A Dramaturgical Analysis:

The Intersectionality of Queerness & Blackness in Digital Communities

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Abstract

This paper will examine expressions of queerness and Blackness in social media networks. They continue to serve as social spaces for members of sexual minority groups to communicate their identity. People who identify as queer navigate through these networks by creating and interacting with social objects that reflect their interests as well as their experiences. Individuals interact within hashtag communities on Instagram and Twitter, for example, to connect with others who may be able to relate to their life stories. These spaces are also used to educate non-members in order to humanize members who are often targets of scrutiny and violence. The intersectionality of race, gender and sex must be investigated in order to understand its impact on computer-mediated communication (CMC) among these groups. The performativity of queerness and Blackness on social media is relevant to gender studies as a discipline. They are both identities that are heavily influenced by social doctrines and socialization processes. Through a theoretical approach that considers the queer theory with an impression management analysis, the nature of communication among queer individuals can be dissected. This paper will address the dynamics of CMC between individuals who choose to identify as queer and Black on social media. It will include a discussion of its influence on communication among online audiences. A qualitative research study will help us to understand the meaning of these interactions in the context of intercultural communication.

Keywords: queer theory, social media, computer-mediated communication (CMC),

impression management, sexuality, performativity

Introduction

Gender identity and sexual orientation share a relationship that is reflected in the

behaviors of individuals each day. We perform gender and communicate identity (Woodard,

2006). Millions of people identify as bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, transgender and queer.

Throughout human history, people have represented themselves with the use of traditional media

such as newspapers, books and even television. One-on-one conversations and public forums are

often used as resources to communicate selfhood (Smith, 1978). We develop communication

patterns as we interact with people online and offline. We present what we view as the

appropriate versions of who we are in public and in private spaces among family, friends,

colleagues and associates (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). This also includes how we express our

sexual identities in digital networks. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) provides

opportunities for people to construct their identities around the world. Through coded language,

visual representation and symmetrical communication we portray who we choose to be and

audiences interpret how they should respond.

Social media channels continue to provide people with spaces to create and reflect on

their identities. Digital communities form and shift based on the dynamics of CMC as

individuals present themselves across platforms (McEwan & Sobre-Denton, 2011). Many digital

participants engage in discourse focused on sexuality and gender performativity. Their

commentary implicates people who identify outside of the social bounds of heteronormativity.

The term 'queer' has transformed over recent decades, and now digital communication is

shaping views on this (Jagose, 1996). Members of queer communities choose to situate their

experiences on their own terms while recognizing the impact of traditional gender identities and

roles. Their expression is often met with tension that is based in ignorance, misunderstanding and

hate. Their narratives serve as opportunities to structure authentic, self-authored content and are

often consulted by group members.

This digital communication analysis is intended to be used by individuals who identify as

queer, educators, social media participants, digitally active youth, parents and psychologists. I

will first review literature that highlights queer communities and race as well as digital

communication. My rationale will capture the scope of this information in which I will use to

conduct my research. Next, I will explain my methodology to closely investigate discourse on

social media and follow up with my analyses. Then, I will describe implications and suggest

recommendations for further studies. I will integrate my assertions and detail how I think this

plan can be used to guide practitioners as well as community members to conclude.

Literature Review

In this review I will provide a premise for my communication plan by defining and

analyzing key terms, theoretical frameworks as well as research projects associated with queer

studies. I will specifically discuss 'queer' as a label and identity, race as it pertains to queer

social groups, digital communities and impression management.

Queer studies encompass the communication behaviors, histories of and social responses

to individuals who identify as queer. In addition to this, Black queer studies consider the

intersectional nature of race, gender and sex (Crenshaw, 1992). Researchers explore the varied portrayals and meanings of blackness as it relates to queerness by conducting studies on group members through the scopes of existing literature, traditional media representation, online communication, and sociopolitical analyses. This review will address the theoretical approaches of researchers who focus their studies on queer communities as well as self-presentation throughout their work. These studies often reflect the unique experiences of group members across locations. Indeed, "...queer Black geographic work is connected to, but to an extent deviates from, the disciplinary movements of producing queer geographies and sexuality and space literatures" (Eaves, 2017, p. 86). Geographic location continues to define Black queer studies as people choose to interact in local, national and international spheres online and offline. Eaves (2017) discusses how being Black and queer determines the livelihoods of group members in specific places in the American South, for example. This can also be applied to the perception of queerness online as it pertains to race.

The 'Definition' of Queer

The meaning of the term 'queer' constantly develops a new meaning for temporal and geographic reasons. Queer means 'weird' or 'unusual' by definition. Over time it has developed new interpretations among social groups. It was initially used in the late 1800s to degrade people who engaged in romantic same-sex relationships. The word itself was reclaimed by people who chose to embrace the term as their own within their communities. The term is a cultural signifier for people across ethnicities. It is still regarded as an offensive word due to the history that group members may share with it and choose to recognize. The World Health Organization (WHO)

provides generally accepted definitions of sex and gender identities while cautioning some of

their uses for this purpose:

> Queer is an umbrella term which is commonly used to define lesbian, gay, bi,
>
> Trans, and other people and institutions on the margins of mainstream culture.
>
> Historically, the term has been used to denigrate sexual and gender minorities, but
>
> more recently it has been reclaimed by these groups and is increasingly used as an
>
> expression of pride and to reject narrow reductive labels (World Health
>
> Organization).

This term is used by people who are often associated with specific as well as nuanced genders

and sexual orientations. Instead of limiting themselves to these identities, individuals may choose

to identify as 'queer.' Gender expression is often associated with these labels, and the

performative aspect of this is where queer studies began to develop as a discipline. Queer theory

is based in these dynamics. Theorists consider the expressions of individuals in the development

of approaches they use to analyze communication among the collective group.

Queer Theory

The queer theory emerged in the 1990s through the work of academics including

philosophers and theorists. Blaise & Taylor (2012) and Littlejohn & Foss (2011) describe how it

differs from other post-structuralist theories. This approach focuses on queerness in terms of

positionality as it relates to social constructs of gender and sex. Teresa de Lauretis coined the

term during a conference on sexuality and referenced it in later publications. It has been used to

investigate the construction and performance of identity among queer individuals. It is also used

to analyze the non-heteronormative expressions of people in various social settings: "Queer

theory attempts 'to queer---to make strong, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp

up--heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are

(in)formed by them and (in)form them" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 113). This theory suggests

the political nature of queer identity and how it is used to confront the barriers of binaries. In the

'West' we group people, places and things into categories that reflect traditional worldviews.

Men are viewed as masculine, and women are viewed as feminine, for example. Any overlap is

met with controversy. It is seen as different or abnormal.

The analyses that researchers provide are merely observations and thoughts, especially if

they are members of outgroups. Queer individuals have expressed their views on how these

interpretations affect their outlooks on how society perceives their identity (McNamara, 1997).

Queer theory challenges prevalent stereotypes against non-binary gender expressions. These

misconceptions are often used to define the identities of group members. This theory situates

these identities outside of the 'normal' perceptions associated with them: "Queer theory is a

framework that offers insights into how seemingly 'natural' and 'normal' gender, as constructed

by dominant gender discourses, is regulated by being linked to seemingly 'natural' and 'normal'

discourse of sexuality" (Blaise & Taylor, 2012, p. 91). These ideas about 'natural' or 'normal'

behaviors correlate with expected behaviors based on ascribed sex assignments. However, we

choose how to express gender identity.

The language we use, the clothes we wear and the people we choose to befriend, for

example, can all be attributed to our chosen identities. Queer theory extends our perception of

identity with an approach that situates gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, asexual and other

sexual orientations based on sociopolitical influences. Indeed, "Queer theory continues to contest

and deconstruct traditional assumptions, categories, labels, and perspectives including the

processes of normalization, heteronormativity, and the notion of *queer* itself" (Littlejohn & Foss,

2011, p. 113). It provides a theoretical framework with a structure that is boundless as it relates

to the characteristics of the individual. People are allowed to express their gender as they see fit

and their sexual orientation is not held at a point of contention. Instead, it is legitimized through

the experiences of people who communicate these identities.

Identity in PAR Environments

Selfhood is communicated in public and private social spaces as people decide how they

will deliver or receive messages based on their audiences. Participatory action research (PAR)

considers real-life experiences along with intervention. Roach (2015) and Campbell & Farrier

(2015) analyze group identity in queer communities through contexts of field studies. Humans

seek connections with others they share qualities with, and this is how we continue to develop

our personal identities. The self is shaped by these interactions in the moment and in retrospect.

This is how community is created as dialogue transforms into relationships across networks:

"Adrift in a sea of resemblance and difference, lost in a spectacle of others 'like me' but distinct

in their virtual frames, the self recognizes itself as one of hundreds, thousands, seeking

connection" (Roach, 2015, p. 64). Communication points are moments where people make

decisions on whether or not they share interests and ideas with specific people.

Across locations, people realize the potential breadth of communication. We focus on quality based on how we feel and what we have learned throughout our lives: "...queer in PaR is a lived experience that exceeds binary thinking, upsets unitary subjects and presents identities expressed in non-normative sexualities. Researchers take these identity positions to the heart of their research fields, studios and stages…" (Campbell & Farrier, 2015, p. 84). The identities of queer individuals in Campbell & Farrier's (2015) studies revealed truths about a group of 25 gay and lesbians who identify as such. Gender identity expression is based in communication in these instances. These 'lived experiences' are not manipulated by the researchers who interact with the target group. These interactions are also influenced by histories and cultural dynamics. The social meanings of blackness and queerness in these studies have been used to frame particular responses from group members.

Race & Queerness

The intersection of racial and sexual politics involves a history of marginalization within a larger social context as well as among gender groups. Non-white racial groups generally encounter the intersectional nature of racism and gender disparities. Sexuality further complicates this for members of these communities. Fields (2016), Johnson (2014) and Johnson & Boylorn (2015) discuss this extensively. For example, queer people who identify as Black have been excluded from queer movements by their peers. This is considered by researchers in queer studies: "A queer feminist PAR recognizes that any effort to democratize inquiry carries the traces of the racialized, gendered, sexualized desires brought to and generated in the encounter. So too do the understandings our inquiries yield" (Fields, 2016, p. 46). We cannot

separate racial discourse from gender discourse as it relates to Black queer studies. These identity groups exist as a result of dialectical tensions among social groups. Non-heteronormativity in Black communities is not seen as the norm or even as an adopted view from dominant, mainstream cultures: "Because blackness and non-heterosexuality are considered non-normative, and Black sexuality has been branded as deviant (hooks, 1992), discussions of Black non-heterosexual sexuality are nearly invisible" (Johnson & Boylorn, 2015, p. 7). The marginalization of those who share non-binary gender identities is twofold. It is often rejected by community members inside and outside of ascribed identities, such as racial groups.

Queer people have established communities around the world to counter hate and ignorance. Black queer people create spaces in response to societal pressures that threaten their being based on their race and their sexual identities: "...black queers have had to forge a home space because they have been excluded from a larger black community because they are queer, and from a larger queer community because they are black" (Johnson, 2014, p. 54). Inclusion was not always championed even among sexual minorities as it pertained to people of color nor was this the case among racial groups. This history continues to manifest across social spaces in conversations and through depictions in the media. The emergence of social media networks presents opportunities for direct engagement and communication analysis by group members and non-members. Communities of color continue to express solidarity even among gender and sexual minority groups.

Digital Communities

Social spaces are created through communication among individuals and groups. This applies to digital communities. Social media participants interact with social objects for the purpose of sharing identities and perspectives with others: "Social media's open structure yields space for people to insert their traditionally silenced performances into the virtual realm resulting in new narrative forms that move beyond the individual story" (Johnson & Boylorn, 2015, p. 4). This offers members of queer groups spaces to communicate with people through shared experiences. Public and private identities are negotiated by individuals based on how they choose to present who they are: "...identity with the blog genre is based on a balance between the need for privacy...and the need for community based on identification with others through sameness" (Rak, 2005, p. 176). Community is formed among sexual minority groups across social media platforms. They connect with posts made by people they choose to follow or add as 'friends', for example.

Active participants on social media who identify as queer use these tools to construct, reconstruct and redevelop self in response to the portrayals of others. They witness the expressions of community members and decide whether they will observe for the purpose of reflection or take action by producing their own content.

> Online media can provide 'critical opportunities for LGBTQ youth to explore their identities and develop important skills,' particularly the ability to 'rehearse crucial developmental tasks (e.g., coming out, cultivating identity, increasing self-confidence and self-acceptance, and building relationships)' online before experiencing these phenomena offline (Miller, 2017, p. 512).

These examples capture the essence of some of the interactions on social media among people

who identify as queer. Individuals present themselves in these spaces, making conscious choices

about how they will portray who they are in social spaces in public and private groups on social

media. Community is based in self-presentations and responses to them.

Impression Management

Goffman's impression management analysis serves as a social constructionist approach to

identity. There are four main components that define this theoretical perspective. We present

ourselves online with an awareness of who we are and what we decide to convey through social

objects. Goffman (1959) "...gave extensive attention to how individuals negotiate meaning and

one of his ambitions was to provide a theory of how particular circumstances of the social life

situates language, and how language in turn adds meaning and structure to social orders"

(Fredriksson & Ihlen, 2018, p. 15). Language is created by individuals and legitimized by

networks, including within online queer communities. The construction of self in digital spaces

requires people to present who they are as they see fit: "...emphasis on impression management

in everyday life means that for the most part, persons offer only partial or incomplete glimpses of

themselves" (Chriss, 2015, p. 11). We manage what Goffman (1959) refers to as the 'frontstage'

and the 'backstage.' This can also be viewed as the public and private self. 'Framing' considers

from what perspective this information is presented. 'Footing' establishes the role that we play in

the reception of this information. We negotiate positive and negative 'face' among our audiences and within ourselves.

Pairing the queer theory with an impression management analysis to investigate the construction and performance of queer individuals on social media will reveal how they interact in online spaces. Queerness continues to be questioned and recognized as outright confusion rather than a real identity. People who express themselves in the digital world as queer people are in fact authenticating who they really are as individuals.

Identity management is at the center of queer studies because individuals are able to control whether or not they will disclose certain information about their sexual identities. People often use the term queer to express that they do not follow heteronormative expectations, but not all queer people express their queerness in the same manner. Bisexuals and transgenders are able to identify as queer as if they choose to do so, but blackness cannot be chosen. It does not have to be expressed verbally because skin color has often been the root cause of marginalization among racial groups. The intersectionality of race and sexuality implicates communication that focuses on self-presentation to promote community building.

Research Questions

    1. How do individuals who identify as Black & queer present themselves on social media?

    2. Why are they using social media channels to communicate?

Methodology

The data set that I [used] (I am using past tense for future drafts after I complete my studies) for this research included videos, text posts and comments that can be found when examining content authored by queer individuals who identify as Black on YouTube, WordPress, and Instagram. The date range for this collection of data is from June 1, 2018 to September 30, 2018. I aimed to analyze the context of these posts to determine their relevance to the individual and to the digital community. Thousands of blogs, vlogs and photos exist across these platforms. I targeted 200 of them that captured detailed experiences. I chose posts where people discussed their sexual identity and their race. They all discuss their queerness as it pertains to their identities and their everyday lives.

For this project I used the grounded theory to guide my processes. To begin my research, I avoided making any personal connections to this data by reviewing the premise of my research questions and using them to guide my initial search. Indeed, "We do not force preconceived ideas and theories directly upon our data. Rather, we follow leads that we define in the data, or design another way of collecting data to pursue our initial interests" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 17). I focused on allowing the data to represent itself before analyzing what it meant in the overall context of my project. I selected photo and video posts with extensive caption descriptions in order to analyze more relevant information from individuals represented in my data set. I also aimed to gather personal posts that reflected their lifestyles.

Next, I completed a series of coding on my data set. I saved video links and typed out portions of them word-for-word to analyze. I combined these with screenshots of posts I chose and copied them into a Microsoft Word document where I performed open coding. I typed out

general notes about the data at first glance. First, I used line-by-line coding to establish the

meaning of captions in my data set: "Line-by-line coding works particularly well with detailed

data about fundamental empirical problems or processes" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 65). I created

codes in the margins that included relevant words that came to mind as I read through each

caption. I used this to understand the actions made by individuals in these texts and the topics

addressed by them in their personal posts. People elaborate on their experiences with being queer

and Black people. I determined what language is commonly used among the individuals' posts

that comprise my data set and noted their relevance to communication in this space. The

following step I took was the process of memo writing. I used this information to better

understand what I overlooked in the initial coding process. I composed these notes to determine

whether or not my codes best represented my data. I revisited some of the codes because they did

not communicate the essence of the material. I edited a few of them after establishing their

meaning in relation to my research questions.

The next form of coding I implemented was axial coding, a "...strategy for bringing data

back together again in a coherent whole" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 75). I formed five categories to

identify my data more specifically with trends I noticed during initial coding. I revisited my

notes from open coding, and I developed 'major categories' to establish relationships between

data based on the context of this research which is rooted in the identities of the actors. I named

these categories and defined their components in general terms of the posts associated with them.

I realized that I used similar codes for different posts so I grouped them together based on these

codes. This led me to theoretical coding, which "...[specifies] possible relationships between

categories you have developed in your focused coding" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). There were [...]

posts that did not seem to fit in any of the categories so I reviewed my initial coding and axial

coding notes to determine their relevance. Once I established their meaning, I was able to

separate them into the appropriate categories after realizing their theoretical depth. I continued to

consider new ways to approach the concepts revealed by this collection through comparative

analysis until I exhausted the properties of the patterns I determined in earlier stages.

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