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Introduction

In a moment where access to digital life is increasing, where marginalized communities are finding both solace and activist opportunities in connecting through social media, I want to take a closer look at how this plays out for queer youth. I want to investigate and problematize how queered spaces like Tumblr function for the community: are they effective respites? Are there drawbacks to these spaces? What is making the space possible, interesting, and appealing to its users, many of whom are longing for a safe, free, and honest reality they do not otherwise have access to? I am curious about the inner workings of the site and how they inform the way the community operates. Moreover, can this information be used to better determine social solutions and responses to the needs expressed by users in this private space, especially through and with entertainment media? Once we understand more deeply what specifics make these communities appealing to their users, we may be better able to deliberately foster online community for LGBTQ youth who may not have supportive local communities. Thinking bigger, however, we may be able to create mainstream media that more adequately responds to the needs the community users are expressing through their use of these sites. How will this research provide comprehensive tools to use in the creation of better, safer social experiences for queer youth, both online and offline? This is somewhat of an extension of my ethnography project, which focused on the Tumblr lesbian community. Branching off of that, my survey for this quantitative portion includes at least superficially analyzing other platforms with a queer

presence. Overall, the goal is to look more deeply at the inner workings of a marginalized online

presence, a microcosm of queer youth activity, for the purposes of improving the conditions that

led them there. While the space itself has positive effects on those who use it, and should

therefore remain available, the need for said space (due to violence, shame, lack of

representation and education) is what I aim to address and improve upon with the results of this

study.

The community I am studying is loosely defined as the online queer community.

Specifically, however, I am focusing once again on the queer female community on Tumblr,

because it is where I found my initial insights. I also believe that its specifically multimedia and

anonymous affordances will reveal valuable nuances in its answers to my questions, perhaps

more so than other platforms. The particular culture and multitude of community interests

provides more in depth, diverse research opportunity than trying to analyze why a certain gay

YouTuber or Instagram star is popular amongst queer youth, for example.

While I am incorporating and relying on the general sociological understanding that

media has a hand in shaping youth identity, I have also found some specific literature on new

media, queer identity, and resilience. One book, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer*

Visibility in Rural America by Mary Gray, highlights the foundational value of new media and

online space in paving a queer identity and strength. She also discusses how rural queer life plays

out in relation and opposition to digital life. Work from the Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental

Health also helps inform my topic, citing the positive effect online resources can have on queer

youth experience, and how they help said youth develop those identities offline as well. I have

also considered a study from the Journal of LGBT Youth, which draws connections between positive media examples of queerness and resilience building.

Research Question

Given this context, my questions aim to push these findings even further. How much of the online queer world is built on an exchange of entertainment media that is or can be read as queer? How much does queer media contribute to the relationships and communities that are formed on Tumblr, Youtube, Instagram, and other platforms with a strong queer presence? How likely are community members to respond to originally or self-created queer content versus mainstream media or produced queer content? Based on the findings of my ethnography, my hypothesis is that the survey results will reveal that users connect deeply with content that emulates the possibility for queer life. This category primarily refers to media depicting love between two women or queer people, for example, such as photos of TV or actual couples, women kissing women, etc. For young queer Tumblr users, most of whom are struggling to openly discover and identify with their sexuality, seeing is believing. It is a recognizable form of validation that queerness is a real, good, possible thing. In my ethnography, the people I interviewed spoke widely about the impact having a visual representation had on their ability to accept their own queerness as something people did not just shove down and away, but something that actually happens. Moreover, having that narrative played out in mainstream media, like TV and movies, is even more affirming because of its far reach. This is part of why queer TV relationships have such devoted fan bases, which are very active on Tumblr, and why issues of queerbaiting are taken so seriously by those fandoms, often blowing up into public

media fights between producers, writers, or actors and the fans of a series. When TV shows queerbait an audience, or hint at possible queer subtext between two characters that does not ever fully come to fruition, they are invalidating and erasing the possibility of that reality, which hits an already sensitive fanbase and sends queerness back into an obscured place of fantasy. Overall, media appears to play a huge role in how young queer people, and all queer people, navigate their sexuality, and I believe the importance of media to Tumblr users will reveal itself in my survey. The project is important because of what it will conclude in terms of how media representation can positively impact the image queer people have of themselves, how they accept themselves, and how they claim their right to live happily and openly.

Research Design

While size is hard to determine based on the anonymity the Tumblr lesbian community depends on to function, we can estimate that users number in the hundred thousands, based off of notes on posts in the community. However, it is likely that the population is much larger than I can even estimate, because of how spread out the community is across different tags and niche interests. My population will likely extend to Instagram and YouTube, given that many queer micro-celebrities have dedicated and measurable followings there as well, and originated from Tumblr to begin with.

Because snowball sampling will result in too many unpredictable weaknesses, I will have to set up observation periods to gather survey takers. This will unfortunately mean I only have access to active users rather than listeners and lurkers, something that will also impact my data, but less so. It will present a problem, however, in surveying the more scared, quiet, and closeted

users who do not even go so far as to like a post. The impact of media is perhaps most crucial to them, and this sampling method will not be able to account for them.

I do not foresee needing to do any oversampling, given that my survey accounts for all possible gender identities represented in the population. Given the anonymity of Tumblr, I do not know much about my population besides the unifying nature of their interest, which is homogenized by their genders and sexualities. Race and location, for example, will function as important but secondary variables to include, and because anonymity prevents me from knowing those things from observation, I do not need to oversample to include more of a certain racial or geographic population within my overall population. To determine who is in my sample, I will observe explicitly queer communities on Tumblr over regulated periods of time, select every tenth active user I see posting or commenting in a group, and message them my survey via the anonymous ask tool, which one does not need a login to access. I will follow up one time if I do not receive a response. I have chosen to make a survey because of the nature of the feedback I am looking for, which can only be gathered using specific questioning and examples, rather than content observational tools. I will be observing primarily what people report responding and connecting to in terms of content, and what they are seeking media wise from the Tumblr sphere.

In terms of ethical concerns, my survey is anonymous and does not ask for any highly identifiable information. It does, however, ask for sensitive information, like gender identity and sexuality, as well as time spent looking at queer media. Though not necessarily used to identify people, this information is especially important to guard given the fact that many of my survey takers may be closeted, or have strenuous relationships with their families or peers regarding

their queer identities. Ultimately, however, this survey is anonymous - I will not be collecting names, usernames, email addresses, IP addresses, birth dates, institutional or employer affiliations, or any other personally identifiable information. The information I am collecting, like gender identity, sexuality, age, nationality, and online behavior, will not be connectable to any specific identifiable information. As instructed, data will be stored in a password protected file on an encrypted computer, and will not need to be eventually destroyed.

Research Instrument

My dependent variable is the popularity of a chosen media type (entertainment media examples of queer life). For this variable, I will be analyzing the different examples of queer media I chose to include in the form of existing Tumblr posts. In the last question on my survey, I ask respondents to rank four examples of Tumblr posts in order of least to greatest in terms of which resonate with them the most. While this is a slightly more subjective question with room for error, I am taking it as a sort of experimental challenge. The posts I chose exemplify queer outfit/style inspiration (a solo shot of a queer person with tattoos), a photo of an everyday lesbian couple, a text post lamenting the woes of being queerbaited by a television show, and a photo of Brittany and Santana, a queer couple from *Glee*. Obviously these can be open to interpretation for some survey takers, but each is meant to represent some of the separate media categories that came up as relatable or positively influencing in my ethnography project, live TV show "ships," opportunities for fandoms, and images that emulated the possibility of queer love or expression. I can only foresee overlap in the case of Brittany and Santana - if a respondent is not familiar with the show, they may see them as a regular couple. Still, I do not see overlap being a huge issue otherwise.

My independent variables are gender, age, race, location, access to queer media outside of Tumblr, and out status (in terms of queer sexuality - presumably, the majority of my population is queer). By access to queer media, I mean to address the nuances within a Tumblr user's access to queer media in a less private setting: is it acceptable for this person to watch queer content around their families, with their friends? Do they feel comfortable doing so in the house, whether their family is home or not, or do they fear getting caught and stick to their personal computer, or the family computer only at night, for example? Is such content restricted in the home, either formally or by family members' attitudes towards queerness? Does the user feel safe or unsafe watching or engaging with content offline? This variable is meant to begin to establish an understanding of the nuances within a user's restriction. Were they driven to Tumblr because they exist in a media desert, regardless of the reason, or do they use Tumblr to supplement freedoms of exploration they already have? What does Tumblr mean to them or give them in the context of the rest of their media time and how they spend it? Given that I have scaled this question, I will be able to see numerically how much freedom respondents are able to exercise offline, at least to some degree.

My hypothesis states that entertainment media will be the most highly favored content of the options I give. I predict that, of my independent variables, the three that will affect this the most will be out status, location, and access to queer media outside of Tumblr. I predict that someone who is rural, not out, and does not have access to queer media outside of Tumblr will be more positively impacted by entertainment media examples, because they need them that much more. I do not think my other variables will impact this as much, but will still include them.

Analytical Model

$$\beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \beta_3 x_3 + \beta_4 x_4 + \beta_5 x_5 + \beta_6 x_6 + \beta_7 x_7 + \beta_8 x_8 + \beta_9 x_9 + \beta_{10} x_{10} + \beta_{11} x_{11} + \beta_{12} x_{12} + \beta_{13} x_{13} + \beta_{14} x_{14} + \beta_{15} x_{15} + \beta_{16} x_{16} = y$$

x_1 = Binary-conforming gender (measured by a 0 for men, 1 for women; self-reported in survey)

x_2 = Non-binary gender (0 for people who conform to the gender binary; 1 for people who reject the gender binary by choosing to identify as a category other than man or woman; self-reported in survey)

x_3 = Age (binned, scaled: 1-7 based on age range category selected, youngest to oldest; self-reported in survey)

x_4 = Race: Black (0 for people who did not select Black, 1 for Black; self-reported in survey)

x_5 = Race: Asian (0 for people who did not select Asian, 1 for Asian; self-reported in survey)

x_6 = Race: Latinx (0 for people who did not select Latinx, 1 for Latinx; self-reported in survey)

x_7 = Race: White (0 for people who did not select white, 1 for white; self-reported in survey)

x_8 = Race: South Asian (0 for people who did not select South Asian, 1 for South Asian; self-reported in survey)

x_9 = Race: East Asian (0 for people who did not select East Asian, 1 for East Asian; self-reported in survey)

x_{10} = Race: Other (0 for people who did not select Other, 1 for Other; self-reported in survey)

x_{11} = Multiracial (0 for people who selected a single race option, 1 for multiple races; self-reported in survey)

x_{12} = Out status online (binned variable, scaled 1-5 - "openly queer online" being 5, "I am not queer" being 1; self-reported in survey)

x_{13} = Out status offline (binned variable, scaled 1-5 - "openly queer offline" being 5, "I am not queer" being 1; self-reported in survey)

x_{14} = Location (rural vs. urban, binned variable, scaled 1-4, 1 being "very urban," 4 being "very rural"; self-reported in survey)

x_{15} = Access to queer media (frequency that user consumes queer content outside of Tumblr - binned variable, scaled 1-9, 1 being "cannot watch," 9 being "more than once a day"; self-reported in survey)

x_{16} = Online behavior (binned variable concerning whether the user looks for specific content or just browse - scaled 1-3, 1 being "browse," 3 being "specific"; self-reported in survey)

y = popularity of media type; calculated as [number of reported preferences for entertainment media/number of total respondents)

Conclusion and Discussion

I believe that once I have conducted my research, we will know far more about what the queer community needs to affirm and encourage the budding identities of its members. We will know what kinds of content ease their coming of age, what they need to see more of, and why it impacts them the way it does. My study will allow for greater detail in the kind of research done on the queer community, especially online, and will analyze the ways media can provide more to them as an underserved demographic. This matters because of the disproportionate violence the community faces - the fact of their being underserved often leads to dangerous health and wellness outcomes, like depression and suicide. In particular, I expect the results of this survey to solidify how crucial accurate and frequent representation is in mainstream media. Media theories like the Bury Your Gays trope or Dead Lesbian Syndrome are clear indicators that media portrayals of queer people are still both harmfully infrequent and problematic when done at all. Given what we know about how media shapes youth, perhaps this research can be used as further proof that fair, positive representation can quite literally alter, for the better, the mental and physical health and safety queer youth experience. Media can influence both how queer people

see, validate, normalize, and encourage themselves, as well as affect the way non-queer people see queer people. How can this research and the nuanced needs it reveals change the media environments queer youth grow up in, and how can those changed environments affect the mental and physical wellbeing of this entire demographic?