reflects a slow to change U. S society and can reinforce those gender stereotypes and promote thinly veiled intolerance to a whole new generation of audience members. As we’ve seen, comedy can be a medium for the reinforcement of essentialist gender binaries and upholding patriarchal masculinity, as humor can subliminally encode the message showrunners and writers are putting into their jokes. Who they decide to
make fun of, i.e., someone who is not an Anglo-white, heterosexual, cisgender man, can reinforce societal intolerance of those who differ from the societal norms. The goal then, is to examine how *The Office* contributes to this phenomenon and if there is a future for alternative masculinity in comedy television.
CHAPTER ONE:

DE-MASKING MEN &

HOW MASCULINITY IS CONSTRUCTED

“If you’re raised with an angry man in your house, there will always be an angry man in your
house. you will find him even when he is not there.”

- Catherine Lacy, “Cut”

Andy’s character was introduced in the first episode of season 3, originally for an eight-
episode arc that then extended to his character being a series regular. He is portrayed by Ed
Helms and was a series regular from season 3 to season 9, when the show concluded its run.
When Helms was approached for the role, Andy was described as “this character who might be
sort of a yacht club kid...he’s kind of obnoxious” (theoffcamerashow, 2020). He was a trust fund
kid who had gotten into Cornell because his dad was an alumni and donor and the reasoning for
sending him to Cornell was a joke in the writer's room filled with Harvard alumni, they were
poking fun at Cornell being a lesser than Ivy League (Greene, 2020). When he was first
introduced, he was virtually no different than Dwight and Michael when it came to annoying
traits and their penchant for being, for lack of better words, total asses. He had a step-by-step
plan to become Michael’s favorite/right hand man (who was, at that point, Dwight) which
included traits such as mimicking and becoming a yes, man. This ended up causing frustration
between Michael and Andy and led to the beginning of Andy’s emotional outburst and sending
him to anger management (“The Return”). But then, Andy returned in season 3 episode 20 and
the writers began an attempt to ‘fix’ his previous self.
To fully understand the scope of how Andy was re-written, we must first delve into how Andy was originally conceived and introduced. To accomplish this, in this chapter, there will be an exploration of societal construction of what it means to be a man, in a hegemonic, patriarchal society, and how Andy initially fits into that binary. This will also include physical construction of manhood as represented by the penis, as Andy’s genitalia plays a major role in how he perceives himself as a person. From there, I will begin dissecting how The Office created Andy to fit into toxic male stereotypes of masculinity while simultaneously introducing differing, queered versions of masculinity within Andy.

Before delving into Andy’s construction of masculinity, I will be using Connell to define key terms and ideas that will be discussed in relation to Andy. I will be using Connell’s definition of hegemonic to understand how The Office reinforces it as an ideal. Connell describes hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995, pg. 77). Connell also clarifies this does not always mean those with the most power, like political leaders, but can extend to people with influence, like film characters. Thus, media and characters within media can represent hegemonic ideals as passive participants. Passive as they are not real people with real world motivations, but act as an extension of real-world values. Connell also makes a distinctive point that hegemony can only be established if “there is some correspondence between cultural ideals and institutional” (Connell, 1995, pg. 77). So, while media can represent hegemonic masculinity, it is not the creator. It is influenced by the individuals who have been influenced by society. In Connell’s definition as well, she describes it within a frame of “currently accepted”, meaning it is reflective of the ideals and goals of society
at the time of representation. For *The Office*, it aired in the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century, but I believe the hegemonic goals of society have not shifted far enough for *The Office* to no longer aptly represent past the final airing of the show in 2013. As well, hegemonic masculinity is not a universal notion, meaning not every culture and society has the same version of a hegemonic man (Connell, 1995, pg. 76). For the sake of my argument, *The Office* is only reflective of a hegemonic man in a U.S context and aligns itself with the promotion of upper-class, white, cisgender, heterosexual men rather than alternative masculine identities.

Furthering the societal construction of masculinity, the homestead offers the initial building blocks of how boys become men. To explain how, bell hooks’ *The Will to Change*’s third chapter focuses on the childhood of men, when they are still boys. Often, boys learn their patriarchal behaviors from their fathers, and if one is not present the mother will sometimes take over the role in teaching her son how she perceives patriarchal masculinity. To understand the patriarchal upbringing of boys, hooks unpacks what the term patriarchy means in chapter two. She describes it as a “political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endured with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (hooks, 2005, pg. 18). She writes, in chapter three, “most patriarchal fathers in our nation do not use physical violence to keep their sons in check, they use various techniques of psychological terrorism, the primary one being the practice of shaming” (hooks, 2005, pg. 47). When hooks put the term patriarchy into usage with patriarchal fathers, she is attempting to explain the role of how male role models and fathers uplift this perceived notion of dominance in the current patriarchal society. This concept of shaming is prevalent in Andy’s life since the age of six, when his birthname, Walter Jr., was changed to
Andrew (Andy), upon the birth of his younger brother, as they [Andy’s parents] felt he “better exemplified” the name (“Delivery Part 1”, 5:44-6:13). Regarding shame, Kimmel also discusses how boys’ notions of masculinity and the ideal masculine traits of manhood are initially demonstrated for them by their fathers, amongst other adult men around them, which contributes to the cyclical nature of hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel, 1994). Thus, applying this to Andy’s character, if Walter Sr. saw at the age of six that Andy was already not living up to the masculine ideals of being a successful, strong, bread winner, Andy would spend the rest of his adult life trying to live up to the hegemonic ideals and proving his masculinity to his father and men around him (Kivel, 2007). In a deleted scene from season 7 episode 9, “WUPHF.com”, from season 7’s extended ‘Superfan’ episodes\(^1\), Andy’s supposed lack of respect from his family is mentioned in conversation between Andy and Michael where Michael is trying to convince Andy to invest in Ryan’s business. Michael tries to convince him in the following conversation (9:48-10:21).

**Michael:** Think of it this way, wouldn’t you love to have more money than your parents ever had? You could buy the Bernard estate and just burn it to the ground while your entire family watched.

**Andy:** That’s horrible. I love my family.

**Michael:** Okay, well. I misread that situation, but how about then…you are able to write a check to each member of your family for $5 million? And they said you wouldn’t amount to anything.

**Andy:** I have a very supportive family, in their own way.

\(^1\) Released during January 2024 while writing this paper.
Michael then gets Andy’s financial investment by bringing up Cornell and using it as a further dig against him, implying Cornell had “laughed” him off campus, finding another point of weakness in Andy’s psyche.

His failure to live up to the masculine ideals is reinforced and demonstrated in a scene in season 8 episode 4, “Garden Party”, when Andy throws a celebration for himself and his parents regarding his promotion to regional branch manager. Though, this statement is denied to the camera by Andy in a talking head segment after Walter Sr. asks if everyone was made branch manager, undermining Andy’s achievement (7:55-8:05). Later in the episode, Andy and his father share an important conversation, unbeknownst that other employees can hear them via the baby monitor. This scene does two necessary things for Andy’s character: it sources where his insecurities stem from, his father, and sympathizes Andy in the eyes of his coworkers and the audience (18:29-19:00).

**Andy:** I don’t know, I just thought that if I could throw this great garden party and show you how respected I am that you’d be proud of me.

**Walter Sr:** Andrew...

**Andy:** I know, I know that you’re proud of me.

**Walter Sr:** I’m not going to tell you how impressed I am that you’re a manager of some rinky-dink branch of a paper company in Scranton, Pennsylvania. How long are you going to go on needing my approval? You’re a grown man, don’t act like a little boy who needs- [conversation cuts out].

Kimmel wrote that the boy is in constant desire for his father’s approval as well as to be like his father (Kimmel, 1994). This is demonstrated by Andy and his father in the “Garden Party” scene. A key adjective Andy used in the above conversation was “respected”, in relation to his father
witnessing the employees of Dunder Mifflin/Andy’s subordinates showing up to the celebration, which, to Andy, translates into respecting him and his authority position over them. Returning to Kivel’s Act Like a Man Box, while respected is not in the box, associated terms that convey a position of respect are bread winners, successful, strong, control of women, take charge, and take care of people (Kivel, 2007). If Andy can successfully convey to his father that he demands respect from his subordinates, he has the associated qualities of what being a man involves, but his father does not hold Andy’s position to a place of respect, sending the message that he does not have the qualities of a patriarchal man.

Andy’s need for paternal approval manifests itself in men outside of his father as well. Expanding off Kimmel, the boy, who is in constant desire of his father’s approval, is also in constant desire of other men to approve of him when he becomes a man (Kimmel, 1994). This is exemplified over the course of the show with Andy and his supervisors, who serve as pseudo-paternal figures as if the office were a family. Initially this is shown with Michael when Andy is first transferred to the Scranton branch and then later shown with new CEO, Robert California (James Spader), who promoted Andy to branch manager. When California is asked why he chose Andy as branch manager he says: “Why did I choose Andy to run the office? Because he’s all surface, uncomplicated, what you see is what you get. Could be a recipe for mediocrity, yes, but then again, it might just be why people fight for him” (“The Incentive”, 20:20-20:34). California is creating his own box of what a successful man is, which is someone likable. That’s not to say California doesn’t represent Kivel’s masculine traits, because he does – he's a sexually charged, high-status man – he is just adding to the box that Andy is trying to fit into (Kivel, 2007). Kimmel’s point of desire for approval by fathers and other men is then demonstrated in a Freudian way, when Andy greets California by calling him “dad” (“The Incentive”, 5:14-5:17).
Then it is complicated in season 8 episode 24, “Free Family Portrait Studio”, when Andy is kissed by California (20:11-20:19). California is doing something narratively drastic when he kisses Andy. When Andy greets California with “dad” it is at the beginning of season eight, after Andy has been made manager, he is letting slip his need of approval by California, in a way that mirrors his desire for approval from his father. But, when California kisses Andy, it is at the end of season eight, when Andy’s been fired, his role filled by a woman, and is going through sexual troubles with his girlfriend. California is emasculating him and de-masking him in front of the office by kissing him, humiliating him even further (Kimmel, 1994). The kiss acts as the first domino to Andy’s devolution, which will be fully explored in the following chapter.

Andy’s fear of being unmasked is also demonstrated through *The Office*’s humor surrounding homosexuality. Like *Two and A Half Men*, *The Office* weaponizes homosexual masculinity, an alternative form of masculine identity, to undermine a straight male character and reinforce anxieties of failing masculinity. In a patriarchal society, “oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men” (Connell, 1995, pg. 78). As opposed to homosexual masculinity, “heterosexual masculinity, then, is encountered in the form of everyday relations with straight men that often have an undercurrent of threat” (Connell, 1995, pg. 155). Where *The Office* introduces the idea of Andy being gay, in Season 6 Episode 1 “Gossip”, it is utilized to further fuel fear of exposure of being unable to properly perform heteronormativity. The more self-conscious Andy is about his perceived homosexual identity, the more it communicates to audience members that homosexual masculinity is an undesirable identity. I would argue that Andy’s internalized homophobia is dormant until it is the topic of conversation, as Andy has no concern dressing as a public gay figure in later episodes (George Michael) or trying to help the only gay character (Oscar) try to find a boyfriend while
on a business trip. It is once his own sexuality is called into question, though, his anxieties re-
surface.

In season 6 episode 1, “Gossip”, a rumor is spread through Michael that Andy is gay, and
Andy both dispels the rumors and faces confusion if his homosocial traits and stereotypes do
mean he’s gay. In one scene, Andy is making a cup of tea when Kevin begins laughing and
associating liking tea with “liking men’s butts” to which Andy defensively replies “Who told you
that? Was it Broccoli Rob? Someone from Chi Psi? Or did you run into someone from my high
school?” (11:00-11:27). This continues with Andy doing a talking head segment and saying:
“This is not the first time rumors about me being gay have come up. Twice before, actually. Just
a weird coincidence. It’s a little too weird. Almost makes you wonder if it’s not a coincidence at
all, woah. Which it is, of course. But makes you wonder.” (11:28-11:47). Later in the episode
still, Andy has two conversations about exploring the notion that he is gay. Once, with Oscar,
who, as mentioned, is the only openly recurring gay character in the entirety of the show², where
Andy imagines a situation where he would be okay kissing a man (Brad Pitt on the beach)
(11:55-13:02). And then once more where he asks Jim if Pam (Jim’s wife) has any female
friends he could set him up with and expresses he is confused if he is gay due to “evidence”
being stacked against him (14:20-14:40). His masculine and heterosexual façade is quick to
crumble in the face of examination.

Andy exists in a state of fear of being caught and exposed by other men, using his
aggression as way of masking his anxieties. In Kaufman’s “7 Ps of Male Violence”, the sixth “P”
is the Psychic Pressure Cooker, which hinges on the internalization and repression of men
expressing emotions outside of anger (Kaufman, 1999, pg. 3). Andy’s anger issues and

² A brief side character, a warehouse worker named Matt, is implied to be gay and Oscar tries to flirt with him.
emotional outbursts are his means to hide his insecurities but also to prove to others he is a man when faced with the threat of being exposed. Not only does Andy fear exposure of being caught as ‘not man enough’, but Andy is faced with the threat of being exposed by other men in the show routinely, as demonstrated. If “manhood is about having power and control, not being powerful means you are not a man” (Kaufman, 1999, pg. 4). The times when Andy acts out in anger, he is lacking control of the situation – meaning, there is usually another character either undermining him or humiliating him, whether it is unintentional or not. An example of this is in season three episode ten “The Return”, when Jim pulls a prank on Andy by putting his cellphone in the ceiling then repeatedly calling it, despite Andy’s increased frustration. For further context, Jim has previously pulled a prank on Andy – putting his stapler in Jell-O – and has knowledge that Andy reacted poorly to that as well, kicking over a garbage can (“Gay Witch Hunt”, 10:24-11:03). This, alongside the rejection from Michael, who Andy was trying to be friends with, causes Andy to punch a hole in the wall, which would conclude his original arc on the show by sending him to anger management.

Another main example of Andy’s psychic pressure cooking going off is in season 5 episode 12 “The Duel”, when he becomes aware of the fact that his fiancée, Angela, has been cheating on him with Dwight for the entirety of their relationship. When Andy learns the news, he initially enacts violence against Dwight, who refuses to respect the relationship between Andy and Angela, who are, at this point in the show, planning their wedding. In the scene below, Andy has pinned Dwight between the bushes and his car, while having this conversation (17:55-19:25):

**Dwight:** Come out and face me like a man.

**Andy:** I am a man! I’m a bigger man than you’ll ever be. I would never sleep with another man’s fiancée.
Dwight: You’re not a man. You don’t know how to take care of her. All you do is dress fancy and sing. La la la la la. What does that mean? You can’t even protect her.

Andy: Protect her from what? Bears, you idiot? When’s the last time you saw a damn bear in Scranton?

It is verbalized through this conversation that Dwight’s view of masculinity aligns with the more hegemonic ideals as he openly mocks Andy’s masculine identity, aligning him with the ‘soft’ man and homosexual, effeminate masculinity. Kimmel, in “Masculinity as Homophobia”, writes “masculinity [as being] defined more by what one is rather than who one is” (Kimmel, 1994, pg. 126). To Dwight, he is a man in the ways Andy is not. This is one of the ways that Dwight will have emasculated Andy, attempting to expose him.

As discussed, there are multiple instances of Andy being exposed as not being man enough in the eyes of his coworkers and family. Throughout the show Andy must prove himself as a man, as if in a series of trials. In his first season (season 3), Andy is fully entrenched in toxic masculine stereotypes: he is aggressive, attempting to assert dominance, and is out of touch with his emotions. When Andy returns at the end of the third season, he comes back as a more toned-down version of himself to blend into the ensemble cast of the show and no longer stand out as a guest character. Throughout season four and five, Andy is more mutable as he attempts to undo his previous toxic version of himself and grow as a person. There are moments, as depicted above, that the writers allude to sympathizing Andy’s character to redeem him – like the conversation with his father and by making Andy the cuckold in the Dwight/Angela/Andy triangle. However, most of his sympathetic moments also act against him, and undermine the less toxic version of the masculinity he is performing. It is my argument that Andy goes on a narrative journey that I have dubbed the male-female-male cycle with his character arc, with him
initially starting as a toxic man in the early seasons. As he undoes his toxic gender stereotypes, he is emasculated by other characters to undermine the new form of masculinity. All this leads back to Andy having to revert to his initial toxic masculine self to prove he is a man, thus proving that the hegemonic man is patriarchal, with toxic traits. In the following chapter, I will be exploring the female back to male arc using Halberstam’s trans* theory, Butler’s performing gender, to show how *The Office* utilizes emasculation to support hegemonic masculinity through Andy.
CHAPTER TWO:
BONER CHAMP & THE
INABILITY TO PERFORM MASCULINITY

“When I got the nickname ‘Boner Champ’, that’s when I became me.”
- Andy Bernard, “Here Comes Trouble”

To understand the transgenderization of Andy, I will be using Jack Halberstam’s various works on trans* theory to discuss the trans* cycle that Andy’s character goes through. As well, I will be using Butler’s work on gender performativity to analyze how Andy’s gender presentation works in tandem with drag masculinity. Following my discussion of the fear of being exposed from the first chapter, I will be using emasculation and fear of feminization to examine Andy’s character changes throughout seasons three to six and how his masculine presentation changes. I take this stance using examples of emasculation from within the show using a transtheoretical lens to discuss how they are utilized to undermine Andy’s masculinity, rather than presenting a legitimate alternative to patriarchal masculinity. Furthermore, the importance of male genitalia to the construction of masculinity, both as a physical idea and societal identity, will be discussed as a contribution to Andy’s trans* cycle and how masculinity is used as drag. It is important to note that I am not arguing that Andy takes on a transgender identity or is at any point identified as a woman. I also want to make it known, I am not attributing failed masculinity to being transgender, but rather using trans* as a verb to explore the reinforcement of dominant, cis-heterosexual masculinity through Andy’s character journey. The idea for transgenderization
came from a scene that will be discussed further in the chapter, that contributes to the idea of male-female-male cycles.

To understand Andy’s gender performativity, I turn to Butler’s second chapter, Gender Regulations, in her work Undoing Gender, which examines how gender norms and practices are regulated within society, to produce what is then viewed as normative femininity and masculinity (Butler, 2004, pg. 42). A norm is not a rule or law but “operates within social practices as the implicit standard of normalization” (Butler, 2004, pg. 41). Where gender is not a real concept, the notions of how society perceives gender construction, how masculine and feminine are produced, have been naturalized to equate certain behaviors, looks, and traits to a particular gender identity. Butler describes gender as a repetition of acts and “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1988, pg. 519). Where hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to women and to subordinated masculinities, the upkeep of presenting as a hegemonic man requires performing in a dominant, aggressive way rather than in an emphasized feminine or homosexual way, which is, according to Connell, the subordinated (Connell, 1987, pg. 186). As I will demonstrate, The Office operates as an extension of social practice, as it is reflective of the real world versus a fantasy world or utopia, where a standard of gender normativity is reinforced. While chapter one focused on other men’s regulations of Andy, chapter two will focus on Andy’s individual gender performance and how it is weaponized against him to contribute to his trans* cycle.

Humor to reinforce hegemonic masculinity can also be explained through Butler’s usage of speech-act therapy. Butler’s use of speech-act therapy is the notion that society is continually created as an illusion through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign (Butler,
Thus, humor is acted from the dominant presence in the workplace – in *The Office*, this would Michael Scott – and signaled to be not only appropriate but the preferred way of being or behaving. The speech-acts can produce the accepted norm which is then repeated and performed (Felluga, 2011). Building from Butler’s work, Barbara Pleister’s article ‘Take it like a man!’: Performing hegemonic masculinity through organization humour¹, examines the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity in organizational comedy, upheld by both men and women in the organization. She argues that “workplace humor is used to establish a hyper-masculine culture” and that the humor displayed by the CEO (the dominant, person in charge figure) is then adopted by the rest of the organization to uphold the approved form of humor and behaving (Pleister, 2015). Employees and managers in organizational culture participate in performing humor that is based in sexism, homophobia, and further marginalizing identities in the workplace. By using jokes and humors at others expense, it distances the men telling the joke from the subject of the joke. This also allows for status and power to be articulated through humor, i.e. those being joked about do not have power where those telling the joke are expressing their dominance over them. Pleister further argues that women also use humor to perform hegemonic masculinity to be accepted within dominant masculine cultures, thus validating the humor (Pleister, 2015).

Applying this to *The Office*, I note that usually Andy is at the butt of the joke, from both men and women, signaling his lack of power and authority over the office, even when he is appointed manager. And if Andy is not the subject of the joke, it is then aimed at non-white characters, fat people, gay people, and women.

¹ She stylizes humor (U.S American spelling) as humour (British English spelling) in the title but from here on out I will be using the U.S American spelling.
In one section of Pleister’s article, she details the dominant forms of humor used in the workplace and how they signal the upholding of hegemonic masculinity, with one being the targeted joke against a male employee in her organizational example (Adrian\(^2\)) from a new, young woman employee (Karen) by morphing him into Spock. By male employees previously using humor at Adrian’s expense – homophobic jokes, simulated sex during business calls, getting him to take photos of other men’s butts to put on female employee’s desktops – newcomer employees and women in the office adopt the same humor techniques to assimilate themselves into the dominant male culture (Pleister, 2015). Karen, through photoshopping Adrian, is also performing hegemonic masculinity, to assert her dominance over the ‘weak man’ of the office.

This interaction parallels the cell phone prank Jim and Pam play against Andy in season three, where Jim places Andy’s cellphone in the ceiling tiles and repeatedly calls it, resulting in Andy’s burst of anger and him punching the wall. Jim initially asks Karen, his girlfriend and longtime coworker of Andy, to assist with the prank but she says she’s too busy, so he turns to Pam, who helps enact the prank after her annoyance with Andy. In this instance, Pam is performing the dominant, hegemonic masculinity that Jim has utilized to place himself near the top of the hierarchy, usually through pulling pranks against Dwight. Because Michael and Pam will laugh at Jim’s antics, they are accepted, if not encouraged. Jim and Pam utilize humor and the prank against Andy to signal their dominant masculinities and place Andy near the bottom of the hierarchy.

\(^2\) Who is routinely used as the butt of a joke, placing him at the bottom of the male hierarchy, in this case study company.
To understand why I’ve decided to analyze Andy’s journey and treatment through trans* theory, we must examine how Halberstam came to use the term trans* in relation to his own work and transgender identity. This is especially important as I do not take the stance that Andy himself is transgender or belonging to a trans* identity, but rather that by using trans* experiences and theory his gender journey begins to make more sense. Halberstam’s adds the asterisk to trans to modify “the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity” (Halberstam, 2018, pg. 4). This idea of looking at gender transitioning as a constant movement versus a fixed outcome can be applicable to gender identity formation outside of transgender communities and identity, and instead also be applied to the constant flux of internal and external gender socialization and understanding – such is the case, in my opinion, with Andy’s shifting gender treatment. Butler also wrote that “the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts”, the acts being the performance of gender to convince social audiences that one is successfully acting their gender (Butler, 1988). The performing and acting of gender to convey gender success also gives recognition that gender presentation varies, depending on how often and how much one ‘acts’ it. Halberstam’s use of trans* is also an opposition to naming, especially in the medical community and scientific sense. Trans* allows for trans* identified people to become their own ‘authors’, rather than confining them to one way of being or labeling themselves (Halberstam, 2018, pg.4). I liked this mindset for exploring Andy’s masculinity since he’s written in the in-between, his masculine construction at odds with itself. There are aspects of Andy’s masculinity that leans towards the more limited, hegemonic ideals while there are then aspects of his masculinity that lean towards a more feminized, soft form of masculinity, which sets him apart from the more
one-dimensional male characters in *The Office*. Trans* allows for understanding the instability of gender and the unattainability of naming it.

In Halberstam’s Female Masculinity, he explores the relationship between masculinity and performance, through drag kings. A drag king is usually a woman who dresses up in a recognizably male costume and performs theatrically and parodically where a male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of masculinity, within a theater setting (Halberstam, 1998, pg. 232). Halberstam also discusses the contrast between the naturality of masculinity and the male body versus the artifice of femininity, how masculinity “just is” (Halberstam, 1998, pg. 234). Additionally, Halberstam offers here another sitcom’s relation to masculinity through an analysis of the sitcom, *Seinfeld*, and shows how comedy pressures the assumption of male naturalization and the instability of masculinity despite the continued, U.S white male assumption that maleness is not performative. Men can believe this through the inability of non-heterosexual, non-white, non-cisgender men to be successful impersonators.

Furthermore, Halberstam’s chapter Oh Behave! Austin Powers and Drag Kings in the book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* examines the relationship between king comedies and drag masculinity. Halberstam utilizes the term ‘king’ as a more precise form of camp, as it draws inspiration specifically from drag kings (Halberstam, 2005). With that lens, he approached the British comedy film *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* and its performance of masculinity that called upon drag king inspirations. Halberstam also offers a unique perspective of transgender/gender-bending approaches to gender

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3 While *The Office* is not a British comedy film it is born from the original British sitcom produced by Ricky Gervais and Stephan Merchant.
displayed by cisgender men, especially when he discusses the comedic approach of the penis in *Austin Power*. Halberstam writes:

> “Austin walks around a room nude while Vanessa, seated in the foreground and oblivious to his presence, holds up various objects (a sausage, a magnifying glass, a pen) that simultaneously conceal and prosthetically extend his penis. In this penis concealment/replacement sequence, the naked body of the male is both on display and under construction; while the gaze is of the camera at Austin’s nude body should confirm at least that this body is phallic, in fact, once again [it] suggests that the body requires a prosthetic supplement” (Halberstam, 2005, pg.133).

Halberstam is daring the reader and viewer to detach the penis from its equivalency to manhood. *Austin* is still desired by women regardless of needing a penis pump⁴, but it allows him to also come to term with his own vulnerabilities without equating them to insecurity or lacking. In *Austin Powers*, humor is utilized as a form of deconstructing masculinity. The king comedy as a genre includes alternate forms of masculinity, masculinity relearned from (butch) women, while also highlighting the futility of dominant masculinity. There is a newfound authenticity that allows men in king comedies to be vulnerable and free, thanks to the queer and trans approach of drag culture. While *The Office* does not directly correlate to the comedy film Halberstam discusses, I believe his discussion of comedy’s approach to masculinity and the queer and transgender lens of comedic masculinity as a gateway to new forms of masculinity allows for connection to Andy’s narrative, especially when discussing the physical makeup of manhood and men’s castration anxiety.

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⁴ Shown earlier in the film when Austin collects his belongings after being defrosted.
Before unpacking Andy’s relationship to masculinity through the physical, I want to examine how *The Office* feminizes and emasculates Andy before castrating him. This process also illustrates how Andy tries to perform his assigned gender by relying on male drag. There is a recurring association of certain characteristics to make Andy appear more effeminate outside of the gay rumor mentioned in chapter one, such as his love of theater. Connell argues, “from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily related to femininity” (Connell, 1995, pg. 78). Furthermore, in Connell’s chapter “A Very Straight Gay”, she writes that “patriarchal culture has a simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity” (Connell, 1995, pg. 143). This is demonstrated in relation to Andy’s character through his way of dressing.

Examining Andy’s style of dress before season 9, it could be described as leaning more ‘metrosexual’. Kimmel wrote in his chapter “From Anxiety to Anger Since the 1990’s” in “Manhood in America: A Cultural History” that metrosexuality is influenced by gay men’s fashion, beauty, and lifestyle trends within television shows, such as *Will & Grace* and *Sex and the City*, and women’s desires for their male partners to become “gay straight men” (Kimmel, 1998). Gay straight men being heterosexual men who exhibited gay affect and style and are more emotionally in tune with women and their needs like their gay best friends (Kimmel, 1998). Andy is typically dressed in more pastel colors, typical to yachting fashion, with bow ties and sweater vests with colorful pants. In season nine, when Andy resumes the role of manager, his way of dressing changes to a more subdued style, in blacks and dark blues. This is not the only way Andy has done masculine drag. In season 8 episode 5 “Spooked”, Andy’s Halloween costume is a construction worker, a job related to the physicality of blue-collar men. To appear more successful, Andy has donned a more masculine presentation. He is no longer flamboyant or

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5 Coined by British journalist Mark Simpson in 1994 (Kimmel, 1998)
dressed like his “life is just one long brunch” (“Garden Party”, 4:04-4:07). This change of dress also comes during the final stage of Andy’s character arc, which is devolution. By dressing in a way that appears more traditionally masculine, Andy can aid his performance of masculinity with the visual cues of dressing like other men he models himself after. Contrasting the brighter, softer colors associated with his middle seasons, the masculine drag he wears as manager in season 9 signals further steps taken to become more of a man, in a hegemonic way.

As workplaces became less masculinized and deindustrialized, the new form of masculinity found in metrosexuality encouraged an alternate form of appearing successful through its style and ability to accessorize. It offered the sense of being secure enough in one’s masculinity while also offering emotional openness – metrosexuality takes the freedom of homosexual masculinity while keeping it in the confines of heterosexuality. This form of masculinity is intrinsically linked to consumerism though, which explains why its infiltration into society is introduced and so heavily linked to television and media. Andy’s affect and style pre-season 9 is definitively metrosexual – he’s one of the nicer men to his girlfriends, openly desires a family, and has less stereotypically masculine aligned interests and hobbies. Rather than this lending to his success – both professionally and socially – his metrosexuality still lends itself to attacks against Andy’s masculinity from other people in the office. Abandoning his alternate masculine presentation for a more traditionally successful masculine appearance thus delegitimizes metrosexuality amongst men.

While Andy is presented as heterosexual\(^6\) through two major relationships, they both reaffirm his inability to perform heteronormative masculinity and heterosexuality. As previously discussed, in chapter one, Andy’s relationship with Angela is thwarted by her affair with Dwight

\(^6\) Outside of “Gossip”, as Andy was not actually written to be gay.
and his more successful and dominant version of masculinity. Where Dwight views Angela as a prize to win, Andy is usually depicted as respecting women (“The Duel”, 14:03-14:06). He also showcases his desire to be a father and family man (“Christening”, 2:56-3:09). When the women of the office openly discuss unfair, misogynistic treatment from DeAngelo (Will Ferrell), Andy is the only man to side with the women (“Inner Circle”, 9:53-10:22). However, this characteristic is rewritten when Andy is in a serious relationship and in a position of authority. In this instance, he abandons both his job and relationship to win back his ex-girlfriend, Erin (Ellie Kemper), who left for Florida (“Get the Girl”). While Andy does set a boundary that he and Erin cannot engage physically until he breaks up with his current girlfriend (Jessica), further explored in the following paragraph, he is still emotionally cheating on her (“Welcome Party”). When Andy and Erin do return to the office, his job has been taken over by Nellie Bertram (Catherine Tate) and he is demoted from branch manager to salesperson. Though Andy fights this as much as he can, he and Nellie engage in a metaphorical pissing contest of money and power, only for Nellie to still be more respected by the other office members. This masculinizes her, reinforcing her power and authority, while emasculating Andy by subordinating him. This is visually reinforced when Andy stands in a patch of grass known for being peed on, signaling his drop from power.

In season 8 episode 20, “Welcome Party”, Andy somewhat uses his gay affect and metrosexuality to his advantage at a point of becoming more patriarchal when going to break up with his longtime girlfriend, Jessica, to get back together with his former girlfriend, Erin. In the scene, Andy, who doesn’t want to come clean about why he’s breaking up with Jessica, attempts the nice approach (“that we can stay friends”), the mean approach (“you twist my words around, part of me thinks we should just end this right now”) and the gay scapegoat approach when

7 A short-lived guest branch manager in season 8.
Jessica says “are you leaving me for Erin? You said she wasn’t relationship material”. Andy responds “Okay, you want honesty? Super honesty time. I’m gay”, to which the gay friend of Jessica’s says, “I knew it!”, because he and Andy would enjoy shopping together. Andy replies, “I liked hanging out with you, you’re a cool guy…which proves my point, that I’m gay” (14:16-15:10). When Jessica says that he couldn’t be gay because they had been intimate, Andy said he was simply faking it and imagining John Stamos, to which she says, “I can’t say it doesn’t make sense”. While Andy tries to believably pass as both gay and not gay, moments before this interaction, he had been nonchalantly eating gummy penises despite the presence of gummy bears.

A major character point for Andy is his penis; it tends to act as a secondary personality to Andy’s identity. This is demonstrated through his college nickname, Boner Champ. His nickname serves as a verbal reaffirmation of his manhood, that it is a functioning part of his masculinity. Andy’s formation of identity, i.e., when he got the nickname, is attached to his genital stage of psychosexual development which is the final stage of personality development, according to Freud, taking place between puberty and adulthood and results in core relationship building (Mcleod, 2023). In contrast to the phallic stage, the genital stage is supposedly more centered on heterosexual pleasure, rather than self-pleasure (Mcleod, 2023). In season 9 episode 5 “Here Comes Trouble”, when Andy is asked the origin of his nickname, by the present acapella group, he says that he “got completely ripped on bud dries, I had sex with a snowman. I just went at that thing...took the face off, just seemed easier that way” (9:49-10:07). By removing the face, Andy is acknowledging the perceived maleness of the snowman, a completely inanimate object.

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8 The breakup happens at a bachelorette party.
9 The five stages are Oral, Anal, Phallic, Latent, & Genital.
only assigned masculinity through colloquialism. By removing the head as well, Andy is accepting shame even in his drunken state, that penetrative pleasure with another male object or man is wrong. As mentioned above, Freud’s genitalia stage is associated with heterosexual pleasure, whereas Andy’s nickname derives from a more masturbatory or even homosexual source.

Andy has also referenced fears when it comes to the discussion of his penis\textsuperscript{10}, as well as its size\textsuperscript{11}, despite his nickname being penis centric. Anne Fausto-Sterling discusses the socialization of males as females when their penis size is inadequate, meaning if the penis is too small at birth than the boy is forcibly feminized through socialization to be raised as a girl (Sterling, 2000). During this forced transition, “penetration in the absence of pleasure takes precedence over pleasure in the absence of penetration” which is demonstrated through Andy’s nickname being sourced from a penetrative-pleasure interaction (Sterling, 2000). Andy is not occupied with caring about the other party, nor is he occupied with caring about his own sexual pleasure, he is focused on showing his penis is both adequate and working. Of further important is that this conversation all comes when Andy is dressed up as George Michael, a gay pop singer, from the \textit{Faith} music video for Halloween. Not only does Andy dress as George Michael for the episode, but \textit{Faith} was also Andy’s routine solo song during his acapella years. As discussed in chapter one, the usage of the gay rumor is utilized to undermine Andy’s form of masculinity. To pair the conversation of Andy having perceived homosexual contact with an inanimate object with Andy’s dressing as a homosexual celebrity is visually and verbally reinforcing that Andy does not operate in a way that aligns with hegemonic, heterosexual maleness. He is visually

\textsuperscript{10} Season 8 episode 10 “Christmas Wishes”.
\textsuperscript{11} Season 7 episode 24 “Dwight K. Schrute, (Acting) Manger”.
ostracized from heterosexual men by dressing as a public gay figure and he is verbally
ostracizing himself by revealing that the origin of his nickname has homosexual ties.

In Halberstam’s chapter Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance, performance is also
used in the discussion of sexual performance. “Performance anxiety, of course, describes a
particularly male, indeed heterosexual, fear of some version of impotence in the face of a
demand for sexual interaction”, which is depicted through Andy’s own inability to perform and
the shaming following it (Halberstam, 1998, pg. 235). Performance anxiety legitimizes the fear
that masculine performance and theatricality can be exposed. In season 8 episode 21, “Angry
Andy”, Andy’s penis is used against him, further emasculating him. Due to the stress of his job
being taken, Andy is unable to sexually perform with Erin (15:42-16:37):

   Erin: So, last night was so not a big deal.
   Andy: Oh, yeah, I was just tired.
   Erin: We both were.
   Andy: Yeah.
   Erin: Plus, I was definitely not my normal sexy self.
   Andy: Woah, no, are you kidding? You were so sexy. Just the thought of you last night
like, crazy turns me on. It just didn’t...last night.
   [Break]
   Erin: But, really, it’s not a big deal.
   Andy (tensely): Yeah, I know it’s not a big deal. (Walks off)

Following this conversation, Erin brings the issue of Andy’s performance to Dwight, who then
tells Nellie to prove Andy’s weakness to Nellie. Nellie then turns it into an office wide
discussion on impotence, going around and asking the other men directly if they’ve experienced
trouble performing, to which all the men answer that they haven’t. To further individualize the issue to just Andy, out of sympathy Pam makes Jim lie and say they have experienced it “a few times”, which makes Jim defensive when she implies that it would be more than once his penis would be unable to perform properly (24:26-24:52). This episode deals heavily with men’s performance and castration anxiety. Though all men are questioned, it is repeatedly confirmed that none of the men, besides Andy, have dealt with impotency or the inability to properly perform. Thus, Andy’s masculinity is reinforced to be inadequate while confirming the other men’s masculinity. *The Office*, like with its message on how there is a right way and wrong way to be a man, also messages to viewers there is a right way to be heterosexual, and in Andy’s case he is shown to fail on both fronts. His lack of performance is tied to his failing masculinity.

Despite his performance issues being tied to stressors, it is attributed throughout the episode to Andy’s failed hetero masculinity. Within the meeting, Dwight shares that flounders experience impotence when converting from male to female back to male\textsuperscript{12}, which is where Andy’s transgenderization is actualized through his castration. Castration anxiety was initially introduced by Freud with his sexual theories of children and the Oedipus complex (Taylor, 2016). It is the psychoanalytic fear that a boy will lose or damage his genitalia as punishment for resenting the father and desiring the mother, which is then legitimized by the anatomical difference between the sexes (Taylor, 2016). While Andy is not desiring his mother in the example described above, his heterosexual desire is still unfulfilled for not performing hegemonic heteronormativity. Erin acts as the initial castrator by exposing the issue to their coworkers. His coworkers then too castrate him by discussing his impotency publicly, framing it

\textsuperscript{12} This is scientifically accurate.
as an Andy issue and not a male issue, signaling Andy is not a true man like the rest of the male characters in the office. Dwight has finally successfully exposed him.

At the end of the episode, Andy is further humiliated in the scene while he is on the phone with his dad, he discusses his demotion (framing it as a “lack of promotion”). During this scene, Erin feminizes Andy – who has already been emasculated and castrated by her and the rest of the employees – by trying to ‘protect’ him from Nellie. This scene operates as Andy’s chance to reclaim his masculinity by reverting to his old, toxic habits. It is done in four steps (25:54-27:16, 31:43-32:01):

1. Andy proclaims he doesn’t need a woman standing up for him and that he is “a man” and “can protect himself”.
2. He then lashes out at his father saying, “Dad, go to Hell, I’m taller than you”.
3. He begins physically lashing out through throwing chairs, breaking pictures, and then punches the same wall which he punched in “The Return”.
4. When fired, he says “I can’t describe it. I just, for the first time in a long time I actually feel in control…I feel alive…” and when Erin attempts to help carry the box of his stuff, he stops her due to his erection.

Through his outburst he has reclaimed his masculinity and sexuality through his reversion to the version of himself in season three, which is continued in Andy’s season nine behavior. Andy has shed the version of his masculinity that was muted, respectful to women, and homosocial to don himself in the version of masculinity that is sexually successful, aggressive, and dominating of women. At one point in season nine, even verbalizing his emotions have been hurt by expressing it as “the ol’ one-two punch to my scrotum pole, translation – penis, translation – my manhood” (3:23-3:32). Translation, his reclaimed manhood resulting in continuing cruelty towards his ex-
girlfriend and others in the office, including characters of color. He has seemingly concluded his journey, stuffing himself back into the man box, no matter the cost. It begs the question, where do men go from here?
CONCLUSION:
NEW SHOWS, NEW MEN?
THE FUTURE OF MASCULINITY IN COMEDY TELEVISION

"For me, success is not about the wins and losses. It's about helping these young fellas be the best versions of themselves on and off the field."
- Ted Lasso, “Trent Crimm, The Independent”

If The Office represents the past – the limitations of men and masculinity within traditional sitcom formats – where does the future of comedy televisions depictions and hopes for men begin? Is there finally a fictional world that can actualize a reality where men are capable of growth and positive change. Or, better yet, where men do not need to undergo change to begin with? Ted Lasso presents itself as a utopian pioneer of kindness and empathy. Aired on Apple TV+ from 2020-2023, Ted Lasso follows Kansas City football coach, Ted Lasso (Jason Sudeikis) as he is transferred to coach London based football team (for Americans, soccer), AFC Richmond. Ted’s signature happy-go-lucky, mustachioed approach to life served as a much-needed palette cleanser during the pandemic years as he deals with anxiety, fighting teammates, and divorce (Harris, 2023). His mantra ‘believe’ is simple and effective, he believes in the people around him, that they are capable of positive change, and therefore they believe in him (Beare and Boucaut, 2024). For being set in a traditionally hypermasculine sports world, critics lauded Ted Lasso’s display of positive and vulnerable masculinities (Beare and Boucaut,
Arguably, though, *Ted Lasso* falls into the same cycle of toxic-positive-toxic masculinity and in its utopic world of ‘believe’, alternative masculinities cannot be fully conceived. The aim of this concluding section is to discuss the way *Ted Lasso* continues to promote outdated hegemonic ideals through the character footballer of Jamie Tartt (Phil Dunster), who parallels Andy’s own character journey. From there, the hope is to understand why comedic television is seemingly stuck in traditional ways of constructing masculinity and if there is a future for alternative, positive masculinities to be portrayed in comedic television shows.

First, I want to explore how *Ted Lasso* constructs its world of toxic positivity and what that means, to further explore how it fails to achieve positive masculinity. I will also build my argument on how *Ted Lasso* contradicts its own message of kindness and growth using previously published literature, written following the series concluding as well as during the series airing. The term toxic positivity has increased in popularity searches since 2020\(^1\) and refers to the psychological term that describes the occurrence when encouraging statements or positive remarks are meant to minimize a person’s painful or negative emotions in response to something, thus creating an unrealistic optimism that avoids the circumstances of the situation eliciting a negative response (Reynolds, 2022). As the show continues, Ted’s own overly optimistic demeanor is challenged, and arguably, seen as a flaw. His ex-wife cites it as one of the reasons for a divorce and he discusses how he blocked out his father’s suicide. Further, he’s shown that he’s incapable of dealing with his panic attacks by not allowing himself to feel the negative aspects of the challenges in his life (Harris, 2023). ‘Be kind’ is not the Band-Aid Ted believed it to be when the show started and as the show progressed further from the start of the

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1 Interestingly, around the same time *Ted Lasso* began airing weekly.
pandemic, it was not the Band-Aid Sudeikis had communicated it to be to the world (Harris, 2023).

While elements of toxic positivity are present in the show, Kennedy Koford expanded on metamodernism and masculinity in *Ted Lasso*. Metamodernism refers to the philosophical perspective aiming to bridge themes of skepticism to themes of hope, vulnerability, and human connection to inform and analyze media culture and texts (Koford, 2022). Where Koford discusses the subversion of traditional masculinity using metamodernistic texts, I’d argue that because of the oscillation between optimism and realism, that *Ted Lasso* does not cement a stance and rather than subverting traditional masculinity, it reaffirms hegemonic masculinity under a patriarchal society. This is not to say that kindness is not a good approach to have when dealing with others and the world, but rather the optimistic approach of the world of *Ted Lasso* is still stuck in traditional ways of viewing masculinity which ultimately harms the once utopic vision Sudeikis and show creators set out to bring to reality. This is apparent in, but not limited to Jamie Tartt, who has textual and visual representations of the shortcomings and benefits of both hegemonic and alternative masculinities in different, strategic ways.

Analysis of *Ted Lasso*’s masculine structures, and the toxic masculinity within the sports comedy-drama, tend to focus on one side character – Rupert Mannion, former owner of AFC Richmond and Rebecca Walton\(^2\)’s ex-husband, rightfully so in some regards (Arvan, 2024). The character of Rupert does exemplify the worst parts of toxic masculinity without ever going through change, but to solely focus on Rupert is purposely falling into the blind, toxic positive approach that I wish to avoid, especially, as Rupert is *not* a main character, and rather a less fleshed out side character. I want to look at the similarities of Jamie

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\(^2\) Current owner of AFC Richmond.
Tartt’s masculinity cycle, in comparison to my analysis on Andy and how it reinforces the message of *The Office* and hegemonic masculinity.

Jamie starts the show as an immature, hotheaded, arrogant, and self-absorbed player³. He begins the show dating Keeley Jones (Juno Temple), who eventually breaks up with him due to his selfishness, immaturity, and mistreatment. He spends much of season two aiming to get back on her good side and AFC⁴ without the ulterior motive of getting back together with her – which is an important note that we will come back to. Throughout the three seasons, he, his teammates, and the audience go on a journey of exploring why Jamie is the way he is. Referring to work by earlier authors, hooks and Kivel, Jamie’s masculinity is directly influenced by his alcoholic, abusive father who deems him ‘soft’ for sharing the ball with another teammate in a match, rather than ‘dominating’ the game (Arvan, 2024). At one point in season two, Jamie’s father yells and shoves Jamie in front of the entire team, softening his teammates outlook on his otherwise dickish behavior. Jaime’s character growth is one of *Ted Lasso*’s main plotlines throughout the series run, which makes the conclusion so disappointing.

I want to look at Jamie’s character journey in a parallel lens to Andy’s, to highlight both the similarities and differences of the characters treatments and to expand on the potential of heterosexual men in comedy television shows. While I do think their overall arcs share similarities, the characters themselves are very different and where Andy can be more fully explored through a transtheoretical lens, I will solely explore Jamie’s masculine journey through the constraints and limitations of heterosexuality within men and *Ted Lasso*. That is not to say that Andy’s own masculine journey is not representative of the limitations of heterosexuality, as

³ Being a player in both in terms of sexuality and being an athlete.
⁴ He was traded to Manchester United at the end of season one.
we saw heteronormativity played a large part in his development and devolution, but rather much of Jamie’s eventual undoing of growth is directly linked to the heteroformalism of *Ted Lasso*’s world. By saying heteroformalism, I am referring to the notion of heterosexuality being both a narrative object and structure, which is exemplified in many instances of the show (Lackey, 2023). Including Nate’s season three arc, Ted’s divorce, Coach Beard’s dysfunctional relationship, and even the responses of heterosexual characters to the queer characters of the show. Most notably to Jamie, his heterosexuality stands in direct relation to another man, with the love triangle that develops between him, Keely, and Roy. As Jamie’s character grows and matures, he engages in *no* relationships – and narratively, this is very important to note, his growth directly seems to hinge on his relationship with Keeley, or lack of it. At the end of the series, despite two seasons of seemingly respecting Roy and Keeley’s relationship⁵, Jamie is back to wanting Keeley again.

The third point in the Jamie/Keeley/Roy love triangle is Roy, who serves two different roles in Jamie’s arc. There is, as shown, the romantic foil aspect to their relationship, as they are both in love with Keeley. But there is also the positive male role model aspect to their dynamic, something Jamie is shown to have lacked in his development. At the beginning of the series, Roy and Jamie are at odds, even enemies – they’re constantly fighting, Jamie shows an open lack of respect for Roy’s authority as team captain, and Roy hates Jamie’s selfish tendencies even while recognizing his talents as an athlete. Season two focuses much on growing their relationship, with Roy retiring from the team and mentoring Jamie to be the best athlete he can be, with them eventually becoming true friends. In one of their final one on one moments on the show, Roy

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⁵ They had broken up early season three and Roy hopes to be getting back together by the end of the series, after Keeley’s failed relationship with a female colleague, Jack.
tells Jamie he’s proud of him, to which Jamie responds, “thanks…thank you for your help too, you know, for motivating me. Haven’t really had that from an older man in my life” (Season 3, episode 12, 19:52-20:05). From there, their relationship – and more importantly, every positive change Jamie has made – crumbles. Roy makes a note to say he acknowledges Jamie’s feelings for Keeley but that he and Keeley are talking again and he doesn’t want this to get in the middle of his and Jamie’s friendship, which Jamie challenges by asking if ‘talking’ was an official relationship or not. Roy further aims to create a boundary (that Keeley is his, not Jamie’s) to which Jamie says no, he won’t step aside. This leads to them insulting each other and discussing Keeley like she is a piece of property, something they have ownership over, even going as far as to imply that because of a leaked sex tape being made originally for Jamie, he was more entitled to embark on a relationship with her. This then cuts to the aftermath of an offscreen fight between Roy and Jamie, both visibly beat up (Jamie more so), standing outside Keeley’s door acting enlightened that rather than continuing to physically fight over her, that she should be able to choose who she wants to date. She tosses them out, having not chosen, and the end of the show never resolves whether either of them end up with her.

Roy serves, as we’ve seen, as Jamie’s father figure and sexual competitor, bridging the dynamics that Andy has with both Dwight and Robert California. Both Jamie and Andy have heterosexual constraints that impair their ability to grow as people, arguably men. Jamie’s masculine growth is directly linked to an end goal of heterosexual accomplishment. Similarly, Andy’s heterosexual accomplishment or failures directly hinge on whether he can successfully perform masculinity. To further explain, Jamie’s growth is both caused and motivated by

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6 Many fans have chosen to believe they could end in a ‘throuple’ (polyamorous trio), but I highly doubt this would ever be made a canonical event (Flateau, 2023).
heterosexual desire – his breakup with Keeley shifts his change and his goal of getting back together with her cause his reversion. Where Andy’s growth is not initially motivated by heterosexual desire, his heterosexual relationships, whether they are successful or failures, are byproducts of his masculine performances. This returns us to the idea of heteroformalism in the world of Ted Lasso (and, expanding past that, The Office). Lackey put it best in his essay “New Men, Same Story: Ted Lasso’s Heteroformalism” when he wrote: to a greater or lesser extent, [characters] change their performances of and relationships to masculinity, heterosexuality sticks around as a background, a horizon (Lackey, 2023). Every version of masculinity introduced in Ted Lasso, both good and bad, “requires the generic drama of heterosexual failure in order to hang together as a narrative” (Lackey, 2023). If Ted Lasso’s heterosexual failures did not exist, the narrative structure of change would not exist, which then limits the potential of men. Is there not a world where Jamie can grow as a man and person without it riding on whether he is in a heterosexual relationship. As Ted Lasso is presented first and foremost as a sports comedy-drama, there could have been a wonderful exploration of the way hypermasculine hegemony exists in the sports world and rich narratives of overcoming that version of masculinity. Instead, Ted Lasso crushes under the weight of heterosexuality, boxing itself into binary ways of viewing gender, and even with its most idyllic way of marketing, cannot reimagine the world.

Andy, throughout all six seasons he was present, was shown to be the least capable of being a hegemonic man, even when performing hegemonic traits. Other men in the show were able to easily navigate hegemonic and heteronormative ideals, even Michael, who is shown to still fail in multiple early attempts at heterosexual desire or who, although he is not taken seriously by others around him, still garners a narrative conclusion involving marriage, children, and living up to his ‘Worlds’ Best Boss’ mug. Andy’s privileged status as “[coming] from a long
line of WASPS so far back it leads to Moses” or being a Cornell nepotism graduate, still do not make up for his masculine faults, as examined. His character flaws were even drawn from real world examples, as discussed by the writers in “The Office: The Untold Story of the Greatest Sitcom of the 2000’s”, with writers joking that Cornell, for example, was “the black sheep of the ivy leagues” (Greene, 2020). Even when Andy is promoted to manager, following Steve Carrell’s departure, his chances of success and growth cannot happen. I do think, in a quick sidenote, that it is interesting to know that the writers initially wanted to promote Dwight, but NBC believed Ed Helms had more advantage due to the success of The Hangover films, and would maintain viewership status, which pushed Andy into the role of manager (Greene, 2020). Similar to how Ted Lasso would contradict itself, The Office would contradict changes made to Andy’s character to fit him into the Michael Scott man box.

For example, as described in “Garden Party” previously, Andy has the moment in which the conversation between him and his father is overheard by his colleagues, creating a point of empathy between the rest of the Dunder Mifflin team and himself, only to be humiliated later in the season. As season eight progressed to the ninth and final season, Andy’s final nail in the coffin was him sailing his family boat with his brother amidst the news of his family losing their money, which resulted from Ed Helms scheduling conflicts to film The Hangover III (Fongers, 2021). This plot point displays a newly regained insensitivity for Andy’s character, his selfish desire to sail the boat and leave Erin and his job behind for multiple weeks, with no communication. Instead, the writers could have taken the opportunity to reinforce the need for

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7 Season 4 episode 8 “Money Part 2”.
8 Andy was absent from episode 6 to 15 for the ninth and final season, with season nine consisting of 25 episodes. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Office_(American_season_9)]
9 When it is verbally confirmed he had the ability to reach out to Erin should he have chosen to.
Andy’s presence – for example, showcase the missing of his skills as manager, or the fondness between him and his girlfriend, Erin – the office showed financial success and Erin becoming emotionally involved with another male love interest due to his lack of regard for their relationship. When Andy returned, his personality was once again a mismatch for the overall cast, like how he was received in season three. His devolution continued when he handled each conflict with emotional immaturity, frustration, and bouts of arrogance and cruelty towards others in the office and Erin. When asked about writing Andy in season 9, showrunner Greg Daniels said “Andy Bernard was funnier as a bit of a dick. We took his character down a few notches. We went back to perhaps an earlier version of his character” (Greene, 2020). But, because of the insistence that The Office be constructed as reality adjacent, the consequences of committing fully to Andy’s revolutionary arc, have societal impact, whether intentional or not.

The issue with aiming for real world believability is that The Office cannot seamlessly coexist between worlds. It cannot be wholly real world due to its status as a television show. The Office could have benefited from not aiming for real world believability, allowing for suspension of belief to make up for instances such as Andy’s concluding arc. Rather, though, modeling The Office after real world events and people, places real people who resemble Andy into the conversation. Where Andy began as a toxic male figure, to then have the writers make conscious decisions to undo those initial traits, to shape him into a more well-rounded individual, there are moments that could have continued his evolution rather than funneling him back to the start. If Andy departed for the majority of the ninth season, could the journey of his departure have been focused on helping his family rather than enacting a selfish boat trip. This could have cemented his growth and the idea that like Andy, men could achieve positive changes and maintain them in the face of turmoil, rather than reverting to more toxic traits.
As mentioned, Andy is, even at his most toxic, the least traditionally hegemonic. He performs a caricature of hegemonic masculinity that proves to be unsuccessful and unfulfilling. Yet, many of Andy’s plot points rely on the unattainable goal of achieving hegemonic masculine status. Andy is constantly striving for a version of patriarchal masculinity to impress other men around him, not limited to his own father. Arguably, the most ‘successful’ version of Andy is when he is not performing traditional masculinity, but rather portraying a more homosocial, alternative masculine influence. Yet, because it is played as a comedic tool rather than a legitimate route for his character, it sends the message he is lacking fulfillment from still being unable to perform hegemonic masculinity.

A decade has passed between The Office concluding and Ted Lasso airing, yet narrative constructs about masculinity remain stuck. For every stride of encouraging vulnerability among men, Ted Lasso would contradict itself with punishing said vulnerability. Similarly, the seasons worth of growth given to Andy’s character is undone in one fatal episode. Words and actions need to align, or at least, if there is an attempt to promote certain words in the case of Ted Lasso, following actions should support not contradict. The world of comedy television, or sitcoms¹⁰, largely avoids being a marker of political progress or being seen as a direct link between social thinking and societal function. Ronald Berman’s “Sitcoms” address the argument of intertwining social change [with sitcoms], with the critical argument that “sitcom[s] should assert certain public values and then show how society fails to implement them” (Berman, 1987). If the format of a sitcom can progress, or rather, comedy television in general, to include more diverse and expansive stories, then the people inside of those stories should be able to be given the chance to

¹⁰ I wanted to expand to include “comedy television”, as Ted Lasso doesn’t fit into the traditional label of situational comedy.
hold more diverse and expansive stories as well. Sitcoms have expanded past limiting themselves to solely focus on marriage and family dynamics, yet, at the core of present sitcoms, those dynamics still take centerstage. Sitcoms have shown the transformation of women from being housewives to career women and played with genre and important political aspects, like in *I Love Lucy*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Insecure*, and *Fleabag*, to name a few examples. Yet, in the world of men in sitcoms, progression is slow. Men, as shown in previous examples of *Home Improvement*, *Two and a Half Men*, *The Office*, and now *Ted Lasso*, continue to uphold the same tropes of masculinity and heteronormativity. Alternative masculinities are introduced only to be shut down and denied. One step forward, two steps back.

Yet, if men cannot be envisioned to change in the most uplifting or narratively light forms of storytelling, how are men expected to be able to successfully achieve growth and enact positive, non-patriarchal masculinity in the real world. If Andy and Jamie cannot end their arcs satisfactorily, their positive changes not being sacrificed for selfish motivation or heterosexual desire, what change is then allowed for men. Comedy media has constructed worlds where men are reminded that they are incapable of long-lasting growth, no matter how much they try. And yet, we expect men to change. Our words don’t match our actions – we are curious and yet, still, judgmental. There must be a fictional world within the comedy sphere, some accessible form of television, that communicates to heterosexual male viewers that there are viable, alternative forms of masculinity that are fulfilling and healthy. Until then, how can we possibly expect the Andy Bernard’s and Jamie Tartt’s of the world to know how to grow, to know they can grow to begin with, if every time they turn on the television, they’re reminded that it doesn’t matter in the end if the world, both inside and outside of screens, still values a certain, hegemonic form of masculinity that continues to harm men and women with its patriarchal goals and norms. That
even, with all the knowledge of said harm, the goal of accomplishing patriarchal manhood is still a legitimate goal. If *The Office* aimed to represent the world to which it aired and *Ted Lasso* aimed to represent the utopic world it wished to be a part of, then men, it would seem, don’t stand a chance. At least, that’s what the world of sitcoms keeps reminding them. New shows produce the same men. The Andy Bernard’s of the world need new shows because they need to be new men.
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VITA

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