

QUEERING NEW MEDIA: CONNECTIVITY IN IMAGINED COMMUNITIES ON THE INTERNET

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ABSTRACT

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This project looks at how the LGBTQ community uses the internet, both in positive and negative ways in terms of media production and community. I briefly give some background using the Frankfurt School scholars on media production and the disconnect it causes between culture and audience when art is produced for mass consumption and then resituate those arguments and put them in conversation with modern technology and theorists to show how imagined communities, specifically the LGBT community, can use the mass consumption of media to their advantage when they are the producers of said media. I analyze three different types of media, Grindr related pictures, Instagram, and YouTube for both positives and negatives and look at not only what the media does, but the context in which it was produced, what it was meant to do, and possible readings of the media. By allowing voices and points of view that would be marginalized through traditional means of media production to have their own space with a global audience these technologies serve as a delimiting, though sometimes dangerous space, for the LGBTQ community to gather, curry social capital, and connect with others who validate them.

Dedicated to the memory of Kathleen Mirra, who encouraged my desire to become an educator,
and always pushed me to be better.

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INTRODUCTION

The world is becoming both infinitely larger and infinitesimally smaller as the methods available to the general public to communicate with one another and express themselves in online spaces become more and more available to a greater audience. Blogs, vlogs, selfies, music, television, graphic art, films, short films and more are available online for public consumption at a staggering rate. The only limit is the physical limitation of time, with content being produced online in far greater numbers than one person could consume. YouTube is filled with videos of all different subject matters and methods of production. Facebook allows for us to connect with friends and family and share the thoughts that cross our mind and the day to day events of our lives. Twitter lets us communicate in short bursts about the things that interest us, Pinterest, shows other people the things we love and want to have in our lives, Instagram lets everyone see our perspective on life, and how we see ourselves. These sites can be fun and entertaining, and allow people who might never meet in real life to establish friendships and share with one another. They may also seem inconsequential to a larger debate about culture to a casual user. It is, however, possible that by examining these sites with a critical eye to see how these online communities offer something of value to the users, especially minority users, who might have a difficult time with relations in the physical world by not having access to others like them. It can also tell us a great deal about culture and how it functions in online spaces, especially in regards to issues of gender and sexuality. Women present their bodies differently than men. Straight people present their bodies differently than gay people, adults different than children, cisgender different than transgender. These differences in presentation are indicative of relative agency in both the online and real worlds. By examining the content itself, the people who produce it, and the context in which it was produced as a text, the power structures that

govern these sites come into focus, echoing real life hegemonic structures that govern everyday interaction, but it also shows these sites as a space of resistance against those hegemonic power flows. A place where a person can attempt to be themselves regardless of consequence, a place where they can attempt to carve out their own space, and in it, express their own agency, curry cultural capital, and embrace themselves and others like them.

Historically, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer (LGBTQ) community has been a marginalized group. Though we comprise a sizable percentage of the population, we have traditionally been denied power, dignity, and rights by those who are already ensconced in the upper echelons of the hegemonic structure. While it would not be correct to equate the struggle for gay rights to the struggle for women's rights, there are similarities. A shared empathy, an understanding of the pain of being marginalized based on arbitrary characteristics, and the feminist movement and gay rights movement seemingly similar tactics have often found the two movements working together in the past and they can still be found working hand in hand often to further the cause of equality. Both have found usefulness in the internet as a space for meeting and connection. It is a place that is difficult to regulate. It is decentralized, with no true nodes of power that can prevent the communication of individual people, and as such, it places the power of creation and gatekeeping into the individual user rather than someone else. While there are some information gateways that restrict access to information, seasoned users of the internet can and will find ways around those gateways and their keepers to find what they are looking for, but beyond that, it offers a much more unrestricted environment in which to share ideas, thoughts, and information, and offers a way to connect disparate groups all over the world with one another. There is a safety afforded by the anonymity or pseudonymity offered by being behind a keyboard and screen. We may not have true anonymity, as if we use consistent

monikers on the internet those names eventually become associated with us and our online actions and personae (pseudonymity), but it affords the opportunity to express aspects of ourselves that may be difficult to express otherwise. The gay community in particular, has taken to the internet en masse and adapted its advantages for themselves. It is still not safe for everyone to be public about their sexuality, or out of the closet as it is termed within the community, if they are not straight, and online spaces have offered a place mostly free of judgments and the threat of violence from outsiders, which allows members of the LGBTQ community to express themselves openly and honestly. It allows them to find other people like them, people who understand the struggles they face and form positive relationships or mentorships to help them grow as people. The gay community has flourished on the internet, and with the rise of social media consumption, LGBTQ content producers find themselves being ever more mainstreamed, even as they carve out their own online niche.

Because content producers have creative control over their social media they can choose what to produce and post what they please even if it does fall outside of the traditional rules for culture and media production. There is greater allowance for experimentation in new forms of social media, more room to express oneself outside of the binaries that identities are often forced into. It does not have to be gay or straight any more. It does not have to be man or woman. Some have even turned this production and expression of self into a lucrative career, producing the content they like for their audiences and branching out into more forms of media, brokering sponsorship deals with large companies to advertise their products, but also by more direct actions, like becoming YouTube partners, or marketing their own personal merchandise. These new forms of content production and media, along with the type of connection allowed for by online communities between producer and audience have changed the way in which we read

these texts, allowing for new insight into cultural expression and new methods of inquiry when attempting to understand cultural norms and what happens when we deviate from those norms.

To further understand these new methods of production it is important to look at a variety of factors. The personal identities and histories of the content creators themselves are vital to understanding what they are producing and why. The texts themselves, both in context, and out of context can also be studied to allow greater insight into how the texts function, and especially how they are different from traditional texts. The agency of the content producers as they move across mediums and alter their content as they do also is telling about the nature of the social contract between the producer and audience. They must keep their audience interested while still taking into consideration what their new audience wants as opposed to their old audience. They must constantly negotiate the line of expression of self and how much exposure is too much exposure, where they should limit themselves and why. They must also deal with establishing themselves as a new form of media and culture production in an industry that is traditionally resistant to changes in production methods. They must also negotiate the hegemonic power flows that still govern them even in a space that allows such freedom, as the internet does, which leads to the question if members of the LGBTQ community are actually empowered by content creation, or are they simply existing within the same types of structure and the same hegemonic powers as the real world, only this time in an online space where they are being tricked into thinking they have more influence than they do?

Justification

As a gay man who grew up with the internet coming of age at the same time I did, I found myself awash in a world of possibilities. I was no longer scared and alone. There were suddenly a great deal more people like me and they were all at the tips of my fingers. I had friends and role models like me, people to model my behavior after, and people that could teach me the difference between the straight world and the gay world. The discovery of a community of people like oneself is a necessary step to developing a fully realized adult personality, and oftentimes it can be difficult to find those role models if a person is a part of a minority. Now with the exponential growth and potential of the internet and the sheer volume of user generated content, it is vital to our understanding of a growing culture and ever more ubiquitous part of our lives that the production of this content is studied in order to understand how the culture is shifting when the producer, the subject, and the audience can all be the self.

By exploring meaning making in the production and reception of user generated content in online communities I show that allowing the user to generate the content in addition to being a part of the user base of the media platform the content is generated on, and part of the communities that form on those platforms provides beneficial effects for those who both produce and consume the media. It allows for a greater sense of personal and community agency, and by examining the intersection of content creators and the LGBTQ community I explore a voice that is oft marginalized through traditional channels or, when presented, often stereotyped and forced into categories that are comfortable and easily understood by the majority.

After reviewing the literature available I have come to the conclusion that while there is a great deal about LGBTQ identity and communities, both in online and physical spaces, and there is a great deal of literature on the effects of social media and how it is produced and consumed,

there is very little literature that looks at the intersection of the two areas. Most of the scholarship that does address the issues is less formal in nature, and not necessarily peer reviewed, as the social media platforms I use are relatively new. Another trend in the literature seems to be a split between scholars on whether or not social media is a positive or harmful thing, especially for youth, but it mostly focuses on heterosexual subjects and sexting, or the creation and sending or posting of nude selfies. While this work evaluates texts that would be considered adult in nature, or as referred to on the internet Not Safe For Work (NSFW) it does not focus on youth and the dangers of sexting and will not be placing a value judgment on the process of creation and dissemination of NSFW materials, but rather the nature of those expressions, and as such, much of the literature in regards to sexual practice in online spaces is not relevant to the work I am doing. I also do not examine the relative contribution of the work as a whole to furthering culture, but rather examine the benefits to a community in terms of agency and self-worth, so while much of the early scholars works like Benjamin and Adorno and Horkheimer are used to give context to the reasoning for my argument they are not relevant to the interpretation of the content itself. Due to the relative scarcity of research that exists on this particular confluence of topics it is necessary to pull from both research on social media and the LGBTQ community to synthesize them into a cohesive work. However, since part of what I explore is the idea of performativity, Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" as both a critique of stringent gender lines and how technology has become so ingrained in our everyday activity so as to become a part of our identities will be useful.

Methodology and Framework

The nature of the scholarship on this subject matter necessitates a feminist approach, which is the most applicable school of thought for dealing with the material anyway, though

some cultural theorists will be used as well. Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin serve as the base for the historical view on content production and mass consumption in order to give context to the current temporality of my arguments. These are used to negotiate and unpack the relative value of culture production for mass consumption and how/if it serves as a distraction from more important aspects of society and life. This, again, allows me to situate the historical arguments about vanity images like selfies, and video logs, or vlogs, especially when put in dialog with Adorno and Horkheimer. Feminist theory and theorists give me a method of inquiring about sexual politics and expression, including how it is judged and policed by others in a Foucauldian sense, and when combined with queer theory allow me to look at how the binaries of gender and sexuality are obliterated when content producers can frame an image to present it any way they choose and are not bound by traditional expression since they are, by and large, outside of the direct influence of the hegemonic structure they exist in day to day while inhabiting physical space. These theories allow me to look at the history of image production, the source of the image, how the image is interpreted when the creator of the image is responsible for its transmission, the medium of communication, intended audience, the actual reception of the message and any type of interference that might alter the meaning of the message when it is received.

My data and texts for this paper are images, taken from public social media sites and blogs. Since I am focused on a specific community I cannot avoid ethnography as it is important to understand the conventions for behavior in the community in order to understand what the images mean when presented to members of the community. Since part of the focus of this work is how content creation works in and affects imagined communities it is vital that my materials are linked to that community in a meaningful way. Semiotics is necessary to study and analyze

the presentation of self, as each text has various indicators of meaning depending on the image which must be interpreted as signs of signals of the creator's intent. Without the understanding that the images were produced by a specific group of people with a somewhat cohesive intent (increased visibility), it is impossible to find any meaning in the images and the process by which they are created. I will look at the details and minutiae of the texts that the typical consumer might not take notice of, but hold a deeper meaning when placed in dialog with the various theories described above. Both the ethnography and the semiotic based approach allow me to explore the theoretical framework by focusing methodology on the interpretation of the content and what it means to the creators and audience in a meaningful way. I already have several social media accounts, and have created a few more, recently, in order to gather the content for this study and further my involvement in the LGBTQ community.

My primary sources for materials are online communities and social media platforms that are open to the public. The content is often tagged in its metadata or by individual users with keywords, referred to as tags or hashtags, in order to sort images or texts and to ensure that the images are searchable and seen by interested audiences, but also as a method of speaking to audiences that might not normally be in dialogue with the user. It is important to note that not all texts will have metadata tags associated with them so manual browsing of the social media sites is necessary as well. All of this content was easy to find because, as mentioned earlier social media is produced faster than it can be consumed, but by limiting myself to the LGBTQ community online it somewhat reduces the volume of images and texts to sift through. Further, by studying primarily visual texts another large portion of social media production has been eliminated further limiting the scope of this study into something manageable.

This study focuses on online content creation and the LGBTQ community, and as such I have decided to exclude longer format content and focus on shorter vlogs and image production. I do not use online movies or television, nor do I employ music as part of my data. The focus of the study is primarily on members of the community though allies may be used as examples here and there, but the focus needs to be on those that identify as other, as their voices are the ones that have been marginalized. I have chosen primarily visual texts that present the self in them, as they are the most relevant to the questions and ideas I am exploring in my research, as they offer clear visual representations of the body and the self and how they are presented. While prolific communities exist dedicated to written text and The Other, especially through the medium of fanfiction, they have less to do with the body and presentation of self, and more to do with subversion of standard ideals of hegemony. As such, they are not focus of the content I discuss, as they do not say much about the body. The methodology of my study is ethnographic and semiotic, meaning I will be doing LGBTQ ethnography and looking at the signs and signifiers in the content I have data mined from those producing images and vlogs on the web. I have chosen to limit myself to these two methods as opposed to other methodologies as they fit the goal of my research best, as they will let me examine an imagined community and how they present themselves. I have chosen more qualitative research methods, rather than quantitative, because for the purpose of this study, it is more important to study the image itself, and the context in which it was produced rather than the types or amount of content produced as this study aims to interpret the texts themselves and not the trends in the production of them. The theoretical framework of the study uses Cultural Theory from the likes and Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin to give background into the traditional views of the production of culture and its relative value, while Feminist theory, and its offshoot Queer theory allow me to examine the

presentation of self and identity. Small portions of what is commonly described as communication theory, such as communication models, allow me to ground the Feminist and Queer theories in terms of the content being meant to convey a message to an audience, how it does so, and how it fails to do so, which keeps the study from being purely theoretical and anchors it somewhat to something more tangible. To include other types of methodology, content, or theoretical framework would cause the study to be too broad to draw any useful conclusions.

The reason I have chosen these sites for this study, to see what useful conclusions can be drawn, is somewhat tempered by my own involvement in both the LGBTQ community and the internet and how the two have both helped me grow as a person and as a scholar. I find value in the attempts to normalize alternative expressions of self and resistance to hegemonic and Foucauldian notions of power and policing specifically because I identify as part of a community that is outside those hegemonic flows. I understand to some extent the difficulty with making a marginalized voice heard and understood. The marginalized have much to contribute to our discourse on power and identity, and while it is possible for the majority to do the same research and present it, there is something to be said for the research coming from a voice that has not only scholarly training, but is part of the community which is being written about. It offers a different, internal perspective that is difficult for those outside of the community to emulate. The internet and imagined spaces have traditionally offered a somewhat safe and anonymous space to explore and come to terms with our own sexuality as members of the gay community, when it can be hard to find people in the real world to communicate with and befriend, especially for the younger generation who do not have the option of things like bars and dance clubs geared toward the LGBTQ community that people over the age of 18 can partake in. The internet allows people

of various ages to interact, and while it is not without its inherent dangers, it allows for a space of creativity and expression that individuals may have no other venue in which to express. It also allows for friendship and mentoring relations to flourish, allowing for the formation of healthy cohesive identities as adults by allowing LGBTQ individuals to interact with models of their community which is different than interaction between LGBTQ individuals and the heterosexual community.

CHAPTER I. HISTORY

The production of culture, historically, has been in the hands of the few and prior to the advent of television, radio, and film, was mostly consumed in person, meaning the audience was geographically and temporally present to see and interact with the art, music, performance or miscellaneous cultural events that were occurring. There was immediacy to the performance and the audience involvement that was not necessarily possible in the age of reproduction until recently with the advent of things like livestreams, where thousands of viewers can actively view an event online as it occurs and interact with other viewers and the performers themselves. Walter Benjamin, in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, argues that reproduced art lacks “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (1936, 2). What Benjamin is speaking of here is what he calls the “aura”, or the unique qualities that are present only in original works of art and not reproductions of that art. Benjamin argues that when the art is viewed as a reproduction outside of its original context it no longer has the same meaning and states that the process of reproduction removes the work from the “domain of tradition”, meaning that not only does the reproduction of art remove the aura, but it also detaches itself from the standard process of creating art (1936, 3). According to Benjamin, with that detachment from the cultural process and removal of the aura, art ceases to function in the traditional sense and begins to function as a commodity to be reproduced and profited from, rather than the expression of culture and ritual. Benjamin attributes this desire for reproduction, at least in part, to the audience’s desire to be closer to things both spatially and culturally. This leads to the audience craving any sort of contact with the art, whether it is a reproduction or the original, but since the reproduction is readily available

and the original difficult if not impossible for average audiences to experience, the audience is willing to throw away the aura and fool themselves into thinking they enjoyed the art (1936, 4).

Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin

Adorno and Horkheimer, in their essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” argue much the same point. Modern art, with its cycle of creation, alteration, and reproduction offers a false catharsis for the audience. Modern art designed for mass consumption leads the spectator or audience member to believe that they are experiencing a unique feeling when presented with art, but they are being fooled, not only because many other spectators are feeling similar emotions or coming to similar conclusions about the art, but that because of the way the culture industry works, they are being led to believe that what they are experiencing is art and not blatant commercialism, wrapped in a skin of artistic presentation. Because art produced and reproduced for mass consumption functions as advertisement for a product or person, then according to Adorno and Horkheimer, it does not function as real art, merely as a tool for pacifying the audience and contributing to the needs of a capitalistic society. Their disdain for mass produced work led them to conclude that high art is intellectually and technically rigorous and thus better than low art (Horkheimer & Adorno 1944).

Interestingly, these authors are all very concerned with the damage that reproduction and mass distribution of art could cause. Though both essays argue for the importance of art and culture, and the processes that creates both of these things, they ignore certain realities of cultural and artistic creation and expression. Benjamin believes that the reproduction of art for a mass audience causes the art to lose its context and aura, but some art is created with the intent to be reproduced, drama in particular. Plays are written so that they may be performed repeatedly and

over time. Shakespeare's plays have been translated, distributed, and performed all over the world. While Benjamin is specifically concerned with mechanical reproduction, his work was first published in 1936, at a time when television and film already existed. At the time Benjamin published this essay, Shakespeare's works had already been put to film with the earliest example being a short silent film from 1899 based on *King John*. While it is possible to argue that the magic, or aura, of live performance is lost when viewing the film version of a live performance, it is equally possible to argue that a filmed performance contains its own inherent aura. A film can have greater detail in set, allow for closer shots of actors and actresses, and allows for a host of other things not possible in live performance that would enhance the performance.

Likewise, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that mass production removes value from art by making it less unique and tricking audiences into seeing something meaningful, but they seem to ignore the possibility of individual agency amongst the viewership. Mass production equals mass consumption, and mass consumption means it does not have intrinsic value. The arguments that Adorno and Horkheimer are making seem to be couched in elitism, though they are ostensibly arguing the exact opposite. It seems their intent is to call attention to the dangers of capitalism commodifying art and how it commodifies the human consciousness and while some of their arguments feel truthful, they are underestimating the audience, both in their ability to see the blatant commodification, but also the audience's need to be distracted once in a while. Adorno and Horkheimer conclude that mass produced art has little to no intrinsic value.

Both of these essays provide some background into the prevailing attitudes towards how art and culture have traditionally been treated as new technologies begin to change the way art is produced and distributed. Neither of them predicts the advent of the internet, however, and how that will change both the production and distribution of culture, and the nature of human

connection permanently. Today comedy, film, music, and all forms of art and culture can be digitally produced, shared, reproduced, altered, viewed, and interacted with immediacy on a global network. Concerts can be livestreamed, photos shared to 1000's of spectators, movies downloaded, all with an internet connection and a click of a mouse. This not only allows for art and culture to be shared and experienced on levels that Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer could not imagine, but it also allowed for the coming together of communities, based not on a shared geography, but on a shared culture delimited by space, subject only to access to the internet.

Queer Internet

With that in mind it is important to note that the internet was not necessarily envisioned as a tool to bring people together in the manner described above. It was originally a Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency intelligence project meant to protect lines of communication and information in times of war. Over the years, and as the internet became ever more common with the citizens of the United States it became something else. It became a place to connect with likeminded individuals as things like text based Multi User Domains, MUDs, and Multi User Domain Object Oriented, or MOOs came into existence in the late 1980's and early 1990's. These were text based programs that allowed many users at once to interact with one another in a virtual world by typing various commands and chatting with other players. These MUDs and MOOs allowed people to explore things that they could not in real life, especially issues of gender and sex. In the anthology *Wired Women* Shannon McRae notes that users engaged in MOOs that were based around erotic roleplaying allowed for users to experiment with gender and sex by roleplaying a character unlike their real life counterparts (242-248, 1996) This is one of the early examples of the internet being a place to explore issues

of gender and sexuality in a safe environment. Players could have several avatars, or digital selves, that were male, female, Trans, or did not identify as a gender at all, not to mention roleplaying animals, mythical creatures, and shape shifters that could grow various genitals and experience sex in ways the live human body could not. McRae also invokes Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in her essay by quoting Haraway's words "We are all cyborgs" stating that we are all "gleeful cyborgs" playing in the work of our fathers and adapting it to our own lives and purposes (243, 1996). Haraway was not specifically writing about the internet or indeed technology in her piece, rather, she was writing about the patchwork nature of our identities and our conceptions of self. Haraway resists the essentialism of earlier identity politics where being female is all that is necessary to bind feminists together and posits that the dualities or binaries that we so often find ourselves placed in are so very easily challenged (Haraway 1991), and thus it is made even easier by modern technology where the self is constructed via text and pixel and can be whatever the user likes to challenge those binaries.

Haraway's conception of the mediated identity and the various influences that go into creating that idea, however, are sometimes taken a bit too far. As author Lisa Nakamura points out in her book *Cybertypes*, the connective nature of the internet can also be reductive to personal identities. In chapter four of her book, "Where Do You Want to Go Today?" she deals with cyber tourism, among other topics. Nakamura deals with advertising for networking and communications companies that were positioning things like race and ethnicity as only visual markers, and thus the internet was the great equalizer as these markers are not visible unless the user chooses to show them. As Nakamura points out, this is problematic for several reasons. It positions diversity as something negative, to be erased or ignored when it should be celebrated,

but further it posits diversity, specifically race and ethnicity as only visual markers. The advertisements Nakamura analyzes further places race and ethnicity into the position of The Other, or lesser while still needing to use the image of The Other to sell their products and the idea that one can go anywhere and experience everything via the internet. This is problematic as it both attempts to erase difference while still profiting from it and further it ignores the non-visual markers of categories of identity, even those beyond race and ethnicity that will still affect how a person uses the product advertisers are trying to sell (2002, 87-99).

CHAPTER II. SELFIES, SHAME, AND SEX

Introduction

For this part of the project I analyze photos from douchebagsofgrindr.com as part of the section of my thesis focusing on sex and sexuality in the selfie. Grindr has very specific rules for what may or may not be shown in photos on the app and what may or may not be contained in the user's profile. I look at the photo the user chooses to represent themselves, the word choices they make to describe themselves, and their stated reasons for being on Grindr, all of which are part of building the profile on the app and then also the language the person posting the profile to douchebagsofgrindr.com uses and the judgments they make about the person and the profile. I use this information to describe the climate towards sexual expression via the selfie in an online imagined community, but an online community that is also built upon the premise of physical proximity to other users. I explore both the positive and negatives of sexual expression, including sexual and gender identity, preferences for partners and how those preferences are expressed, and the intent of the user who created the profile.

All of the images collected for this section of the paper come from the website douchebagsofgrindr.com. These images are collected and submitted to the website by users of the social networking app Grindr. Grindr is a location based social networking app for use by gay men that allows them to see other users in a list ordered by geographical proximity to one's self. Grindr has very specific rules for the content of user profiles. While it may seem strange to some, as Grindr is an app devoted to serving a sexual minority, and has options that allow a user to declare that he is looking specifically for sexual encounters, Grindr has the following restrictions on profile content. Pornography, nudity, sex acts (real or simulated), sex toys, weapons, firearms, drugs, drug paraphernalia are all prohibited, and no copyrighted images or

illustrations, no images of people under the age of 18, and no images impersonating anyone else are allowed (<http://grindr.com/profile-guidelines>). Images containing any of the items on the list are not allowed and will be denied or have the image cropped to remove the objectionable material by the administrators who review profiles.

The text in the profile must conform to similar standards, disallowing sexually explicit or suggestive text, profanity, including abbreviations, fill ins, and masking of the words, no text that invokes racism, bigotry, hatred or physical harm, no advertisements, no mentions of drugs except for tobacco, alcohol and caffeine, and no explicit references that promote unsafe sex. No links to other sites are allowed either, except for standard social media profiles in the section of the profile designated for them. Violations of those rules can result in permanent ban from the app (<http://grindr.com/profile-guidelines>). These rules presume to give the app a sense of legitimacy, ostensibly by reducing the sexual element, among other things, but it also seems designed to shame users for expressing their sexuality on an app that in theory, is not solely for sex, but is often in practice used for solely for that express purpose. This reticence to address the sex that Grindr users would engage in seems to be a hold-over from cultural mores and judgment values, such as the ones described by Gayle Rubin in her essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality”. Rubin separates characteristics of sex into those that are judged to be morally acceptable, and those that are judged to be morally deficient in some way. Qualities like straight, monogamous, indoors, and committed are all good aspects of sex and thing like homosexual, non-monogamous, varied locations, and casual sex are all looked down upon (Rubin 153). Grindr’s rules are an attempt to ameliorate the judgment that users would face for engaging in morally questionable sex, but as the target audience for the app is already identifying themselves as part of the outlying or bad portion of the structure Rubin delineates, it

seems self-defeating on the part of Grindr to limit sexual expression of a self-identified sexual minority. Authors Amparo Lasen and Antonio Garcia, in their essay “...*but I haven't got a body to show*’: *Self-pornification and male mixed feelings in digitally mediated seduction practices*” state that “there is a cultural, social and personal shaping of digital technologies while, reciprocally, individuals and interpersonal relationships are shaped by technological presence, uses and practices. This shared agency not only include the individual user and the particular device, but other people and groups involved in the interaction, the conditions of commercialization and use defined by providers and platform owners, as well as institutional regulations”(2012, 5). The authors are speaking of heterosexual or straight men here, but the relationship they describe is carried over into the nature of relations between the individual and device, but also the platform itself and all of the rules and regulations that entail using the platform which in this case is the Grindr app.

Douchebagsofgrindr.com

Fortunately, the users of Grindr will find ways to express themselves and their interests within the rules of Grindr. Douchebags of Grindr is a website that is dedicated to shaming Grindr users who present themselves in an authentic, if sometimes offensive manner. Gay culture is not the same as straight culture, and there are different rules that govern gay men in that culture, yet some things remain the same. Jessica Ringrose, in her book *Postfeminist Education? Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling* describes the process of slut shaming, which is used to regulate sexual expression by placing codes of conduct and behavior onto a body in order to discipline them from deviating from current sexual climate and mores. This gets translated into the gay community in much the same manner; it is not exclusively women that slut shame or are victims of slut shaming in the gay community. Douchebags of Grindr slut

shames the presentation of self and identity in gay men. Though the website purports to be about calling out people who behave in a manner the moderators feel is rude on Grindr, in reality it serves as a place to judge others for their sexual desire, slut shaming them by calling them douches for their sexual preferences in a public place. But should those expressions be judged? As members of a community that is already suppressed it seems disheartening that we would further suppress and shame ourselves but it seems commonplace. Douchebags of Grindr does just that. Each image submitted has a title to describe the poster's reaction and is also tagged with metadata to describe the content of the image with things like femmephobia, to denote a dislike of feminine gay men, racism to denote racially insensitive profile material, and tweaker to imply or outright state that the subject of the profile is seeking drugs in return for sexual favors. Over the course of 57 pages there are dozens of images all laden with heavy judgment in an attempt to out the subjects as douchebags and it shares some similarities with forced outing of the subject as gay, but seems to have less of a negative connotation as the subject already self identifies as gay. These images, chosen originally by the users of Grindr themselves, were meant to portray them in a positive or attractive light and are now being used in order to shame them for their behavior and judge their sexual desires (douchebagsofgrindr.com).

Douchebagsofgrindr Textual Analysis



Figure 1 Screen Grab Douchebagsofgrindr 11/12/14

Figure 1 is an image of a man posted to the blog December 9 2014. The man describes himself as 30 years old, Latino, single, and looking for dates, friends, networking or a relationship in the personal information section of the profile. He lives in New York City and the user who viewed his profile is slightly more than 3000 feet from the person to whom this profile belongs. The text of his profile questions if there are any masculine men left, and says the he is a Man, with the M in Man

capitalized. He states in his profile that if anyone is going to hit him up, a colloquialism for initiating contact, whoever does so should act, walk, and talk like a man.

Upon inclusion of this image on the website, the image was titled “Sway Them Hips Douche” because of the cocked hip leading to the protrusion of the subject’s buttocks and tagged with bottom, to indicate the subject’s preference for roles during sex and femmephobia to denote his dislike of feminine gay men. The poster is using the body language in the photo to make assumptions about the subject’s preferred position as the receptive partner during sex and combined with calling him a douche and labeling him femmephobic in an attempt to denigrate him for his sexual preferences. While the subject of the profile certainly could have chosen to express his preferences in a more positive manner, literally by using positive language such as

saying that he prefers men who are more masculine instead of saying that he does not like feminine men, it is interesting that both the subject of the image and the person who posted are both using shame as a deterrent. The subject is attempting to shame feminine men, which is disheartening as then it implies that there is something lesser about femininity but also because the overall tone is negative. The poster of the image is also using shame, in multiple ways to sanction the subject here. The poster is using shame, as mentioned, through name calling and labeling, but in a lack of self-awareness, the poster seems to be perfectly at ease with labeling the subject as femmephobic and then using an inferred preference for sexual positioning as a way to shame as well. Through the inference that the positioning of the subject’s hips, meaning feminine, in the title of post, that he is a bottom, or the receptive partner and that is something to be ridiculed. The poster of the image has clearly taken issue with the apparent femmephobic nature of the subject but, in a spectacular moment of cognitive dissonance, does not recognize his own complicity in shaming by not only associating being a bottom with being feminine, but also that it is something seen as negative or bad.

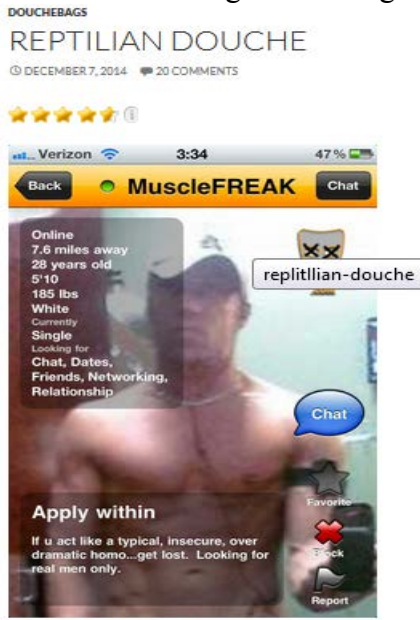


Figure 2 Screen Grab Douchebags of Grindr 11/13/14

This image, posted December 7, 2014 is titled Reptilian Douche. The subject is 28 years old and approximately 8 miles from the person viewing his profile and is looking for anything from chats and networking to dating and relationships. The subject is once again listed as femmephobic in the tags, but also Godzilla and Mothra are included in the tags. These tags, along with the poster’s title of the image are meant to insult the physical

appearance of the subject, again evincing a cognitive dissonance of lack of care that he is enacting the same type of slut shaming as the subject himself. In this case, the subject is fairly offensive in his wording of his preference for more masculine men, calling gay men typically insecure and over dramatic while referring to them as homos, a fairly derogatory term for a gay man, and tells any men who might fall into these categories to get lost. While the language of the profile is offensive, it seems that the poster of the image believes that the appropriate method of redress is attacks on the physicality of the subject, calling him reptilian and comparing him to Godzilla and Mothra, two famous Japanese movie monsters. This image is more explicit than figure 1, by including the exposed chest of the subject and this time the image includes the full face of the subject as well. The topless nature of the subject, the fact that his face is included in this photo, and his word choice could lend this profile a more aggressive nature, but at the same time could indicate the subject having a bit more comfort with themselves, their body, and their sexual identity. They do not hide their face or body, nor do they hide their feelings towards more feminine men. It is indicative of a level of comfort with both body and identity that is a positive expression of self, but one that is complicated by the off-putting manner in which that confidence is expressed.

EVEN MORE RACIST THAN USUAL

DECEMBER 5, 2014 24 COMMENTS

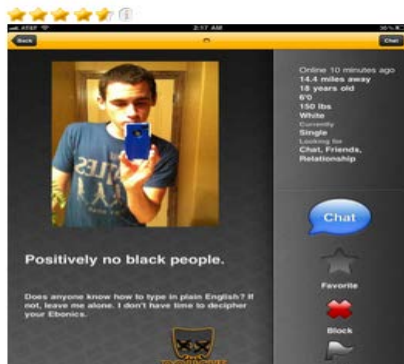


Figure 3 Douchebags of Grindr

Screen Grab 11/12/14

This image posted on December 5, 2014 and titled “Even More Racist Than Usual” has little redeeming quality to it. The subject is 18 years old and has stated “Positively no black people” and made references to the inability of users on Grindr to type in full English and states that he doesn’t have time to decipher Ebonics. The metadata tag on this

image is racism, and there is little to critique about the presentation of the image. It is a fairly standard mirror selfie with the user's phone present in the shot. There is nothing overtly sexual about the pose, nor in the text of the image. In this case, it is the overtly racist nature of the profile itself that the moderators of douchebagsofgrindr.com have taken issue with. The subject professes a dislike for black people and intimates that all black people speak and type in Ebonics. This seems to be a case where the website, douchebagsofgrindr.com has let the profile speak mostly for itself, which is interesting as it raises the question as to why this profile was treated with less vitriol than the other images presented so far. The subject is not denigrated for racial preferences or the manner in which he communicates them, other than being called a douchebag, whereas in figures 1 and 2 personal attacks were made on the subjects by the poster, demeaning them for their physicality. It seems to point to a disparity in how we treat the nature of our sexual expression. It is less acceptable to profess a preference for stereotypical qualities of a gay man than it is to have a preference based on ethnicity, illuminating a possible hierarchy for the relative values of various sexual preferences, such as the hierarchy mentioned in Gayle Rubin's essay.



Wow she's really working to destroy those stereotypes of Middle Eastern men being homophobic.

Figure 4 Douchebags of Grindr Screen Grab

11/12/14

11/12/14 mention is made of the subject's race, just his overt racism, in this case, the subject is falling into the category of femmophobic, but the poster does not comment on this. The subject identifies in his profile as being middle-eastern but the poster has identified him as Arab, which is not indicated or intimated in the profile in any way. Further, the poster has captioned this image with language designed to mirror the insult the subject has given to feminine men. By calling the subject "she" the poster is attempting to shame the subject by placing them into the category that they despise, meaning feminine, again pointing to a negative attitude towards the feminine amongst gay men which is indicative of a larger problem in the gay male community and how members of the community treat women. This image is tagged with Arab, douche, and Grindr, which seems to imply that in the infancy of the site the creators still felt the need to specifically

This is one of the earliest images posted to the website, if not the earliest. Posted on July 2, 2011, it was titled Self-Loathing Arab Douche. No age is listed for the subject, but he does link to his personal twitter account. His profile also states that anyone who contacts him should not be gay; specifically the kind of gay that their mother would have said is "out there". In contrast to figure 4, where the subject is white and no

state that the picture was a douchebag and from Grindr, but once again makes assumptions about the ethnicity of the subject that are unsubstantiated and racist.



Figure 5 Douchebags of Grindr
Screen Grab 11/13/14

This photo is of a man, no age given, who identifies as Latino. He present himself as humble, but gracious and socially aware and a participant in the No H8 campaign, a photo and video series that documents LGBT community members and allies that are dedicated to creating a society free from hatred and homophobia, as evidenced by the duct tape covered mouth and NOH8 insignias on his cheek and wrist. The poster has titled the image + H8 Douche. The subject here comes off as sincere, invested in the LGBT community and an active member of a social justice initiative. The tags on this

image are just variations of Grindr, douche, and Tumblr, but the image itself has been rated one star by users of the site. When the mouse cursor is placed upon the star rating system a rollover description pops up, depending on which star is currently selected. One star means the moderator is a douche, two means the subject is not a douche, three means the subject is a douche, and four and five stars both rate the subject as a “supermegadouche”. In this particular image the moderator has been voted a douche and in the comments for the image, a majority of the sentiments expressed are that the image should never have been included on the site to begin with, although a couple do state their annoyance with the No H8 campaign in general. The overall tone of the comments, however, is one of support for this young man, though several of

those supportive comments do end up being related to the young man's attractiveness, rather than just the fact that the subject is simply not a douche.

DOUCHEBAGS

LUBE DOUCHE

OCTOBER 3, 2011 ADMIN 30 COMMENTS



- Lube
- Jiffy Lube
- L.C. Lube
- Quick Lube
- Jiffy Lube Coupons
- Express Lube

Incoming search terms:

- d bags of grindr
- grinderdouchbags
- grinderdouchbag



← 1/10/2011

Figure 6 Douchebags of Grindr Screen Grab 11/14/14

This image, one of the top rated, meaning most often rated as a supermegadouche has 213 ratings, 202 of which rate the subject as a five star level douche. It is tagged with arrogant as the only metadata assigned to the image. This subject states in his profile that most of the users of the app are awkward and in need of alcohol to function in social situations and completes his profile by stating that he is happy that he is already in a relationship. He is posing casually, leaning on a table or bar, with what appears to be a beer in his hand. This particular subject, again, shows some level of cognitive dissonance. Although he does not purport to be using the app for dating purposes, stating that he is using the app for networking and friends only, but still insults the user base of the app, of which he is a member. His presentation of self and sense of identity is detached somewhat from the rest of the Grindr community, as he feels as though he is better than the majority of the users of the site. Users of douchebagsofgrindr.com can comment on posts and a majority of the posts here are statements calling the subject a douchebag, claiming to know the subject personally and that his relationship will not last, sarcastically lamenting the loss of this man from the gay dating pool, and insulting his appearance. There is also a level of pleasing irony in the subject's statement about alcohol being a necessary social lubricant for awkward cyber-daters, specifically because he is not only using the app, but posing with what appears to be a beer. The poster here has chosen to comment on the hypocrisy of this profile, specifically that the subject claims users of the app, of which the subject is one, are not good at social interaction and sadly, need alcohol to interact with others, while showing himself drinking. Again, it is a lack of self-awareness of the presentation of self that causes a negative reaction in the viewers of the profile and commenters on the site.

Douchebags of Grindr.com Conclusion

It seems that the presentation of desires, preferences, and the body are vital to how the message is received. Personal interpretation also seems to play a large part. The individual frameworks through which we view and interact with the profiles and pictures color our reception of the digital presence on Grindr. What we say, how it is said, and what we show the audience all combine to present a cohesive online identity. This presentation, whether received positively or negatively does, however, open us to criticisms, whether or not we want to be open to them. By placing the self in an online community designed to connect gay men with other gay men there is both the opportunity for positive and negative interactions. Judgments abound when using sites like Tinder and Grindr and to use those sites is to accept the possibility of being judged in a negative light. I believe the real question is whether or not we should be judging the expression of sexuality and desire in the way we do. As gay men, we should have a more open mind about the sexual practices of others, having known the judgment of others placed upon our own sexuality. Gayle Rubin notes that our sex, as gay men, is judged harshly and found lacking in morality. As people who have experienced the pain of that judgment, one would hope that there would be an inherent understanding for the differences of sex. The presentation may be wrong, but we cannot help to whom we are attracted. We cannot change our attraction to tall men, skinny men, white men, or black men any more than we could change our attraction to men at all. While for some it is the personality, or lifestyle, or quirks, of the person that we are attracted to, for others it is the physicality. If I will only date funny people, does that make me any better than someone who will only date men over 6 foot 1? What qualities are okay to be attracted to, which are not, and why?

Sexual identity and expression is as varied as the people who claim that identity and choose that expression. While the presentation of those desires may be rude or as several users of *douchebagsofgrinder* have stated, “douchey”, it does not necessarily follow that the expression of those desires is wrong. While there are standards and expectations of behavior in the gay community, inherent to claiming to be a member of that community is the defiance of expectations. It is expected that you are straight. It is normal to be so, and while the concept of homosexuality is becoming more and more commonplace and claiming the identity of gay is becoming more acceptable, it still remains something that places one in a minority category, and one that is not the default of society. *Douchebagsofgrindr.com* seems to be an attempt at resituating gay desires and bodies within the straight continuum even after they have self-identified as outside of the hegemonic structure. It applies the standards of behavior and sexual politics of the straight community onto the gay community, but does so under the guise of catty remarks and self-righteous self-policing. While openness about non-normative sexual desire and expression is surely to be lauded for diversity’s sake, the policing of that behavior into hegemonically defined and delineated categories complicates the positive nature of this expression. The expression of the self and the body is positive while the tone and content of that expression is not. The expression of homosexual identity and desire is positive, but the in group policing, shaming, and punitive actions strains the positive effect those expressions can have. Grindr is not a place to find happiness. It is not a place for intellectual connection, or a place to meet the kindest souls. It is, however, a place for connection, for sex and desire, where the body and identity are placed into full view to be judged as desirable or lacking by the community, but again, I am forced to ask from where our right to judge emanates and even if we deem ourselves arbiters of justice should our judgment be public? I remain unconvinced that shame is a good

deterrent to prevent any behavior. Damaged egos and semipublic outings hardly seem to be beneficial to any of those involved.

CHAPTER III. INSTAGRAM, GENDER, AND PERFORMANCE

Introduction

Instagram is a site where users can post and tag photos to share with followers and other members of the Instagram community. Because of the nature of tags and how they can be searched and create a narrowcasting effect in the users feeds, it allows for the creation of insular communities within the larger community. It causes an imagined community, based not on geography but on shared interest in photography, and then allows for multiple communities to exist within the larger based on other interests besides photography, like fashion, food, sexuality, and gender. These photos can range from selfies, to inspirational quotes, to calls to action to help members of the community. Instagram is a repository for images, and more recently short videos, which can be shared to other social media platforms. Instagram launched in 2010 and as of 2014 had over 300 million active users tagging their photos so that they can be found by interested individuals (Fiegerman, 2014). It was also acquired by Facebook in 2012, for around 1 billion dollars (Stern, 2012). The LGBTQ community has once again carved out its own niche space to exist in on Instagram by tagging photos of themselves and sharing them with those tags to make them more visible to others on Instagram who have decided to follow them or search out those tags. In contrast to the images from *douchebagsofgrindr.com* most of the images presented on Instagram have a much more positive and uplifting tone. *Douchebagsofgrindr* is a site dedicated to shaming and judging Grindr users, which has in its reason for being, a negative context, whereas Instagram is merely a repository and social networking site with no stated intent as to how the things posted to Instagram should be viewed. This difference in the purposes of the sites play out in the tag functions and comments that the photos receive. The Grindr comments are mostly negative and the tags attached to the photos are mostly negative as well, but on Instagram the comments are decidedly more positive, with compliments and

commiseration being the standard, and the tags are usually directed at making the images easier to find, rather than degrading the subject of the image. The community of Instagram also seems more socially aware, as recently the site has been flooded with memes, images, and videos of support for Leelah Alcorn, a transgender teen recently in the news following her suicide, as well as things like the recent #jesuischarlie movement that occurred following the terrorist attacks on the French satirical magazine.

Instagram Textual Analysis



Figure 7 Screen Grab Instagram 1/11/15

Conchita Wurst posted the following image on January 11 2015, in preparation for the Golden Globes award ceremony. This image, posted by Wurst’s Instagram, is not a selfie as such, though it does include Wurst in the image.

It is an action designed to raise awareness, both of the diversity of the entertainment industry and those who work in it, but also as a reminder that freedom of speech is not always celebrated by all. In response to terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo because of the magazine’s usage of images of Muhammad, the magazines offices were attacked and several murders committed by two men later identified as Islamist brothers, resulting in the death of 12 staff members and setting off a violent chain reaction leading to hostage taking and stand offs at various places in Paris. Wurst tagged her image with the hashtag #jesuischarlie, French for “I am Charlie”, as show of solidarity for those affected by the tragedy and ostensibly, to identify herself as a supporter of the purpose

the magazine and its mission. The image has over 6500 likes after being posted to Instagram and more users like it as it spreads further, though it seems as though the initial rush of the image being spread has tapered off. What's interesting about this image is the fact that Wurst, who has faced heavy opposition as her bearded drag queen character has chosen to post an image of herself clearly designed to be more professional looking than the standard selfie to stand next to her message rather than being the focus of the image. Wurst is using her persona and body to reinforce the fact that not all people live the same lives and that celebrating diversity where it occurs is important to her. By using the tags #jesuischarlie and #goldenglobes she may have also hoped to maximize her potential audience by including not only the social activists tracking #jesuischarlie but also the people actively watching and searching out materials tagged with #goldenglobes. In this way, Wurst is using her Instagram in the hopes of effecting change in a positive manner, not specifically for the LGBTQ community but for anyone who falls outside the standard behaviors and expectations of others, while simultaneously attempting to increase her own cultural capital, or agency, on Instagram. In a traditional Marxist reading of this Wurst is attempting to fetishize and commoditize herself, making her image the product and reducing herself to an object to be fetishized, but since Wurst is in charge of commoditizing herself it is difficult to make the argument that the process is damaging her ability to control her own life and means of agency.



Figure 8 Instagram Screen Grab

12/11/14

This is another photo of Conchita Wurst, the drag persona of Thomas Neuwirth. Neuwirth identifies as a gay male and uses male pronouns when referring to himself and female ones when referring to his drag persona. This photo shows Wurst performing during dress rehearsal for Eurovision Song Contest 2014, which she later won. Neuwirth considers Wurst a character he plays, and has created a fictionalized backstory for Wurst separate from his own life. Neuwirth decided to give his character a beard because "The beard is a statement to say that you can achieve anything, no matter who you are or how you look,"(Elleftheriou-Smith). Wurst is using a facial feature that women are traditionally shamed for to increase her social agency and again subvert hegemonic expectations of gender and beauty. Wurst's use of facial hair on a female figure is subverting the notion that all females must lack facial hair to be considered attractive, or at a more base level even to succeed. A woman with facial hair is derided and seen as lesser and all women face tremendous social pressure in the United States to conform to the standards of grooming for women which include removal of facial hair, both from other men, and other women.



Figure 9 YouTube Screen Grab 1/20/15

This image, and the following one as well, were not posted to Instagram, but instead are screen grabs of videos. They are included in the still images section as they are being treated as still images rather than looking at a video in its entirety. This photo of drag queens Milk (left) and Kelly Mantle (right) on a YouTube

show about cooking with drag queens

shows two very different styles and types

of drag, and two very different ways to present gender fluidity. While Kelly Mantle presents as a stylish sophisticated woman with an edge, Milk has instead chosen to present with a more exaggerated drag look, including the mustache he wears in his day to day life when not in drag. Kelly presents what we might see as a more typical drag look by minimizing masculine traits, but Milk has chosen to let his masculine traits show through in his drag performance as a possible reminder to the audience that drag is a show, a performance of gender in action, intended to highlight the perceived masculine or feminine qualities that we assign to men and women. This is different from the way Wurst uses her beard, in that Wurst uses her beard to celebrate difference, as a sort of call to action for acceptance, but Milk uses it possibly to remind the audience that everything is a show, and we are all in drag some way or another. It is meant to remind us, not only that Milk is performing a role, rather than living that role, just as we all perform different roles and identities throughout our lives, thus one possible reading of Milk's

presentation of self and identity here is that he is showing that not only is gender performative but it is more fluid than the masculine/feminine binary would imply.

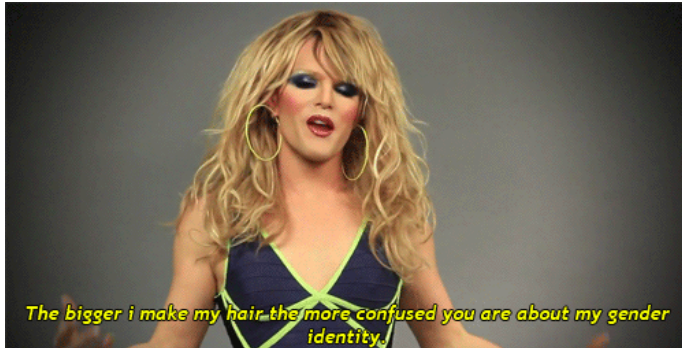


Figure 10 YouTube Screen Grab 2/10/15

This image of Willam Belli is another example of performative gender in drag. Willam, who goes by his real name, and not a female stage name, in this image, is purposefully exposing the illusion of drag. By increasing the visibility of some

features, like hair, drag queens minimize the masculine features of their faces by making them look smaller in order to make themselves appear more feminine. Willam here is pointing out that everybody already knows she is a man in a dress and that she uses makeup and wigs to create the illusion that she is a woman, but everyone already knows that it is a performance. Willam's persona is similar to Milk's in terms of reminding the audience that drag is a performance of gender, but Willam does so with humor and jokes, where Milk uses physical appearance to do so. Willam and many others have also called attention to the places where the illusion of Willam's drag fails, specifically his beard. Willam has made it clear that he is aware that his beard shows through his makeup and in other places has stated that he is aware of a process of color correcting to prevent the blue shadows of his beard from showing through his makeup, and he has had it done in the past. Willam does not usually color correct though, as it provides fodder for his comedy performance by allowing him to joke about the dichotomy of dressing and being made up to perform femininity while having traditional masculine features showing through.



Figure 11 Screen Grab Instagram 1/9/15

This image, posted by `lgbt_nation34`, is again, not a selfie, but rather further evidence of the use of a social media platform as a call for solidarity. This

image has been floating around the internet recently, as of January 2015, and depicts the states in the United States of America where gay marriage has become legal. In the comments one user questions the validity of the map based on its inclusion of Arizona, but as of October 2014, same sex marriage is legal in that state. The reality is a bit more complicated than the map shows, with states like Michigan legalizing gay marriage, making it illegal again, and recently state Supreme Court judges ruled that the state must recognize all marriages performed while same sex marriages were legal, but the intent of the image is clear to most viewers. It is meant as a celebration of progress and an inspiration to those chafing under legally sanctioned discriminatory laws. The tags for the image are largely unrelated to the image itself and seem to be more about forwarding the poster's personal agenda rather than a community agenda, but the image can still be a rallying point for community members and allies, and has seen wide spread sharing on social media platforms.

This image was posted by user `lolliejames`, a self-identified gender fluid individual from Ireland. `Lolliejames` in this instance has posted the top of their Facebook page with a request to be added on Facebook by their followers. The image had 19 likes at the time it was collected

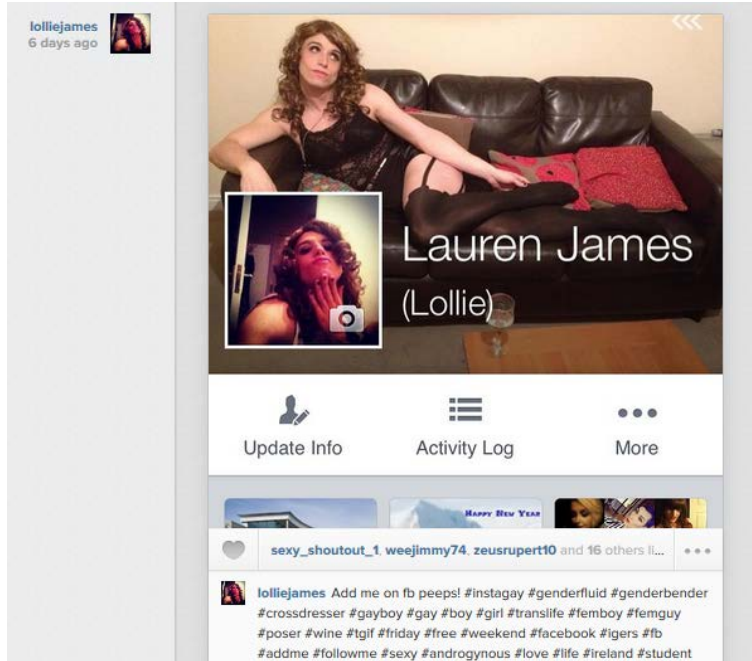


Figure 12 Instagram Screen Grab 1/11/15

and contains a picture of lolliejames, who goes by Lauren on Facebook, in drag. There are several implications in the sharing of this image, and one possibility is that Lauren/lolliejames believes their identity to be fluid enough to create social media pages to represent themselves as female, as this image gives no indication in

and of itself that the poster is biologically male. The tags lolliejames chose to include on Instagram however, may lead the viewer to believe that while lolliejames may be gender fluid, he primarily identifies as male, as evidenced by the inclusion of six separate tags indicating maleness but only one that indicates femaleness, though several tags do indicate genderfluidity as well.

What is most interesting about this photo is the possibility it is an attempt to subvert gender binaries, a theme that runs through this user's Instagram, but a sort of failure to do so as well. While the person in the image is playing with gender conventions and portraying themselves as female despite being biologically male, the tags seem to create a framework for the user to exist in where the only options are boy or girl, and the user tags himself as a gayboy, a femboy, a femguy, gay, and uses the hashtag instagay as well, indicating that although the user plays with gender conventions and wants to present themselves in a fluid manner, they still essentially consider themselves a male. This leads to a disconnection between the presentation

of self and the intended effect of that presentation and the tags the user has embedded into the image in order to make it easier to find. The possible intention of the image is to present a gender fluid individual that is proud of their gender fluidity and the fact they do not belong into any specific gender category, but they then proceeded to categorize themselves into both male and female categories, placing themselves into the binary they are trying to break.



Figure 13 Screen Grab Instagram 12/10/14

This image is by the same user, lolliejames. The second image is of a self-identified male, wearing women's clothes. It is tagged with #gayboy #girl, #bigender, and #highheels, among others. In this case the subject presents as clearly male, but while wearing typically female clothing. In this case the subversion doesn't come from the lack of identity but rather the blending of identities. The

subject also tagged his photo #boyswholikegirls and #straight. This photo is particularly interesting as it seems that the subject enjoys playing with categories of gender and blurring the delineation between male and female or masculine and feminine, but also tagged the photo into specific categories that contradict one another. A possibility is that they are attempting to subvert hegemonic understanding of gender and sexuality while simultaneously interpolating himself into the binaries by tagging things like straight and gay and another possibility is that the user is attempting to speak to or hail the people who fit the groups they have tagged.

Instagram Conclusion

Instagram seems to be a much more inclusive and accepting site than one like Grindr, or the blog that sprung from it, *douchebagsofgrindr*, in that the majority of comments are supportive in nature, but this is due in part to the fact that tags allow the user to specify the images and posts they wish to view by organizing them for the user thematically into categories based on the tags. It is possible to follow individuals as well; meaning that as they post things to their Tumblr notifications will appear for the user that someone they follow has posted. Whereas Grindr is based on geolocation and *douchebagsofgrindr.com* is a static blog with no traceable tags, Instagram is a constantly changing decentralized blog. Almost any word can be a hashtag and thus can be tracked, traced, and followed as it spreads over the media platform which allows for a great amount of freedom of exploration and a great potential for connection with those who share similar interests or ideals as the user, allowing them to meet others like them and forge meaningful bonds with people regardless of location, age, gender, education, or other characteristics. This is not an entirely positive phenomenon though. It can easily lead to a self-imposed narrowcasting or niche market. By only looking at posts that contain tags they are interested in, or posts from the people they follow, it leads the user to form a barrier between themselves and the people like them, and the world at large. They are no longer being exposed new things or other points of view, a trap that is easy to fall into on any social media platform by carefully maintaining lists and groups of friends or interests. This is where the insular nature of the internet surpasses its ability to connect disparate people due to the effects of narrowcasting. Instagram and the selfie in general also receive a lot of criticism for creating a culture of narcissism and self-interest where photo likes become linked with self-worth and self-esteem (Fox, 2015). This does not, however, negate the positive effects of having personal identity

validated by external sources, nor does it erase the intent of users that post images of themselves in an attempt to normalize alternative identities and encourage others to not only express themselves and their identities but also for others to accept those identities. For many, images they post and the likes they get are not necessarily, or solely about the social capital it gains for them, it is about authentically expressing themselves and being accepted by others both similar and dissimilar to themselves.

CHAPTER IV. YOUTUBE AND THE VIDEOLOG

Introduction

The culture industry has existed for a long time. As long as art has been a commodity, there has been an audience to receive and judge it. The audience forms a community joined by their consumption and judgment of that art, no matter the media in which the art is produced. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, as the nature of the culture industry changed, so did the nature of the audience. As art became mass produced, so too did the shared identity of audience. The moment of experiencing the art, while it produced emotions and allowed for catharsis, was falsified by the nature of mass produced, formulaic art, and thus the catharsis was falsified as well. Art and culture were regulated, and homogenized into hegemonic structures of society. Where it was once a signifier of individualism and personal expression, it became a method of homogenizing people into standardized groups. This homogenization presented a problem for Adorno and Horkheimer, as it allowed audiences to falsely believe that they were individuals experiencing a work of art and reacting to it accordingly, when they were truly part of a group experiencing an event designed to invoke specific emotions in the audience, falsifying their individual experience and distracting them from their individuality by presenting a false sense of it, while using the art to create a new identity as a member of a group (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944). In some ways, Adorno and Horkheimer were correct. The mass production of art does reduce its efficacy in creating individual reactions in people, but their critiques are predicated upon the technologies of the time in which they were writing, the 1940's. They could never have conceived of the technological advances of media production as it has changed with time. The formation of the Internet is one of the greatest technological advances in the history of science and has been an invaluable tool for communication and the gathering of information, but it has

also become one of the greatest sites of production for art. There are sites dedicated to poetry, drawings, novels, paintings, music, short stories, where the site user is also the producer. It has allowed the audience to become the producer, blurring the lines that had so carefully delineated categories and changing the way the audience member saw themselves in relation to art. The production of blogs, vines, and YouTube videos have created a space where millions of audience members can experience the inner thoughts of people like them. Culture is no longer the provenance of the elite and with these advances in technology and the free ability to create art and distribute it to an ever growing global audience, Adorno and Horkheimer's criticisms seem to have lost some of their relevancy as the culture industry has changed.

YouTube, in particular, has become a bastion of self-expression, for better or worse. It is filled with hopeful vloggers, musicians, comedians, artists and other producers of culture, hoping to gain an audience that appreciates their particular brand of art. The rate of production for YouTube videos is astounding. They are produced and uploaded at such a rate that it is literally impossible to watch them all. There are more minutes of video on YouTube than a single person could watch in their lifetime, and that number is only increasing.

Granted, not all of these will be wonderful pieces of art, but neither were all of the films and paintings produced before Adorno and Horkheimer began their critique of the culture industry. There are countless stories of YouTube users becoming famous and making a career out of the production of personal videos for their audiences, receiving in return an almost fanatical fan base willing to assist them in funding outside projects. One YouTuber in particular, Grace Helbig, has taken her training in comedy and improvisation and parlayed them into a personal brand built completely on the internet.

Helbig began working for entertainment website MyDamnChannel.com in the late 2000's starring in internet shorts, while creating her own video blogs ([youtube.com/user/dailygrace](https://www.youtube.com/user/dailygrace)). Company CEO Rob Barnett decided that Helbig needed a larger audience for her particular brand of comedy and offered her the chance to produce her own video blogs specifically for MyDamnChannel, which led to the creation of the "Daily Grace" YouTube channel (statedmag.com). Produced for MyDamnChannel starting in 2010, "Daily Grace" had over 800 videos uploaded and amassed over 2.4 million subscribers by December of 2013, though this number does not include videos exclusively created for MyDamnChannel.com and not YouTube. Following the publicity regarding her decision not to renew her multi-year contract with MyDamnChannel Helbig announced that she would begin producing videos on her own, in the same format, under the new channel name, "It's Grace", since MyDamnChannel owned the "Daily Grace" name and channel. Two and a half weeks after her re-launch in January 2014, "It's Grace" surpassed one million subscribers, and as of April 2015 has around 2.4 million subscribers and over 87 million views on the videos uploaded to the channel ([Helbig](#)). While all of this was going on, Helbig, like many other YouTubers hinted that she was working on side projects. These side projects included teaming up with fellow YouTubers, comedians and best friends, Hannah Hart, whose channels "myhart0" and "yourhart0" feature her show "My Drunk Kitchen", personal vlogs, numerous celebrity guest stars, and music videos about food and her love of the internet, and Mamrie Hart, not related to Hannah Hart, whose primary channel "You Deserve a Drink" features celebrity themed mixology videos laden with puns and dirty jokes, to fund, write, produce, and act in the film Camp Takota. The film was released in early 2014 for digital download and streaming. While mostly well received, the film is not necessarily ground

breaking in terms of content, but it does signify an interesting development in the production of such materials.

Grace, Hannah, and Mamrie saw the opportunity afforded them as YouTubers with significant audiences to create a film about the things they wanted, with the humor they wanted an opportunity not often afforded to people engaged in traditional means of production (Kannoff, 2014). With a proven success record from the three women, predicated on channel subscribers and video views, the three were considered a relatively safe investment, especially since they had built in audiences that could hopefully be converted from a YouTube audience into a film audience (Silverman, 2014). The audience did indeed follow, generating at least \$50,000 with specialized pre-orders called care packages, but it would never have existed in the first place were it not for the followers the three had amassed on YouTube (Miller 2014). They managed to escape financial pressure to modify their film for commercial success based on the built in audience they already had. Their hope, as film makers, stated throughout their vlogs during the period of film production, was that the people that had enjoyed their humor and the glimpses they gained into the YouTubers lives would appreciate that humor in a different medium and as such, they were attempting to write a film that they themselves would find funny and hoped would be successful, regardless of industry standards and the preconceived notions of how to be successful by pandering to audience desire and producing a film that is engineered to be successful ([youtube.com/user/dailyyou](https://www.youtube.com/user/dailyyou)).

They were, by and large successful. The film did modestly, and was consistently well received, with an average rating of 7 out of 10 on the Internet Movie Database, but it marked a shift in attitudes towards the production of art and film (Internet Movie Database). As an independent film, it likely would have garnered little attention were it not for the constant

advertising the film received via the three creator's YouTube videos. Their built in audience of over 3 million YouTube users meant that a marketing strategy for the film was already in place, and it was one that users could only avoid by not watching the videos the women produced, which fans were not likely to do. Interestingly, most viewers did not object to this blatant advertising, partially due to their parasocial relationship, or a relationship in which the audience presumes an actual friendship or relationship, (Horton and Wahl 1956) with the women which led to many users commenting, wishing the women luck on the film, and promising to rent or buy the film when it was released with users commenting about how they already purchased their care packages, have already pre-ordered, or will do so as soon as they are financially able ([Helbig](#)). They also served as a policing force after the release, trying to prevent digital piracy and scouring sites like YouTube to make sure that the film was not uploaded for free viewing and reporting those uploads for copyright violation, which Helbig commented on, stating that she was very pleased with her viewers dedication to her and her friends continued success (Mashable 2014).

This dedication to the YouTubers is akin to dedication to a favorite musician or painter but offers a more personal connection, as through their video blogs, YouTubers are often addressing the viewer directly creating a sense of intimacy between themselves and the viewers, with many YouTubers referring to viewers as friends or some other permutation of the word. Adorno and Horkheimer would argue that this is a false sense of connection and solidarity made apparent by the fact that the viewer is never actually interacting with the YouTuber, but rather reacting to a recording, a representation of that person and not the person themselves, but this argument falls flat in the face of multichannel communications on the internet (Enlightenment as Mass Deception). Most YouTubers now regularly address posts on twitter, Facebook, Instagram

and other forms of social media in their YouTube videos, responding directly to user posts and answering questions they may have about the vloggers lives or sharing jokes with them. For Grace, Hannah, and Mamrie, this process continues even further through fan meet and greets, YouTube conventions, live shows where the three perform various comedy skits and songs, and in Hannah Hart's case, a road trip across the United States touring various cities and shooting episodes of her show "My Drunk Kitchen" in fan's homes (youtube.com/harto). Further, YouTubers often collaborate with one another, shooting special videos often involving internet challenges, such as drunken spelling bees or viewing specific tags on sites like Tumblr.

Oakley, and many other YouTubers, including Helbig, Hart, and Hart, use the internet as a platform for explaining themselves, their interests, their lives, their passions, their humor and the like. They also use it as a social awareness platform, in particular Oakley and Hannah Hart, a gay man and lesbian respectively. Both are open about their sexuality and it does inform their videos, with Oakley incorporating it as simply a part of himself and his persona, while Hart will casually reference it in her cooking videos on occasion but did produce several videos series on being gay and coming out where it was addressed directly. This was most likely a reflection of their video styles, as Oakley focuses more on personal video logs and Hart focuses more on the entertainment aspect of video production on YouTube, but regardless, both have used their work in the production of culture on YouTube to reach a large platform on the issues that are important for them. For the past two years, Oakley has challenged his viewers to donate money to the Trevor Project, which helps LGBT youth, through website prizeo.com in lieu of sending birthday gifts to his post office box. The first year Oakley raised almost 30,000 dollars in charitable donations for the Trevor Project, and in 2014, Oakley challenged his viewers to reach a donation goal of 150,000 dollars with prizes for donations ranging from signed merchandise to

a date with Oakley himself, garnering over 500,000 dollars in donations for the Trevor Project. Oakley has set a goal of 500,000 dollars again for this year (2015), with 90,000 dollars to go as of the time this was written (<http://www.youtube.com/user/tyleroakley>).

This points to the importance of social media and culture production in regards to imagined communities (Anderson 1991). Both consider themselves part of the gay community, an imagined community of people who identify as non-heterosexual. YouTube, Facebook, and other social media sites allow users to connect to people who share the same traits as them, allowing them to meet and connect in ways they could not before, a fact of considerable importance for minorities like the LGBT community. It provides a safe space for them to be themselves, which they may not have at their physical location. These imagined communities strengthen the bond between producer and audience by giving them both a tangible aspect of their lives to commiserate in.

Also in 2014, both Hart and Oakley were invited to the White House to meet with President Obama, and be part of a panel discussion on how the current administration could have greater success in reaching the “YouTube generation”. Both spoke about the meeting on their YouTube channels, and spoke about a variety of topics they discussed with the president, including the affordable care act, which both pointedly mentioned that their users should sign up for which does call to mind Adorno and Horkheimer’s arguments about the purpose of culture being used for control. This criticism while valid, is also predicated on the belief that things like the affordable care act are an attempt by the government to gain greater control over its population which continues to be part of the discourse of American society and as such is not the most stable ground upon which to construct an argument that the government is attempting to limit its citizens in a negative way.

With YouTube functioning as a venue for the production of culture and the creation of community while simultaneously serving for some users as a platform of social justice it seems that the criticisms of Adorno and Horkheimer need to be renegotiated. While some mass produced art, like the latest summer blockbuster filled with aging celebrities, guns, and explosions, still seem to function as that false catharsis, not all do so. Because media production is now much more accessible to the common citizen, it is no longer the sole provenance of those with power, and because of this, more diverse artistic expressions, and more importantly, more production of culture that is unmediated by industry dictates, the mass production and consumption of culture now functions differently. Instead of the pacifying effect Adorno and Horkheimer describe, some use their points of production, the spaces where they create and distribute their culture, as a call to arms, much in the same way a protest song would. Furthermore, the ubiquitous nature of pop culture, in which many YouTubers are so immersed, leads to a greater visibility for their chosen platforms of social justice, which is a decidedly polarizing, rather than pacifying, issue. The other main criticism of Adorno and Horkheimer, the notion that mass produced culture leads to a false sense of catharsis and identity, still holds true to some extent but the advance in communication technologies mediates this. Near instantaneous communication with the producer of the culture allows for greater dimension in the relationship between audience and producer. Communication is no longer a one way process. Feedback can be incorporated instantaneously and YouTube is peppered with short videos from YouTubers filmed only minutes earlier, with the message that the YouTuber is live on Google hangouts or a similar video chat program to talk to and interact with their fans, with some YouTubers even going so far as setting up the online equivalent of a movie night with friends. These advances in technology have complicated Adorno and Horkheimer's views on the

purpose of popular culture and what it can do. It still functions in the ways the cultural theorists proposed it did in the 1940's, but it has incorporated the shift in technology to great result in a way that the theory could not have predicted and thus dealt with. While there is still value in the ideas put forth by Adorno and Horkheimer they must be taken into context and applied judiciously avoid the downfalls of ignoring things like instantaneous feedback and the importance and real power of online communities for those that partake in them. Viable connections are now possible in imagined communities and online sites of culture production. YouTube, then, is a space of power, negotiation, connection, and production in ways that can be beneficial to those who are active in the YouTube community and space.

Vlog Analysis

<http://youtu.be/WYodBfRxKWI>



Figure 14 YouTube Screen Grab 2/20/15

This is a vlog of popular YouTuber Connor Franta coming out of the closet, meaning he would no longer hide his gay identity. Franta began posting on YouTube in 2010 and joined a collaborative group known as “Our2ndLife” in 2012. Franta and the other boys

involved in the collaborative channel garnered nearly 3 million subscribers and close to 400 million views on their posted videos. Franta left the group in summer, 2014, for personal reasons but did continue to post videos on his own personal channel. He currently has over 4 million subscribers on his channel and nearly 200 million views. In December of 2014 Franta

posted the above vlog as a coming out to his fans and the YouTube community at large. In one month, it has garnered over 6 million views. Franta is noticeably shaken as he vlogs, starting off slightly out of breath and stating that his heart is beating very quickly. He did not script the video and chose instead to improvise as he told his story. His story follows a common theme in coming out stories, where the person coming out knows they are different, but does not know what that difference was. In his middle school years, Franta thought he might be gay, but did not want to accept that he might be gay, and stayed in the closet, including dating women. Franta felt isolated and scared throughout his high school and early college years, leading to eventual depression as he continued to avoid acting on his same sex attraction. Franta finally came out to himself, saying that he was gay while looking into a mirror and began the process of coming out, first to his friends, then his family, then others. Franta states in the video that he felt like he was monitoring and censoring himself constantly so that no one would question his sexuality, and that it became tiring and depressing to do so. He also states that he found the courage to come out through the internet, watching other coming out videos, googling the coming out process and chatting about it with others in internet chat rooms. Near the end of the video Franta becomes emotional while telling his viewers that they should not need to hide themselves and that the fact that members of the LGBTQ community do have to hide their identities is not okay. He finishes the video by stating that he wants this video, despite its importance and serious nature, to be like any other video and signs off using his typical vlog signature, asking for subscriptions and thumbs up.

This video is important, both to Franta as part of his process of exploring and cementing his identity and to the community at large as a call for the normalization of non-heterosexual identities. It also gives a face to the coming out process, leaving it less abstract and more real for

people contemplating beginning their own process. While Franta mentions the deleterious effects that staying in the closet had on him personally, they are also indicative of a larger trend for people in the closet. It can be a stressful, lonely, and dark place and the constant monitoring of our own behavior is tiring and can wear us down.

<http://youtu.be/kSR4xuU07sc>



Figure 15 YouTube Screen Grab 2/19/15

Ash Beckham, in her TED Talk from Boulder Colorado in September of 2013, goes into detail about the damage that staying in the closet can cause. She states that while her closet is the gay closet, but that in the closet you cannot tell what the closet is, only that it is

dark and lonely, and that whatever secret is locked away in that closet is more harmful in the dark than out in the open. She takes about the fight or flight response and how it is a body's way of reacting to perceived danger and stress, and a layover from the times when we often had to fight for our lives to get food or safety. She goes into what constant stress can do to the body, stating that the hypothalamus floods the body with adrenaline and cortisol. According to Beckham this response in and of itself is not problematic, but rather it is the hypothalamus's inability to distinguish the nature of the perceived danger that is the problem. While the threat of being eaten by an animal is immediate and ends when the animal is no longer a danger, the tough

conversations that make us nervous and scared will continue to affect us until we face them.

Chronic exposure to adrenaline and cortisol can lead to a variety of health issues including things like depression and heart disease.

She states then when we do not have these hard conversations they continue to weigh us down and affect us negatively. She ends her talk by stating her three rules. She calls for anyone who needs to have a hard conversation to be authentic, as you cannot expect authenticity from others if you cannot be authentic yourself. Be direct and be honest, to remove any chance of misunderstanding during that tough conversation. Finally she states, with a picture of Mr. Rogers giving the audience a big smile and the middle finger on the screen behind her, to be unapologetic. She says that we must apologize for the things we have done that have hurt other people along the way, but never apologize for being ourselves. She ends her talk by calling for brave souls to come out and be an inspiration to the next person who needs to have a hard conversation because a closet is no place to live.

<http://youtu.be/YhNXxlMvo08>



Figure 16 YouTube Screen Grab 2/16/15

Youtuber, writer, actor, and producer Grace Helbig has a solution to the problem of the harrowing process of coming out. Helbig, who initially began posting videos on her own eventually partnered with media company MyDamnChannel and began producing original content for them.

Helbig eventually left to start her own wildly successful channel, but had to leave behind the majority of her content, which was owned by MyDamnChannel. MyDamnChannel moved all of Helbig's content onto a channel called DailyYou, modeled after the title of Helbig's channel, DailyGrace, while she was working for the media company. Since leaving the company Helbig has acted and produced in a film released via digital distribution that received decent reviews and was a financial success, written a New York Times best seller, and has a television show being produced for the E! Network scheduled to air in April of 2015.

This video, whose original posting is January 2011, is Helbig's comedic answer to the coming out process. She states in her video that this is a serious topic, and she decided to include it in her themed day "Sexy Friday". She states that she has gained a significant LGBT following and is often asked by fans how to tell their family that they are gay. She then states that she will take the pressure off them and proceeds to start reciting a form letter. She starts by

saying “Dear” and a title card is imposed briefly over the video saying “PERSON WHO IS RECEIVING THIS VIDEO” and apologizes for addressing the viewer as a letter. She proceeds to give a heartfelt coming out speech for the person who sent the video to the viewer. After saying that she is gay, she then proceeds to sing, speak and dance while repeating the word gay in different forms for nearly two minutes, ending with the statement that the word has lost all meaning and thus is not a big deal. She signs off by saying she loves the viewer, unless it is inappropriate to do so, and looks into the camera saying “gay” in a deadpan voice one more time and signing off.

Helbig’s offbeat comedy and embrace of her own personal awkwardness have an off-putting effect, but not necessarily in a bad way. The video feels awkward at times, but is meant to be. It also treats the coming out process both as something important and serious, but as something that should not have to be. Helbig is using comedy to defuse a situation that is painful and scary for some and allowing them a psychologically safer way to come out to others rather than doing so in person. Helbig has commented on gay rights in many of her videos and collaborated with out gay YouTubers such as Tyler Oakley and Hannah Hart, as well as her brother Tim, an out gay man.

http://youtu.be/CIDXLf_EAmM



Figure 17 YouTube Screen Grab 1/9/15

This video, by YouTuber hartbeat, has over 2.5 million views. Hart is a genderqueer lesbian with nearly 400 thousand subscribers to her channel, and often responds directly to comments and questions in her videos. In this particular instance she is

responding to a consistent question on her gender presentation and why she does not dress like a woman if she loves them so much. In response Hart says that she loves watermelon and the video cuts away to Hart wearing a homemade watermelon bra with a slice of watermelon covering her genitals. She then proceeds to dance around the room until her mother comes in and asks her why one side of the bra is bigger than other, at which point Hart bursts into dance again and the video cuts back to Hart talking to the audience.

This video deals with both body acceptance issues and assumptions about what sexual orientation means to the individuals who claim non-normative sexualities as their own.

Interestingly, most often when lesbian stereotypes are brought to the forefront of discourse it is the butch lesbian that is the most commonly accepted stereotype, but in this particular instance the stereotype about butch lesbians is eclipsed by the need for others to understand clear and

delineated lines of gender presentation. The users that question Hart have accepted her lesbianism and do not question that aspect of her, but do question her presentation of self and body as being unfeminine and thus inappropriate. In their mind Hart is attracted to women and thus must want to be as feminine, meaning womanly, as possible. Hart, however, simply points out that we love lots of things and that just because we love them does not mean we want to be them or dress like them. She, like Helbig, uses comedy and a bit of weirdness to demonstrate her philosophy about gender expression and sexuality to not only bring to light to these issues, but also in an attempt to point out that this questioning process of other people's sexual identity and gender expression and forcing stereotypes or value systems onto them is ridiculous, which is a topic that occurs in several of her videos.

<http://youtu.be/Oz2AxKwPj94>



Figure 18 YouTube Screen Grab 2/1/15

Another video from heartbeat, this one starts off with a brief monologue about Hart doing something with no explanation, stating she believes that newcomers to her channel were probably wondering about her gender, stating that she is a human, rather than stating that she is a man or woman. She then says she is sure her viewers are tired of being judged and

that she will probably regret the video, but that she needs to do this. The video then cuts to Hart dancing nude, rubbing her body, slapping her stomach, and shaking her bottom while being covered with black censor bars or words with sayings like “lyrics can’t express this” and “learn to live laugh and love”. While Hart does not state an intent for this video, and in fact says that she has no explanation for the video, the video does serve a purpose for the audience, regardless of whether or not it was meant to. Many of the comments reference Hart being beautiful or having a beautiful body or just that they enjoy her freedom with herself, her expression of self and her fearlessness in showing her body to a potential audience of everyone with an internet connection. While Hart does not state an explicit reason for her video it can be read, because of audience reaction as a method of furthering body acceptance and self-love, which is what the majority of user comments on the video seems to support.

http://youtu.be/2a_tJnqmJCs



Figure 19 YouTube Screen Grab 2/11/15

This video features internet celebrity Hannah Hart and comedian Joan Rivers. I choose to include this video as a method of showing the push for cooperation in both the LGBT community and internet content producers. In

this case, Joan Rivers is known for her comedy, fashion, and outrageous nature, but not necessarily for her internet presence. Hannah Hart, a young woman whose first video for her

web series “My Drunk Kitchen” received over 3.5 million views quickly became a savvy YouTuber and frequent collaborator in online spaces, negotiating a book deal, advertisement deals, a merchandise store, and has toured the country several times, including a drunk cooking tour where she met up with fans to cook and volunteer at local food banks and a traveling comedy show with her best friends and fellow YouTubers Grace Helbig, and Mamrie Hart, to whom she is not related. In this video Rivers may be attempting to link herself with someone who has much more of a web presence and is likely better known in younger age demographics. Hart is using Rivers, a longtime friend of the LGBTQ community, though some question Rivers’ devotion to the Trans and intersexed portion of the community, to add some legitimacy to her brand by linking it with someone who had great experience and advice for the YouTuber, and whom would embrace Hart’s identification as a lesbian.

In this video Hannah and Joan talk about Hannah’s life and career, from coming out and her first girlfriend, to the success of her comedy channel versus her personal channel. When Rivers asks Hart which channel gets more attention Hart answers that it is obviously the one with “the drinking and the jokes and the fuckery” and that her personal channel where she tackles issues in a more serious manner is for her, implying that any accolades she receives from her work there are secondary to the need for her to have a place to express her feelings. Many YouTuber tend to follow this multichannel format, with secondary or tertiary channels containing different types of videos or bonus content, but the additional channels generally have the same tone as the primary channel, just different content and are used to create a conglomerate and brand of entertainment.

Hart bucks this trend by admitting that her second channel is not for fans, though it does allow fans greater insight into her as a person and not just the character she plays in “My Drunk

Kitchen”, but rather a space for her to work through her own problems and issues and hopefully inspire viewers or at least spark a dialog about the things she is speaking about in her secondary vlogs. She is also a YouTube partner, meaning that google runs ads on her videos and she receives a cut of the profits from those ads. Hannah Hart’s multiple channels, shows, advertising deals, and other projects have allowed her a measure of independence that few YouTubers can find. As an out gay woman she has made several videos on the subject of homophobia and the coming out process on her secondary channel, and while her primary channel is also informed by her sexuality, sex, and gender, it is generally not serious in tone and as such Hart chooses a different format for the social issues she wishes to address, whereas other YouTubers that tackle social issues tend to do so in the same format as they usually work, like Franta’s close and personal vlogs where his head and upper body are framed and he is speaking directly to the camera, or Helbig who will not drop her comic persona when dealing with social issues.



Figure 20 YouTube Screen Grab 2/16/15

http://youtu.be/OZ_8O929WOA

This video is of Hannah Hart describing her coming out process. Unsurprisingly, Helbig and Franta’s videos, one couched in comedy and the other in vulnerability have received 15 million views between them, while Hart’s coming out video

on her secondary channel, YourHarto, has only 900,000 views. It is also important to note that Hart was already out at the time of her coming out video, which functions as a story of her coming out process and gives advice to people who are planning to come out. Her tone is more serious as she talks about the blatant homophobia she faced from members of her family, her emancipation from her family at 15 before she even began questioning her sexuality, her relationship with Christianity and the process of realizing that she was a lesbian but trying to reject lesbianism by acting straight. The reason for this difference in views, and thus social capital is important.

YouTube Conclusion

Of the three videos about coming out mentioned in this project, Hart's is the only to offer more than token advice and delve deeply into the thought process of denial and coming out. Helbig stays true to her comedy and refuses to break her character and deal with the issue seriously, but attempts to use humor to make the process of coming out less scary and normalize it by mitigating the fear associated with the coming out process via comedy. While it is funny, it is also somewhat problematic. It could be read as mocking the dangers associated with coming out and not recognizing that it can be a deeply personal and terrifying process for many. With that being said, most of the comments on her video reflect a general good humor about the video and plans from various commenters to use the video in some way to come out. Franta's video is his actual coming out process, to his fans, and is deeply emotional and discusses the negative effects of coming out but ends in a positive manner, with Franta seeming visibly relieved to have gone through the process and promising to continue to do videos just like he always has. Hannah Hart's video however, deals with homophobia, family, religion, and while she does mention her relationship with her family as problematic, also states in the video that she will not discuss her

family's reaction, nor the reason why she was emancipated. She also notes that her video is darker and more serious than her other videos, stating that she understands that her viewers generally come to her for drinks and puns, but that this channel and video are not like that, finishing with that she will put out more videos for "My Drunk Kitchen" to satisfy her fans, and inviting them to join her in watching a live streamed movie, maybe with a drink or two.

Hart's acknowledgment of the different space, tone, and content of her coming out video may account for some of the disparity between the views on her main channel videos and other videos about the same subject, but more likely it is the more negative approach to the coming out process, that while more realistic than the comedy of Helbig, or the happy ending of Franta, is less appealing because it does not end neatly for the audience. Hart admits that she still has deep rooted issues with her lesbianism and does not offer a suggestion on how to come out, how to deal with internalized homophobia, or how to reconcile faith with sexuality, though she does hint that she is no longer Christian. Because there is a distinct air that the video is not going to be funny, revelatory, or happy, it seems to have gotten fewer views. Of the three, it does provide a more realistic version of coming out. Franta survives the coming out process relatively unscathed, and many of his friends and family knew before he announced it to his fans via his video that he was gay, and while he may have lost some fans, it seems from his recounting that his process of coming out was relatively well received, whereas Hart presents her coming out as a process that may have ended some friendships and family relationships.

These three videos, however, all have their purposes. Helbig acts as an ally wishing to take the burden off of people struggling with the decision to come out and also brings needed levity to a situation that can be stressful at the best of times. Franta's video almost follows the "It Gets Better" video format of explaining the coming out process and how things have become

so much better for him since he did. Hannah Hart describes the very real consequences of coming out and how it can upset most or all facets of life. When looked at together the videos show the coming out process from a variety of angles that should be seen, both by members of the LGBT community and those wishing to understand the community a little more.

While the comments on YouTube videos range from incredibly supportive to offensive and sometimes criminal in nature it seems to be one of the largest social media platforms currently available, having over a billion active users a month as of 2013 (Reuters 2013). The amount of traffic generated by YouTube is probably in part due to its nature as a video hosting site. Because video seems to provoke a more emotional response for viewers more often than text or still image it is unsurprising that more users visit the site. Video also allows for longer and more complex creations to come to fruition, and allows the content creator to directly address the audience with their own voice and physical presence despite being separated by geography. It also allow for a longer period of interaction as while images are immediately consumed, though an image based blog may have hundreds of images to review, videos require the viewer to interact with them for longer periods, a phenomena inherent to the medium of videos rather than still images, as if the viewer wants to enjoy the video to their maximum ability they must view the video in its entirety in order to receive the pay off.

CONCLUSIONS

The internet has changed how people interact. It connects them to others across the world that they might never have the opportunity to communicate with otherwise. It allows people to chronicle their lives for fans, friends, and subscribers. It reconnects distant family members and friends who have lost touch. It allows users to represent themselves how they choose to. It creates communities of likeminded individuals in the gay community and it provides a safe space to express sexuality, desire, and gender. It allows members of the LGBTQ community to find one another, without discreet symbols and signals for fear of retribution in the real world. It provides a safe space for members of the LGBTQ community to develop and test out facets of their identity they do not feel comfortable expressing in the real world. The internet is not, however, without inherent pitfalls and dangers. While it can be a safe space that does not mean it is always so. The dating app Grindr and the website created from its profiles are an excellent example of this. While the app is designed to help gay men find one another for romance, dating, or sex, it censors many expressions of sex and sexuality. Further it illuminates one of the dangers of a web presence that includes images of the self. Once a picture is posted, it cannot be taken back. The creators and users of *douchebagsofgrindr* do not own the images in the blog, they are not the subjects of the photos, yet they have taken it upon themselves to judge, sometimes harshly, members of their community. Gay sex and desire is already seen as lesser and the contributors to this blog help maintain the lesser position of gay sex by reinforcing the negatives of expressing gay desires. They may be right unfortunately, not in their judgment and harsh words, but that the expression of desire that the gay men they ridicule on the blog is inappropriate. There is overt racism, self-loathing, rudeness, and just general bad manners on internet dating sites and Grindr is no exception. That does not mean that these users should be

demeaned and insulted, and further insulting their sexual preference serves no purpose and sets the community back in terms of acceptance and progression towards equality. If we wish not to be judged so harshly by outsiders then we must resist the temptation to do so ourselves. While this could be read as a form of self-policing in an effort to look respectable and present ourselves nicely to people outside the LGBTQ community it fails to be effective by being just as rude and demeaning as some of the judgments that come from outside the community.

Fortunately, not every space functions like Grindr or douchebagsofgrindr. Instagram, while again not without its faults, serves the community in a much more visible way. Members of the community are creating networks of like-minded and supportive individuals and using the selfie express what they feel are aspects of their true identity. They post images of themselves or things they find inspirational to share and spread to the far reaches of the internet. Celebrations of gay marriage laws being updated across the world, hashtags to show solidarity for the victims of terror attack, attempts to expose the world to non-binary sexualities and genders, fun frivolous pictures of the self or aspects of the self can all be found on Instagram being shared, passed, reposted, and liked. Instagram functions as a series of communities built into a larger one where you can find images or posts on any subject you desire, simply by checking hashtags. A person beginning their transition from one sex to another can find people who have gone through the process and see what it might be like for them on the other side. A young girl or boy questioning their sexual identity can find support and love from members of the community when they share their story. Gender fluid individuals can show their masculine and feminine sides through clothing, hair, and makeup and share their experiences, stories, and knowledge with one another. It is easy to look at the selfie and Instagram and see only people struggling to get likes and feeding into their own narcissism, but it would be a disservice to ignore the sense of validation

they can receive from other people telling them that they are okay. They are normal. Other people are like them, and they may not be quite as alone as they thought. Self-esteem may be a mostly internal process of developing one's own identity and being comfortable with it, but outside validation can help the process by letting someone know that their identity is real and recognized by others, and it is through selfies and the visual that this process is completed on Instagram.

YouTube functions in much the same way Instagram, except in longer format video. The largest difference is that YouTube seems to be a larger and more legitimate platform from which to make a living. YouTube is couched in commercialism, with ads playing before or during videos, and YouTube celebrities pitching products and subscription services, both their own and outside merchants. YouTubers ask fans who are going to use sites like Audible.com to sign up through their microsites or using their special promo code to get a cut of the profits. It is commercialism and capitalism as Adorno and Horkheimer described it, covered in a thin veneer of entertainment. That does not mean that it offers the viewer nothing. Videos like the coming out videos of Hannah Hart and Connor Franta have multitudes of comments both validating Hart and Franta and expressing pride, joy, empathy and other numerous positive emotions, but also comments that mention how the person commenting has been inspired to come out to their loved ones after seeing their favorite YouTubers go through the process.

There are of course negative comments, but they are largely outweighed by the flood of positivity. Further, the agency and political power of celebrity YouTubers are gaining wider recognition as the influence they have over young fans is recognized by organizations like the White House and the president of the United States of America, who has not only met with YouTubers to discuss various political agendas, but also done several one on one interviews with

YouTubers, that can be seen online and were livestreamed at the time of their occurrence. YouTubers can partner with YouTube and Google, broker their own advertising deals, create their own merchandise, and sell themselves as the brand, and while the viewer might be, on occasion, fooled into thinking that all those book recommendations are just book recommendations, a savvy viewer will recognize the advertisement for what it is, and then decide to sign up for the service or not. Meanwhile the YouTuber is able to make a living, and a quite successful one at that, while still maintaining control over their content and projects in a way that many performers, writers, directors, producers, and actors cannot. YouTube also affords the oft marginalized voice a space to express itself as any person can become a YouTuber by participating in the community, which does not limit membership. This leads to a sense of personal empowerment and community where success is built upon how many people will click, watch, listen, and share.

The internet affords users the opportunity to be who they want to be, to share themselves with others who would never normally connect with them. It allows them to explore themselves and others, solidify their identities, interests, and world views. It allows for instantaneous feedback, not without its dangers of becoming a constant loop of feedback and reassessment, but that feedback may offer validation for someone struggling with their identity and how they fit into the world at large. It can show them that there are other people who think like them, act like them, or live like them. It can be a great force for normalizing alternative expressions of the self, the body, and sexual orientation. It can be a place where difference and diversity are celebrated instead of judged or merely tolerated. Used responsibly it allows users to feel free to be themselves, and sometimes, just sometimes, it reminds us, the users, YouTubers, Instagrammers, and Facebookers, that we are fabulous.

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