

5-2020

#LGBT: Regulation and Categorization of LGBT+ Discourse on Tumblr

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Recommended Citation

Schmieder, Sara, "#LGBT: Regulation and Categorization of LGBT+ Discourse on Tumblr" (2020). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 1556.
<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorsthesis/1556>

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Introduction

The thing I'll never understand about exclusionists is the energy. Why would you put so much time and energy into gatekeeping, into making rules over who can be here and who can't, when you could just... not do that?

Summary

During my adolescence, I spent a lot of time online. Specifically, I spent most of my time on Tumblr, a blogging platform that had a variety of interest-specific spaces organized through tags. One of the most prominent of these spaces was that of the LGBT+ community. As a teenager working through my own struggles with sexuality, I initially saw Tumblr as a "safe space" for me to connect with other people and learn more about LGBT+ people. I expected that with the various experiences and identities that the LGBT+ umbrella encompassed I would be able to experience a diverse array of opinions in a tolerant and welcoming online environment.

While this was initially the case, I soon noticed that some other users were not discussing their experiences of being LGBT+ but were instead using hostile language to police other users. Instead of being accepting and trying to build relationships based on commonalities, there was a push to exclude people whose views were different. The guise of a "safe space" began to slip, revealing a reality where saying the wrong thing would spark a swarm of hate messages taking someone to task for not being an "exemplary" LGBT+ person in the eyes of someone else and asserting criteria for determining who and what qualifies as LGBT+. I soon realized what was contested was not what qualifies someone as LGBT+ but the categorization and conceptualization of categories that fell under the LGBT+ umbrella. Frequently discussions focused on the question of whether asexuality fell under the LGBT+ umbrella and the possibility

or impossibility of making LGBT+ categories more fluid. There are two sides to the argument. One posits that asexuality is not inherently LGBT+ and that labels have a specific definition for a reason, so they are not fluid. The other side believes that anyone who is not strictly cisgender and heterosexual is inherently LGBT+ and should be welcomed without any questions.

These observations, combined with a desire to apply theories and perspectives from sociocultural and linguistic anthropology to the internet, led me to the premise of this thesis. I argue that on Tumblr LGBT+ online communication processes focus on categorization through labeling and hostile interactions employed to reinforce both labels and ideology. These digital speech acts affirm or deny another person's legitimacy of self through category negation or the denial of the legitimacy of classification. Employing a system of classification that organizes people in terms of models of sexuality is a way to express one's selfhood and police the selfhood of others. Questions regarding classification systems fuel arguments over so-called gatekeeping and how the expression of particular views or utilization of specific labels create an internal cultural conflict that divides Tumblr users based on ideology. Some users promote particular perspectives as the "correct" perspective and encourage others to accept their thinking and reject all others. Calling-out and gatekeeping through posts and replies is the primary way of asserting "authority" on the functions and boundaries of LGBT+ categories. Ritual actions of belittlement further allow a poster to assert authority, but this also drives away people who do not want confrontation. I hope this research will shed light on the function of categorization within LGBT+ conversations on Tumblr and how the negative discourse surrounding particular identities is less about gatekeeping than about the negotiation of categories and the use made of categories by people in their attempts to express themselves.

The Function of Categories

D'Andrade defines culture as "an information-holding system" equipped with "instructions needed for coping with the environment and performing specialized roles" (D'Andrade 1984: 198) where people have ways to function within their place in society. Cultural knowledge of what "one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to [society's] members" (Goodenough 1957: 167). The knowledge then acts somewhat like a program in a computer "consisting of a set of rules that prescribe what actions are to be taken under various conditions" (ibid.: 199). For LGBT+ people, there is a cultural knowledge of what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, etc. but the concept of LGBT+ culture emerged because many people agree that LGBT+ people have different beliefs and practices than non-LGBT+ people. To see them as a culturally distinct group is to acknowledge a difference between them and non-LGBT+ people with distinct practices that can be categorized as "LGBT+". The creation of that category is only possible through an agreement that something counts as something else involving the adherence of a group of people to a constitutive rule and the entailments incurred by the application of the rule (D'Andrade 1984: 201).

While the creation of a category comes from constitutive rules, the category is solidified through physical objects and symbols (ibid.: 202). For LGBT+ umbrella categories, the physical objects and symbols that solidify the categories come in forms that include pride flags, equality laws, and ways of presenting the self as a member. With constative rules creating the category itself, regulatory rules are what maintains the category. For Searle (1969), "regulative rules regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of behavior" (33), so the rules of the category are different than the ones in its creation. The regulative rules create the norms within

the category, thus helping to define expectations within the category and give members a set of actions and ideas that are acceptable.

These regulative rules create the two main conflicts within Tumblr's LGBT+ spaces: issues of what makes a person fit into a category and whether there is even a need for that category. Their debate is not over whether LGBT+ categories exist, but on what subcategories are LGBT+ and how those categories function with members. Denial of a person's self-classification is important because it brings into question whether the constative rules that created the categories in the first place are legitimate.

Categorization and Classification

The difference between categorization and classification is essential for understanding why categorization is a contested issue. Categorization turns experiences into learned, meaningful categories that humans respond to (Varela et al. 1991: 176) and, I would add, the rules about what qualifies an individual to be considered a member of each category. Classification can be "understood as the way in which categories are related to each other and the means by which particular cultural patterns are produced" (Ellen 2008: 1). Therefore, two categories can have similarities that would require a similar classification, but they still comprise two distinct groups with different restrictive rules. For example, a bisexual woman and a lesbian could use the same classification of being attracted to women. Yet, they are in different categories due to the restrictive rules of bisexuality and lesbianism. Classification can describe a type of category such as the broader classes "gender" or "sexuality" or LGBT+ but the categories within these broader classes are more stringent.

Conflict occurs when the attempts to classify a person and potentially place them in a category backfire. The various ways a person experiences the world cannot always be in a specific category. Sometimes confusion also results when categories within a broader classification overlap. The LGBT+ acronym is a broad classification that lays a foundation for categories that potentially include people whose self-described attributes fall outside the discrete categories that currently comprise the classification. This leaves two options: revise boundaries of existing categories, create more, or eradicate those whose definitions are challenged.

LGBT+ Categorization

This study functions on the premise that classifications and categories are a part of and emerge through social relations, which endure as historical precedents. These precedents constrain the definitions available to people who must continually engage in classifying processes to situate themselves and everything around them rationally. The same is true in the case of LGBT+ categories. The acronym LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender and came into widespread use in the United States in the 1990s (Marzullo 2015: 1). While there are many variations of this acronym, the base of "LGBT" has not changed since the 1990s. Some variations include a "Q" for queer, an "A" for asexual or ally, an "I" for intersex, and a plus sign to cover any other identities. Yet these additions are "often criticized as unable to capture the variation that occurs within human sexuality and gender experience/identity between places and over time" (ibid.) with the critique that they do not cover every possible LGBT+ category.

To understand how these categories were created and adopted to the base acronym, it is essential to see where this acronym began, with the term "gay." In the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, the Homophile Movement "was formed as a political and social response to the

persecution of gender nonconforming and/or homosexual people" (ibid.: 2). This movement advocated for the assimilation of such individuals into society with the expectation of keeping their sexuality and gender identities private. At this time, "gay" was the only category available to place oneself in if one experienced same-sex attraction, and even though the word lesbian existed, its lower visibility and underutilization made its use as a category less ideal. In the 1980s, the "L" and "B," standing for lesbian and bisexual, were added because "criticism of the non-inclusive term "gay," which presents sexual orientation as generically masculine, white, and excludes gender nonconformity" (ibid.). Thus, expanding the categorical possibilities of gender nonconformity and same-sex attraction to include "lesbian" and "bisexual" in addition to "gay" led to the creation of the acronym, now "LGB" or "GLB." During the HIV/AIDS pandemic, many lesbian and bisexual women took care of sick and dying gay men, building an alliance which solidified the acronym to "LGB," still comprising only three categories, but placing "lesbian" at the front (ibid: 2). During the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the word "queer" came into circulation, reclaimed by activists in part to highlight the ambiguity of sexuality – but, because many people still saw queer as a slur, it was not added to the acronym. By the 1990s, "T" was added to "LGB" once the category of "transgender" identity was created, thus forming an acronym, "LGBT," that encompassed gender identity as well as sexuality (Marzullo 2015: 3). "Transgender" was understood at the time to be an umbrella term for many gender identities, and still covers many kinds of non-cisgender identities. It was also in the 1990s when the term "LGBT community" came into use to describe a singular group. It was also during this time that the constraints of a four-category system became more apparent. Some see the term "LGBT community" "as ahistorical, cohesive, and authentic, while other attempts at articulating sexualities or genders outside this initialism are seen as inauthentic, temporary, and even

suspicious"(ibid: 3). The conflicting perceptions of the term led to debates over which letters should be added and concerns that the acronym would become "alphabet soup" with too many letters (ibid.: 3). In the early 2000s, "Q" came into common usage as a part of the LGBT acronym to stand for "queer" or "questioning." The addition was an effort to incorporate identities not encompassed by "LGBT" and break away from racialized and nationalized Euro-American sexuality and gender norms (Marzullo 2015: 4).

Confusion around the LGBT+ acronym centers around categorical ambiguity. Some people want to be as inclusive as possible and give equal representation to all categories, no matter how hyper-specific; these people are referred to as "inclusionists." Conversely, others want to narrow the categorical options in the interest of removing confusion, as having too many letters with overlapping meanings can be difficult to comprehend and articulate. These people are referred to as "exclusionists." To address both sides of this divide, the term "MOGAI" was coined in the 2010s, standing for Marginalized Orientations, Gender identity, And Intersex and originally intended to be more inclusive than the standard LGBT+ acronym. Some people saw this term as an improvement, but others saw it as an erasure of LGBT+ history and activism. Eventually, MOGAI became the category for particular identities that do not easily fall under the LGBT+ umbrella, or that are made up by a single individual to define their specific identity. These smaller, more nuanced labels are frequently called - often derisively - "micro-identities." For example, while someone could identify as a lesbian, the micro-identity of "gynesexual" is used to specify an attraction exclusively to cisgender women, since the term "lesbian" includes both trans women and nonbinary individuals who are woman-aligned. Such "Micro-identities" developed to add nuance and diversity to existing categories. Instead, they created a series of labels that some see as less legitimate due to their hyper-specificity.

A significant aspect of so-called MOGAI micro-identities is the split attraction model, whereby an individual can place themselves in different categories for their sexuality, romantic attraction, and even aesthetic attraction. Initially, the split attraction model was developed by and used among asexual people to dispel the equation of asexual and aromantic identities and to differentiate generally between sexual attraction and romantic attraction. However, the concept has found traction among people outside of the asexual spectrum as well. The split attraction model allows people to place themselves in multiple, sometimes contradictory categories which not only disrupts the original categorization system of LGBT+ but creates an issue where many people are confused about the categorical possibilities. For example, identifying as "heteroromantic homosexual" seems contradictory, as it describes a person who is romantically attracted only to the opposite gender but sexually attracted only to the same gender.

Overall, LGBT+ is an umbrella term for a cluster of categories contingent on not identifying as both cisgender and heterosexual. Conflict arises when confusion over this categorical system emerges. One issue is that some people believe that this system does not legitimate their positionality in the world. For example, they cannot succinctly communicate varying types of attraction, such as platonic, romantic, aesthetic, and sexual. Another problem occurs when people place themselves in categories using disparate understandings of the identity they are claiming, which has the potential to create conflict and potentially threaten the solidity of the category. Sometimes a person realizes they miscategorized themselves and change their categorical affiliation—for example, a person coming out as asexual as a teenager but realizing they are bisexual as an adult. Confusion around categorical domains is at the root of this discussion, along with a debate over what subcategories exist. These issues with categories are seen in specific messages discussing the use of categories which highlight confusion, thus

leading to conflict. Negotiating both the existence and legitimacy of categories, along with how the categories fit together, is the central conflict within Tumblr's "gatekeeping" debate.

LGBT+ Categories

As previously mentioned, "LGBT+" is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, but those are not the only categories that are a part of the acronym. For example, transgender is an umbrella term for multiple gender identities that are not cisgender, and there is a wide array of categories that fall under the B and the +.

Bisexuality is an attraction to two or more genders, or an attraction to one's same and opposite gender(s). Under the bisexual umbrella, there is the category of pansexuality, which generally refers to an attraction regardless of gender. "Pansexual" was first coined to break the binary view of bisexuality as an attraction to males and females. The addition of a category that recognizes attraction to nonbinary and genderless people seemed initially to make sense. Still, the definitional differences appeared to draw the need for two categories into question and, eventually, conflict.

While the bisexual umbrella only covers pansexuality, the asexual spectrum is much more extensive. Asexuality is "a sexual orientation describing people who do not experience sexual attraction." (Milks & Cerankowski 2014: 1). While asexual individuals have been around for a long time, the asexual movement "emerged in the early 2000s with the political goal of establishing asexuality as a legitimate sexual identity." (ibid) Within the asexual spectrum, experiencing some sexual attraction but only infrequently or only a few times is the definition of "greysexuality." Similarly, the term "demisexuality" is experiencing infrequent sexual attraction. Still, it is predicated on the individual development of sexual attraction only after a deep

emotional bond emerges. All these identities exist on the asexual spectrum to define the varying ways a person experiences sexuality or the lack thereof.

Identity (and Categorical) Essentialism

A wide variety of categories is significant because it allows more opportunities for people to place themselves in a specific category and have others understand the nuances of said category. One issue with this is that it does not provide a lot of flexibility for a person trying to find what category, if any, they fit. Often paired with the need to find a category to describe oneself accurately is the underlying belief of cultural essentialism. Cultural essentialism is "a system of belief grounded in a conception of human beings as 'cultural' (and under certain conditions territorial and national) subjects, i.e., bearers of culture, located within a bounded world, which defines them and differentiates them from others" (Grillo 2003:158). This assumption means each category carries something inherent to that category, and that leaving that category can make someone "fake" or raise the accusation that they were "pretending" to be a member of that category. Each category is supposed to be inherently different from the others, with the distinctions between them very apparent. It is not always the case and results in situations where "the emphasis is on multiple identities or identifications whose form and content are continuously being negotiated" (ibid.:160) is being brought to the surface, thus undermining the categorical system.

Defining the Field Site: The Internet

The internet: a global computer network providing a variety of information and communication facilities, consisting of interconnected networks using standardized communication protocols.
(<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/internet>)

Hosting categorical discussions online not only allows for a wider variety of opinions to be heard; it also allows people to be free to say anything to anyone due to the perceived lack of in-person social repercussions. There is an "assumption that it [the internet] is opposed to and disembedded from the real " (Miller and Slater 2003: 4), but the internet directly connects to people's real lives. The discussions taking place on these forums are not separate from the "real" world and, therefore, can have a tangible impact on face to face relations by creating concern over who supports what categorical system. The internet acts as "a space of mutual possession" (Boellstorff 2016: 395) where everyone can have an opportunity to name and define themselves and others, and to converse with like-minded individuals. While it is possible to make space for each identity, there is still a possibility of criticism of those affirming a given identity or even the existence of that space. This means that "it is not that virtual worlds are potentially real, but that they are additional realities" (ibid.) where communication occurs across time and space—creating unique forms of conversation that do not require the same linearity as a face-to-face conversation. As more people begin to use the internet, there has been a "widespread adoption of a variety of new communication channels: email, which for many years constituted the main driver for users to go online; instant messaging in various formats; user net groups; online forums; mobile voice calls; texting; voice-over-Internet protocol (VoIP); and an array of social networking sites" (Broadbent 2012: 127).

What makes the internet unique compared to the physical world is that it allows users to communicate and form alliances or make enemies despite the distance. In the absence of in-person connection much of the strife online can be attributed to miscommunication through online text. Because users cannot read tone or physical presence, there is a higher likelihood of miscommunication (Dickey, Wasko, Chudoba & Thatcher 2006). This is not to say that in-

person interactions would prevent the escalation of debates. Still it is much easier to not see the other person as an actual person when one only encounters a username and an icon. The nature of digital spaces also allows people to form alliances, dogpile onto those who do not agree with them, and effectively cause a person so much strife that they concede to the other side or leave the space altogether. Unlike physical spaces that can hold many categories of people within close physical proximity, digital spaces allow for various groups to distance themselves from each other to the point where they end up in an ideological bubble, hearing the same ideas over and over. This promotes intense responses towards anyone who disagrees and protectiveness over one's ideology. Emotional reactions that question categories or aim at questioning categories are what fuels accusations of "gatekeeping."

Social media's primary purpose is communication. LGBT+ people in a cis-dominated world are often thwarted from communicating about their social position. This "results in a foreclosure of the privilege of disembodiment, an imprisonment within unrecognizable bodies (e.g., nonhuman, monstrous, or queer) and a denial of the security and pleasure of political representation, cultural diversity, or simply, becoming understandable" (Axel 2008: 356). Within online spaces, "communication is not merely the means by which individuals gain access to each other; it is also an instrument by which individuals control each other and all social forms in the struggle against a natural tendency toward disorganization (entropy)" (ibid.: 358). Within online LGBT+ spaces, arguments over boundary-definition are used to create an organized system and result in the imposition of ideological binaries. In the face of ongoing conflictual exchanges about who legitimately belongs, a desire to end the constant disharmony produces a desire for order on the part of users. In having users discuss issues of belonging and subsequently creating

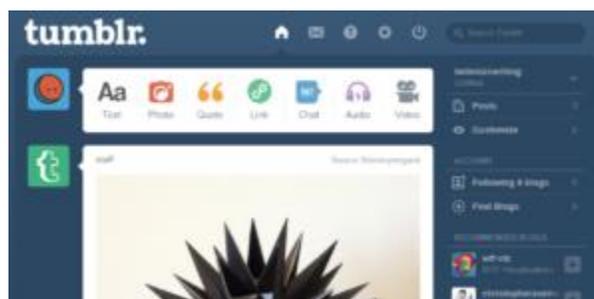
the practice of gatekeeping, there is rooted a desire to create an order which would end the conflict.

An integral aspect of the internet is what Coleman (2010: 488) calls "cultural politics of media" where "cultural identities, representations, and imaginaries, such as those hinged to youth, diaspora, nation, and indigeneity, are remade, subverted, communicated, and circulated through individual and collective engagement with digital technologies." Cultural politics of media includes defining a person's relation to broader social issues throughout their profile, stating one's age, race, sexuality, and other information the person considers necessary for others to know. These practices are not unique to digital spaces, but digital spaces build in infrastructures and expectations that individuals define themselves by a series of labels that hold meaning to the individual and the larger world. With respect to the cultural politics of media, features of identity legitimate the expression of viewpoints. It is also true that without these labels and the functions of tagging posts and searching through tags, it would be harder for people to find each other and form groups that make social media social. "Cultural politics of media" implicitly link identities to "modes of behavior which are usual, and which characterize that particular community" (Radcliffe-Brown 1956: 205). Thus, an imagined community materializes in the minds of users that carries the assumption that behaviors vary from community to community and includes the shift in labels that users would display to position themselves. Individual instances of behavior described for people labeled a certain way is projected outwards in an implied description of a group. For example, if a blog centers around an idealized gay relationship, then it could influence the way people perceive gay relationships that constitute a gay community. In the same light, creating content that depicts specific actions as undesirable can also affect how a notion of community might exclude certain identities. For

example, a post that criticizes the practice of calling oneself queer despite being cisgender and heterosexual can set a precedent for the exclusion of those exhibiting this behavior from the LGBT+ "community." While there is less of a mediator of opinion on social media than in face-to-face groups since each user acts as a personal content creator, the depictions of LGBT+ life still work in tandem with the current understanding of categories of LGBT+ identity. The layout of social media sites influences the way an individual presents themselves online.

Tumblr: A Crash Course

Tumblr is a social media blogging platform created in 2007 by David Karp and Marco Arment (Shedden 2015). Each Tumblr user has a blog with a tumblr.com URL and only needs an email and a username to create an account. The username can be changed at any time and is the user's "main blog" with the capacity for "side blogs" under different usernames but still attached to the same email. The options for posting include text, photo, quote, link, chat, audio, and video, all of which are at the top of the user's webpage known as the "dashboard." By making posts in any of those formats, a user can gain followers, people who actively see the content they post. The only blog that can follow others is the main blog; side blogs can have followers but cannot follow other blogs independently. The content of every blog that a user follows is shown in chronological order on the dashboard.



<https://www.swinburneonline.edu.au/how-guides/how-use-tumblr/your-tumblr-dashboard>

Within the posting system there are various ways to interact. The first is to "reblog" a post, which means that the post and its contents will show up on the user's blog with credit given to the original poster (often known as OP). Within a reblog, a user can add their comments to the end of a post, thus engaging with the original content and enabling people who reblog it from them also see their commentary. There is also the option to add "tags" to a post. Tags can either help a user organize their posts by subject on their blog or give content warnings that other users can block. They also work to put posts into searchable categories that other users can find. For example, if a post is tagged with #LGBT and another user searched #LGBT on Tumblr they could see that post. Some people prefer to leave their commentary in the tags of a post so only their followers can see it, and it will not be attached to any future reblogs. Another way of interacting with a post is to "reply" to it. Replying, unlike reblogging, does not put the post on the user's blog. The comment is sent to the original poster but is still visible to anyone who goes through the "notes" on a post. Notes function as an indicator of the amount of interaction—in the form of replies, reblogs, and likes—that a post received. A post with fewer notes generally has less interaction. Finally, the last way to interact with a post is to "like" it. Liking a post is not a public act, as people who are not the original poster are not notified of other people liking a post. Still, likes are counted and are visible (along with the users doing the liking) in the notes of a post. Generally, liking a post is seen as support without making said support public. But some users also like posts to access them later.

Apart from posts, interacting with other users on Tumblr can occur through the "ask box." Users can open their ask box to receive questions, comments, and concerns from other users. The ask box also has two settings: anonymous and not anonymous. Asks are rebloggable and likable but also come with the option of replying privately if the user receives a non-

anonymous ask. Those who send anonymous asks are called "anons." When an anon leaves mean or disparaging messages, these messages are referred to as "anon hate," and are a form of Tumblr harassment. Sometimes said anon hate could occur when a user with a large following urges their followers to send anon hate to another user.

Unlike on other social media platforms, where users with large followings can monetize their accounts and become so-called "influencers," having a large audience on Tumblr does not offer many tangible or real-world benefits. Having a large following can cause a user to gain more hate than if they had a smaller following. Other users can make "call-out posts" towards users with the intent to "expose" them so they will lose their following, thus weaponizing their follower count and heightened visibility against them. With the lack of opportunity for monetization, real-world influence, or even the to amass a kind of internet-based fame, the motivation to gain a large following on Tumblr is relatively low compared to other forms of social media.

These various functions of Tumblr are essential to understanding the different ways these discussions on categories and their function work. The action of making an original post is different than the act of receiving an ask, but they both contribute to continuous strands of discourse. Pictures and other media—videos, audio clips, etc.—also garner the same type of responses as text-based posts and the like. As a platform, Tumblr structures discussions through reblogged threads and other comments in the replies. The tagging system can keep the conversation contained to specific parts of the website, so a person who is not already involved in that part is less likely ever to encounter that content.

What is at Stake

I argue that the exchange of opinions and posts can have real consequences for LGBT+ users. I am primarily concerned with users who send and receive messages about their understandings of the world that are experienced as messages about self. Even when posts are not responding to another user or an original post, the exchanges are not experienced as abstractions. Still, they may be interpreted as judgmental or somehow challenging of ideas that anchor their own identity. On the other hand, there is always the possibility that exchanges can be experienced as supportive towards one's identity. Currently, social media users are vulnerable to some extent with their online presence. But there are some different risks involved that I explore in the remainder of this thesis because the ever-shifting use of LGBT+ categories has change during my lifetime and presumably will continue to evolve. Discussion of labels are not just about which categories best describe "what exists in the world": they also challenge the existential frames of those not grounded in a cisgender heterosexual self.

The digital discourse on Tumblr over LGBT+ categorization leaves the LGBT+ classification structure and its accessibility at stake. Historically, "LGBT+" is an umbrella category filled with subcategories, each distinguishing itself, so questioning a subcategory's legitimacy or self-definition disrupts the more extensive categorical system. This disruption causes conflict and confusion and has the potential to create a rift between users with ideological differences. Conflict and confusion can make people avoid trying to understand the classification system altogether because each side sends out harsh messages about the other. These messages attempt to explain each categorical system, which intensifies the confusion over which system is the "correct" (or supposedly least harmful) one to use, and how the system works more broadly.

Methodology

I gathered my data by using the following tags on Tumblr: "ace discourse," "exclusionists," "inclusionist," "pan discourse," "LGBT discourse," "queer discourse," "biphobia," and "aphobia," along with any other relevant tags gathered from my initial search. For my analysis I picked posts with the most discussion, which I determined based on their number of replies and reblogs. I then copied the posts and responses onto a Microsoft Word document and renamed each user to create anonymity despite the Tumblr blog being a public entity.

For the posts and messages I gathered, I analyzed what they explicitly say instead of any intentions the OP or respondents might have had. I sort messages into two types based on their function and relation to the classification system. In one group I included messages that relate to group affiliation and self-generated identity. These messages can affirm group affiliation or self-generated identity by claiming membership and then following the rules of the category. For example, claiming asexuality membership and never posting about experiencing sexual attraction because that is not something the person experiences. The messages can also actively contest group affiliation or self-generated identity. For example, a person claiming asexuality membership but posting about their sexual relationship which could prompt response that the individual is not "really asexual." Affirmation means that someone is claiming a category, like that of asexual identity, and then meets the expectations of belonging to that category, such as not experiencing sexual attraction and, therefore, not wanting to have sex.

Conversely, if the group affiliation or self-generated identity gets contested, then there is an issue with either the formation or the use of categories. For example, the category of "bisexual lesbian" is often challenged because the bisexual category includes attraction to men. In contrast,

the lesbian category specifically excludes attraction to men, so the category of "bisexual lesbian" is contradictory.

The second group of posts selected those that challenged the inclusion of categories within the LGBT+ superordinate. In this second group of posts the most common disagreements centered around the definitions of pansexuality and bisexuality and whether the asexual subcategory should be included in the LGBT+ category. Concerns over the possibility of cisgender heterosexual (cishet) people co-opting vaguely defined LGBT+ categories for their personal gain, like appearing cooler or claiming a type of oppression they do not have. Many messages, for example, focus on cisgender asexual people in relationships that appear to be heterosexual to opine that the category of LGBT+ does not include them because being cisgender and heterosexual disqualifies a person from being in any LGBT+ categories. Contesting the logical inclusion of a category or the category's formation is often present when discussing subcategories that do not fall under the classes comprised of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. There can be an acceptance of labels within the LGBT superordinate category, especially when a category has historical precedence for belonging there. For example, replacing the "B" for bisexuals in LGBT+ with a "P" for pansexuals is controversial since *bisexual* has an extended history as part of the acronym.

Both the messages regarding group affiliation and self-generated identity, along with the messages regarding categorical formation come in positive and negative forms. The distinction lies in reading a message as reaffirming and inclusive, thus positive, or as invalidating and exclusionary, therefore negative. The intent behind sending a message is not knowable, but beyond the intent of its senders, messages can still get read as positive or negative based on the discourse used. Thus messages can either reinforce the current categorical system or question its

legitimacy and advocate for change. The coding of messages and their placement in either category is the first step in the analysis of messages concerning category formation and affiliation.

Group Affiliation and Self-Generated Identity

The following post is one of the best examples of messages concerning group affiliation and self-generated identity. It calls into question the usage of "bisexual lesbian" and critiques its usage.

OP:

i think when it comes to the "bi lesbian" "biromantic homosexual" "bisexual homoromantic" nonsense there are still important things to remember in regards to the people using those labels.

like obviously the most important thing is that those labels do not exist. they do not describe a genuine sexuality and one cannot be, under any circumstances, a lesbian and a bisexual.

but ive also never seen someone use those labels if they aren't genuinely attracted to women and/or multiple genders. so the people using these labels aren't some form of "cishet invaders making up sexualities for oppression points" or whatever. they are lesbians or bisexuals struggling with their sexuality and i feel like that's the angle we should approach it with.

like yeah it sucks to see people implying that lesbianism somehow includes genuine attraction to men or that bisexuality doesn't truly describe genuine attraction between women so it needs to come with a modifier etc etc. but the people who use these labels are either truly lesbians that are struggling with internalized lesbophobia and feel like they can't identify as a lesbian because of it (whether it be bc they have seen lesbophobic comments abt how restrictive the "lesbian" label is compared to a label like bisexual or because they are struggling with a form of comphet and feel like they have to make room in their sexuality for attraction to men in some form)

or they're bisexuals and are struggling with internalized biphobia and therefore don't want to identity as bisexual (whether it be because of the stigma attached to the bisexual label as being childish/indecisive/slutty or because they've seen people talk abt bisexual women not truly being attracted to other women like lesbians are and feel like they need to prove their attraction to women thru another label)

but regardless of their reasons, they are still a member of the lgbt community and yes it's important to correct them (esp when they're old enough to know better) but i also think most of us have struggled with accepting our sexuality and the stigmas that are associated with them so my heart does go out to people who are still stuck at a point in which they are struggling so much with their sexuality that they have to turn to a fake label to justify themselves and their attraction.

Terfs, swerfs, febfems, and radfems of any kind pls fuck off¹

The OP begins by pointing out that the categories of "bi lesbian," "biromantic homosexual," "bisexual homoromantic" do not exist and, on that basis, negates those self-generated identities. Overall, the message of this post validates OP's opinion that bisexuality includes attraction to multiple genders and lesbianism is only the attraction to women and women-aligned individuals. OP's message does not say that "bisexual lesbians" made up a fake category to be LGBT+. Instead, they are either a lesbian with internalized lesbophobia or a bisexual with internalized biphobia. Either way, the message is one of understanding that, while the self-generated identity of "bisexual lesbian" and the like is not real, the person needs to be corrected and understood as having some type of issue coming to terms with their sexuality.

The sixth respondent's message agreed with the premise of lesbians being a sexuality that explicitly excludes men by responding with:

the point is not "people with complicated attraction to multiple genders don't exist", it's "lesbians who are attracted to men don't exist". bisexual lesbians cannot exist because lesbians, by definition, are not attracted to men, and misapplying "lesbian" to a sexuality of "sexually attracted to both men and women but I don't want to date men as much" is, by definition, NOT what works as being lesbian. this all beside the fact that op (and many lesbians and bi women) have explained countless times how this identity has been used over and over as a result of internalized biphobia or lesbophobia.

¹ "Terfs" are trans-exclusionary radical feminists, "swerfs" are sex worker exclusionary radical feminists, "febfems" are bisexual radical feminists who refuse to date men and "radfems" are radical feminists.

Both posts bring up the point that experiencing sexual attraction to men and women but only wanting to date women does not constitute lesbianism, under the rule that lesbianism excludes attraction to men. They show support for the OP's message that a person cannot occupy both the bisexual category and the lesbian category. Affiliation with either category is possible but being in both is logically impossible and a self-generated identity that includes cannot be properly included within the existing categorical system since it does not respect the difference between bisexuality and lesbianism. The posts that reject "bisexual lesbian" as a viable category based on the mutual exclusion involved in the definition of bisexuality and lesbianism allow us to understand how a counterargument in favor of inclusion may be crafted.

The following message thread employs just such an argument to affirm that the category of "bisexual lesbian" can exist and the merging of the two categories does not constitute a contradiction when combined in a self-generated identity. The thread starts with the premise that the OP's message is incorrect and that any possible combination of labels can form a legitimate and logical self-generated identity. Also, the thread should be read as a message in response to the previous one.

Respondent 18:

I hate seeing bullshit from people who think that they are the Arbiter of All Human Experience on my dash.

Just because you cant fathom something doesnt mean that it doesnt exist.

Respondent 19:

Every time I see people complaining about queer people changing the usage of the language or inventing new words or word combinations, I am reminded of pompous assholes railing against people corrupting the purity of the language. As if the language is

supposed to exist in a static and unchanged state and isn't actually a tool for the people and not an entity unto itself.

It doesn't matter which way OP slices it. Their message is that people are "using words wrong" even though they themselves acknowledge those words apply to those people and are within their right to use them and change their meaning to adapt to their needs and continue the unstoppable evolution of language.

It's intracommunity elitism, is what it is. Doesn't matter if you couch in a "they are still queer people so we should remember that" appeasement, your intentions are the same.

Respondent 18:

The fucking arrogance "we should correct people (especially if they are old enough to know better)" like bitch! I can fucking guarantee that the stranger you want to "correct" knows more about themselves than you do.

The insidious misogyny of insisting that men's choices and men's actions are the fault of women existing and expressing their truest self.

OP

I'm an elitist because I can use a dictionary? What the fuck are y'all even whining about? Sure, words can change and adapt over time but just blatantly misusing them doesn't make sense, and as I pointed out in the post, often in these cases it's bc there's smthn else going on

I never said to attack people or mock them or tell them they're stupid. I said to talk to ppl who may be struggling with their sexuality and help them become comfortable in it. Because yeah, if someone is Id-ing as a bi lesbian bc they feel like calling themselves just a lesbian is too restrictive or outdated, they are struggling with lesbophobia and that can rly hurt them and it's not something they should deal with alone. If someone is saying they're a bi lesbian bc they want it to be clear they're attracted to women too and don't want their relationships w women to be diminished, it's a struggle w biphobia which they should also be helped with?

There's nothing "condescending and elitist" about saying that the lgbt community is meant to support each other w the same struggles many of us went thru? Sorry y'all wanna stew in your misery or internalized shame but people deserve to be comfortable and happy with who they are

And I very specifically have talked out against anyone trying to argue that the "bi lesbian" label is bad bc it confuses men or whatever because that's a piece of shit

argument and men's actions aren't the fault of wlw so I don't know why the fuck you would even bring that up here but maybe read the actual post and then fuck off

Respondent 18:

You think that people deserve to be happy and comfortable with their labels UNLESS and UNTIL you personally don't understand them, and they want to assign them labels.

That is not supporting people. That's being shitty.

Sorry if you think I was only responding to you, op, but there are lots of people in the notes claiming that bi lesbians hurt "real" lesbians, so why don't you go yell at them

Respondent 20:

Okay but....OP is right? Being very rude with the whole "correct them" thing, but still.

Bisexuality and lesbianism are two different things. One involves the attraction to two or more genders. One involves the attraction to women, while being a woman (or somewhere in the vicinity of a woman, I know NB lesbians exist).

You can't be both. That's like saying you're a puffin duck. They're both water birds, but fundamentally not the same, in ways that matter.

Respondent 23:

But if someone experiences sexual attraction to people of multiple genders, but can only form romantic attraction to people of a specific gender, does that not mean that they can and should use nuanced labels to describe themselves, if they so choose? We're back to the "if you personally cannot fathom it, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist."

Most of us are lucky enough that our romantic and sexual orientations line up, but that's not always the case, and we shouldn't discredit or (by god) "correct" people who are just out there living their lives and experiences

Respondent 20:

I mean, my response to being that way was to call myself queer, not to mash together words that literally contradict each other. That's the part of this I don't get. It's like taking black and pink and slapping them on a page and saying they're both the same color.

Respondent 24:

but if you're a woman who's biromantic homosexual or homoromantic bisexual then in both cases "bi" and "lesbian" are both true. They aren't opposing conditions, they're socially constructed identities based on loose metrics (what IS gender? What IS attraction? What IS sex?) with a lot of overlap. That's the whole point, they don't **actually** contradict each other, because there are different kinds of attraction.

It's cool that for you "queer" covers it (honestly, same. Jump between "bi" and "queer" and that's fine by me), but I don't see how it hurts anyone to use "bi lesbian". It's not any different from how it's cool for people to be both nonbinary and lesbian, even though that would seem like a contradiction in terms (how can you be a woman attracted to women if you're not a woman? because you can).

What it comes down to at the end of the day is that there are very few if any cases of other people's identities actually being "x"-phobic (whatever people like to claim). Being Ace isn't homophobic. Being bi isn't panphobic OR transphobic and being pan isn't biphobic OR transphobic. Bi Lesbian is neither biphobia nor lesbophobia nor queerphobia. We could argue whether the distinctions mean anything or are necessary or what, but doing that kind of forgets what the labels are for. Which is finding people who share your experiences, and feeling comfortable in who you are. So policing other people's labels is pretty silly, and will always come down to usually meritless gatekeeping (or, worse, exclusionism). If labels help you find community but then every community you find says you must have analyzed yourself wrong or misunderstood the words that made you feel at home, then that ends up being antithetical to the point, which was to welcome each other home.

You don't see the need for someone to be a bi lesbian? Well that's why they're not you. They aren't lying about their experiences, so I will trust them to know themselves best.

And if they DO need to try on some stuff before something sticks, and go through some things that "don't make sense" in the interim, that's still no reason to try to argue with them about their own labels. They will take things at their own pace, and it's not up to anyone else to tell them whether they're done or not. Nor does it invalidate the labels they chose, even if they later discard them.

tl;dr bi and lesbian aren't contradictory because everything's made up and the points don't matter.

The entire exchange relies on the premise, as respondent 18 put it, "Just because you can't fathom something doesn't mean that it doesn't exist," meaning that the message of the OP is

invalid because it refuses to imagine a categorical system that is more fluid. As mentioned previously D'Andrade defines culture as "an information-holding system" equipped with "instructions needed for coping with the environment and performing specialized roles" (D'Andrade 1984: 198). What is being argued is that the instructions for coping in this environment should be relaxed instead of tightened. We know that cultural knowledge is what "one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to [society's] members" (Goodenough 1957: 167). The knowledge then acts somewhat like a computer "consisting of a set of rules that prescribe what actions are to be taken under various conditions" (ibid.: 199). For LGBT+ people, there is a cultural knowledge of what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, etc. The concept of LGBT+ culture emerged because many people agree that LGBT+ people have different beliefs and practices than non-LGBT+ people. The distinction between LGBT+ and non-LGBT+ is being blurred to allow more people to identify as LGBT+ in an issue within this thread. There is also the issue of blurring the distinction between people of various LGBT+ identities to allow for more movement between categories and create a larger cultural knowledge. By positioning the boundaries between lesbian and bisexual as firm and unchanging, the response of claiming that they are fluid is negative in response to the original message.

A crux of the negative message is how there is, as respondent 19 puts it, a "purity of language," which is about culture not language, that the OP's message promotes is not in line with a current belief in fluidity between categories. The definitive line between bisexuality and homosexuality should, the argument goes, be blurred, thus allowing for a person to self-generate an identity that includes both. While respondent 20 does concede that it is simpler to place oneself in the category of queer rather than trying to explain the nuances of inequivalence

between romantic and sexual attraction, there is still an ideological disconnect. One ideology rules that the category system is static, and the other that the category system either is or should be fluid. The message of people needing to be "corrected" when using any "bi lesbian" dual category marker plays into the first cultural understanding where any "bi lesbian" is a person who is confused or scared of the bisexual or lesbian category. They believe that the preexisting categories should be enough for people to sort themselves into based on the logical criteria of known types of attraction with a historical precedent.

Conversely, the person saying that gets deemed to be closed-minded by those who use a more pragmatic approach. The pragmatic approach uses labels as terms that can be associated with each other based on compatibility but not necessarily consistency. As respondent 18 says, "Just because you can't fathom something doesn't mean that it doesn't exist," which calls into question the imaginative possibilities of other people. The pragmatic approach would allow for blended labels such as "bi lesbian" since the labels are compatible in describing and experience. Blended labels being "fathomable" or not, such as being attracted to men but not desiring any sort of romantic or sexual relationship with a man, is proposing a different cultural understanding about the way people may be classified and the meaning of such classification. The first cultural understanding entails constative rules that would regulate membership, while the other cultural understanding represents a stricter use of labels for categories that depend on their serving the needs of their users. Recognizing the existence of a type of attraction and using labels that are already understood allows for legitimacy. Blended labels also push against a normative perspective on attraction where there is a presumed singularity of attraction. Rules for inclusion do not depend on predefined logical criteria but rather on temporally changing attractions

experienced by the user. This, in turn, feeds back into the debate over rigidity versus fluidity of categories and their systems, thus regulating membership.

As respondent 24 says, "policing other people's labels is pretty silly, and will always come down to usually meritless gatekeeping (or, worse, exclusionism)," which says that people trying to reinforce or explain the definitions of categories are "exclusionists." If the need for categories appears constraining to some, it makes sense for them to conclude that the best way to resolve the issue is to remove the categories. By ignoring categories altogether, the concern of who can and cannot be included (and to what capacity) gets resolved. The view of the lesbian category as archaic and restrictive is a recent shift, and these messages, specifically the ones in favor of the "bi lesbian" category, promote the concept of the lesbian category being a descriptor rather than a set of enduring criteria. Therefore, instead of having a lesbian category, the word lesbian would become a descriptor to mean female attraction, thus opening the category to use by everyone and allowing "bi lesbian" to become a salient self-generated identity.

Category Existence

The debate over the inclusion of asexuality as inherently LGBT+ is one of the best examples of conflict over categories. Since asexuality is the lack of sexual attraction, some people argue that it is not inherently LGBT+ as it still allows for the possibility for a "heterosexual-presenting" partnership; this is especially persistent for asexual-identifying individuals who are cisgender.² If LGBT+ identity is defined as being not heterosexual and cisgender, asexuality exists in a gray area between the two. The lack of sexual attraction is removed from both same-gender and opposite-gender attraction, which complicates the binary

² Heterosexual-presenting is when a couple appears to be heterosexual but is not.

framework. While some frameworks propose that asexuality is not real, in my research I am focusing on the message that asexuality is not inherently an LGBT+ category.

To explore this dynamic I use a post by a different author, entitled "Cishet aces and aros are valid but not LGBT," which reads as follows:

And that's okay. If anything, it's great that they're not LGBT. They don't have to deal with the abuse most LGBT members face.

Aces and aros have their own community, and it's not like it's hard to find, either. AVEN, I believe, is the name of the community. As they have their own, why are they forcing their way into LGBT? Well, as bad as it is to say, many like the attention. Which is annoying, but sometimes true.

Aces/aros that are, for example, lesbian bisexual/romantic, gay, or trans are super valid and are actually LGBT. But that's the only time aros/aces are LGBT. Which also means they can't say LGBT slurs, which is another thing that happens a lot.

Aces that are chill, you guys are rad. But aces that force themselves into places they do not belong give everyone else a bad rep.

The original poster's message essentially states that asexuality exists as a category but does not exist as a specifically LGBT+ category unless the individual in question also experiences same-gender attraction (often shortened to SGA). Unlike the message that two categories are not compatible like "bi lesbian," this message focuses on the premise that asexual and aromantic categories cannot be LGBT+ because lack of sexual and romantic attraction is not equivalent to experiencing same-gender attraction. The OP suggests that instead of understanding asexual- and aromantic-identified people as belonging to the LGBT+ category, they belong to a distinct category under the AVEN superordinate category (Asexuality Visibility and Education Network). In this "web community, members from around the world communicate with each other via web forums, often using these communication networks to arrange in-person meetings for social or political action" (Cerankowski & Milks 2010: 651). Founded in 2001, AVEN is described by the initial poster as an alternative space for asexual and

aromantic individuals to interact. This exclusive interaction would situate asexuals and aromantics within their own category, one that exists outside of both LGBT+ and the cisgender heterosexual category. Positioning asexuality and aromanticism as part of their standalone category functions both to validate its existence while simultaneously implying that people to which this label applies fail to meet the rules of being in the LGBT+ category.

Since there are not a lot of responses on this post, the rest of the comments thread goes as follows:

Respondent 1

Ah shit, here we go again What about aroaces?

Respondent 2 to Respondent 1

If an aroace is also a trans person, then yeah, they're LGBT. Otherwise, no, they aren't. Without either dysphoria or same gender attraction, someone is not LGBT.

Respondent 3

i just thought you should know that cishet means cisgendered heterosexual aro/ace means aromantic/asexual. By definition of being asexual you cannot be heterosexual. If you are asexual you are asexual and that is it. The LGBT+ community are people who are not cishet & asexuals are not heterosexuals BECAUSE THEY ARE ASEXUALS. I'm sorry I just don't know how to make that clear to you. It's a very common misconception, I'm sorry you did not understand fully.

Respondent 2 to Respondent 3

But if they're still heteroromantic what's the difference? If a straight person was asexual (a CISHET ACE) they're still straight, man..

These comments highlight the contending positions regarding the categorization of asexuality within the overarching category of LGBT+. According to respondent 2, if a person is heteroromantic and cisgender, then they are "still straight." Hence, their asexuality in no way counters any heteroromanticism since all relationships will still be straight. By this logic, the only way a person can be heteroromantic, asexual, and LGBT+ is if they are also transgender.

Identifying as transgender would allow access to the non-cisgender component of LGBT+ categorization. Respondent 2's message to respondent 1 highlights this concept, with the rules for being LGBT+ being experiencing "either dysphoria or same-gender attraction." Respondent 3 counters the assertion that asexuality is not inherently LGBT+ by defining asexual as inherently LGBT+. Their message emphasizes that asexual people cannot be heterosexual, thus making them LGBT+. Without limiting the place of romantic orientation within their model, the fact that a person is not heterosexual becomes enough to allow for inclusion in the LGBT+ category.

Categorical Restriction

Placing regulations on the usage of categories—primarily on which categories are LGBT+ and which ones are not—creates rules for how the LGBT+ umbrella functions. These rules are alternately reinforced and disputed by the messages that people post and reply to on Tumblr. The fluidity of categorical possibilities creates the possibility for confusion among viewers of these messages and leaves room for a misunderstanding of the logical viewpoint of each message. It is not to say that there can only be one form of interpretation or only one message that is somehow innately more correct than others, but instead that these messages are attempting to make sense of other conflicting messages. Can we infer that the side with the most messages is the "correct" side? Undoubtedly numbers alone do not resolve the conflict since systems of classification are changing organizations of cultural knowledge that change as culture changes. Still these patterns of restricting categorical combination and restricting the number of categories within LGBT+ goes beyond the two pieces of data discussed. The exchanges reveal recurrent patterns that show how LGBT+ categorization gets discussed on Tumblr. The lack of agreement over categorization and the rules regarding categorization lead to messages that emphasize disagreement that reflect the fact that there is no unanimity of opinion. Instead we are

clearly faced with a situation in which there are competing cultural understandings of attraction and identities that are associated with a polarity between cis het and LGBT+ categories and the way that individuals come to terms with a social world not of their making and in which they cannot easily find a place for themselves.

Discussion

Within the discussion of categorization, I found myself realizing the distance between the commonsense way that community is used in Tumblr exchanges and the way that it has traditionally been defined by anthropologists. According to Raymond Firth (1951), "A human community is a body of people sharing in common activities and bound by multiple relationships in a way that the aims of any individual can be achieved only by participation in action with others." (41) Firth also goes on to say that an essential aspect of a human community is the capacity to be in close physical proximity to one another. In contrast, those on Tumblr can come from a variety of geographical locations. Firth also distills human communities down to "primary groups" whereby "the members of which are in close personal contact in daily life" (44). There are two aspects of these small communities. First is the integral community, which is structurally self-contained; second is the sectional community, which is a part of a broader entity (Firth 1951: 49-50). For Firth, an integral part of a community is social alignment which includes "social structure" and "comprises not only corporate groups of more permanent type, based on sex, age, and kinship, but also associations of persons for such common aims as work or recreation" (Firth 1951: 41). But the key to Firth's use of community is how "mere size tends to govern quality as well as the quality of social relations" (ibid.: 47). For Firth, community is a strictly in-person relation based on functional interdependence.

Physical proximity is also a significant component of Bateson's (1935: 179) definition of "culture contact" where "the contact occurs between two communities with different cultures and results in a profound disturbance of the culture of one or both groups; but also, cases of contact within a single community." While "cultural contact" can occur between communities that are not within the same physical space, there is still a notion that these are discrete groups of people who know each other and can interact in the physical world. "When personal meeting is not possible to the same extent, more unknowns enter into choice, local autonomy is restricted, the techniques of conveying decisions in themselves require extra organizational roles" (Firth 1951: 50), so the "cultural contact" between groups without personal meetings creates more issues than solutions.

The verbiage of an "LGBT+ community" is a productive way to describe everyone who is LGBT+. However, when the term is used in digital space, it becomes difficult to pinpoint the location of community. There is no consensus regarding the shared practices by which a group of people may be defined, yet the treatment of specific messages as if they were actions are similar to certain sanctions that occur within communities. Radcliffe-Brown's defines sanctions as "a reaction on the part of a society or of a considerable number of its members to a mode of behavior which is thereby approved (positive sanctions) or disapproved (negative sanctions)" (1965: 205). In the context of LGBT+ Tumblr communities, making posts that another user disagrees with could be interpreted as an action that is not desirable, which in turn warrants a negative response to discourage any future actions. Negative sanctions, in this case, could include sending hateful anonymous messages, responding to messages in a way that actively calls for harm towards the creator, or using degrading insults to make the creator look like a bad person. These messages have the intent of making the sender appear superior while the receiver

seems inferior. A "dialogic character of a statement-reply kind, with an expression on the part of one individual calling forth an expression on the part of another, the latter expression being understood to be a response to the first" (Goffman 1976:70-71) is typically how online discussions occur. But sometimes there is an asymmetrical dynamic where the person making the post has the upper hand over the person the post is about. For example, a post cataloging all the wrongdoings of a specific user is a display that promotes the poster's position as morally superior.

I found that online debates function in a way similar to degradation ceremonies, a social procedure whereby "a person loses eligibility (relationships that confer status or behavior potential) in a particular community." (Schwartz 1979: 139) A degradation ceremony consists of three parts: 1) a community that has a set of values that all adhere to; 2) a denouncer, witness, and perpetrator and; 3) both the denouncer and witness must be in good standing with the community (ibid.). For the degradation ceremony to be successful, the event and the perpetrator must be made to seem abnormal with respect to a desired outcome in place of what actually happened. The denouncement must be framed not as a personal issue but an issue that affects the community; the denouncer must, therefore, assume the moral upper hand, and must have their beliefs confirmed by an outside witness (Garfinkel 1956: 422-423). The effectiveness of a degradation ceremony varies depending on the organization, its systems of operations, and the method of communication. Consequently, a degradation ceremony functions differently in person than it does online (ibid.: 424). What makes the process of online insults different from degradation ceremonies is that those being insulted are not losing their status by being called out.

A major finding from these digital messages is the use of the categories as ways to validate "community" membership. A simple example of this might be a person using LGBT+

labels to index their association with the LGBT+ community, which in turn gives them access to various parts of LGBT+ "culture." Even if the label is not well understood the possession of a label still provides access. While the culture of the LGBT+ community is not cohesive throughout Tumblr, there is a belief that it is embodied and disseminated through categories and their labels. While being LGBT+ "is experienced by different people in radically different ways depending on their racial identification, location, age, social class, personal history, and so forth" (Valentine 2003: 579), there is still an assumption that all LGBT+ people share the same culture. This is rooted in the concept of LGBT+ people belonging to a "community," which colloquially implies that they partake of the same, unified "culture" regardless of outside influences or multiple facets of identity (e.g., race, religion, etc.). Therefore, discussions of categories and their function devolve into debates over what is best for the "community" at large and what LGBT+ "culture" is, they become either inherently inclusionary or inherently exclusionary. Because they cannot definitively outline a "community" within these online LGBT+ spaces, it is also difficult to define a "culture" given that there is no cohesive practice or ideology to unite everyone. It is not to say that the term LGBT+ community has no place in common parlance; instead, a perceived group of people united by their engagement with a common tag on Tumblr cannot get defined as a community with total accuracy.

Offline, an LGBT+ community, is helpful as a space for identifying with marginalized and oppressed people because of their LGBT+ identity, but online this premise breaks down. In the future, it may be possible to define what parts of Tumblr, or social media more generally, can be considered a community. It may also become feasible to analyze digital messages in a way that contributes to a greater understanding of intent and impact. Still, because of the anonymity of Tumblr and existing issues with online textual interpretation, this is a mode of inquiry that

needs further development. Moving forward digital anthropology will have to tackle broader questions of methodology in discerning group affiliations and intention in digital spaces. I could see this project being extended to LGBT+ "communities" on other social media platforms as a point of comparison. Given the influence of a given platform on user interaction (and on their visibility to those outside the community), looking beyond Tumblr would be an essential step in the study of LGBT+ digital communication and identity formation.

Conclusion

On Tumblr, divergences of opinion, sometimes harshly expressed, emerge from differently held cultural assumptions that are expressed in the form of clashes regarding labels. When examined more closely, these clashes take the form of the logical formation of self-generated identities and subsequent inclusion or exclusion of specific categories within the LGBT+ umbrella. These take the form of seeming confusion over what constitutes "being" LGBT+. With such a wide array of categories falling under the LGBT+ umbrella and new ways of formulating self-generated identities, conflict over how the categorical system now works has begun to emerge. Combining two categories into one does not appear logical to those who may understand categorical rules and definitions that exists prior to their use by people. However, it may seem reasonable to those who understand that blurrier boundaries can better accommodate the use of labels by people looking to connect with others. The existence of gatekeeping emerges from this split over the rigidity of categorical boundaries. Challenges to the way that labels are used constitutes a form of disagreement that goes beyond the abstract and theoretical. In fact, there are two diametrically opposed orientations. One position appears to include or exclude users who employ certain labels or combination of labels based on "objective" criteria. In contrast, the other side looks like they are trying to include everyone.

As in any culture categories provide organization and understanding to a wide array of possible experiences while also providing a means to situate oneself within a larger order. Challenges to categories often hold the promise of freedom from the rules and requirements associated with them. In the online world, labels furnish an avenue to find others and an overly restrictive use of labels may be at odds with the search for other users with shared affinities. The construction and maintenance of categories is intended by many users to give legitimacy to people who exist outside of cisgender and heterosexual norms. If a category appears restrictive to a person, then they do not personally belong in that category. However, if all categories seem restrictive to a person then it makes sense that they could conclude that the existence of categories is the real issue.

Online discourse on the legitimacy of categorical combinations and the inclusion or exclusion of particular categories is important in understanding any shift towards a more fluid and pragmatic categorical system. In my opinion, embracing a more fluid categorical system that did not assume that identities are defined a priori in accordance with essential and unchanging characteristics could allow more people to use labels to their advantage, although I recognize that this runs the risk of misunderstandings regarding subject positionality. Understanding both the ways people are using categories and the issues people are discussing online can show the importance of categorization and how categories get contested. As is often the case online, a word describing a category affiliation is the only way users can index involvement in LGBT+ spaces. These online discussions of categories are ever evolving but still important for how LGBT+ categories are constructed, maintained, and changed through social media messages.

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