"I Love You Just the Gay You Are":

LGBTQIAP+ Users' Analysis of Queer Life and Bias Online

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Abstract

This article explores Generation Z queer individuals' perceptions of and feelings about social media, regarding homophobia and transphobia, queer representation, algorithm-driven content, and platform features. For queer individuals, the online and offline environments diverge because the visibility of their own sexual orientation and the broader representation of their identities differ. Drawing on data from interviews (N = 15) with queer people ranging from 18-24 years old from across the United States, in addition to one international student from the Middle East, we propose a social media homophobia scale to show how homophobia can manifest online, whether violently or subtly. We capture everyday queer users' perceptions of inclusivity on social media, including its content and platform design. Our participants use a wide range of social media sites, and many attribute the largely positive experiences they have had on platforms as queer users to algorithms but worry cisgender heterosexual users on the same platforms may interface with more homophobic content. In this article, we also present participants' ideas for designing more inclusive and uplifting social media platforms for queer users, as well as advice they have for younger queer people on social media. This research method gives voice to queer users in a solution-focused framework.

Keywords: Queer, social media, homophobia, Generation Z, algorithms.

An overwhelming amount of research on the queer population has been deficit-focused, specifically analyzing queer adolescents experiencing mental health issues (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; Delli & Livas 2021; Haimson, 2020). While the unique problems minority populations face are important to investigate, solely studying the subset of the queer population that faces mental health concerns fails to account for the different and varied experiences of the wider community. Centering research on obstacles and negative outcomes overlooks positive interventions gleaned from the insights of the broader group and leads to the mischaracterization of the queer community as a problem-laden group.

In the present study, we illuminate the social media experience of everyday queer adults in Generation Z: those born between approximately 1997 and 2010 (Dimock, 2022). We are interested in Gen Z because they have had access to social media throughout their adolescence and young adulthood. Specifically, we introduce to this field an exploration of how queer users think about social media algorithms, queer content, and the differences between queer and cisgender heterosexual ("cishet") social media use. We inquire about whether queer people feel there is sufficient queer content and media representation (e.g., "thirst traps," celebrities, and online influencers) and investigate whether the online world is equally as heteronormative as the offline world. With our findings, we create a guide for what users and platforms could do to enhance the positive effects of social media for queer users.

We also recognize a need for a media homophobia scale because no homophobia scale has been introduced that caters to the facets and experiences of the online world specifically. For queer people, the online and offline environments are incongruent, and we discuss this reality further in our findings (Byron et al., 2019; Carrasco & Kern 2018). Scales can be effective tools for conceptualizing amorphous concepts like homophobia. They can also be used as

self-reflection and educational tools. We believe that a social media homophobia scale will prompt allies to improve their allyship and treatment of queer people in their lives and the broader community.

Homophobia is manifested in intentions, actions, feelings, and behaviors (Rodriguez, 2017). To reduce it into an identity one "is" or "is not" is an oversimplification. Similarly, sexual orientation encompasses more than what an individual does, or does not do, in the bedroom. Distilling queerness into sexual preferences oversexualizes queer[1] (LGBTQIAP+) people and omits the social connections, romance, support networks, self-expression, fashion, familial structures, and more that constitute the identity. #Loveislove was an effective slogan to convince cishet people that queer people are just like them (Myers, 2017). However, it does not necessarily fit queer people's priorities or experiences. For example, aromantic individuals do not experience romantic connection in relationships. Research on queer populations can highlight societal shortcomings and project us forward.

More recently, the U.S. government and population have become more accepting of queer people, as demonstrated by Pew Research Center reports, the Supreme Court's 2020 decision to outlaw sexual orientation discrimination in employment federally, and the 2022 Respect for Marriage Act statutorily enshrining same-sex marriage at the federal level (Davidson, 2022). However, there still are many instances where the bare minimum of tolerance toward queer populations is not met and violence occurs. For instance, on November 19th, 2022 at Club Q in Colorado Springs, there was a shooting that killed five people and injured nineteen (Philipps, 2022). The club was a social gathering place for queer people, and the shooter's actions were charged as a hate crime. While violence is a real threat for the queer community,

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[1] In this paper, we use the word "queer" to refer to individuals who fall under the LGBTQIAP+ umbrella. The literature we cite uses a range of terms (e.g., sexual minority, homosexual, and LGBT). To maintain consistency and improve clarity, we replace those terms with "queer."

tolerance is not the ultimate goal either. Tolerance is insufficient: it fails to welcome the entirety of what it means to be a queer person. Being queer is not only about sex, it touches upon many facets of a queer individual's life and their daily experiences (Drushel, 2018).

Social media serves as an alternate public sphere where queer users can engross themselves in queer culture and find supportive community (Byron et al., 2019; Etengoff & Daiute 2015; Dym et al., 2019). Social media allows for selective self presentation, so queer individuals can authentically express their gender and identities (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018). Moreover, it allows them to find supportive people more quickly and easily than the offline world. However, homophobia still takes place online, manifesting in cyberbullying, hate speech, etc. (Craig et al., 2019). Although online and offline homophobia are both a product of harmful prejudice, homophobia's expression and resulting impact can differ based on the setting.

Through this project, we analyze homophobia on social media. We also explore the social media experiences of queer people. Our research team is progress and solution-focused, so our overarching aim is to identify the current status of queer inclusion online and clarify the next steps to advance improvements.

In this study, we create a media homophobia scale collaboratively with queer participants to underscore the nuances and stages of homophobia to concretize expectations and goals for allies. We further gauge the state of queer representation online from the perspective of queer participants. We then propose platform features suggested by queer participants to enhance queer users' experiences on social media and collect community advice for younger queer people navigating the social media landscape.

Literature Review

Dimensions of Homophobia

First, we will outline existing homophobia scales and their uses to explain their importance. "Homophobia" is commonly understood to be hatred, discomfort, aversion to or prejudice against queer people. However, the *phobia* suffix can suggest an irrational fear, glossing over other homophobic acts. Instead, homophobia encapsulates attitudes and beliefs ranging from mild dislike to abhorrence; the term is multifaceted and broad. To avoid confusion with phobias, psychiatrist Dr. Hellman proposes the term "homosexism" (2020). Discourse surrounding the implications of these terms shows the importance of defining and explaining them to cishet people. Scales denoting a spectrum of behaviors and beliefs have been implemented as a solution. The Riddle Scale was developed in the 1970s by the renowned psychology professor Dorothy Riddle. It measures anti-gay bias and captures the range as follows: (1) Repulsion, (2) Pity, (3) Tolerance, (4) Acceptance, (5) Support, (6) Admiration, (7) Appreciation, and (8) Nurturance. It is most used in anti-bias training; particular attitudes are typically assessed through self-reflection survey questions (Riddle, n.d.). Each scale item connotes certain behaviors; for instance, an individual who reacts to queerness with "repulsion" believes queer people are "sick" or "immoral" and would support the condemnation of queer people or conversion treatments (Spalding, 2016, p. 160). By contrast, a person aligned with "nurturance" recognizes queer people as "an indispensable part of society" and is enthusiastic to align themselves with queer people and advocate for queer rights (Spalding, 2016, p. 160). While ascending terms can be understood to be a progressive improvement in attitude toward the queer community, the first four terms can be categorized as negative attitudes, and the latter four as positive. Riddle identified that commonly expressed views like "tolerance" or "acceptance" *still* suggest that queer people must be put up with (tolerated) or that queer people have an issue that needs to be "accepted." Therefore, these attitudes are not the end target. The Riddle Scale is not

the only one of its kind. In 1980, the Hudson and Ricketts Index of Attitudes Toward

Homosexuals Scale was developed to measure people's affective response to homosexual people

(Hiyane, 2012). It is administered like a quiz and yields a homophobia score. The Wright,

Adams, and Bernat Homophobia Scale was later developed in the 1990s and recognized both

cognitive *and* behavioral components of homophobia (Hiyane, 2012). In addition, there are

quizzes available on many online platforms to test one's own homophobia, as well as countless

other adaptations of scales focused on different angles, such as parent homophobia, lesbian

homophobia, and internalized homophobia. These scales have been designed to tease out

different nuances of homophobia, thus showcasing its complexity. Scales are useful in sexuality

studies because they complicate categorical understandings and concretize and reveal dimensions

within amorphous concepts, including homophobia and queerness. Homophobia scales can

provide a roadmap for societal goals as they illustrate hierarchies, from homophobia to positive

behavior.

Foundational Communication Theory

Second, we will review relevant literature that informs our understanding and approach.

The foundational communication theory, Uses and Gratification, posits that media users are

active in selecting the media they consume to gratify their needs, and are *not* an audience which

is passively affected by media (Katz et al., 1973). The theory was developed prior to the

introduction of personal smartphones, but is only made more salient in a world in which users

can easily create content and share information. Users can manage and control their

self-presentation online, determine how much time to spend online even if it is detrimental to

them, and choose from seemingly endless content (Ruggiero, 2000). Users may be more active

than ever in choosing the content that meets their needs and desires on the internet.

Social media is a public sphere that allows users to manipulate their image (Siljanovska and Stojcevska, 2018). The ability to present an idealized version of oneself results in a disconnect because humans also rely on others to co-construct their sense of self. The "Looking-Glass Self" explains that one's perception of oneself is not formed independently, but socially (Siljanovska and Stojcevska, 2018). In other words, how others perceive you affects how you see yourself. Uses and Gratification and the Looking-Glass Self explain that media is highly personalized and influences an individual's inner sense of self. Escobar-Viera et al.'s (2019) research underscores that queer social media users navigate the online world differently than cishet users. They argue that previous findings about social media's connection to mental health and well-being cannot be applied to queer populations without further research. Queer people are a unique population with well-being outcomes distinct from the majority population due to a history of being legally oppressed and socially marginalized.

Queer Well-being Online and Offline

Same-sex marriage was not recognized nationwide until 2015; sodomy was not even legally protected federally until 2003 (Davidson, 2022). Queer people's sexual and romantic lives have been forcibly hidden and rendered invisible in the public sphere. Given the social stigma, there used to be little positive queer representation in popular media. Queer audiences have had to read between the lines to find hints of queer love in media (Anselmo, 2018). Greater acceptance has been attained more recently. Still, queer audiences engage in "queering": the reading of characters as homosexual, even if they were not explicitly written that way. Anselmo's (2018) research shows that queer communities turn to social media where they form extensive fandoms around their queer readings. In these fandoms, they produce videos, gifs, and other advertising content that benefits the original text through elevated attention. Anselmo (2018)

argues that television producers do not recognize queer audiences' labor nor value it. In recent years, queerbaiting[2] and "pinkwashing[3]" have become effective marketing strategies. Anselmo (2018) posits that this behavior takes advantage of the queer community because it profits from it without understanding or truly uplifting it. Though there are few academic studies dedicated to analyzing the content of online fandom environments, it is well-known within the queer community that they exist and are prolific (Anselmo, 2018).

The queer community is very active online. Many studies focus on the negative impact on well-being that social media use can have, especially on queer adolescents. Craig et al. (2019) conducted a cross-sectional study at the University of Toronto with a sample of 5,243 queer youth. Their data revealed that queer people turn to social media to cope with stress and find support. However, social media can also be a negative environment because cyberbullying and negative comments are often directed toward queer users (Ceglarek & Ward, 2016). The negative impact is exacerbated because queer youth are at an elevated risk for mental health concerns, as their social networks often do not provide adequate support for them while they navigate their identities. Craig et al.'s (2019) study captures the state of existing literature on queer social media use: both constructive and deficit-focused, it focuses on how and why queer users are disadvantaged and struggle with mental health. The harms of social media and challenges the queer community faces are important to identify and investigate but are overrepresented in the literature on this population.

By contrast, Devito et al.'s (2019) research highlights the positive impact of social media on queer people. The authors reject the overwhelming narrative in popular culture and academic

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[2] Queerbaiting occurs when content hints at queerness to attract queer audiences but does not provide explicit representation that would be affirming to those viewers and destigmatize their identities (Dictionary.com, n.d.-b).
[3] Brands "pinkwash" when they performatively display shallow support of queer people, often only during Pride Month and not earnestly (Dictionary.com, n.d.-a).

scholarship that emphasizes the detrimental impact of social media use on well-being. Instead, through their research, Devito et al. (2019) show that social media can help queer people decrease stress, find community, navigate their identity, and more. This positive impact occurs because queer people can better find each other online when they may not be able to do so as easily in their offline environment. Clemens et al.'s (2015) work also argues that online environments can be uplifting for queer users, describing them as "safe" because face-to-face settings involve heightened risks related to negative reactions. They also explain that online environments allow for connection across geographical distances, making it easier for queer people to find others who share their identities. Clemens et al. (2015) report that cishet users do not experience those benefits to the same degree. Additionally, Pellicane et al. (2020) found that, for queer individuals, social media can lessen the symptoms of anxiety and depression. Social media aids queer users in finding community, and affinity group support has significant positive effects on mental health. In the Pellicane et al. (2020) study, those positive effects of social media on anxiety and depression were not observed in cishet participants.

Despite the literature showing social media's positive benefits for queer people, this population is still more likely to experience mental health challenges compared to cishet peers (Pellicane et al., 2020). The CDC (2019) reports notable health disparities for queer youth. For example, 63% of LGB youth have felt sad or hopeless persistently compared to only 28% of heterosexual youth. Additionally, 48% of LGB youth have seriously considered suicide compared to only 13% of their heterosexual peers. Queer individuals also suffer higher rates of violence: 78% of trans students in K-12 report experiencing harsh harassment, and more than one of four gay teens are kicked out of their homes. Homophobia causes degradation of well-being for those targeted (Ceglarek and Ward, 2016). It exists both online and offline.

Due to its disadvantaged health status and unique social media outcomes, the queer population needs special attention in academic research. Moreover, there is a historical underrepresentation of minorities in academic research: this study will contribute to the growing body of literature that departs from that tradition. The following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: What are the dimensions of homophobia on social media?

RQ2: What are Generation Z queer users' use and experiences of social media?

RQ3: What platform features do queer users believe would enhance queer users' experience on social media?

Methods

Participants

Any queer person between the ages of 18-25 was welcome to participate, regardless of their specific identity under the queer umbrella or their gender. Convenience sampling and snowball sampling were employed, as recruitment occurred via flyers on Stanford University campus and through word of mouth. There were fifteen participants total and all but one grew up in the U.S. Most participants are current undergraduate students at four-year institutions. Two participants are in graduate programs, one participant completed some community college, and one participant has a high school diploma with no college credit.

The interviews took place between October 2022 and February 2023. Participants volunteered their time and insight and were not compensated. Participants' specific demographic information is listed in the table below:

Figure 1

Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation	Education
1	Man	22	White	Gay	Undergraduate student
2	Woman	24	Latinx, White	Lesbian	Graduate student
3	Woman	24	Asian, Middle Eastern	Lesbian	Graduate student
4	Man	23	White	Gay	Undergraduate student
5	Man	24	Latinx	Gay	Some community college
6	Woman	22	White	Pansexual	Undergraduate student
7	Woman	21	Native American, White	Lesbian	Undergraduate student
8	Woman	21	White	Bisexual	Undergraduate student
9	Woman	22	Asian	Bisexual	Undergraduate student
10	Woman	20	Latinx	Bisexual	Undergraduate student
11	Woman	18	Asian, White	Queer	High school graduate
12	Genderqueer	20	White	Asexual gray-panromantic	Undergraduate student
13	Man	21	White	Gay	Undergraduate student
14	Woman	22	Asian	Lesbian	Undergraduate student
15	Trans Man	3	Middle Eastern White	Bisexual	Undergraduate student

Procedure

The interviews were conducted on the video conference platform Zoom. We do not believe that conducting the interview online negatively affected the degree of self-disclosure or the quality of responses because, following the COVID-19 pandemic and dramatically increased use of video calls, most individuals are comfortable conversing over Zoom. The protocol

consisted of 20 open-ended interview questions asking about each participant's personal social media use and experiences, as well as their perceptions of queer acceptance more broadly. Participants had the option to skip any questions, and they were reassured at the start of the interview that there were no right or wrong answers, but rather that we were interested in hearing their views.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded using Zoom's recording feature with the participants' permission. The audio was transcribed automatically through Zoom's transcription feature. Once the transcriptions were checked for correctness and used for analysis, the original recordings were permanently deleted. Participants were assigned identification numbers and any names mentioned during interviews were redacted so that no identifiable information remained on the transcripts. The researchers then reviewed transcripts to extract themes and anecdotes that help answer our stated research questions.

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Findings

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What are the dimensions of homophobia on social media?

Distinguishing the social media experience from the offline world is crucial for queer populations, because, due to the nature of homophobic acts (e.g., hate crimes and emotional and physical violence) the online and offline worlds are two very different environments. Social media can provide physical safety that queer people cannot guarantee in face-to-face interactions. For example, a user can log off, leave, block, or report negative online interactions–safeguards that are inapplicable or more difficult to use in the offline world. To underscore this difference, we asked the participants to share how being queer online feels different than in "real life." Participant 2 explained:

> Being a queer person in the real world is so much scarier because it's harder to see
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> yourself in the people around you, and it's hard to be the minority in the room and to be
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> the one that is pushing against the status quo, and I find that my time on social media
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> kind of empowers me to go out into the world.

She began to get tearful as she explained this because she, like the other participants, finds that social media platforms help her reach community more safely.

Scales are a tool that can be used to assess current levels of discriminatory attitudes toward queer people in an individual or community and set goals for the future. A preliminary draft of our novel scale closely resembled the Riddle Scale. Participants were shown this early version during their interview via the screen sharing feature on Zoom and were invited to provide constructive and positive feedback. In addition to providing feedback, they reported their personal definition of scale items and gave examples from their lives. The final scale and accompanied explanation contain their insights, suggestions, and experiences.
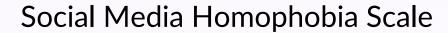
Participant 13 suggested that internal processes be separated from their associated behaviors to reflect that, especially on social media, what one says does not overlap perfectly with what one thinks and feels. Relatedly, participant 2 notes that there is a lot of emotional distance between each point that corresponds with substantial internal work to jump between them. Therefore, the structure of the scale accounts for both the internal and external aspects of homophobia and acceptance.

The Social Media Homophobia Scale

1. Violence
2. Rejection

3. Fetishization and Homohysteria

4. Tolerance

5. Affirmation

8:00

Social Media Homophobia Scale

(1) Violence
5m ago

Internal Process: Queerness is met with hatred or anger.

Associated Behavior: On social media, the user may leave malicious comments or violent threats. They would humiliate, dehumanize, and shame queer people. Cyberbullying, name-calling, and doxxing are violent behaviors that fall under this category. They might also share violent memes as a joke or publicly support anti-queer public figures, messages, and policies intended to harm the queer community.

(2) Rejection
4m ago

Internal Process: Repulsion toward or unconscious fear of queer people.

Associated Behavior: On a personal level, rejection looks like unfollowing someone once they come out, excluding someone because of their sexual orientation, and intracommunity bias. Algorithmic rejection manifests in erasure, lack of diversity in promoted content, shadowbanning, and disproportionate take-downs.

(3) Fetishization and Homohysteria
3m ago

Internal Process: A subconscious disconnect between espoused acceptance of queer people and harmful actions.

Associated Behavior: Homohysteria can look like remarks in the comments or over chat like, "that's hella gay," or compliments given to someone of the same gender accompanied by "no homo." Fetishization includes sexualizing statements like, "Can I watch you and your girlfriend have sex?" invalidating same-sex relationships or fetishizing queer individuals to fulfill a fantasy, objectifying them.

(4) Tolerance
2m ago

Internal Process: Distaste or passive neutrality toward queer people.

Associated Behavior: Passive neutrality looks like scrolling past queer content without engaging due to disintrest or mild dislike, or witnessing cyberbullying or other violence toward queer people and not stepping in.

(5) Affirmation
now

Internal Process: Loving and welcoming queer people.

Associated Behavior: Showing affirmation looks like supporting queer creators through engagement, uplifting queer voices and issues, hyping up queer friends about their ventures, like dating, or including queer couples in their own content.

The listed internal processes and associated behaviors are not meant to be exhaustive lists, only examples.

(1)   Violence

Internal Process: Hatred or anger

Associated Behavior: Violence *can* occur online. Often, one comment can launch a mob effect.

Under one post, the queer community or a queer individual can have thousands of malicious

comments directed at them due to being queer. Violence on social media can include, but is not

limited to, violent threats, humiliation, shaming, cyberbullying, name-calling, doxxing,

dehumanization, sharing violent memes, commenting religious passages frequently used to

demonize queer people, expressing sentiments like "they're pedophiles," "they're trying to hurt

our children," "they should all die," or "they're going to hell." Rather than being the instigator,

violence can also include vocally supporting anti-queer public figures, messages, policies, or

actions intended to harm the queer community. Although digital, this online behavior can

promote real-world violence in others, make queer people fear for their safety, and detrimentally

impact their mental health and well-being.

When detailing the differences between the queer experience in the online vs. offline

worlds, one of the most salient differences is safety. Being "out" in person means one cannot

control how one will be received and treated. Online, it can be *physically* safer, but there is still

violence. Participant 1 said that he has seen active calls to violence online, elaborating, "I use

Reddit a lot for talking to people who go to my school or people who have the same interests as

me. But, sometimes things come through…and it's like full-on 'we need to go kill these people.

They're trying to take our children' or whatever." Participant 2 also sees hateful threatening

statements on social media and emphasized that the impact of such behavior on the target's

emotional well-being should be extremely alarming, as consequences, such as taking one's own

life, can be a direct result of online hate. While hiding behind a screen and typing threats may seem like it should not trigger the feeling of imminent harm, it could. She explained that queer people are being attacked for their sexual orientation in the offline world and that hearing about that on social media can make queer people feel deeply unsettled and more vulnerable. Due to globalization aided by social media, queer people in the U.S. and other progressive areas are exposed to those hateful ideologies and can internalize them. For example, a revolution is underway in Iran right now over human rights; in Iran, an individual could be put to death for not being heterosexual (Gritten, 2022). Queer people in the U.S. hear about this on their newsfeeds, from watching others' Instagram stories, etc. Hearing about such violence, despite not experiencing it directly, can also be detrimental. Overall, violence against queer people is happening abroad and in the U.S., and the social media sphere is no exception.

(2) Rejection

Internal Process: Unconscious fear or repulsion

Associated Behavior: Rejection can be unintentional, deliberate, or systematic. Unintentional rejection can occur because social media feeds show more of what people like or already know, so queer posts and individuals may fail to reach the feeds of those who lack experience or awareness of the queer community. Deliberate rejection can look like queer people feeling like they cannot post about their identity or relationships because they may lose friends. Rejection can occur even within the queer community, like claims that bisexual people are not "gay enough." Algorithmic rejection includes erasure, such as shadow banning and disproportionate take-downs. One case of rejection built into platforms (systematic rejection) is queer women's experience on dating apps. Every woman-identifying participant we interviewed who previously

used a traditional dating site reported being solicited by heterosexual couples, under the guise of a female profile, for the purpose of finding "unicorns" who are willing to have threesomes.

Participants 8 and 14 strongly believe that algorithmic bias is present against queer people, which is why part of this paper includes suggestions for app developers on how to improve equality among users and acceptance of queer populations. Other participants shared how rejection can occur between users. Participant 1 has seen comments attempting to morally shame queer people like "this is against God's will" on a wholesome video of a gay couple. On a more personal level, participant 5 vulnerably explained:

> I feel uncomfortable coming out, especially in the gaming community. I don't know how people are going to react to that or how they're gonna treat me, their friend. I'm afraid of being excluded. So, I feel like I'd rather not let that happen or give them that chance. I would rather not let them think of me as whatever I am, and we can enjoy playing Super Smash Brothers or Overwatch or Valorant. I even find myself trying not to sound too feminine on the voice chat so that people don't start thinking that I am probably a gay guy. I feel like I may be overthinking this, but at the same time, I don't want to risk it.

(3) Fetishization and Homohysteria

Internal Process: A disconnect between one's espoused acceptance of queer people and one's harmful actions.

Associated Behavior: Despite a person not considering themselves homophobic, their actions can still be harmful. Statements like "that's hella gay" are used to insult. Although they may not be intentionally used to hurt queer people, they imply homosexuality is negative. Compliments

given to someone of the same gender may be accompanied by "no homo" to distance the commenter from queerness and from being perceived as gay. Queer women face fetishization online. On social media chats like Discord, queer women hear things like, "Can I watch you and your girlfriend have sex?" that objectify them. The speaker may not realize that what they are saying expresses that queerness is less valid than heterosexuality or recognize the harm in sexualizing queer individuals to fulfill their own fantasy. Similarly, on platforms like TikTok, gay male influencers can have large cishet female followings that make sexualizing comments complimenting the influencers. The online atmosphere can embolden individuals to say comments they would not say face-to-face. Although the commenters may believe themselves to be supportive, their comments objectify and fetishize.

Fetishization and homohysteria occurs when homophobia is decreasing in a given culture or society (McCormack and Anderson, 2014). Fetishization involves hyper-sexualizing a person or group by reducing them to their identity, as if they are putting on a show for others' pleasure. People who do this may not consider themselves homophobic, but fetishization is not affirming of queer people. Participant 3 said:

> I hate [fetishization]. I get TikTok sounds where it's some guy who's talking about how he is going to "turn" this gay girl and make her want him. It's common in music sometimes and it can be prevalent on social media.

Homohysteria is most demonstrated by cishet men (McCormack, 2014). It is the fear of being thought to be queer when one believes that being queer is undesirable. Participant 5 shared a personal experience emblematic of homohysteria:

When I was in high school and middle school, a very common phrase you would hear was, 'oh, that's gay. That's hella gay. Like gay as F.' That was when I didn't even know I was gay, either. But I knew that it still hurt. I felt super uncomfortable with that. I was like, you can't just use that word as a bad word.

Participant 4 also shared an example of homohysteria from his experience on Grindr. Grindr is a dating app for queer men, describing the app as:

An interesting space [where] you can get the whole range of people [but most] are in it purely for the sex–that's the most common use for Grindr. Unsolicited dick pics are very common… but in terms of the homohysteria and fetishization, [it] does happen. I've seen accounts of someone who's like 'I'm straight but I want to experiment,' and it's sort of like they have to go out of their way to inform you, 'I am straight.'

Participant 8 conveyed that some people watch queer content/creators to fulfill fantasies, not because they are allies. She thought separating act from intent would be fitting in defining homophobia, saying "I think one thing that not everyone would realize is that it can be totally hidden; it could be in the intentions of watching the videos, and that is totally an invisible fact."

(4)   Tolerance

Internal Process: Distaste or passive neutrality

Associated Behavior: Queer people perceive tolerance negatively, for it involves putting up with their identity. Someone exhibiting tolerance may think, "Oh, I don't care if gay people exist; they can do their thing, as long as they don't rub it in my face." They are not actively opposing queerness, but they still perceive queerness as negative. As a queer person, you can be who you are, but a tolerant person will not appreciate or love you for who you are. They will not take

drastic means to demean you, but they are thinking it. Tolerance in a social media context may also be invisible. On social media, tolerance looks like passive neutrality: scrolling past posts and queer creators without engaging or witnessing cyberbullying or other violence and not stepping in.

Tolerance was the scale item with which participants had the strongest emotional reaction. Each participant could talk about a moment in which they were met with tolerance. They expressed that tolerance hurts because it is thinly veiled distaste. Participant 4 said, "I generally perceive tolerance as a negative word. I find tolerance to be putting up with something…they're fine with it if you don't do it around them, so they tolerate you being gay, just not reminding them that you are gay." Participant 2 also shared a personal story about her brother, "He's okay with it technically, and he's fine with us being our own people, but I feel with tolerance there's always this hard edge of 'I really don't accept you. I'm just not actively trying to do harm to you in an overt manner.'" Participant 3 also shared her personal reaction to tolerance:

> Tolerance sucks…I think tolerance is as bad as any form of prejudice that is still demonization…Tolerance is just putting up with someone. It's not accepting them. It's not loving them for who they are. It's not supporting them. It's saying, 'You are a burden, but I will allow you to exist in my presence'…It means maybe you're not going to fight them every day on their identity…you won't take the most drastic means, but you don't love them for who they are, so I think it's as vile, problematic, and hurtful in my life.

She also said when she thinks of tolerance, she recalls the Don't Ask Don't Tell military policy that ended in 2011. Prior to that policy, which was enacted in 1993, lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals were wholly banned from participating in the military. With the policy, they were

allowed to enlist if they remained in the closet. In July 2017, former President Trump tweeted that transgender individuals would be banned from the military or forcibly removed if they were currently enlisted ("Repeal," n.d.). These are examples how real policies or authority figures communicate what a moral body looks like and how it behaves.

Tolerance has a negative edge, neutrality less so. However, a neutral person is a bystander, not an ally. Participant 5 defined neutrality as, "You're not against it, but you're also not doing anything to help, support, or defend it." Participant 10 said that if a user is "not interested in seeing videos of two women together, it's not going to pop up because [that user's] algorithm knows it's not what [they] want to see. Once in a blue moon, [they] might get a video like that, and if [they're] not interested, [they] just won't stick around to watch it." A person demonstrating neutrality might watch homophobic videos or see hateful comments without reporting them or standing up against them. They may also watch content from queer creators and enjoy it, but not engage with the content to show support or go out of their way to defend queer people when a friend says something homophobic. They may not think critically about their opinion on queer people's rights or uphold them through voting or activism. Someone who is neutral may not have an issue with homophobic views and not see them as wrong, claiming everyone has a right to their opinion. Yet, homophobic views have been wielded to rob people of their rights as equal human beings, so they are unethical.

(5) Affirmation

Internal Process: Loving and welcoming

Associated Behavior: Affirmation is demonstrated by those who actively go out of their way to let queer individuals know they are loved and celebrated. Affirmation creates an environment

where queer people can wholly be themselves in their identities, relationships, etc., without any concerns of judgment. Queer people are loved not *despite* who they are, but because of it. Affirming queer people on social media looks like supporting queer creators, uplifting queer voices, or hyping up friends about their ventures, like dating, under their posts. One example may be a TikTok psychiatrist consistently providing content related to queer couples. Another example is cishet users creating or engaging with content related to queer subculture. However, affirmation also can come off as too enthusiastic or be thoughtless, such as forgetting the confidentiality of a person's queer identity and outing them with the intention of being inclusive or celebratory. An affirming ally respects queer-centered spaces and queer culture by knowing when an environment or terminology is not meant for them; cishet presence will invariably alter queer spaces and the expression and safety of those within it.

      While acceptance means holding only positive emotions towards queerness, it implies that queerness is an obstacle to be accepted. Participant 5, who is not out to many people due to fear of homophobia, explains how acceptance feels:

> I actually feel relieved and grateful to be accepted instead of [them] feeling kind of neutral or normal. I feel relieved, like, oh, thank goodness, I'm glad you're not homophobic or anything. I feel like I have to thank the universe for something, but why do I have to be thankful for something like that? I just am who I am.

Contrastingly, participant 3 describes affirmation:

> Whether it's coming from a straight ally, or from people who are just like you, it means that they see you, and they love you *for* that thing, too. They know that it makes you who you are. They know that it gives you the strength that you do, the wounds that you have,

and everything about you. They understand that it's all tied together, and that to love you means to love that part of you as well. So, affirmation is loving, celebrating, and supporting you. It's the highest form of love and support; it's often also listening and creating space for you. It can show up in a lot of different ways, but I think it's important that it's active and not just passive, and it is really far from tolerance. And, I think it's the best thing that anyone can give to a person from the LGBTQ community.

Of course, there is a distinction between being an affirming ally and being within the queer community. Several participants said an ally could never truly understand their experience. For allies, affirmation is the ultimate goal.

To determine the importance of prioritizing social change and the positivity of online spaces, we asked participants how important feeling accepted is to their overall well-being. Seven participants said it was "very important," four said "it depends," and three said it is "not important." The "it depends" answers were explained as follows:

- Participant 5 sees acceptance as a perk he is very grateful for, but does not expect it.
- Participant 11 said that acceptance is crucial from those she cares about, but that it does not matter with strangers because it would be too overwhelming to care about how everyone sees her.
- Participant 13 and 15 clarified that acceptance is very important in the long term, but bias against them can be coped with in the short term.

The seven participants who considered acceptance very important were adamant in their answers. Demonstrating this, participant 2 exclaimed, "Oh, [acceptance is] super important, a million through the roof, because it's an integral part of who I am, and I am probably going to cry

again. But, it is so heartwarming to be celebrated by my friends, and it is very gut-wrenching to know that I can't have that same celebration with my family."

While acceptance is important to her, that was not the case with all participants. For example, participant 3 said:

> I'd say [acceptance] is not very important because my sense of identity and my self-confidence in that area of my identity is unshakeable and unwavering. I don't have any internal homophobia left or I would say very little…so if someone rejects me it's almost laughable in my mind because I don't respect whatever weird ideology they may have and it doesn't affect me. I can recognize it for what it is: it's bigotry and has nothing to do with me. It has nothing to do with how I see myself.

Participant 3 attributed her confidence to finding queer community on social media as a young person. Before she realized she was lesbian, she engaged with queer pages on Tumblr that were very affirming so she knew that, despite people in her real life being unaccepting, there were people she could turn to who were fully supportive. While she does not let homophobia affect her sense of self, she went on to explain that dealing with it is a heavy mental load. She shared that it is hard to defend herself and who she is and that having to do that saddens and frustrates her. Her coping strategy is "griping" to her community and bonding over that common experience.

Participant 2's reflections juxtaposed with participant 3's and shows the great range of experiences within the queer community–even between two lesbians. Closely examining how queer people report the importance of acceptance for their well-being helps us understand if and to what degree we should care about enhancing it on a societal level. Our first research question guided us to co-create, in community, this social media homophobia scale. The social media

homophobia scale can act as a guide to allies to advance affirmation, the most loving and welcoming level on the scale. It also calls out substandard levels, such as being a bystander in the face of homophobia or simply tolerating queer people. Even though this scale could be an effective tool to encourage affirmation, it can also be used as an objective way to understand what the online experience of queer people is like or be a self-reflection tool. The visualization of the scale, taken apart from our long-form explanations, is not inextricably linked to a certain set of beliefs; it could be read objectively.

What are Generation Z queer users' use and experiences of social media?

Of our three research aims in this study, the second is to understand, from the perspective of queer people, the state of queer representation on social media. The most salient things mentioned across interviews were echo chambers and algorithms, queer versus cishet social media use, and the nature of queer content. These topics also help illuminate how queer individuals are thinking and feeling about the social environment online.

Echo Chambers and Algorithms

When trying to summarize the state of queer representation online, participant 1 recognized the disconnect between what he sees and what others encounter, explaining:

> With representation, I feel like we're pretty good. I do also recognize that I'm in a content tunnel. Because every social media [platform], whether it's YouTube or whatever, figures out what you want to see, it will feed you that. But, I feel like it might be difficult for people who are outside of that stream to find it. I think the whole echo chamber issue is one of the biggest issues that we're facing as a country, even outside of LGBTQ+ communities.

Queer participants are hyper-aware of the one-sided view they see on social media due to algorithms. When talking about the benefits and concerns of algorithms, participants named TikTok, followed by the Instagram Explore Page or Reels, the most. Participant 2 described algorithms as follows:

On TikTok or just general social media, since we get to curate our experience, and we can kind of fall into those niches if we help the algorithm go in that direction. Because of that, I feel there is a really great presence of queer people online, but I do also recognize it's not something that everybody sees.

For TikTok specifically, participants deemed their niche "GayTok." Eight of the fifteen participants expressed that their social media hosts almost *entirely* queer content. For example, participant 3, who estimates 75% of her feed is queer, is glad that's the case: "I think they really nailed the algorithm there." Participant 10 said that her social media feeds *always* feel affirming. Naturally, she loves the feeling of a welcoming environment and explained that that is why she's on TikTok "all the time." Participant 10 did wonder "how much representation someone who's not on [her] algorithm would see." She also conveyed that algorithms are a black box: "if you're not on the algorithm, and you want to find yourself on that algorithm, I feel like it will happen for you just naturally." Thanks to her highly personalized environment, she does not interface with hateful content or even "just tolerant" users. She explained that, because TikTok knows she's not straight, it knows what she'll be interested in seeing. Participant 3 experiences the same benefit. When she sees negative content about queerness, "It's always really shocking and surprising, but it does exist. I don't think queer people tend to see it. If your algorithm is an active reflection of who you are, I think you tend to see videos that represent you."

Participant 15 also estimated that 90% of his feed is queer; he almost never sees instances of hate. He also noted that he sometimes seeks out conservative viewpoints out of curiosity. Ultimately, that was detrimental to him. He explained:

It's satisfying in some way, but also seeps into little corners of your brain. You can't shake it. They'll say something that invalidates you as a trans person, and you're like, 'I hate you'; 'You're so dumb'; 'You're obviously just transphobic and trying to appeal to [more viewers].' But then, the next day, you think…'Am I really trans? Do they have a point?' It's just really self-destructive, psychologically, it's not a good move at all.

Participants 7 and 15 pointed out another nuance: the volume of queer content they see online does not accurately reflect the offline world. Participant 7 elaborated, saying that going to class or going out in general feels "straighter" that the social media environment does. Participant 9 said she feels more represented on social media compared to other media, like television, where queer representation often feeds into stereotypes. However, she also expressed concerns over the algorithm, saying, "I feel like it gives the illusion that everyone is seeing [queer content] and, maybe, everyone is becoming more accepting of queer people and trans people. But really, it's just [that the algorithm] knows that I am all for that stuff, so it's giving it to me." Participant 11 expressed the same sentiment, saying:

If I had no other context, I would be like, 'Yeah, people are totally represented,' just because that's just what I see a lot of…And then I'll go into the real world, and people will be like, 'Oh, what is ace? What does that mean?' or, 'What is a romantic spectrum?' It's just such a shift between me going into the depths of this [online] community, and all the discourse and all the jokes and whatnot. And then, going outside of that, and people don't even know the first thing about it.

Participant 11 said the associated feeling is isolation. Overall, algorithms can provide an affirming sanctuary for queer people, but may be contributing to users' warped perception of the world, regardless of what "side" of TikTok they are on.

Heterosexual vs. Queer Social Media Use

This study and the broader literature on queer people's social media use show that queer users have unique needs and experiences.

One prevalent concern among participants is palatability. Participant 5 said if he ever were to come out, he'd still avoid posting pictures of him and his boyfriend kissing "because then that may be too much for people to handle…and I don't want to trigger anyone." He thought a straight couple would likely not think twice about posting similar pictures. Participant 4 thought that gay and lesbian people are mostly accepted by society, but that trans visibility is now the "hot button" issue. Participant 8 had a similar theory, saying that while homosexuality is mainstream, trans, non-binary, and polyamorous people have less positive exposure. Participant 14 emphasized intersectionality, highlighting that the experience of a non-white straight woman might relate more to her than a gay white man because white men are still afforded more respect in our society. In her eyes, gay men are at the forefront of queer visibility, the ones who benefit the most from mainstream culture, and that "non-white queer people and trans people are especially left out."

Participant 7 found humor in thinking about what cishet users might watch on TikTok, guessing that they are on "CarTok," or are just watching singing and dancing videos while she is viewing rich and affirming queer content. She explained the benefit:

I've created in my head a community that I can go to. It's not like I know these people,

but it feels like a safe space. I feel like a heterosexual [user] compared to [queer users]

would definitely not have the diversity, and they don't have these complications that they

have to deal with every day.

She concluded the benefit of social media is identity-based. Participant 10 shared similar

conclusions, saying that, while she's found a community online, "a straight person just would

never have because they don't have to." Finding a community that can be excited about

queerness is, in her words, an element of social media that is "really special."

But, not all differences between queer and cishet social media use are positive. Some

platforms fail to prioritize queer users' safety, such as popular dating sites like Tinder. Participant

2 is open to the possibility of a relationship and is using dating sites to help find a romantic

partner. She has a profile on Hinge, Bumble, and Tinder, where she identifies herself as a

woman, and selects that she is interested in dating other women. Unfortunately, she is shown

women who are not single, but rather are in relationships with men and looking for a "unicorn."

A unicorn is a single person, typically a woman, who would be open to a threesome with a

heterosexual couple. Participant 2 said that at least two out of every ten profiles she sees are

couples looking for a third. She elaborated on the definition and what she encounters:

It's just super common. Typically, it's a female of a couple. The woman will create a

profile, and then she'll say, 'Oh, my gosh! Me and my boyfriend are looking for a third,'

or, 'We're looking for a unicorn,' etcetera. It feels very much, back to your scale, like the

fetishization of queer culture, because of the idea of men finding it hot that girls make

out, but do not give weight and validity to the fact that women love each other, and that

that exists outside of their existence. Additionally, it also invalidates more queer

relationships, because it's, 'Oh, it doesn't matter if my girlfriend has sex with another

woman, because it doesn't count,' when it literally does in other relationships. They're

just choosing not to bring it to the same level.

Then, participant 2 opened up about how it feels:

At first, I thought it was funny and intriguing. It's not that I was interested, but I found it

intriguing in the same way that we like to eavesdrop on other people's tea…But, after a

bit of time, I just got really fed up and tired and kind of angry at it. Especially because I

feel like there are people who are constantly coming into queer spaces, and it is very

frustrating.

This experience is an example of a platform failing to accommodate queer users. Instead of being

shown individual women's profiles, participant 2 is being targeted to fulfill a fantasy and reduced

to the sexual gratification she can provide to someone else. Again, each of the

woman-identifying participants we interviewed who have used traditional dating sites have

encountered accounts like this, so it is indicative of a broader trend and problem.

Comparing queer and cishet people's experience illuminates the different social media

needs of the groups. However, although queer people comprise a community, their experiences

vary tremendously too. Participant 13 joked that the LGBTQIAP+ community is the "alphabet

mafia," a grouping that should not convey homogeneity. Queerness is just *not* being cisgender

and heterosexual. It should not stir any specific images or assumptions. A few participants

underscored distinctions within the queer community that show that social

experiences–particularly those on social media–depend on which letter of the alphabet mafia you

belong to. Participant 4 said lesbian and gay representation seems to have improved, but that

trans rights and representation is still a prominent issue. Participant 4 said he has seen comments

that get "pretty nasty," telling trans people they should commit suicide, that they are worthless, and that they are "ladyboys" or "femboys."

Another dividing factor that came up is the perceptibility of one's queer identity. Specifically, participant 10, who is femme, and participant 11, who is masc, spoke about the obstacles they face. The femme feels like she is not "gay enough" among other lesbians. She also worries that because she cannot tell if other feminine girls are queer, she may misinterpret their attention as potential interest, but does not want to risk coming off as predatory. The masc feels like people do not question nor give unwanted attention to her same-sex relationship because it aligns more closely with society's gender binary and gender role expectations. She said, "I definitely think that people try to put gay relationships into a box, like there has to be a man, and there has to be a woman. To pair a masc and a femme together, people just say that makes sense." When she started styling more masc, she also noticed people treated her differently as a result. Now, she cannot compliment other women without seeming flirtatious nor can she engage with children as casually because parents react with fear. But, men do not accept her either.

Participant 5 thinks that male same-sex couples are looked down on more than female same-sex couples. Being gay is equated with being less of a man: weak and pathetic. He tied this to homohysteria, saying the same people who would hold that belief would use phrases like, "Oh, that's freaking gay," "Oh, that's so gay," "Don't do that, that's kind of homo." He said, in his experience, statements like that are usually directed at men by men.

These select examples show why it would be important for platform developers to consider the diverse types of users on their platform instead of factoring in their queer users as a homogenous group.

The Nature of Queer Content

Figure 2

Collage of Queer Influencers and Celebrities Mentioned by Participants[4]

Queer content has an impact on individuals, communities, and the perception of popular

stars or media. Social media can be extremely empowering for queer people. Participant 2

shared, "I'm following so many queer people on TikTok, and anytime I get on TikTok it feels like

just a barrage of queerness…Just being able to see that representation feels very much like I'm at

home. I feel safe. I feel warm." Participant 8 articulated that, for queer users, something as

simple as putting a rainbow emoji in one's social media bio is like an "announcement to the

world." Participants 5 and 13 agreed that coming out on social media quickly and impressively

disseminates the information to one's social network and is like a permanent digital tattoo.

Interestingly, participants 8 and 13 are single, so they cannot come out by posting a couple's

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[4] This collage showcases queer content creators and celebrities whom participants mentioned are important to them, being pivotal in their coming of age, meaningful representation, or entertaining to watch. From left to right then top to bottom, they are Gigi Gorgeous, James Charles, Stanchris, Camille and Julie, Avery Cyrus, Hannah Hart, Josh Helfgott, Ashlyn Harris, Dylan Mulvaney, Lil Nas X, Renee Rapp, Matt XIV, Natalie Wynn, Eugene Yang, Troye Sivan, Noah Schnapp, Tyler Oakley, Taylor Swift, Jojo Siwa, Kim Petras, Megan Rapinoe, Kyla Nova, Olivia Ponton, and Yasmine Benoit.

photo. Doing so, they said, would be the easy way to come out. Without a couple's post, coming out will be more subtle, as it is not as typical, and could even be awkward, to post a picture of oneself as an announcement. Nuances like this are important to understanding how queer people navigate the social media environment; their social media norms and positive and negative experiences do not entirely overlap with cishet users.

Queer content does not remain solely in social media echo chambers, for its influence can reach the broader community. Participant 14 asserted that trends and "what drives the internet" is often produced by queer people. Popular slang and fashion are two things she pointed out originate from queer people of color. She described it as "trickling outward" until it becomes mainstream. She and participant 15 said cool clothing and hair styles for women echo fashion that queer women introduced. Many straight men are wearing jewelry and nail polish now as queer men have been doing. The dissemination tool is social media. Participant 14 clarified that this is not harmful appropriation, but it would still be uplifting to recognize these trends are born from queer communities.

Content creation can be an expression of queer culture made *by* queer people *for* queer people. Although affirmation through cultural appreciation is important, it can unintentionally lead to the dilution of some predominantly queer environments (Drushel, 2018). The heightened visibility that results from cishet individuals in queer spaces invariably alters that space. He writes that assimilation of queer people into mainstream culture is not the goal because it threatens the unique culture of the community. Drushel (2018) compares that process to the U.S. imagery of a "melting pot," in which everyone is supposedly welcome but the liveliness of separate cultures is diminished into a "sludge like stew" (1759).

Participant 15 explained some more niche facets of the queer community online. For instance, many animals are queer-coded, including frogs, raccoons, rats, crows, worms, and snails. For example, participant 15 follows a page that primarily posts queer frog memes. He said the beauty of queer culture is that the queer community has repurposed symbols to hold meaning. Participant 15 also stressed that cishet users should be aware and mindful of queer-centered spaces to not intrude on them. Affirmation includes not co-opting queer spaces and culture. For example, cishet peers using queer terms like "pillow princess" or "top and bottom" is inapplicable to them and, in his words, "disturbing."

As discussed in the literature review, queer audiences often must read between the lines to find media representation of queer identities and relationships among celebrities and other popular media (Anselmo, 2018). A viral example from 2022 is Taylor Swift's "Gaylor" fandom. Self-proclaimed Gaylors believe Swift is queer and has hidden her same-sex relationships in the past, most notably, her suspected romance with supermodel Karlie Kloss. Participant 3, an enthusiastic Gaylor, explained some of the reasons for this suspicion. Below are some pieces of evidence, in Participant 3's words:

1. "There's a song called "Ivy" [that's lyrics] point to being about Emily Dickinson and her secret love with Sue. It's all about being in love with "someone"–not gendered–who is married to a man and that the man would burn the house down if they were found out, but that the other person's love is ivy on a house…it grows and has taken root there anyway. It just uses a lot of imagery that sounds like Emily Dickinson's era, and Taylor doesn't frequently license her songs, but she allowed that song to be used during and after a famous sex scene between Emily Dickinson and Sue in the show *Dickinson*."

2. In Swift's song "Right Where You Left Me" "there's this quote where she says that you could 'hear a hairpin drop'…Gaylors and anyone who is paying attention to lyrics and looking at it through a queer theory lens would know that 'hairpin' is a super famous queer word because 'dropping hairpins' is a phrase for dropping that you're queer. Stonewall, which was the start of Pride and one of the most famous parts of LGBTQ history, was known as 'the hairpin drop heard around the world.'"

3. In Swift's new album, the first song is "Lavender Haze." "Lavender is specifically known as a lesbian flower, a queer flower. It's something that you could give to your lover…again, really *really* overt messaging."

These are just a few of the many key pieces of evidence that participant 3 relayed. She also explained that she understands why Swift may not overtly come out: she is one of the biggest and most well-known pop singers of this era, but she began her career in the more conservative genre of country music. It would be a career risk to come out explicitly, as some of her fan base may be revolted or angry. At the same time, Swift's choice to only hint about her sexual orientation has forced queer fans to analyze lyrics. Hetlors (the fans who insist Swift is heterosexual) are, according to participant 3, very aggressive online. Heterosexual individuals do not need to search to find a song or love story that is representative of their relationship.

In addition to speaking about the queer influencers they watch and follow, participants were eager to share the ways social media benefits them, specifically, and queer people in general. Being a queer person on social media–whether a passive observer or active–is completely different from being a queer person offline. Participant 13 relayed that code-switching based on context and selective self-exposure is fundamental to the queer experience.

Participant 2, a lesbian woman whose family is unaccepting, said social media helped her figure out what being queer looks like and is all about. Participant 12 conveyed the importance of such a space, because if you do not have it, you might grow to believe there is something fundamentally wrong with you, no one else feels this way, and that you need to change yourself to be like everyone else. Participant 13 said, over time, without support, one will start to self-blame. He recognized that there will always be "haters," but with social media, people who support you can significantly outnumber those who say negative things and put you down. Usually, he said, "the comments section takes care of itself." Participant 11 said that quantity is more important than quality in this regard because if you have one great friend who is also queer, you could still conclude you both are the odd ones out. The participant also thinks it is easy to feel included on social media because you can see other queer people go through the same problems, confusion, and coming out experiences. Social media connects queer people across great distances, so it is easy to find people like you. In contrast, in person, you may be in an inhospitable environment, like a small town where the culture is not inclusive.

Participant 10 lived at home in a small town in Illinois during the pandemic and shared her story about how social media helped her:

During COVID I downloaded TikTok, and God, honestly, that helped me just come to terms with everything. It just made [my sexual orientation] less something to be ashamed of or scared of and more something that was cool. It's like something you want to be a part of…it was fun to see these relationships that were not present in Illinois…It's like getting a glimpse of the outside world when I was literally just stuck in Illinois…it just made me more excited…and happy….I just always feel included when I'm looking at the

comments, and we're all thinking the same things. They're all happy and accept each other and stuff like that.

Most other participants echoed this sentiment wholeheartedly. Participant 5's perspective was the most unique, as he is not out so he avoids engaging with queer content entirely. He goes as far as to click "not interested" for fear he could be found out if someone borrows his device or sees over his shoulder. He talks about the positivity of social media enthusiastically:

I hear a lot from other people that they joined these gay communities, gay discord chats, or discord chats for lesbian gamers. That sounds so cool. You could probably easily find that, and then you'd have this group of awesome friends that you'd probably never see face to face, but it just makes your day… I can't wait to explore the LGBT communities online. They are, from what I've seen, so fun. It's so great. I know it's something I would love.

Participant 1 captured a core benefit of social media: connecting with other queer people online "allows people to come into that space, post and read about it, and just feel like there's some light on the other side of the tunnel."

Overall, participants reported that social media played a positive role in their lives, but also harbored some concerns. Participant 6 spoke about being interpreted in a way that she did not expect. She posted a video of herself in the format of a popular trend which invites people to jokingly give their ranking of the creator's attractiveness. The video accrued several thousand views despite her anticipating it would only be seen by her friends. Women she had never met were leaving flirtatious comments. First, she was shocked to see people could tell she was queer, as it reached a female audience. Second, she said, "I don't think that people would be outwardly forthcoming with that kind of commentary in real life." Participant 14 said social media's culture

can be detrimental to users, including what people are willing to say online and what they choose to care about. Online environments can lead to a lot of misunderstanding. For younger queer people, they may adopt very cynical views about the world because, in participant 14's eyes, people tend to focus on small things online instead of more substantial offline issues. She provided the example of JK Rowling's controversy: the author is openly transphobic, so people online argue about the ethics of reading Harry Potter books, enjoying the movies, and playing related games. Participants 14 and 15 thought queer people would be better served finding solutions for issues like the disproportionate number of queer people who are made homeless at young ages through activism and improving awareness. Participant 14 said, "If you spend too much time on the internet, it can make you forget that there are problems that [are more pressing]." She joked, "go touch some grass," which is a popular phrase used by Gen Z to encourage people to get off of social media and get out into the real world.

What platform features would queer participants suggest to enhance queer users' experience on social media?

Our third and final research question invites queer participants' suggestions for improving queer users' experience online. We asked them for suggestions they would give to platform developers and to younger queer people. Fox and Ralston (2016) emphasize that social media can fulfill an important educational function for queer users, especially those with less common identities, because users "shar[e] information with others about their experiences as an LGBTQ person." For the participants in the present study, Fox and Ralston's (2016) findings rang true, as finding community online is healing to them. For example, participant 15 explained that his school and parents did not include queer sex in their sex education or sex talks. So, he turned to YouTube and Tumblr to learn about queer sex safety and mechanics. Queer content

creators would, in a respectful and affirming manner, provide to the queer community the education that was lacking offline. As a trans man, it was foundational for him to learn how trans men have sex from individuals who are also trans men. He elaborated on the value of learning things from other trans men:

> [Trans creators] putting themselves out there–with their face–talking about the specifics of their medical transition is really risky. You can get doxxed. You can definitely get chased off of the internet: it's happened to a lot of people. So, the fact that they still [posted], because they knew that it would help young trans kids like me, was really nice and made me feel really included.

Participant 4 concluded that, while social media is an "amazing venue for change, it is almost impossible to change the mind of a singular individual." He said:

> It backfires! It's an actual psychological effect: it's called the backfire effect. Trying to change someone's worldview–and sometimes being anti-gay is a worldview for people–causes them to lash out because it's denying everything that they have been raised on until that point and actually makes them believe in that [original] opinion more strongly.

Consequently, he believes social media platforms should not necessarily focus on changing people who exhibit homophobia. A few participants argued this same sentiment. They believe there will always be "haters," and that it should not be queer people's burden to jeopardize their well-being to educate them. While no participants said they take the time to argue with someone in the comment section, they did have ideas about what platform developers could do to enhance queer users' experience. None of the participants have a technical background in software development, and we argue that it makes this advice more valuable because it is the authentic reactions and unfettered recommendations of everyday queer social media users.

Queer Users' Advice to Foster Uplifting Social Media Platforms

- Introduce a more effective method to block certain sounds on TikTok, so that if a popular song contains a homophobic lyric, for example, the user does not have to engage with it or click "Not Interested" to no avail. Relatedly, users should be able to block certain songs on Spotify so that if homophobic songs like Drake's "Girls Like Girls" is on a playlist, the user does not have to manually skip it.

- Prioritize the safety of marginalized groups in particular. When instances of hate occur, ask community members of the oppressed group what reaction and solutions feel appropriate.

- Disseminate more ads that feature queer couples, so that queer users feel represented and welcomed. But, this content should not only occur during Pride month, as inclusivity should be a sustained effort.

- Foster true safe spaces online for identity groups by verifying users who join. An important aspect of this would be to prevent false verifications of users who could be trolls.

- Attach a marker to queer users' accounts (that opt in) that can only be seen by other queer users.

- Monitor hate speech more carefully and publish a transparent policy for deplatforming violent accounts.

- Ensure censorship and shadow banning does not affect queer content or creators at disproportionate rates.

- Normalize the use of pronouns in bios.

- Prevent screenshotting by turning the screen black when it is attempted, like streaming platforms do. This safeguard could help prevent someone from getting outed.

- Allow users to see what trends and creators their acquaintances watch most to jumpstart finding shared interests and other commonalities.

- Put content warnings on users' pages for "homophobic content" or other triggering material.

- Host open discussions featuring minority advisors to debate the fine line between limiting freedom of speech and protecting the community from prejudice, hate speech, and violence.

- Invite users to look at old, problematic posts after a certain amount of time and reconsider whether the posts still align with their views and should remain on their profile.

- Bump positive content about queer people because exposure begets social change. The internet can either radicalize users or open their mind more about diversity. As the safety of queer people is at stake, use social media as an educational tool.

- Break up prejudiced echo chambers because social media and technology allow hateful ideas to become accessible to larger audiences, younger users, and those who are less able to think critically about the prejudicial ideas due to lack of exposure, education, etc.

- Offer an automatic way to find other queer people near you.

- Bump authentic queer users' posts within queer hashtags, rather than bots or fetishizing content.

When we asked participants "What advice would you give to a younger queer person?" and "How would you coach a younger person on how to navigate the social media landscape?"

their answers underscored the importance of community, especially one linked by shared otherness, the quality of non-heterosexuality. Personal advice can be a crucial form of community support, especially for this population where chosen family can help maintain safety and well-being.

Advice for young queer people| 🔍

(Some responses have been paraphrased for clarity.)

https://Participant1

Find Positive Stories

When I was younger, I had a therapist who was always was trying to get me to go and find stories about young gay people who were just living their lives and being happy. I would try to share those with young people, give young people that same advice.

http://Participant4

Balance Courage and Caution

Be sure to leave some hope. You can't leave someone scared to go through the internet because that would hinder their social capabilities. There's so much social interaction that happens on social media these days and if you're afraid to step foot onto those platforms because you're afraid of getting attacked for who you are, then you're never going to do it and you're never going to have proper social interactions of this day and age. Still warn young queer people that there are sites out there that are very unaccepting of the LGBT community. It's very hard to fight against hate because hate typically wins in the end because they can keep berating you, and there's only so much that you can do to try and make them stop.

http://Participant14

Making Friends Online

If they want to make friends on social media, I would say that the best way is to just immerse themselves in some kind of subculture. There's huge, really well-established and wonderful, online communities. So, I would encourage them to be a part of one of those and to try to contribute to positivity on the internet.

http://Participant5

Find Community and Support and How to Handle Hate

I would tell them that I love the internet because it has all the resources that you could look for if you need support. Here they are! You could find these channels, these communities that you could not find at your own schools or with your parents or your own family. There is support out there–please take advantage of it. You might even find your heroes: there are gay influencers out there who share their struggles and embrace who they are, and they're really inspiring. One last thing I'd say to kids is a little bit of a warning: you might see, no matter who you are, no matter what you are, remarks made against you, whether it's sexism, racism, or homophobia. There's a lot of love, but there's also a lot of hate on the internet and it can sneak up on you. It can come out in gaming, YouTube comments, or, if you start digging a little deeper, on other platforms. Sorry, that's the reality. Most of the time, it's not personal. Even then it still hurts because people are just hating gay people for being gay. They're trying to add fuel to the fire. You can report them or block them: you are safe. We don't run away. You can avoid these comments. You can outmaneuver them. You can sometimes stand up for yourself. You can be strong. You can sometimes be a little vulnerable–don't be ashamed. But, please don't let them make you think that the internet is a no-no place. It is a great, magnificent world full of resources and communities that are there for you.

http://Participant15

Align Yourself With What You Believe In

My advice is not going to be to fact check everything you see; the world is so nuanced and nobody is realistically going to do that. Media is all biased one way or another. Maybe the ideal situation is for children to not be on the internet at all, but that's impossible. My parents tried to ban it, but it didn't work. So, just try to make sure what you're watching aligns with your values, morals, and identity. You should view the content you're watching as morally good and "right." Watching hate videos out of anger, for example, is ultimately detrimental to your well-being.

http://Participant7

Hold Friends Accountable and Follow Activists

Be attentive to what your friends post and what they "like." If you see them comment on something and it's homophobic, don't just let them have a pass. I think we do that a lot because once someone is our friend, it feels like they can get away with a lot more. Also, follow activists in the queer space because that will make you feel like you can find community, and it'll also make you feel more affirmed in your identity. Plus, it's nice to keep up with what's going on in the community. Follow your local pride account. Just like what you like. Try to personalize your feed to yourself and your liking and what makes you feel safe and comfortable.

http://Participant8

Leave Unwelcoming Spaces

If a space doesn't feel welcoming, and it's not something that you need to be a part of, you don't need to be in a place where you're not wanted. That can be really hard to actually put into practice, just because it's very hard to push people out of your life and push online connections out of your circle that are important and meaningful to you. But, at the end of the day, if a space doesn't feel accepting online–or in the real world–listen to your intuition. You really do not have to be somewhere where you're not wanted and you'll find places where you are wanted.

http://Participant12

It's Okay to Be You and How You Identify

We like categorizing the way people feel things. It's okay that you are this way, and if it doesn't fit with what you've been taught. There are other people who are like this, too. If you want to find an online space, there is that space online. If you want to accept a label, you can accept it or you could just not take it at all. That is also okay because there's allowed to be a gap between what you feel and how you identify. However you are is okay, and however you choose to define yourself is okay, and that's awesome.

http://Participant11

It's Your Life Not Theirs

I think if someone were to comment something hateful, for an older kid it's easier to block that out because you already learned how to through life. But, for someone pretty young, I would say just block them or try your best to ignore them and tell yourself, 'They're just uneducated and hateful.' I'd teach them to continue to be themselves because why should someone be telling you what to do? Why are they so interested in and worried about *your* life? Over time you learn self-respect and confidence, and that you shouldn't be caring what other people say about you.

http://Participant6

Follow Your Comfort Level

Social media is like a resume for your personality. Post what you feel comfortable with–don't feel pressured. Just because you know that you might be gay, doesn't mean you need to come out tomorrow. You should totally tell the girl you have a crush on, so you can make that happen, but you don't need to do it on your public Instagram. Just move at a speed that's comfortable for you.

http://Participant10

Bond Over Queer Media and Icons

I would share my social media with them and introduce them to all the icons. For example, my cousin is 13 and just came out as transgender not too long ago. It's been really cool to bond over queer TikTok. It's been so fun, talking about things like, "Oh my god, I love them! I love this song–a new Fletcher release!"

http://Participant9

Trust Yourself, Not Others Who Haven't Earned It

My advice would be to not trust people who have not earned your trust with private information. Also, trust your gut. If something is making you uncomfortable, it's because it's bad. You should not just entertain bad behavior. Block immediately...No one in your life should wish you ill or have malintent. Absolutely not. Just getting over that quicker, I think it's a skill.

Conclusion

We answered our three research questions by constructing a media homophobia scale, snapshotting the status of queer representation on social media, and finding areas and strategies for platform improvement by giving queer participants the ability and dignity to be the masters of their own experience and the authority on the subject.

This study adds to the existing literature showing that media can be a powerful and positive force for the queer community. Social media can be a public sphere that is much safer than a queer person's local community. Almost all of the participants said TikTok "nailed" the algorithm for them. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement. The present study is solution-focused and presents a novel social media homophobia scale. The scale reflects the unique facets of an online environment and captures internal and external processes; it should be utilized by cishet social media users aiming to demonstrate affirmation of their queer peers. The scale is a welcome contribution to sexuality studies, which have historically used scales to complicate binary understandings of concepts like gender and sexual orientation.

Another novel contribution in this study is queer users' perceptions of algorithms. Multiple participants were *concerned* about social media algorithms. They reported they do not see a lot of homophobic content, but attribute that to likely being in echo chambers**.** Participant 1 raised TikTok as an example, saying that it learned exactly what he likes and only feeds him videos he will agree with or enjoy. The status of queer representation seems impressive. But, he and other participants expressed worry that there is an opposite side: users who only see hateful content. At the same time, participants felt algorithms gifted them their safe queer niches that contribute to their sense of belonging and self-perception. We argue that asking queer users what suggestions they have for platforms is the best way to assess and address their unique needs.

Lastly, as a part of our solution-focused framework, we provide a snapshot of what queer community support looks like. Community support is crucial in queer spaces, and we showcase direct advice from our queer participants to highlight its emotional depth and underscore the resonance of shared experiences. Participants also suggested improvements platforms could employ to enhance queer users' experience. Although the suggestions have no technological grounding, they should serve as inspiration for developing inclusive and affirming platforms.

Positively reframing the deficit-focused research on queer populations, as we have done in the present study by talking to everyday queer people about their lived experiences, is empowering and imperative.

Limitations and Next Steps

This small sample of fifteen and the preliminary findings demonstrate only a fraction of the insight that could be gleaned from using this protocol with a larger sample. Moreover, the sample was not randomly generated, so it may not be representative of the broader queer population. In future studies, researchers should also focus on diversity in age, as online experiences may vary greatly across ages; a broader age range could produce more generalizable insights.

The participants in our sample identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, genderqueer, asexual, aromantic, pansexual, and queer; it is a priority to recruit queer people of other identities as well in the next phase. It would be beneficial to include multiple participants of each queer identity for more accurate findings. For example, participants repeatedly mentioned the adversity trans users face on social media, so the sample should include trans individuals. Though grouped together, the LGBTQIAP+ community contains immense diversity. On the one hand, reducing

these numerous identities into one group separated from the "default" of being cishet "others"

the community. On the other hand, the queer community, with all its diversity, is uplifting to its

members and powerful politically. For that reason, diversity in research samples is of paramount

importance. Both academics and social media companies should consider analyzing queer

identities separately, as they are not homogenous.

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