Chapter 9

How Queerness Goes Online:
Intersectional Perspectives on Digital Sociality

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author challenges the commonsense claim that the internet provides equally accessible resources that are free from stigma, prejudice, or discrimination. Through the stories of university students in their own words, this intersectional analysis explores how the internet certainly offers substantial benefits to queer and nonconforming youth; however, interpersonal bias and systems of oppression pervade online forms of communication and social media applications. Additionally, the author troubles the notion that the internet is experienced as a 'safe space' for anonymous or uninhibited explorations of queer identity. In fact, despite the internet's practical affordances of identity work, there are severe limits to tolerance and inclusion in online sociality, and because of this, doing queer identity work online has the potential to exacerbate the isolating effects of homophobia and discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

There has been much less attention to the body which is not screened, the one which is 'left' when the computer is turned off, or even what happens to the 'real' body when the computer is on. – Wakeford et al. (1997, p. 35)

Since the advent of the digital age, the internet has largely been championed as a revolutionary (Haber, 2017) and innovative space for queer people. Indeed, the internet's capacity to be liberating and expansive, inclusive and informative, as well as anonymous and discreet has had a profoundly positive impact on identity work across generations of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Baams et al., 2011; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013). From the more recent development of social media applications to earlier means of interaction (e.g., chat rooms, forums, and other SNSs [social-networking sites]), research has identified the benefits

of accessing online resources and communities (Herrera, 2017; Miller, 2016; Thomas, Ross & Harris, 2007), experiencing digital representation (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Gray, 2009), and participating in ever-changing forms of digital sociality (Cavalcante 2018; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Duguay, 2016; Haber, 2017; Henrickson, 2007) for queer individuals who are stigmatized in heteronormative society.

Of course, the assumption that the internet is an equally liberating, emancipatory space for all queer people is erroneous; in fact, this critique has been well-established in recent works (see Haber, 2017; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013). But despite this mounting analysis, related literature still lacks a nuanced understanding of how queer people *perceive* digital life[1], especially *in terms of* their social location. There is a need for more meaning-centered explanations of how and why queer people go online in the first place (or why they don't) and, more importantly, how individuals link online activity to an assortment of lived experiences. Existing work also tends to prioritize a "single-axis" (Crenshaw, 1989) inquiry of LGBTQIA+ identity first and foremost—and more specifically, the L, G, and B. Because of this, the experiences of more marginalized queer[2] identities (namely, those who fall on the TQIA+ end of the spectrum) are either interpreted as synonymous to more widely recognized identity categories, or worse, they are rendered invisible. However, beyond that, a larger blind spot remains unaddressed: i.e., how larger systems of oppression—including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism—impact queer identity work online.

To address some of these conceptual gaps in Western scholarship on digital sociality, I draw on qualitative interview data that captures students' perceptions of queer identity work on the internet and social media platforms specifically. Using a critical intersectional stance on whiteness and privilege, I demonstrate how the perceived value of the internet can be better understood by taking positionality—i.e. an analytical understanding of social location—into account. Overall, findings suggest that having social capital and robust social networks may partially explain why someone may not invest in online queer resources or digital LGBTQIA+ communities. In other words, for queer individuals who lack interpersonal social supports, the internet may be explored and sought out for its perceived promise of accessible information and seemingly inclusive social networking platforms.

OVERVIEW AND METHODS

The data that informs this chapter's thematic analysis comes from my larger thesis project that broadly compared interpersonal and online coming out narratives. The study's sample was composed of 17 university students in the northeast United States who responded to an on-campus advertisement for an interview study about coming out. In order to assure that I maintained participant anonymity, I refrained from including any identifying information in transcripts and memos that could be traced back to the individuals themselves, and as I conducted open coding and thematic analyses, I employed abbreviated pseudonyms[3], such as H. or S. With a median age of 22, interviewees included one freshman, three sophomores, four juniors, three seniors, five graduate students, and one transfer student. Across participants, there was a diversity of gender and sexual identities, and while many students identified with more recognizable categorical terms such as female, gay, or white, others employed their own interpretation of identity, including phrases like "gay as hell" or "not straight", as well as "woman-ish" or "empowered female." Although the study's racial diversity was not representative of institutional demographics[4] (i.e. the sample favored white U.S. students compared to others), all interviews probed participants on their understanding of intersecting identities and racial difference. The interview schedule was formatted as

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