



Going Bareback: Time and Aging in a Gay-for-Pay Porn Career

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Abstract

This article explores a critical moment of *going bareback* in the career of arguably the biggest gay porn performer of the 2010s, Johnny Rapid. The analysis reveals a decidedly negative reception of Rapid, the promotion of bareback as event, and the quality of the bareback performance itself, all of which I read in accordance with what these narratives have to tell us about bareback at the time. Yet I also take the opportunity—writing several years after this critical moment in Rapid’s career—to reflect on the success of the campaign. I read the case study in line with the concept of time, which has particular resonance with bareback. Through this reflection, I arrive at the conclusion that the time was right for an aging twink performer to be freshened-up by a transition to bareback—similar transitions of which have become widespread across the gay porn landscape in the intervening years between the 2015 *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* event and the present day, thanks in no small part to advancements in HIV prevention technologies.

Keywords Aging · Bareback · Cultural studies · Gay-for-pay · Gay pornography · Johnny Rapid

Introduction

Johnny Rapid began his porn career at the start of the 2010s as a fresh-faced 18-year-old, shooting scenes with *Boys First Time* and *Bukkake Boys* before signing with *Men* as an exclusive and releasing his first scene in November 2011. At time of writing, toward the close of the last decade (November 2018), Rapid was just five

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scenes short of his 200th scene with the studio, and while his age was beginning to count against him, remained a major player—ranked *Men*'s “most liked” performer with more than 6,800 audience ‘thumbs up’.¹ He was also named as the second most searched for gay porn star in Pornhub’s 2017 “Year in Review” annual analytics report (beaten to the top spot by relative new-comer William Seed, also a *Men* exclusive)² and was the 2017 recipient of *Str8UpGayPorn*'s Best Gay-4-Pay Performer award.³ Rapid's success in 2018 appears to have been buoyed by his highly publicized bareback debut a few years earlier (in 2015, in a series known as *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback*), which forms the focus of this article and raises questions that are still relevant at time of revision and publication (in June/July 2021). How was Rapid's immense popularity leveraged to help launch a new “rough sex” porn studio? Did this move help to revitalize Rapid's fortunes, who aged 23 at the time of his bareback debut, was a twink performer nearing the end of his expected porn lifespan? And what insights into the mainstream integration of bareback and ageist restrictions normally placed on twink performers are to be gained from textual analysis of audience reactions to Rapid's bareback debut? Audience reactions that, as I note briefly, also reveal certain class-based assessments of Rapid and his infamy at the time.

My qualitative method—textual analysis in the cultural studies tradition (see Fürsich, 2009)—is used to interpret audience reaction to this debut (both the performance itself and the notion of a ‘star’ being used to promote a bareback launch event), drawing out key themes for discussion. This process reveals a decidedly negative reception of Rapid, the promotion of bareback as event, and the quality of the bareback performance itself, all of which I read in accordance with what these narratives have to tell us about bareback at the time. Yet, I also take the opportunity—writing several years after this critical moment in Rapid's career (in 2018), and then at the time of revision and publication several years after that again (in 2021)—to reflect on the success of the campaign. Specifically, I read Rapid's transition to bareback in line with the concept of time, which has particular resonance with bareback. Through reflection, I arrive at the conclusion that the time was right for an aging twink performer to be *freshened-up* by a transition to bareback; similar transitions of which have become widespread across the gay porn landscape in the years that have ticked over since the 2015 *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* event and our present day (see Brennan, 2020a)—due to the widespread mainstreaming of bareback in commercial gay porn, which has been buoyed in no small part by advancements in HIV prevention technologies.

¹ <https://www.men.com/models/popular/> (accessed November 1, 2018).

² <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2017-year-in-review> (accessed November 1, 2018).

³ <https://str8upgayporn.com/photos-here-are-the-winners-and-presenters-at-the-str8upgayporn-awards/> (accessed June 18, 2021).

Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback

Johnny Rapid's bareback debut served as the launch event for *Bromo*; a site that shared a parent company (MindGeek) with *Sean Cody* and *Men*, these latter two sites that in 2018 held the distinction of being the first and second most frequented sources of gay porn on the web, respectively (Brennan, 2018). *Bromo* has since established itself as a quality producer of 'rougher,'⁴ though still mainstream, gay sex. *Bromo* itself had a confused genesis. It initially launched in 2015 as *Juicy Boys*,⁵ a bareback site based on MindGeek's popular video-on-demand property of the same name, being rebranded as *Bromo* that same year (in late 2015).⁶ News of MindGeek's intentions to create the site broke in May 2015. Then on July 27, 2015, ahead of the studio's scheduled August 6 launch, a campaign was run that invited fans to "Guess who barebacks for the first time?" Dennis West fronted the campaign with a video that teased: "I just can't believe the scene I shot with one of the top gay performers out there. It's his bareback debut."⁷ Once Rapid was named as the headline act, the campaign and its resultant videos became known as *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback*.

In this article I attend specifically to the competing audience narratives that surrounded *Bromo*'s launch. In particular, its selection of Rapid as a popular performer whose bareback debut would serve as a "launch event." I read both Rapid's performance and discourse accompanying the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign. Focused attention is given to viewer commentary at key points in the launch, namely: the moment of confirmation of Rapid's participation, the launch itself, and during the release of scenes. My analysis is drawn from 293 comments posted to six blog entries on *Str8UpGayPorn*, a popular gay porn blog that covered the campaign. I observe that while Rapid's first-time bareback performance is marketed as a coup for viewers, the general consensus among *Str8UpGayPorn*'s readership is more cynical.

As my reading of the discourse will show, the largest proportion of those commenting on the campaign expressed a decidedly negative viewpoint. This negativity included the belief that the selection of Rapid amounted to a desperate ploy by the owners of Rapid's exclusive contract to resurrect a perceived slump in his twink

⁴ My use of 'rough' here is informed by Eugenie Brinkema's (2014) schema, though broadly applied in the case of *Bromo*—to encompass a grittiness that extends beyond bareback, to include more edgy 'aesthetics' (see Brennan, 2016b), theming and model selection that complements its bareback content. At time of revision in June/July 2021, for example, the site's promotion of performer Bo Sinn—on its splash page and in its promos—embodies a rough-/thug-sex aesthetic. The model also appears, on balance, to be the most popular across the site.

⁵ <http://queerfever.com/2015/05/juicy-boys-to-become-a-new-mindgeek-owned-bareback-site/> (accessed June 19, 2021).

⁶ <https://www.thesword.com/for-some-reason-juicyboys-has-already-rebranded-itself-bromo-com.html> (accessed June 19, 2021). According to this report on *The Sword*, *Juicy Boys* launched as a bareback site in August 2015 and was rebranded as *Bromo* in November 2015.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5vYJzG3yv0> (accessed July 11, 2016).

career—and at a time when the star was also embroiled by recent controversy.⁸ Others direct their attention to the act itself, either deeming it to be a shameful promotion of “unsafe” sexual practices for financial gain or criticizing the final product for not capturing on screen the kinds of authentic sex promised by the bareback genre (such as internal ejaculations, known as “creampies”—that are now standard fare).

This discourse is worth considering because it is underscored by prejudices of aging; with Rapid(-as-twink)’s late age and recent controversies outside of his porn career used by commentators as just cause to attack his selection for the campaign. In short, many believed Rapid to be past his prime, and thus unfit to draw sufficient interest in the launch of a new site. Of course, we now know that this event was in fact a success, and was followed up by a sequel the following year—*Johnny Goes Bareback... Again!* We also now know that Rapid’s career did not suffer the kind of terminal decline that is typical of other twink performers—such terminal decline as I have examined elsewhere, such as regarding Jake Lyons (see Brennan, 2016a). The comparison between Rapid and Lyons will be addressed in the latter part of the article, where I will also reflect on the significance of Rapid’s career resilience in the years since his bareback debut. But first, let us consider the commentary that emerged on *Str8UpGayPorn* in that critical period before and during *Bromo*’s launch. Such commentary of which provides us with insights into Rapid’s bareback performance, and how this performance become inscribed with issues of age and health.

Coverage on *Str8UpGayPorn*

Str8UpGayPorn was selected partly for its depth coverage of this particular campaign, and partly for the notoriety of its creator, Zach Sire. Sire has a reputation for developing “fixations” (see Brennan, 2016a, 22–23) on certain performers, “power bottoms”⁹ (see Mercer, 2012) particularly. His intrusive reporting style has attracted criticism from performers and industry executives alike, such as from Brent Corrigan¹⁰ and Lucas Entertainment founder Michael Lucas.¹¹ In fact, by Lucas’ account, Sire’s reporting style led to his removal¹² from another popular gay porn gossip blog, *The Sword*. Such fixated coverage has fostered candid comment cultures across *Str8UpGayPorn* that are ripe for analysis, reports of Rapid being chief among these.

⁸ This controversy includes a domestic violence charge and alleged attempt to solicit sex from a female minor.

⁹ While Rapid has been versatile in his sexual repertoire, he is best known as a power bottom twink.

¹⁰ See <https://twitter.com/brentcorrigan/status/600158576611491841> (accessed July 14, 2016).

¹¹ See <https://twitter.com/michaellucasnyc/status/378597492071596032> (accessed July 14, 2016).

¹² Lucas alleges that he got Sire fired from *The Sword* by threatening to withdraw advertising. Lucas says the catalyst for this was Sire’s reporting of one of Lucas Entertainment’s performers (Jett Black; see Brennan, 2016a, 22).

Evidence of Sire's near-obsessive Rapid coverage includes his "Countdown to 200 Cocks,"¹³ a running tally of Rapid's anal receptiveness that further demonstrates his bottoming persona and was ongoing as of publication. Sire also tracked Rapid's first "100 Cocks,"¹⁴ a milestone the performer reached in November 2015—after just four years in the industry. Rapid's distinctive "bottom persona" is important to the "event marketing" behind the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign, especially given the potential insights this persona brings to bear on how the campaign and Rapid himself were constructed by online discourse (as well as in a more practical sense, as the receptive partner in on-screen portrayals of anal sex). In particular, the way in which those commenting construed (or imagined) Rapid *going bareback* as the last-ditch action of a performer past his prime. Such an audience position that is supported by previous studies of performers' transition to bareback (i.e., Brennan, 2016a). Rapid's bareback debut, after all, did premiere in the same month as his 23rd birthday, which is significant as it marks the definitional twilight of what a twink is: namely a boyish, 18–23-year-old (Tortorici, 2008, 205).

Textual analysis involves the identification of key themes and strategic selection of aspects of the analyzed discourse (Fürsich, 2009). These selections are then presented to the reader as evidence of an overall argument. The following excerpt, posted to Sire's first entry¹⁵ ("July 15, 2015" hereafter), provides a good overview of some of the themes that I will be detailing in this article. These comments were posted when Rapid's involvement was rumored, but not yet confirmed:

I hope is not¹⁶ Johnny Rape. He's boring and overrated. [...] (C2)

If I have to wait till August 6th, only to find out it's Johnny Rapid's tired ass.... (C17)

MindGeek says "Top Porn Star".... so going off of the rules of gay porn hyperbole, this means that it will be Johnny Rapid. (C64)

The headline should read: "Guess who cares? NOBODY!" (C91)

As I have said before, once you have sold your kunt for a few dollars over and over there is only one thing left to do.. BB ! It won't be long before there are no studios doing condom porn, its already in the minority. BB is in demand and BB sells. [...] (C95)

One of the few respectable things about him was that he still used condoms. So I guess that's gone. (C102)

In the above, what is notable is the now-tainted image of Rapid—"Johnny Rape"—as resultant from certain controversies, in particular his arrest just months earlier for battery and an alleged attempt to arrange a sexual encounter with an

¹³ In which each man to penetrate Rapid only counts once in the tally, even if more than one scene has been shot between them and Rapid. <http://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-gay-porn-cocks/> (accessed July 11, 2016).

¹⁴ <http://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-gay-porn-star-men/> (accessed July 11, 2016).

¹⁵ <http://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-bareback-juicy-boys-dennis-west/> (accessed July 14, 2016).

¹⁶ Comments are included as is complete with typographic errors.

underage girl (age 14).¹⁷ Readings of Rapid as past his prime—“tired ass”—and of his turn to bareback as both desperate—“only one thing left to do”—and reckless/shameful—“one of the few respectable things about him”—are also evident. Additionally, commentators point to the momentum of bareback in pornography—“BB is in demand and BB sells.” The trend toward a widespread adoption of bareback within commercial gay porn is worth reflecting on, too. Especially as this trend relates to the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign.

The Barebacking Coup

Analysis of viewer receptiveness to the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign offers particular insights into the function of ‘bareback event marketing,’ and with it the impact that the movement towards a “state of condomlessness” (Brennan, 2020a, 131) in gay porn has had on audience expectations around what constitutes a newsworthy performance—together with audience views on the ethics of condomless promotion itself. The evolution of bareback pornographer Paul Morris’ outré pornography (see Scott, 2015) is a case in point. Morris founded his Treasure Island Media (TIM hereafter) studio in 1998; his portrayal of multi-load internal ejaculations in films like the 2004 *Dawson’s 20 Load Weekend* were enough to distinguish his studio as “radical” in the first decade of its operation. Just as the 2010s ushered in the frequent presentations of acts that would have been considered extreme pornography a decade earlier—such as anal creampie—on sites that are generally considered “vanilla” gay porn (Kiss in Nielsen & Kiss, 2015, 132), Morris has himself been forced to gravitate towards more extreme portrayals in order to maintain his radical reputation. Examples of Morris’ movement into more extreme variants of bareback include his 2014 HIV-conversion feature *Viral Loads* (see Florêncio, 2018 for a reading of this film; also see Scott, 2015 for readings of other examples) and his 2015 *Breeding Season 3*, scene 13 from which features Dayton O’Connor as a sadistic top who carves the pornographer’s name into a performer’s chest and uses blood as “fuck-lube”; Morris labels the scene “Extreme. Not for Everyone.”¹⁸

Morris’ pursuit of perpetual notoriety/attention is reminiscent of the symbolic importance of the ‘first time’ hook in gay porn. This hook is employed especially by gay-for-pay (see Mercer, 2011) sites such as *Broke Straight Boys* and *Bait Bus*, together with virginal twink properties such as *Boys First Time* (which is among Rapid’s first credits). The ‘hook’ in the case of *Bromo*’s launch (and Morris’ attempts at continued relevance in an era where condomless gay porn is the norm once more) is to be able to make some claim that what viewers are seeing is new. The novelty of the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign, therefore, comes through in the presentation of a suite of scenes depicting a prolific, yet still young, gay-for-pay performer being penetrated ‘raw,’ and perhaps ‘seeded’ for the first time on screen. I recognise that terms liked ‘seeded’ and ‘breeding’—as connoting creampie—are loaded, and

¹⁷ See <http://str8supgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-arrested-for-beating-girlfriend/> (accessed July 14, 2016).

¹⁸ <https://store.treasureislandmedia.com/BREEDING-SEASON3.html> (accessed November 5, 2018).

more ‘extreme’ than the absence of condoms. My use of such terms here is deliberate and supported by the discourse that, as I go on to demonstrate, is inclusive of audience expectations that grow out of the event marketing of this series. For example, one comment that calls for “real creampiees” and “felching” (the act of eating a creampie), “because regular barebacking has become so common in gay porn now it’s almost boring.” (Scene 1, C19) Such commentary lends credence to my view that mainstream pornography is encroaching on TIM territory and normalizing it.

Rapid’s bareback debut *as event* was meant to connote a spectacle [invoking Guy Debord’s (1967) “society of the spectacle”], and triumph for the new site and for viewers, who may become privy to the first time recorded ‘breeding’ of a prolific bottom performer. At least this is the narrative crafted through promotional materials accompanying the *Bromo* launch. For instance, we are told by one banner advertisement that the scene will be “[f]eaturing Dennis West & mystery pornstar.” Once the mystery is unveiled, a follow-up banner reads, “Aug 6 Johnny Rapid’s 1st bareback scene: RT [retweet] & win a free membership to check it out!” Such promotional materials invite viewers to share the news across social media, for a chance to be among the first to see the depiction. Presumably, this narrative is in line with certain perceptions of bareback, such as that it allows for an intimacy “unlimited” (see Dean, 2009) and the feeling of belonging to an “alternative community.” (see Florêncio, 2018) Also, as John Mercer (2017) notes, the “first time” device is “one of the key discourses of youth that is summoned up in gay porn,” (89) which is an understanding of the genre that helps explain the casting of Rapid for this particular rite of passage. We should remember that the announcement also coincided with Rapid’s 23rd birthday and that 23 is a symbolic age near retirement for the twink persona (Tortorici, 2008, 205), and therefore a critical moment for reinvention into something else, or failing that: decline into obscurity.

Crucially, the event message set out above is not adopted unilaterally by audiences commenting on the announcement. Nor, it would seem, is the level of intimacy promoted necessarily delivered in the final product, as will be explored later. Considering first the reactions to the news of Rapid’s bareback performance, the failure of *Bromo* to stir up interest—and for its intended message to *land* with *Str8UpGayPorn* readers—is surmised by two themes; namely: bareback as itself now mundane, and Rapid’s bareback debut as dangerous. Each of these themes will be taken in turn.

Theme 1: Now Mundane

The first theme is straightforward. Within the last decade gay porn has undergone wholesale abandonment of the condom. This has been so profound a transformation of the landscape that condom pornography’s status as the norm has been entirely displaced by bareback pornography, which is the new “center.” (Mowlabocus et al., 2013, 525)¹⁹ The increasing centrality of bareback porn is identified by those

¹⁹ See my (Brennan, 2020a) article on the “bareback momentum” as demonstrated by the transitions to bareback of the ten most visited commercial gay porn sites that have operated for ten years or more. Sire (2018) also maintains (on-going at time of publication) a real-time account of gay pornographic studios’ uptake of bareback at *Str8UpGayPorn*.

commenting, many of whom use it to support their position that Rapid *going bareback* constitutes nothing new. I take this to mean that bareback has become such a commonplace action that in order for Rapid's debut to be truly event-worthy, those responsible for its orchestration needed to do more than simply remove the condom. In short, that Rapid's performance of bareback itself is not enough of a 'coup' for viewers, and something greater was therefore required of the eventual performance itself—which would ultimately also disappoint. In the words of one commentator: "gay porn stars doing bareback is no longer 'news.'" (C55) The more complicated of the two themes that emerged in the wake of the announcement is the healthism aspect.

Theme 2: As Dangerous

Of course, bareback sex was once the norm in gay pornography—before the HIV/AIDS era—, and it was campaigns of another kind—namely for safer sex—that have created the opportunities for harsh judgement, even censure, here and more broadly. Returning to Sire's initial July 15, 2015 post, we can find a case being made by those commenting that bareback event marketing is "dangerous." Such a case serves to demonstrate an anti-barebacking "health discourse" (see Numer, 2008):

Who the FUCK cares ??? BB / BARE BACKING is DD / DANGEROUS & DEADLY !!! (C25)

..putting your health on the line to make a really hot BB fuck flick is definately worth the risk johnny! SMART MOVE!! (C81)

Bareback is never the intelligent choice. Safer sex is the smart route. HIV and other STD's²⁰ are serious illnesses. (C87)

Also encompassed by this health discourse are comments that move the safer sex debate from a representational/fictional space and into a more personal one. Namely, those commenting volunteer whether or not they practice bareback themselves, which is often framed around issues of trust in committed relationships. As one commentator critical of the anti-bareback discussion surmises: "for 99% of 'anti barebacking' gay couples, it's because they don't trust each other and themselves." (C61)

This discourse reveals both representational and experiential views on bareback, such variance of which makes clear a number of complex issues associated with the debate more broadly. One such issue encompasses the salience of safer sex messaging within the community, and more recently, the potential for pre-exposure prophylaxis (better known as "PrEP") to be a more effective public health measure. Behind what Michele L. Crossley (2002) terms the "perils of health promotion" and the "barebacking backlash" lies the belief that "involvement in sexually risky behaviours may be embedded in sociocultural processes that are resistant to—perhaps

²⁰ Reference to risks other than HIV in barebacking practice is rare across the discourse—the significance of which I go on to explore.

even in opposition to—safer sex messages.” (Wheldon et al., 2014, 6) Such readings of barebacking as a form of resistance—to more conventional safer sex awareness campaigns in particular—has been popular in scholarly work dating back to the 1980s and the period in which the AIDS crisis played out in the United States (see Poland & Holmes, 2015). A perhaps more nuanced view is that barebacking as a practice and (as of 2021) a now dominant condition of gay pornography, as consumed and experienced in the 21st century, is a site of increasing negotiation and trust. Such a view is emboldened by the foregoing comment pertaining to a specific sexual health peril innate in bareback sex (HIV/AIDS), which also gestures toward residual fear and “policing” (in personal, community-based, and increasingly political contexts) bound up in the issue (as per the “and themselves” acknowledgment of C61).

Jeffrey Weeks (1995) captures perfectly the residual power of AIDS (and now HIV) as being significantly “anchored” (see Barthes, 1982, 38–41 for elaboration on anchorage) to barebacking. Weeks writes that sexual identities are “necessary fictions” (1995, 98) shaped by historical circumstances: the spread of HIV within Western gay and queer male communities of which is a case in point, and a circumstance from which we devised a “grammar for safer sex.” (98) Whether we as individuals and constituted identities, and the gay porn industry as producers of representations of sexual practices, conform to or misuse this grammar, it seems, remains contested terrain.²¹ We turn now to viewer assessment of the scenes of Rapid’s barebacking debut, such assessments that were authored in the comments sections of *Str8UpGayPorn*’s coverage.

Scenes of the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback Campaign*

Four scenes were released as part of the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign—one per week beginning on August 6, 2015. Scene 1 paired Rapid with Dennis West and was the subject of two blog posts by Sire—dated August 3, 2015²² and August 6, 2015.²³ (Scene 2 did not feature Rapid [instead it paired West with Jake Wilder], and thus Sire’s post²⁴ on Scene 2 is not analyzed as part of this article.) Scene 3 paired Rapid with Vadim Black, and was the subject of one post—dated August 19, 2015.²⁵ Scene 4 concluded the series and grouped Rapid with West and Wilder. Notably, it ends the series by featuring two variations on the double penetration of Rapid (West and Black, West and Wilder)—‘double penetration’ being a practice where the anus is penetrated simultaneously by two penises. Sire sums up this scene with—some might read—veiled criticism of its ‘first time’ credentials;

²¹ Though generally outside the scope of this present argument, those interested in discussion of the “troubling paradoxes” to emerge from such contested terrain can see Weeks, 1995, 86–87 (also see Yep et al., 2002).

²² <http://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-fucked-bareback-dennis-west/> (accessed July 14, 2016).

²³ <http://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-bareback-gay-porn/> (accessed July 14, 2016).

²⁴ <http://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-bareback-dennis-west-jake-wilder/> (accessed July 14, 2016).

²⁵ <http://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-bareback-gay-porn-vadim-black/> (accessed July 14, 2016).

“letting Johnny perform one of his signature acts—getting double-penetrated. Only this time, the cocks DP’ing Johnny Rapid don’t have condoms on them.” This final scene was the subject of one post—dated August 26, 2015.²⁶

Scene 1: Johnny Rapid Makes His Bareback Debut

Scene 1 received two posts, which accounts for a pre-scene release teaser (on August 3, 2015) and the event of the scene’s release—the latter of which also marked *Bromo’s* launch (August 6, 2015). In the pre-release discourse there are both fan—“I have no shame of my lust for Johnny,” (C3) “i don’t care about his crime sprees. i care about his DP [double penetration] skills.” (C21)—and anti-fan—“I’m sure it doesn’t take much \$\$\$ to get an alleged woman beater with multiple kids to take a raw dick,” (C5) “Johnny Rapid’s repulsiveness has reached new heights.” (C18)—comments. Commentary on bareback itself and the ethics of “portraying” it continue here:

BB sex is risky business. It goes against all good medical advice. Portraying popular and healthy looking models engaging in BB sex is sending a bad message, especially to young gay men, that it’s no big deal. Like the tobacco companies of yesterday, they are showing healthy looking people engaging in unhealthy behavior. (C22)

The foregoing comment is worth some depth reading. It links the popularity of barebacking in gay pornography at the time—and campaigns that promote it (such as *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback*)—with the glamorous advertisements of big tobacco companies of yesteryear. More subtly, the comment also makes the connection with the glamor, coolness, sexiness, and rebelliousness that accompanied the portrayal of tobacco in cinema (see Charlesworth & Glantz, 2006). It is a view that recognizes the potential of the internet in promoting certain sexual practices (see Rosenberger et al., 2011); but also, it points to the “risky business” of a regressive trajectory following a perceived decline in the threat of HIV—whereby “against all good medical advice,” the porn industry is putting profits ahead of community health by “showing healthy looking people engaging in unhealthy behavior,” and “sending a bad message, especially to young gay men,” for many of whom porn, it is assumed, plays an important role in their identity formation. A study by William B. Elder et al. (2015) into the sexual self-schemas of gay men bears relevance here. Not only does it confirm abundant use of pornography by gay men (also see Duggan & McCreary, 2004), but also, of the 20 participants who took part in the study, three quarters of those interviewed attributed gay pornography as their primary means of learning about gay sex during adolescence (Elder et al., 2015, 951).

The foregoing viewer comment is akin to what Alex Carballo-Diéguez and José Bauermeister (2004) found in their comparatively early content analysis of

²⁶ <http://str8supgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-bareback-double-penetration-gay-porn/> (accessed July 14, 2016).

comments for and against barebacking. These comments were posted to a chat room devoted to the practice on *Gay.com*. In one comment from Carballo-Diéguez and Bauermeister's dataset, even the term "bareback" was deemed dangerous—for it "is a word coined to make unsafe sex sound exciting and glamorous and cool, and it's none of those" (quoted in Carballo-Diéguez & Bauermeister, 2004, 9). Carballo-Diéguez and Bauermeister do not unpack what it is about 'bareback' as a slang term for condomless sex between men that renders it *cool*. However, given that 'cool' is levelled in a similar way in this earlier research to those included in my own dataset—namely by respondents decidedly *against* the practice—we should delve here (with caution). Following 2004, scholarship has offered some answers. The 'cool factor'—inclusive, I think, of those who view the practice as especially *uncool*, and downright dangerous (admittedly, a more widely-held view in 2004 [and 2007, for that matter] than it was more than a decade later when this series was launched)—is explained by Sharif Mowlabocus (2007):

The word "bareback" has invested the previously taboo practice of unprotected anal sex between men with a "cool" deviancy that has allowed some to legitimate and eroticize unsafe sexual contact. (218)

Mowlabocus' definition comes as part of a study also centered on bareback online fora. The informal nature of such commentary is served by the distinctly unscholarly²⁷ tenor of the term, while the 'cool deviancy' idea also connects the definition with—in my reading—a cool aesthetic of the frontier cowboy. Connection with the tobacco industry and yesteryear advertisements—along with cinema portrayals—add further support; as does the persona of proponents of the practice—especially porn stars, and 'straight-identifying' ones like Rapid—, who may court an 'autonomous sexual adventurer'²⁸ appreciation.²⁹

The potential for bareback pornography to incite viewers to adopt riskier sexual practices was explored in a subsequent study by Kai J. Jonas et al. (2014), where it is suggested that men having sex with men (MSM) are more inclined to engage in unprotected sex after viewing bareback pornography. Such a "media effects" or "harms-based" (see Kendall, 2001) view of gay pornography is not one I necessarily agree with. In contradistinction, surveys by Todd G. Morrison et al. (2007), for instance, find little support for the correlation between the viewing of gay pornography and harmful sexual practices.

Yet, such media effects arguments cannot be discounted outright. Especially when we consider that such arguments are echoed throughout *Str8UpGayPorn*'s comments sections. Clearly the Rapid campaign itself is one that, by design, seeks to glamorize sex without condoms. We should also not discount the concerns of viewers about the power of these representations and their potential impacts. After

²⁷ Perhaps unexplored by Carballo-Diéguez and Bauermeister's study (see 2004, 3) due to a stated 'advancing scholarly work on bareback' central aim.

²⁸ To appropriate Mercer's (2012, 220) metaphor for the power bottom.

²⁹ I wish to thank one of the anonymous reviewers, whose idea it was to expand on what is 'cool' about barebacking—a valuable question in the context of 'event marketing'.

all, bareback is not “creeping back into gay porn videos,” as vocal anti-gay porn scholar Christopher N. Kendall wrote in 2004 (with Funk, 105), but is now the norm. The days of the gay porn industry serving as a bastion of safer sex practices for a community in crisis (see Skee, 1997, 53) seem now to be long gone. In fact, as I noted earlier, the viewpoint that bareback is now “almost boring,” and “so common,” recurs across the sample, as do calls for the representation of even riskier and more “authentic” practices that would warrant the fanfare of a new studio’s launch. To quote one commentator in full:

they include real creampiees and felching here because regular barebacking has become so common in gay porn now it’s almost boring. (C19)

This call for even riskier representations continues in the August 6, 2015 post, which coincides with the release of Rapid’s first barebacking scene.

In the comments section of August 6, the scene (at last revealed) draws criticism for not being authentic enough: as “the same kind of crap scenes that you get at Men[.com] only this time without condoms.” (C19) Though one user does applaud “the little dribble of shitty brown spooge dripping out of his ass toward the end,” (C30) which perhaps hints at a less-scripted, more visceral depiction of a normally polished (i.e., sufficiently douched, non-“shitty”) Rapid. One participant even specifies that he/she would only be interested in viewing Rapid performing bareback “if it’s over at T.I.M.” (C10) It is a comment that adds credence to my earlier observation on the efforts of TIM to maintain its controversial image. We will use the remaining scene commentaries to venture into some of the more problematic discourses that Rapid’s barebacking series inspired.

Scene 3: A Meeting of Controversies

Scene 3 pairs Rapid with Vadim Black, a performer of whom, like Rapid, has been the subject of controversy. Black’s infamy results from gay slurs he published in October 2014 via Twitter (@The_Vadim_Black). Two tweets stand out, where he states: “I just hate FAGS who like to run their mouth...no offence,” and “I’m just tired of all the bitchy gay queens in porn.”³⁰ He attracted a fair bit of criticism and ridicule for the comments. The blog *Brad Bare*, for instance, ran the headline: “This is What a Guy Who Hates Fags Looks Like Getting Fucked Raw,”³¹ accompanied by images of a scene Black shot with Donny Forza while with studio *Dallas Reeves*. Black is best known for his work with gay-for-pay site *Broke Straight Boys*.

Patrick Henze (2013) writes that *Broke Straight Boys* showcases “hetero-normative settings and homophobic resentments.” (59) By mobilizing a “cajoling” fantasy, the studio features broke, “homophobic straight men” who are persuaded by money to perform sexual acts with each other. (58) Henze’s argument may explain Black’s

³⁰ Account suspended as of writing, see <http://str8upgayporn.com/vadim-black-bareback-gay-porn-star-fag/> for screen captures of the tweets (accessed July 18, 2016).

³¹ <https://www.bradbare.com/2014/this-is-what-a-guy-who-hates-fags-looks-like-getting-fucked-raw/> (accessed July 18, 2016).

homophobic comments. Yet, I also recall what Mercer (2004) wrote in the context of the “prison scenario” in gay porn. Mercer makes the point that while a theme of homophobia may be seen to underscore certain scenarios—such as sex in prison (and perhaps hazing and gay-for-pay narrative settings as well)—, to label such scenarios as homophobic is “far too simplistic and reductive to account for the relatively complex range of discourses at play.” (166) I tend to agree with Mercer’s line of argument, though the controversy of Black (in particular, as one that was formed *outside* the context of any pornographic text or genre) is still important to consider, in particular when coupled with the misogynistic associations that were attached to Rapid at the time of his bareback debut (as an “alleged woman beater” [August 6, 2015, C5]). Scene 3 combines an alleged misogynist (Rapid) with a perceived homophobe (Black) in a pairing that those commenting recognize as a meeting of controversies:

One asshole getting FUCKED by another how original (C20)

The only upcoming scene I’d be interested in watching featuring Vadim Black (doesn’t that make him sound like some cheesy vampire?) would be if he were the next duct-taped guest at the FraternityX beer-n-hide-the-bratwurst gangbang. What a hoot that’d be. (C23)

Vadim has a nice body but thats all. Everything else about him is a boner killer. [...] (C24)

Just read Vadim’s tweets. How can someone be so beautiful yet open his mouth and become so ugly? It’s jarring. (C29)³²

In addition to offensive signifieds that adjoin these performers’ off-screen lives, one commentator also labels these men as probable racists, presumably in line with the white-washed nature of much of gay porn:³³ “As much as I dislike both of their personalities, and that they both might be potentially racist as well, I’m watching this mainly for Vadim. He’s a little homophobic hottie.” (C9) I will pick up the discussion of controversy surrounding Rapid at the time of this campaign in the final section of this article when I consider how negative reaction to the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign can in part be attributed to his tainted celebrity image at the time. But at this junction it is worth noting how class-based some of the criticisms surrounding Rapid were.

Readings of Rapid as a misogynist and of Black as a homophobe have insights to offer with regard to gay pornography and class, particularly with respect to gay-for-pay performers. In analyzing the career, for instance, of one of the biggest gay porn stars at the time (Jeff Stryker), Richard Dyer (1994) argues for the “wider social reference in porn stars’ images.” (55) In Stryker’s case, such a social reference is

³² Reference is also made to *Fraternity X*, a studio that also belongs within Henze’s “hetero-normative settings and homophobic resentments” category. See Brennan, 2016b for my reading of *Fraternity X* in line with the gonzo realism trend in gay porn.

³³ Representations of race in gay porn is an area that has attracted particular scholarly interest. For example, see Fung, 2005 for representations of the Asian male, and Tziallas, 2015 for the growing interest in Middle Eastern men in gay porn.

drawn from repeated association “with working-class iconography, through roles” that reinforce “the idea of him as an innocent who, willingly but almost passively, gets into sexual encounters.” (56; also see Mercer, 2003, for a discussion of gay porn prototypes) A detailed discussion of Rapid and class would be worthwhile as part of a star study, something that is outside the scope of the present argument. However, what can be gleaned from the discourse regarding class is that Rapid’s gay-for-pay porn identity, combined with his reputed treatment of women, merges with his “power bottom” performances to create a distinctly working-class construction that was central to his narrative at the time. He is both outwardly gruff (violent to women) and inwardly passive (receptive to phallus): as is evoked by this comment, quoted earlier, that is dismissive of his alleged crimes while receptive to his famed pornographic performances: “i don’t care about his crime sprees. i care about his DP skills.” (August 3, 2015, C21)

There are also examples in the commentary on this scene that are consistent with other themes presented earlier, namely of Rapid as a “has-been”—“The only thing that’s Rapid about Johnny is my declining interest” (C28)—and of a desire for more value from the bareback pornography than an absence of condoms; a hope that is, for some, tied to the final scene of the series, which features Rapid’s signature act (double penetration): “I hope he gets a DP internal creampie! At least make it worthwhile!” (C16) “And next week the orgy... we’ll see Johnny takes the bareback DP....” (C21)

Scene 4: A Signature Act with a Bareback Twist

In the fourth and final scene of the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* series, Rapid performs his signature act—‘double penetration,’ or ‘double anal,’ a form of extreme anal penetration where the performer receives two penises in his anus simultaneously. Rapid is double penetrated as part of two different pairings (West and Black, West and Wilder), which is performed bareback each time. Despite the anal elasticity required for the act, which has been a defining feature of Rapid’s popularity, on balance, *Str8UpGayPorn* commentators seem unimpressed. There is some evidence of fan appreciation—“HE’S JUST SO CUTE!” (August 19, 2015, C30)—and ‘slut-readings’ of Rapid, common in the reception of power bottom performers³⁴—“Johnny Rapid=Sloppobottomus,” (C4) “it is easier to find a dime in the grand canyon than it is to hit Johnny’s G spot.” (C5) Yet the consensus seems to be that Rapid’s bareback debut as an ‘event’ is disappointing.

Both the scene itself together with the promotional images that accompany it are criticized as overly staged—“There’s some[thing] decidedly unsexy about a group of guys stopping to pose for the camera in mid-fuck” (C14)—, under erotic—“he’s the most boring and passionless gay porn performer I’ve ever seen, no matter how many dicks he can take at the same time. Sorry.” (C13)—, and, perhaps most tellingly of all, as not offering the kinds of authenticity that bareback promises—“That looks

³⁴ See Andrew Reilly’s (2016) essay on the use of the “bottom” identity as a “mechanism for censure.”

fun, said no one ever.” (C3), “Just because it’s bareback, doesn’t mean you don’t have to try.” (C24) In summary: boring, staged, and not authentic enough. Even with the performance of bareback double anal, a more risk-aligned sexual practice—as identified in Taylor et al.’s (2007) study of workplace HIV infections in the porn industry.

Themes of disappointment and disinterest in the discourse on this final scene might appear anti-climatic. Yet, I wish to suggest, such disappointment was symptomatic of the state of gay pornography at the time, and the expectations of bareback specifically. “I hope he gets a DP internal creampie! At least make it worthwhile!” (August 19, 2015, C16) read the hopes of one viewer for what the scene might contain. But, there is no internal ejaculation in the final scene, no “creampie.” There is bareback, and double anal (that is not novel for Rapid), but not “breeding,” not a “vital sexual symbiosis of human and [possibly] viral DNA” (Morris in Morris & Paasonen, 2014, 217), and therefore, by some, it is deemed worthless. Disappointment surrounding Rapid’s bareback event falling short of expectations encourages reflection on the state and role of barebacking in pornography at the time and today. If it is true that bareback pornography once served as catharsis, as a substitute for the unacceptable risk of unprotected sex, as Daniel Harris argued in 1995, then now, with an event launched 20 years on from Harris, it is timely to reassess the function that the practice serves.

Let us prompt such reassessment by drawing from scholarly reflections on the subject from the present century. For Mark Kiss (in Nielsen & Kiss, 2015) the performance of “double anal penetrations,” and even “graphic cream pies,” while once an indicator of “‘extreme’ gay pornography” and “relegated to shady, dim backrooms studios” such as TIM, “are now somewhat common place; perhaps even yawn worthy to especially jaded gay porn connoisseurs.” (124–25) This statement helps explain the unenthusiastic reaction Rapid’s climatic double penetration performance received—and the “momentum” (Brennan, 2020a) for extreme articulations of bareback (where creampies are now commonplace, too). As part of the same reflexive exercise (in Nielsen & Kiss, 2015), B. R. Simon Rosser considers findings from a study he co-authored (see Hald et al., 2015). The study Rosser was a part of, he explains, concludes that consumers of gay porn seek out pornographies that “enhance or amplify what they enjoy doing.” For example: “If I like being penetrated, watching double penetration is even more exciting.” (in Nielsen & Kiss, 2015, 126) In other words, for many there is a desire for specific and personally-practised gay sex acts to be exaggerated in porn.

It follows that if bareback is desirable, or perhaps practised as part of a consumer’s sex life—as recent advances in HIV preventative technologies have made possible without being necessarily acts of resistance—then there is an expectation that pornography will take this portrayal further. Such expectation is no doubt heightened in the case of pornographies that utilize event marketing as part of their promotional activities. The expectation that an already extreme act—such as bareback double penetration—would be pushed to even greater levels of extremity brings with it

certain ethical quandaries that if left unchecked may threaten the safety of models,³⁵ though exploration of this is generally outside the scope of the present argument. By way of final discussion on the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign, I will now connect it with a similar study of mine. Such comparison invites reflection on why, despite criticism, Rapid has managed to emerge from the 18–23 twink category age restriction with his career apparently unaffected.

Did Going Bareback Revive Johnny Rapid's Career?

The harsh reception that Rapid's bareback debut garnered connects this present study with an earlier analysis of mine. In an article published in *Porn Studies* (see Brennan, 2016a), I perform a star study of another power bottom twink, Jake Lyons. My study of Lyons also attends to how this performer's career decisions are narrated by members of an online community (*The Sword*), his decision to bareback especially. Key among my observations is that Lyons' progression into barebacking prompts a discourse of "disposal and disgust" across the forum analyzed. The connection between this earlier study and the present one is of particular importance given that in the data analyzed, a key position to emerge is that Lyons was "spoiled" by his decision to perform bareback. In discarding Lyons, one commentator nominates Johnny Rapid as his successor. To quote from the discourse: "Please evaporate[, Lyons]. Your career is over and we've moved on to Johnny Rapid." (quoted in Brennan, 2016a, 29).

Lyons' transition to bareback late in his twink career prompted similar discourses to those observed here, adding credence to my present argument. The Lyons piece emphasizes the transience of porn stardom, particularly for twink bottoms, who have "little recourse for reinvention within the industry once they cease to conform to the category to which they were assigned." (Brennan, 2016a, 20) The foregoing "please evaporate" comment, which called for a then 22-year-old Lyons to step aside for a rising Rapid (age 19 at the time), gains new relevance in the present study. In 2015, when the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign was run, it seemed like Rapid was in a similar situation to Lyons, and therefore would soon be viewed as "spoiled" by his bareback performance, which would be followed by a slip into obscurity—only to be replaced by a newer, younger model soon after. What I am describing here is the lifecycle of many gay porn performers. Sociologist Paul Cressey (1932) wrote about the "the retrogressive dynamic" that underscores an unrelenting search for new and fresh talent in certain "flesh" industries. Cressey was using the case of female "taxi hall" dancers to set out the term, which Jeffrey Escoffier (2007) later applies to male sex workers, including gay porn performers.

³⁵ I (Brennan, 2016a, 29) develop one such quandary via the necessary "transference of risk" onto the performer that takes place in bareback pornography. It is an idea that captures how the pleasure of viewing increasingly "risky" sexual practices functions as a release from personal risk that is then conferred to the performer. This idea is supported by two key themes of the present study, namely recognition of bareback as both dangerous (promoting risky behavior) and yet also a desire for the depiction to go further (Rapid's performance as not risky enough by contemporary standards).

Lyons is an apt demonstration of the retrogressive dynamic. And yet, as we now know, Rapid dodged a similar fate and did not suffer career decline in the years following his 2015 bareback performance. In fact, Mercer (2017) nominates Rapid as one of three performers who typify “the specific physicality and aesthetic of the boy-next-door and the sexy kid” (85) in his monograph on gay porn, which serves to illustrate how Rapid, aged c25 at time of Mercer’s monograph, continues to enjoy “kid”-oriented appreciations, despite his age. Why exactly this might be is perhaps the most interesting question of all. I acknowledge that the reason Rapid’s career survived while Lyons’ floundered and soon ceased is likely attributable to a number of factors—including a continued infatuation with “straight-acting” performers over more gay-identifiable/effeminate ones such as Lyons and Lyons’ movement into watersports—erotic urine play—around the same time (an area of gay porn in need of greater research). Lyons’ behavior during his porn career’s declining years have also been read by commentators as markers of mental ill-health, which likely also played a role.³⁶ For our purposes here, I would like to use this final opportunity for discussion to connect Rapid’s bareback debut with the concept of time and to proffer why *timing* may have underscored Rapid’s resilience.

The Matter of Time

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign paid off. So successful was the campaign, in fact, that as of November 2018, not only was the first scene in the series (*Johnny Goes Bareback Part #1*) ranked as the site’s all-time most viewed³⁷ and most popular,³⁸ but two other scenes from the same series (*Johnny Goes Bareback Part #3* and *Johnny Goes Bareback #4*) also rank in the all-time top four across both categories. And, as previously noted, a sequel followed up the series in 2016. But we should remember that considerable controversy surrounded Rapid at the time of his bareback debut, meaning that his success was not assured. Mercer’s (2017) discussion of “celebrity damage” (see 178–79) in his monograph is helpful in understanding the kinds of verdicts on Rapid’s character that were still fresh at the time of his bareback debut. In fact, announcement of the bareback debut in mid-2015 followed reportage earlier that same year of Rapid’s arrest for battery and attempted solicitation of sex

³⁶ This latter point is especially worthy of future research, perhaps in line with a gay porn-as-harmful rhetoric, by scholars such as Christopher N. Kendall (see 2001), who writes in a Dworkin tradition. For an example of commentary critical of Lyons’ mental health, see this post by Sire: <https://www.thesword.com/lollipop-twink-jake-lyons-bizarre-new-life-im-not-gay.html> (accessed June 19, 2021). Additionally, as one of the reviewers remarked, it would be valuable to interview these performers in a neutral, non-judgemental setting, to better understand the audience rejection of them following these career events—something outside the scope of my text and audience dimensions here, yet that, I agree, would be an immensely worthwhile pursuit.

³⁷ <https://www.bromo.com/tour/videos/all-models/all-categories/alltime/mostviewed/> (accessed November 8, 2018).

³⁸ <https://www.bromo.com/tour/videos/all-models/all-categories/alltime/popular/> (accessed November 8, 2018).

with a minor. Given this timing, it is unsurprising that a theme to emerge from the discourse was that the bareback debut was a “stunt” aimed at redemption, and at a critical late stage in Rapid’s twink career. Redemption did seem to befall Rapid, in stark contrast with Lyons. A possible reason for this is that 2015 was a good time for a notable-but-aged twink in need of a career boost to go bareback. Reflecting on the discourse discussed here, it is interesting that when the news was announced, his bareback performance was considered to be subversive by some commenters (with a ‘no condom studios left’ and ‘this is unacceptable’ sentiment), but after his bareback premiere, that the act was considered rather mundane (a ‘most studios don’t even use condoms, who cares?’ sentiment). Timing, in other words, goes a long way toward explaining why Rapid’s transition worked for him in 2015.

Time is important to bareback (see Dean, 2011; Varghese, 2018), and to this case study, too. Five years separate the two bareback debuts: Lyons in 2010 and Rapid in 2015. And while a separation of five years may seem insignificant, it is worth considering how the timings of these debuts constitute different contexts in terms of bareback pornography. As another study of mine—into the bareback transitions of the most popular sources of gay porn (see Brennan, 2020a, 131)—reveals, 2010 falls just shy of a number of high profile bareback adoptions that would come between the Lyons and Rapid debuts: in late 2011 (*Sean Cody* and *Corbin Fisher*) and late 2013 (Lucas Entertainment and Next Door Studios). Additionally, attitudes to the practice within the broader cultural landscape were different at the time of these debuts, with the drug PrEP receiving FDA approval in 2012 and public awareness of the widespread benefits of “treatment as prevention” measures increasing steadily up until 2015. The *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* event, therefore, provided a damaged celebrity with the opportunity for a “redemptive ending” (Mercer, 2017, 179) just in time to give his career a rare boost of interest, and propel him toward the end of the decade on a high.

Concluding reflections across time

The *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign of 2015 was a defining moment in the career of arguably the most prominent gay porn performer of the 2010s. This article looks at both that critical moment in 2015, while also taking the opportunity, writing several years later, and revising some years after that, to reflect on the aftermath. Let’s take, in the first instance, that critical moment. Viewer commentary on the campaign’s announcement and the release of scenes provides empirical evidence of a widely held view that bareback had attained a degree of the commonplace in 2015. On balance, the commentary was negative, with viewers presenting two key criticisms of the event marketing of Rapid’s transition to bareback; namely: that such marketing was unethical (dangerous), and also that it was misrepresentative (not an event at all). Those who objected to the practice on ethical grounds viewed it as akin to celebrity endorsements of potentially harmful practices (such as smoking or alcohol consumption), thus connecting it with a health discourse that is especially potent given the historically-charged connection between the gay community and HIV/AIDS. This is a position of diminishing returns, however, as the widespread

availability of HIV preventative technologies today mean that in 2021 so-called “unprotected” sex has lost much of its potential to deter—certainly, in line with the hysteria (arguments of the justifications for this notwithstanding) typical of the AIDS era. I acknowledge here that there is in fact still considerable risk of the ‘H’s’ other than HIV when barebacking—namely herpes, HPV and hepatitis. PReP has minimized one risk, but the others are still present.

Gay men tend to see ‘risk’ myopically when it comes to bareback. To carry through the equine metaphor: a sizable proportion of gay men today wear blinkers when it comes to bareback and risk—holding HIV in their field of vision. Rather than reducing this to an example of reckless abandon—a position with its own pleasures —, I believe that understanding can be reached through contextualization and account for the cultural formations and practices that have become embedded in gay culture, and which were shaped by so-called unsafe sexual practices of the past. Mowlabocus, for example, argued in 2007—a time when risk in bareback was perceived by gay men as much more real than it is today—for the importance of a “fully contextualized” (218) understanding of discourses on bareback—both the hedonistic freedoms felt by proponents and practitioners of it, as well as the rhetoric of its detractors. “Contextualizing barebacking,” Mowlabocus writes, “reveals it as a by-product of earlier safer-sex campaigns, the same campaigns that successfully saved the lives of millions during the 1980s and the 1990s.” (218)

The success—and scars—remain today in my native Australia of other ‘event marketing’—the public service campaigns particularly, such as the 1987 National Advisory Committee on AIDS’ *Grim Reaper*³⁹—that, in my reading, bled gay men-as-original-disease-carriers with reapers striking at the heart of everyday citizens—children included. This demonization—of gay men anchored to a specific disease—effectively ‘exnominated’⁴⁰ lesser risks (other H’s included) in service of, campaigners would have argued, a public good. In other words, as a life and death, health and HIV, families/children/straights and gays issue. Little wonder, therefore, that the apparent vanquishing of HIV via pre- and post-exposure technologies has served as a rapture event; one that, but design, keeps lesser risks in the shadow of public enemy number one—for gay men’s health and their standing in the community at large. The diminishing risk of bareback, therefore, even casting back to 2015, is demonstrated through the second main theme of this study—that is also the more dominant, and of lasting relevance to the field.

This second criticism captures the majority-view across the sample. It categorizes the campaign as a failure; namely, as failing to impress on the grounds that it offered little more than condomless sex. In this regard, viewers promote the idea that

³⁹ For a contextualized reading of this advertisement and others on HIV/AIDS, see Geraldine Fela (2019, 50–51), where *Grim Reaper* is described as “terrifying [and] inflected by homophobia and prejudice. [In it,] Conservative media and politicians singled gay men out as agents of infection.”

⁴⁰ See Fiske and Hartley, 1978, 176 for a discussion of exnomination, the evacuation of a privileged term from the binary system—admittedly, a loose fit here, yet one that does help to explain how, through an obsessive pursuit of HIV (through health campaigning, and both internal to and as an oppressive force onto the gay community) other health risks of condomless anal sex between men could be rubbed out of consciousness, and stay faded, even today.

a well-known performer simply abandoning protective latex covering is no longer sufficiently eventful—compared, for example, with the far more extreme narrative underpinning how TIM marketed former *Big Brother* contestant Steven Daigle's bareback scenes in the 2013 film *Cum Whore*, a studio that continues to court performances of controversy. By 2015, it would seem, viewers were expecting more extreme portrayals of bareback, even from what can be described as 'mainstream' pornography producers—of whom *Men* were top of the pile. Returning to the words of one commentator: "Just because it's bareback, doesn't mean you don't have to try." (August 26, 2015, C24)

We are left to conclude that Johnny Rapid's career was not only freshened-up by his transition to bareback—it was saved by it. Rapid's continued popularity at time of writing (and less so, but still popular, at time of publication) is significant because it bucks received wisdom on the career trajectory of bottom twink—who tend to retire or fade into obscurity by their mid-twenties, especially when they represent a certain working classness (as opposed to performers like Brent Corrigan, whose industry savvy and connectedness with gay culture has assured his continued relevance). Rapid himself appears to concede this lifeline in accepting his 2017 award for Best Gay-4-Pay Performer: "You know, I didn't think that I would win another award in my lifetime."⁴¹

Carrying through the concept of time, and the hope of another researcher continuing to carry these ideas through further research, let's look at the state of play for Rapid on the eve of publication, in mid-2021. As one of the reviewers pointed out to me, Rapid has had a popular website that revolves entirely around him for a while now (and has also taken advantage of the *OnlyFans* revolution to self-market and boost his revenue opportunities—his Twitter [@JohnnyRapidATL] is a key channel for his own promotion of new scenes, with close to 0.25 million followers at time of publication, for example). Revising amid a global pandemic (COVID-19) also invites cultural messaging parallels to the current mask versus no-mask phenomenon—in line with both adherence/resistance to health campaigns as well as regulatory/ethical directives aligned with a similar protect-yourself,-protect-others-using-bodily/intimacy-barriers imperative amid AIDS. It would make for a worthwhile follow-up study to compare these reactions, and is a space in which interested researchers will find fertile ground to start. Diego Semerene's (2021) essay on 'creampies'—"the ejaculate excess that oozes out of a subject's orifices after coitus," (199) the ultimate in what Semerene terms 'ejaculative kinship' that, as we found in the present study, fans of Rapid felt disappointment in his bareback event not delivering—, for example, draws "anti-mask macho grandstanding" into the realm of bareback and PrEP, with Semerene describing it as "a viral outburst of phallic porn of sorts, [that] reiterates the fantasy of the phallus as the one that doesn't need protection. It wages violence but is inherently immune to it." (203)

Time, in other words, continues to shape both Rapid and reactions to bareback practice and pornography. The perspectives of this paper point to how cultural shifts and pressures influence and impact the direction of pornography, particularly gay

⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oyg2bDqmhRw> (accessed November 9, 2018).

pornography—as a representation of what may be happening in sexual practices. As HIV and AIDS has become more of a ‘chronic’ health condition, and as medications that seemingly prevent HIV have become more available and popular, gay men may have re-claimed bareback sex as a sexual practice—certainly, gay pornography has [see, for example, my (Brennan, 2020a) discussion of the change-of-heart, return-to-being-a-bareback-studio progression of industry heavyweights like Michael Lucas, of Lucas Entertainment (143–145)]. The present article offers readers some insight into how the career of a popular performer in gay pornography used ‘going bareback’ as a means of (re)launching a new phase of his career, particularly as he was beginning to ‘age out’ of his initial porn identity as a ‘twink’ performer. Of course, certain questions remain, some not-wholly-knowable as part of our scope.

These questions include whether Johnny Rapid’s decision was an act of resistance or purely a self-service to his imperiled career? Audience discourse and critical reception of Rapid’s performance itself proffer opinion that is weighted toward the latter, as does a consideration of his career trajectory in the six years since his bareback debut—and his gay-for-pay status. Certainly, Rapid has enjoyed continued success following the ‘event,’ and this success was in a ‘mainstream’ vein—in stark contrast to his predecessor, Lyons, who transitioned earlier and (erroneously, it would seem) pursued a less conventional route into fetish acts, such as watersports (that remain more of an underground, acquired taste).

Looking beyond 2015, examples of a revitalized career can be found in Rapid’s leading role in ‘mainstream’ gay porn parody films released in the wake of his bareback turn—including parodies of *Pokémon*⁴² and Justin Bieber⁴³ in 2016, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*⁴⁴ and *Justice League*⁴⁵ in 2017, for example (for a reading of Rapid’s portrayal of the Flash in the last of these parodies, see Brennan, 2020b, 279–281). These parodies are probably the best demonstration of Rapid’s (shrewd) commitment to widely accepted pornographic trends and products. No TIM for him, in other words. No urine play.

Bareback became his staple, as it has across the industry. In 2019, Rapid launched his own site—*Johnny Rapid* (licensed under “MG Premium Ltd.,” a MindGeek subsidiary)⁴⁶—, marketed as “100% bareback” and launched using another event hook—his first interracial scene, with Blane Porter. Interestingly, similar comment cultures can be found in response to this, as the top comment reads on the *Str8UpPorn* coverage: “Okay, that’s great, but is he going to kiss any of them?”⁴⁷ Yet, as other commentators point out in subsequent responses, there have been instances in which Rapid has kissed other performers, notably in scenes with Tony Paradise and Jake Bass. Intimacy, of course, is subjective—as is the dataset for this study.

⁴² <https://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-pokemon-gay-porn-parody-fuckemon/> (accessed July 6, 2021).

⁴³ <https://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-justin-bieber-gay-porn/> (accessed July 6, 2021).

⁴⁴ <https://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-pirates-gay-porn-parody-diego-sans/> (accessed July 6, 2021).

⁴⁵ <https://str8upgayporn.com/justice-league-gay-porn-parody-johnny-rapid-manila-luzon/> (accessed July 6, 2021).

⁴⁶ <https://www.johnnyrapid.com> (accessed July 6, 2021).

⁴⁷ <https://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-bareback-gay-porn-studio/> (accessed July 6, 2021).

Take the Rapid/Bass pairing of August 1, 2015,⁴⁸ Jeff Baillargeon (2019–2020, 24) cites Canadian poetry in which the intimacy of this scene is used as a fantasy of first-time gay sex. The Bass pairing, which occurred in the same year as the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign, supports an ‘escalation effect’ in Rapid’s repertoire, both amid and since his bareback transition. For example, a 2020 scene involves both kissing and a creampie with scene partner Matthew Camp.⁴⁹

Herein lies the value of this study’s across-time formation. It renders a more nuanced understanding of the *Johnny Rapid Goes Bareback* campaign and its pivotal role in Rapid’s career, including the impacts of aging on a performer who has had a persistent presence in a notoriously fickle industry. Yet it also adds credence to the key arguments of this event. In denying the creampie in 2015, was Rapid effectively resisting the “ejaculative evidence of the violence enacted by the phallus” (Semerene, 2021, 202); and with it a vital—especially gay—commitment to kinship and a return-to-bareback practice among gay men; something shown in the disappointment of those viewing the series when their hope of being privy to an especially intimate event by, arguably, the best-known performer at that time fell short? Over time, creepies have come for Rapid, but in a limited sense—far more limited than has become standard across the industry; and with age, so too has come further attempts by Rapid to recontour his career—his more recent ‘power top’⁵⁰ performances serving as a striking example. Each time, however, Rapid has transitioned in a commercially-viable manner that, if anything, falls behind the momentum of bareback within commercial gay porn; a momentum that accelerates all of us viewing this content towards intimacies—in the receptiveness to ejaculates especially, and personal practices, possibly—more extreme.

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Conflict of interest Joseph Brennan declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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⁴⁸ <https://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-jake-bass-gay-porn-men/> (accessed July 6, 2021).

⁴⁹ <https://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-matthew-camp-gay-porn/> (accessed July 6, 2021).

⁵⁰ <https://str8upgayporn.com/johnny-rapid-gay-porn-bareback-michael-boston/> (accessed July 6, 2021).

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