


Chapter 10

The Indexical Field of “Queer”: Reappropriation and Social Meaning on Twitter During the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies the indexicalities of the word “queer” during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, it provides insight into whether the rising homophobia during this crisis affected the indexical field of “queer,” revealing the effectiveness of reappropriation. The study followed a qualitative and descriptive approach, utilizing corpus-based data to examine the usage of “queer” on Twitter (now known as X). Data were analyzed using the indexical field framework with multimodal discourse analysis to examine data including images. Indexicalities were identified by coding the meanings behind “queer” in the tweets and grouping them into one of two indexical orders: stances and permanent qualities. Social types emerged from the identification of the other indexical orders. The results reveal that “queer” primarily indexes confidence through self-labels, a referential word for queer individuals, solidarity, a slur, and absurdity. These stances and permanent qualities also reveal the following social types: pro-queers, queer-coders, and anti-queers.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-7194-8.ch010

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INTRODUCTION

Hate crimes against queer individuals have been on the rise in the United States. Survey data indicate an increase in support for banning education related to gender identity in elementary education, with a 4–6% increase between 2022 and 2025 (Americans have grown, 2025). Criminology lecturer Justin Ellis argues that growing negative sentiments towards the queer community are a result of longstanding religious bigotry from America, multiplied by digital media’s power to amplify hate (Bell, 2024).

Callahan and Loscocco (2021) support Ellis’ statement, noting the same influence of religion in promoting homophobia, especially in Italy. They reveal that researchers have marked the Roman Catholic Church as one of the primary obstacles that have led queer Italians to resort to invisibility to survive in their communities. Bell (2024), Callahan and Loscocco (2021), and their sources, unanimously agree that religion plays a major role in this trend. In parallel, support for protecting transgender individuals from discrimination has declined noticeably, leading to a rise in denial of their gender-affirming care (Human Rights Watch, 2023). International scholars thus provide consistent evidence that discrimination against queer individuals has been rising rather than declining in recent years.

This surge of queer discrimination is believed to have begun around the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on World Health Organization reports, Northwestern Medicine (2025) places the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 and its official end as a global health crisis in May 2023. Understanding whether reappropriated queer terms have been used by these homophobes and transphobes is urgent as it can lead to pejorative meanings overshadowing reclaimed definitions of the terms. Such use may lead to the words being recognized as slurs more often in the near future.

It is vital to understand and recognize whether currently reappropriation tactics constitute self-imposed sabotage or remain an effective linguistic strategy for empowering minorities because the former would reinforce homophobic discourse. These reappropriation tactics refer to how minority groups recontextualize common insults against their community by using these words to label and describe themselves (Koponen, 2021, as cited in Galinsky, 2003). The tactic is evident in the reappropriation of the word “bitch” in communities of women, where the word carries a positive meaning (Schavikin, 2024; Koponen, 2021).

This trend is also becoming more visible in the Philippines. The Trevor Project (2024) reported that over 70% of Filipinos have been discriminated against because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Although some believe that the country is welcoming to queer individuals, over 30% of the participants in the Trevor Project believed that their communities did not truly accept them, but only tolerated their

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