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Queer Rural Youth Online: A Digital Ethnography

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Queer Rural Youth Online: A Digital Ethnography

by

Joseph Robert Burns

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Anthropology

Thesis Committee:
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Portland State University
2024

Abstract

This thesis is based on digital ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2023 within Queer subcommunities on the social media sites Reddit and Twitter (now known as X) and data collected from interviews with Queer rural youth members of these communities. The data reveal that social media use directly influences the lives and actions of Queer rural youth, who use the space to build social connections, shape their personal identities, and seek advice pertaining to their in-person lives and decisions. By using these spaces, Queer rural youth build both bonding and bridging social capital, learn to subvert restrictions to their Internet access, and express their identity by conforming to the norms of the broader Queer community. Often, this conformity involves changing their lifestyle to meet the ideal standards that social media influencers, advertisers, and users set. In particular, many Queer rural youth consume suggested media, change their behavior, and even migrate to coastal urban centers in order to fulfill their perceived ideal of Queer life. Although the Internet serves as a haven for many youth, it exposes them to dangers as well, many of which will shift and change with future technological advancements in AI. This research enhances anthropological understanding of the significance of virtual spaces in contemporary society and their potential to both empower and endanger minority communities.

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Chapter 1 Introduction, Theory and Methodology

1.1 Introduction

Pru left school early that day. For the third time in a month, she waited politely for the secretary to call her mom and arrange a ride home. The first time it was a 'stomachache,' the second, a 'migraine.' It wasn't a total lie, but it certainly didn't help explain her truancy. Three months earlier, Pru came out as a transgender woman to several classmates and began socially transitioning. She changed her appearance and behavior at school and, since then, had faced constant taunts, slurs and threats from her classmates at her rural Ohio high school.

Pru had always prided herself on having thick skin. She lost her father when she was only five and her mother turned to alcohol to cope; she lived a difficult life, to say the least. However, the constant harassment was starting to become too much to bear. By the time she reached high school, even one of her only friends, Rachel, turned on her, leaving no avenue for support. As she watched her mother drive up to the school and made her way to the passenger side, she let a tear slip down her cheek before brushing it away with her hoodie and opening the door. "This better be the last time," her mother snarled and Pru stared out the window in silence for the rest of the trip.

That night, Pru had a small plate of mac 'n' cheese with a piece of leftover garlic bread, a common meal for her family. After watching TV with her mom and younger brother for a while, she went to her room early, claiming that she had homework to do.

Pru sat at her desk. She brushed away some of the clutter, making just enough space to open her laptop. As she did, a notification pinged and she clicked through the

pop-up into Discord. She had participated actively in multiple Queer Discord communities for years before coming out; in fact, her online friends had encouraged her to come out in the first place. More recently, though, she had begun her own online community for other Queer people in her area of Ohio. The notifications came from a conversation she had started the night before, asking if anyone was interested in meeting up in-person. They were, and she and her friend Brian started planning a date for the next week. Pru re-read the chat a few times and smiled widely for the first time in days.

As my creative non-fiction (Clayton 2010) narrativization of Pru's story shows, Queer young adults in the United States, especially those living in rural areas, often face hate and systemic oppression related to their gender or sexuality. Many undergo an erosion of support systems and interpersonal relationships in the time following their coming out (when they make their identity known to others, either all at once or over an extended period of time). At the same time, their social and legal status and protections precariously shift depending on where they live (Escobar-Viera et al. 2022, 2). These shifts are even more common in specific regions of the United States due to the nature of legislative and sociopolitical differences between states. For instance, in 2022, Florida passed a 'Don't Say Gay Law,' which bars school teachers from mentioning Queer people in a classroom setting (Kline et al. 2022, 1397). Other states are considering similar laws (Kline et al. 2022, 1397).

At the moment, the Queer community faces persecution and shame. The literature shows that Queer and Trans young adults in the urban centers of liberal states perceive the security of their civil rights differently from those living within rural communities in more conservative states, where local politicians are more likely to discuss limiting them (Kline et al. 2022, 1401). Queer people around the US face an increased risk of suicidality, various mental and physical illnesses, and hate crimes (Austin 2022). Research reveals that in 2022, roughly 82% of transgender youth had considered suicide, and 40% had self-harmed (Austin 2022). My work focuses on an understudied segment of the Queer youth community: those living in rural areas.

The “Queer” Umbrella - The Drawbacks and Values of Generalization

The Queer community encompasses a broad categorization of people. The use of the term Queer is, in and of itself, a bit contentious. The Queer community is anything but a monolith, as highlighted by the acronym LGBTQIA2S+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, plus). I use the term ‘Queer’ here to include all who identify as any part of the acronym. I am following the trend of others within the community, who are reclaiming a term once considered a slur. The community is rapidly accepting and perpetuating the use of this name. Kozinets (2015, 27) builds off of Turner’s (1969) earlier argument of *communitas* to suggest that “*Communitas* is a sense of being equal with your comrades, having kin, being a member of a group and perhaps into that internalized sense of membership as connection, a way to fulfill needs for belonging, affiliation, acceptance and love.” Reclaiming the slur

“Queer” helps the community solidify its identity. Further, humans possess an innate need to connect with others, which the Internet feeds. Many members of the Queer community find their kinship in joint ostracization and oppression (Miller 2017) and seek comfort and support from those they perceive will understand them most - other Queer people.

Online sub-communities and forums sampled in this study include those for gay men, lesbian women, trans women and men, nonbinary people and intersex people. There are key differences between these groups, which many of the posts in Chapters 3 and 4 outline in detail, but the sociohistorical context of their allyship connects them. This diverse community largely exists because hegemonic forces lump them together as sexual- or gender-deviant ‘others’ (Butler 1990; Miller 2017; Foucault 1976); their socio-cultural proximity and marginality creates and entrenches their shared cultural reality. For example, pride parades are open to members of the Queer community and allies; they offer the community a chance to connect and embrace their identity safely, while simultaneously creating community. In the context of Internet forums, the concepts of notifications and subcommunities allow youth to embody and perform the identities and history that initially led to the creation of those subcommunities (Greenhow 2009, 122). This analysis considers subcommunities and forums in the context of their respective individual categories as well as under the broader ‘Queer’ umbrella. This sample strategy ensures that the analysis will not erase the unique identities and experiences within the Queer community while highlighting the vibrancy and authenticity of the many facets at play in online communities. Additionally, it

demonstrates how they interplay on and offline (Berger et al. 2022, 12). The Queer community's breadth is exactly why so many youth find a fulfilling home in online communities.

In addition to identifying as Queer, my participants' perception of rurality also formed a key facet of their identity. Scholars define rurality differently, though the common understanding at the US Census Bureau is that rural areas are any areas that are not categorized as urban, based on population (Ratcliffe et al. 2016). This stark and binary definition often downplays the fact that rurality is a spectrum (Clark, Harper & Weber 2022). For instance, the population of suburbs is sometimes similar to rural areas, but their proximity to urban centers differentiates them from small towns. Rural residents face unique challenges compared to their urban peers, including higher rates of poverty and slower population growth (Cromartie et al. 2020). In this study, I allowed my informants to self-identify as rural (see section 1.3 for more information on selection criteria). In many cases, suburban people did not consider themselves rural. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, many of my informants later moved to urban areas within their state or across the country.

1.2 Theoretical Perspectives

Digital Ethnography

The field of digital ethnography has come a long way in its short lifespan. The quick integration of the Internet into everyday life and communication in the early 1990's brought about significant confusion and misplaced fear. Researchers were critical

of the potential psychological and social implications of the Internet; an early nay-sayer, Sherry Turkle, prophesied in their work *Life on the Screen* (1997) an impending erosion of community involvement. Boellstorff (2008) rejected Turkle's notion in one of the earliest and most respected digital ethnographies, *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008) and demonstrated how virtual communities engage people meaningfully, rather than separating them. Further, their research showed that participation in virtual communities did not, in fact, erode in-person social engagement, but rather complemented it. In Turkle's 1984 book *The Second Self*, they discuss the projection, or even the evolution, of the human spirit into a digital form and the implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for our future. In that sense, what we view as a negative erosion of traditional social engagement might actually be a shift to something new entirely. However, current research shows that social media degrades young adults' body image and self confidence (Berson 2002, 55; Brown 2021; Greenhalgh 2012; Mitchell 2014, 757). The benefits and risks of the Internet will continue to change moving forward.

The digital realm has opened up a new frontier for anthropological research: digital ethnography. Digital ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that leverages the Internet and its various platforms and communities as a primary data source for online social and cultural interactions. As an actively developing methodology within ethnography, digital ethnography serves as an environment for fast discovery and innovation. At this early stage, the method has the potential to subvert some of the flaws of older anthropological and ethnographic methods. Pioneers include Kozinets

(2010), who outlines appropriate research practices for netnographies (his term for a style of digital ethnography), Van Doorn (2011), who takes Kozinets' work further to argue that digital communities are inseparable from real world social constructs and norms, and Turkle (1997), who studies the psychosocial ripples of the increasingly digital nature of communication. Their groundwork makes it possible to explore the experience of more specific communities online, such as those of Queer rural youth. Kozinets' (2010, 25) and Van Doorn's (2011) methods contextualize online communities as extensions of physical reality and human behavior rather than a mysterious frontier. These pioneers do fall prey to some systemic problems of anthropology and ethnography, including a penchant for moral universalism and minimal engagement with a culturally diverse range of scholars. Thus, this new ethnographic frontier is not immune to anthropology's broader history of silencing minority scholars, as Harrison (1999) highlights. Regardless, these pioneers' contributions stand as the baseline for future online research.

In my research, I took on the role of an investigative observer, poring over hundreds of posts in the course of a few months. I used my informant interviews to contextualize these digital traces. This method allowed me to develop a nuanced understanding of the community's culture, norms and social dynamics and gave me a clear impression of what it would be like to be a Queer rural youth surfing the same sites. My flavor of digital ethnography relied on various data sources, including social media platforms and subcommunities, posts and comments, to uncover insights into the community's beliefs and practices. To take it further, I solicited and conducted my

interviews virtually, using the video-conferencing platform Zoom. This methodology provided rich qualitative data for me to use in my in-depth analysis.

My study is an example of patchwork ethnography popularized during the pandemic (Günel 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a unique combination of field sites and methods for this project's success. Although Kozinets (2015) argues for participant observation (interaction) in addition to collecting observational data (investigating) and conducting interviews, I found that the interviews provided more than enough context for the observational data I gathered during this study. This new epistemological viewpoint changes the game and limits the potential for disruption of traditional fieldwork.

Digital ethnography is an extremely flexible methodology. Van Doorn (2011) used this to his advantage in his own work to show how digital culture and social movements intersect. He expanded the scope of virtual ethnography from exploring online communities in general, to discovering the role digital platforms play in shaping contemporary social and political movements. His work highlights the importance of understanding the power dynamics and political implications of online communities, particularly in the context of activism and protest. My informants clearly express that social media is not only their way to converse about the news, but where they get their news and gather to make a change in their world. In other words, the Internet is not just their newspaper, but their political organization and town square as well.

Digital ethnography continues to grow rapidly as a burgeoning field of research. It provides valuable insights into the dynamics of online communities and digital spaces.

The actions of early authors have laid the methodological groundwork, but it is even more important to understand after the COVID-19 pandemic, which sped up movement online. Young people around the country quickly lost access to in-person support and education during the pandemic, impacting their lives considerably. As the Internet continues to reshape how people interact and form communities, digital ethnography remains a powerful tool for understanding these evolving dynamics online.

Contemporary authors have continued applying these varying theoretical lenses to study the Queer community online. Bozkurt (2016) and Huang (2021) build upon the foundational discussions of digital socialization and identity to explore identity-formation and expression, specifically how online interactions can positively affect self-perception. Likewise, Manago (2014) as well as Cserni and Talmud (2015) touch upon the Internet's role in assisting Queer youth with understanding their social positioning and describe how this benefits them throughout life. Additionally, Toomey (2018) explores the category of Queer rural youth, but not in direct conjunction with either of these ideas. This thesis fills a significant gap in the literature by applying the existing research to Queer rural youth specifically.

In this thesis, I reveal how digital socialization affects real world actions and identity formation as well as hints at ways to better the lives of Queer rural youth. In recent years, scholars made excellent headway when researching Queer youth. Manago and Greenfield (2014) and Miller (2017) highlight exactly how the Internet and online interactions affirm Queer youths' identities. However, the current academic literature does not center the particular strife of Queer rural youth. On the other hand, school

administrators, parents and local legislators are paying significant attention to this group. Debates over transgender rights, access to gender-affirming care and 'Don't Say Gay' laws are especially active in rural, often conservative, areas of the United States. This attention is mostly negative and my informants report feeling ostracized, scapegoated, and neglected.

Social Capital in Virtual Queer Communities

In my research, I discovered that building social capital was a direct motivator for Queer rural youth to explore virtual communities. Social capital is the network of relationships between people, from which they can garner support and prestige (Gittel 1988). According to Gittel (1988), bonding social capital comes from relationships amongst people with similar backgrounds, whereas bridging social capital develops from relationships amongst people with different backgrounds. Kim, Subramanian and Kawachi (2006, 122) found that the accumulation of both types of social capital decreases the risk of adverse health outcomes for individuals. I investigated how social media informs Queer rural youth behavior, how heavily other people on social media influence their behaviors and actions, and how they build both forms of social capital.

Many Queer rural youth lack the in-person support networks necessary to avoid negative health and social outcomes the way some of their heterosexual and cisgender peers might (Austin 2022, 2700). Not only do they face harassment (Pascoe 2007) and difficulties obtaining and keeping employment (Badgett 1996, 35), they are also susceptible to more physical and mental illnesses. Cserni and Talmud (2015, 165)

present one potential solution for these problems with their research into social capital. Their work touches on the importance of both bonding and bridging social capital for LGBT youth. My work takes their ideas further by directly applying the theory to Queer rural youth, who sometimes find themselves insulated within relatively homogenous online Queer communities, specifically for their sexuality or gender identity (and thus forming bonding social capital), but simultaneously build bridging social capital with other allied subgroups of the Queer community (e.g. gay men interact and become friends with trans women, bi women, bi men, etc.).

Additionally, the formation of social capital allows people to maintain or pursue social mobility. Although my informants did not directly discuss their jobs, many of them alluded to the fact that their Queer identity encouraged them to move out of their small towns for college. Some of them, including Michael, one of my informants who is a 20-year-old, gay, white man who is from North Dakota, were first generation college students. Strong social networks result in advancements to personal and community health, sometimes directly as a result of social mobility and economic advancement (Cserni and Talmud 2015). Time will tell how Queer youths' social capital affects their financial stability and wealth.

Queer Theory

Despite the progress the Queer community achieved in the past decade, there is no escaping Western culture's obsession with marginalizing, sexualizing and, ultimately, institutionalizing Queer people. Psychology, in particular, medically categorized gay men and trans people as diseased and mentally inferior (Herek 2010, 693). Historically,

genocidal governments, mental asylums and untreated pandemics plagued the Queer community (Owens 2020; Treichler 1999). Although American activists fought back against the worst injustices in the years following Stonewall, homosexuality remained in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) until 1974 (Herek 2010, 693) and gender dysphoria remains in some form today (King 2019). Bureaucratic and scholarly oppression often slips past the work of civil activists because it is typically so passive and socially ingrained.

Academia is complicit, and frequently active, in much of the history of Queer peoples' oppression (Renn 2010, 137). However, certain trailblazers, including Foucault (1976) and Butler (2006), centered the Queer community in a positive light, and created the theories that future scholars would use to overcome previous shortcomings. In recent years, many academic fields began to face internal reckoning via decolonization as minorities reclaimed their own narrative (Harrison 1999, 88). This trend continues today as scholars attempt to center the voices of their informants above their own opinions.

The battle against this bias in Academia was never silent, however the status quo historically shunned non-heteronormative scholars. In the 1950s and 60s, society relegated LGBT media to subversive poetry (Ginsberg 1956), and other art forms. In what became known as the Lavender Scare (in homage to the Red Scare), Americans associated homosexual people in positions of power with communism and considered them a danger to Western ideals of sexuality and gender (Owens 2020, 120). Clearly, this was not a time when sympathetic scholars safely shared their opinions in the open,

nor did those within the status quo respect their viewpoints. Regardless, scholars like Pauli Murray (1965) pressed on as pioneers of civil rights.

During the peak of the HIV/AIDS crisis, some heterosexuals around America envisioned male homosexuality as evil and dirty. The identity now came with a marker of disease, which only made it easier to treat this category of people as medical and social pariahs. Heterosexuals created the identity of homosexuality itself by classing it 'dirty' (Douglas 1966) and 'other.' According to Treichler, reality is culturally constructed and an epidemic is the perfect time for prior stigma to further embed itself or new conceptions to stick (1999, 150). This solidification of the 'Queer' identity in the 70's and 80's heterosexual American doxa (Bourdieu 1986) allowed several scholars to publish groundbreaking works about gay men in particular. My research depends on the groundwork laid by scholars such as Foucault (1976), who, in many ways, took great risks to not only study Queer identity, but the powers that led to its creation in the first place.

In this thesis, I also draw on classical and modern theories of identity formation, performativity and expression. Despite writing before current conversations of decolonization and minority erasure, Butler (1990) and Foucault (1978) are inarguably seminal authors on post-structural identity. Butler's work outlines the complicated nature of gender and the various methods by which society polices its expression; western society encourages families to raise, educate, and consistently enforce their children's identity of either a heterosexual male or female (Butler 1990, 343). Butler challenged this binary conception of gender in *Gender Trouble* (2002,10) and critiqued

the heteronormative framework that previously dominated the study of gender and sexuality. She also introduced the concept of 'performativity,' arguing that gender is not an inherent or stable identity but rather a repetitive and socially constructed act. She contended that the stylized repetition of normative behaviors produced identities, including those within the Queer spectrum. My informants provided evidence that, when rural youth use the Internet, they are able to explore their identity and, when appropriate, reject their assigned gender or sexuality. Further, their Internet use enables subversion and active protest against the gender and sexuality norms that they face on a daily basis in their families and in-person communities.

By deconstructing the previously fixed nature of gender and sexual identity, Butler's work empowered marginalized individuals to contest normative categories and provided scholars with a theoretical foundation for deeper study into the fluidity and performativity of Queer identities. In this document, I pull from her insights to further discuss the performative nature of sexual and gender identities. Families always enforce an individual's gender before the child has a full grasp on the concept. Gender-reveal parties before birth, blue versus pink color coding, dolls versus action figures, etc. all function as pillars of binary gender experience. Eventually, this external identity becomes ingrained, latent, and self-enforcing, even when the individual is in complete privacy (Goffman 1973, 249). Deviations from these assigned gender and sexuality roles often result in social ostracization, dysphoria, and shame (Miller 2017, 512). In Pru's case presented in section 1.1, social ostracization and shame directly affects her daily life, mental health, and ability to participate in, and focus on, her own education. Pru is

a white transgender woman who identifies as straight. She is 24 years old, and stayed in her rural hometown in Ohio.

Foucault made substantial contributions to the development of Queer theory through his exploration of power, knowledge, and the construction of sexual identity. Foucault's work, particularly in texts like *The History of Sexuality* (1976) and *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), challenged heteronormative conceptions of sexuality by emphasizing the historical and social dimensions of sexual identity. He argued that sexuality is a cultural construct, shaped by power dynamics, discourses, and institutions. Foucault's notion of the 'regime of sexuality' demonstrated how societal norms and expectations influenced the categorization of sexual identities, moving away from prior essentialist views. I use his work on the mechanisms of control and surveillance to regulate non-normative sexual practice. Local and national institutions of control shape the ways Queer rural youth move through the material and the digital worlds. Foucault's influence on Queer Theory remains profound, and his deconstruction of the binary oppositions and emphasis on the multiplicity of sexual experiences informed how I spoke with my informants and analyzed their subversive and identity-reaffirming behaviors.

Moving on to more modern sources, scholars continue to build off of Butler and Foucault's work. Adriana Manago (2014) provides a fresh lens on Butler (1990) and Foucault's (1976) work. She takes the work of Butler further by considering how gender ideologies play out on social media platforms. In particular, her findings indicate that cisgender and transgender adolescents use social media to accumulate bonding and

bridging social capital (Cserni and Talmud 2015). Online communities provide necessary outlets for Queer rural youth socialization and support.

1.3 Research Site and Methodology

This study is a one-shot case study (Bernard 2011, 93) investigating how Queer rural youth interact with online communities and how these interactions influence them. I observe how youth think, feel and behave in response to Internet use. In this research, I seek to understand Queer online communities and their importance to the lives of Queer rural youth.

In the study, I employ multiple qualitative research methods to investigate the online community experience of Queer rural youth through textual analysis of social media spaces (primarily Twitter, now known as X, and Reddit) and the more personal experiences of youth through semi-structured Zoom interviews. The study is thus a multi-sited ethnographic investigation into how social media influences the lives and identity of queer youth growing up in rural areas, as well as how their online experiences shape their perceptions of reality and their actions.

One of the biggest methodological considerations in this study involved how to sample social media posts in a representative and unbiased way. The sheer scale of these communities presented itself as an issue early on in the planning phase. In order to sort through so many posts, it was necessary to (1) determine a systematic sampling method, (2) cull redundant or irrelevant posts (including posts from trolls or presumed trolls), and (3) find a way to mainly include posts from or about Queer rural youth and rural life. To face point (1), I selected data based on both time and popularity. The

popularity of posts was a critical factor because it shows that a large number of people are engaging with the content, whether in a positive or negative way. Time was an equally important consideration because filtering for recent posts kept the data collection focused on the state of these communities as the study progressed. There is certainly room for a historical analysis of past posts, but other scholars are hard at work archiving that information. I relied on the algorithm of the social media platforms, including filters for recent (typically within the past 24 or 24-48 hours) and popular posts. I sampled between January and March of 2023 and, after applying my filters, selected the first 5 posts from the results weekly.

Point (2) was difficult to resolve. I used the service Botometer (<https://botometer.osome.iu.edu/>) for posts on Twitter (now known as X) to sort through accounts that were not obviously bots or trolls. However, most of the time it was clear from redundant phrases and unnatural language patterns when a post came from a bot. For instance, bots will often repeat sentences within the same paragraph or even two adjacent sentences. The majority of scholars overlook one key facet of this topic: while these bots and trolls are dangerous, pervasive and covert, their very ubiquity means that they play a vital role in developing and perpetuating culture within these online communities.

Finally, and arguably the most important point considering the title and purpose of this study, I needed to select these posts based on their relevance to Queer rural life. My informants offered enough context and information in their interviews to highlight and affirm what discourse and knowledge was valuable to them in their online

communities. They often seek posts related to Queer rural life, but they are just as likely to engage with posts whether or not they speak to their rural experience. For instance, I selected and counted posts toward the specifically rural data points even if the post mentioned small towns or rurality in the title alone (See Figure 14 in Chapter 4).

Over the course of 3 months, I selected 5 popular and 5 recent rural-related posts as well as 5 popular and 5 recent general posts once a week from each website (on Monday because people have more time to post over the weekends). I picked a different community source for each site each week out of convenience and, in the end, the sources were primarily r/gay, r/lesbian, r/asktransgender, r/trans, and r/gayrural on Reddit and under the hashtags #gay, #rurallesbian, #ruraltrans and #queer on Twitter. These search terms and communities were the most relevant while also maintaining a significant amount of activity (over 20 posts a week). These hashtags and forums methodologically compartmentalize these massive platforms into usable chunks, which Queer youth seek out based on their own identities. I did filter out Not-Safe-For-Work (NSFW) content, when that feature was available. Sometimes the popular posts were the same from prior weeks, in which case I moved on to the next original post in the list and selected it instead. In other cases, the popular posts were weeks or even months old - I did include them in my study. By the end, there were approximately 450 posts included in the analysis. I removed dozens when I investigated accounts and found evidence of bot or troll activity. However, I included the comments in my analysis because those real people contributed to that conversation, whether the original poster was a bot or not. I sourced some of the methodological explanatory posts outside of

these sampling criteria. This social media data could serve as the catalyst for much more research going forward. Additionally, I found that my interview data offered invaluable context for understanding the experience of Queer rural youth in these online communities.

As the study progressed, I realized that these social media communities are exceptionally osmotic. Few informants participated in just one community, and most frequented communities across at least three different platforms. Each community served its own unique function. For instance, informants used Discord to engage in private discourse with peers and form tighter social bonds. They used Reddit and Twitter for sharing opinions and gathering engagement.

The inclusion of interviews vastly improved the trajectory of this project, especially given my personal identity, which provided me with an early advantage in building and maintaining rapport with informants. I am a white gay man from rural Michigan in my early-20s, and I personally faced my own challenges as a result of that identity, which shaped my life decisions and worldview. From the beginning, I prioritized the confidentiality of my informants, many of whom hesitated to share the full range of their experience without assurances of protection. My informants offered candid data in their interviews specifically because I promised to use pseudonyms for them, and my own identity as a member of the Queer community inspired a sense of confidentiality, comfort, and protection for them. Additionally, I implemented power-sharing methodologies such as granting co-hosting rights on Zoom to informants. Interviews often covered sensitive topics such as the thoughts and experiences of participants who

were actively struggling through the questioning or coming out process, and their honest recollection of opinions and experiences were critical to my project's success. They also seemed to find the interview process cathartic and they seemed excited to know that people found their stories interesting. Each of the methodologies encouraged open discourse with research subjects and protected them from unnecessary stress.

In order to select my participants, I reached out to a convenience sample of users on Twitter and Reddit who made posts under the above-mentioned and similar hashtags/subreddits for my interviews. I interviewed 15 total informants, in line with Bernard's (2011, 154) suggestion that sampling this number provides an adequate understanding of the range of views within the community. According to him, "There is growing evidence that 10-20 knowledgeable people are enough to uncover and understand the core categories in any well-defined cultural domain or study of lived experience" (2011, 154). Furthermore, I chose people who had posted within the past 24-48 hours to ensure that they were active users of the communities in which I found them.

Although my informants deserve to speak for themselves, there are some instances where I did find it best to paraphrase or narrate their stories. For instance, I chose to recount some of Pru's story in my words, rather than her own, to highlight some of the emotional aspects of her lived experience. I am inclined to agree with Clayton (2010, 372) that, by using creative nonfiction, researchers can decontextualize informant information for the very purpose of organizing it into a more revelatory form.

Instead of sharing fragmented pieces of her experience, I wrote a creative nonfiction (Clayton 2010) following the guidance of Richardson, who argues that, “I consider writing as a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about writing as a mode of ‘telling’ about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of the research project. Writing is also a way of knowing” (2000, 923). I use this portrayal of her story to creatively introduce the themes and experiences some of these youth face, in line with the key findings of my thesis. I recognize that there is a fine line between this method and the revisionist work of some early anthropologists, whom I previously criticized. Pru’s story epitomizes how Queer rural youth overcome challenges in their lives by forming online and offline social connections via the Internet. I include direct quotes from Pru and all of my other informants in later chapters, where their insight is essential to understanding the community and their own experiences. Instead of choosing one approach, I recognize the value of each and thus include both in this document.

This work only exists because of the contributions of my informants: rural Queer young adults from around the United States, who participated in communities on Twitter (now known as X) and Reddit. The number of informal informants involved is innumerable, so I would like to credit all those whose social media posts that I used for my textual analysis. Each of them has a unique story to tell, and I am privileged to have had the chance to interact more deeply with several of them. For this thesis, I conducted interviews with 15 unique informants. These informants self-identified as rural and Queer, either in a public post, on their profile, or when I initially messaged

them. Many of them defined rural as a small, sparsely populated town of less than 10,000. Other scholars agree that population is one of the main factors in defining rural (Ratcliffe et al. 2016; Cromartie et al. 2020). Cromartie et al. (2020) say that around 46.1 million people live in rural counties as of 2019. Forstie (2020, 154) believes this number includes many LGBT people, who face challenges such as difficulty accessing healthcare in their small towns and cities. I chose to only interview people between the ages of 18-25. I chose this range because these people were young enough to represent an age group that grew up with the Internet, but old enough that they were able to begin making life decisions for themselves. These expert informants represent wide swathes of the Queer community, including gay men, lesbian women, transgender men, transgender women, an asexual man, and bisexual men and women, as shown in Table 1 in the appendix. In the order of when I interviewed them, my informants' pseudonyms are Anders, Pru, Nicole, Jacob, Mitchell, Thomas, Sarah, Michael, Alex, Jordan, Blake, Travis, Carson, Amy, and Sam. Table 1 provides a summary of their gender, sexual and racial identities, as well as their location, the influence of which I examine in this thesis. These in no way represent their entire lived experiences, but it is important to keep in mind while reading through their various quotes and observations.

The semi-structured nature of these conversations offered my informants a chance to share their unique beliefs and experiences with minimal restrictions. My interview questions related to Queer youths' experience growing up in rural areas, how their schools' and parents' policies influenced their social media behavior and access,

and how social media changed their perception of themselves and their communities at-large. See table 2 in the appendix for the full list of questions.

I recorded interviews with the consent of participants. I used the automatic transcription feature on the video-conferencing platform Zoom. This technological support made coding and annotating the interviews easier. Following the interviews and collection process, I coded the posts and transcriptions to discover which themes presented themselves most often in the data. I then individually analyzed them to piece together the bigger picture of the data. I chose to use Grounded Theory as my basis for analysis. Grounded Theory works under the assumption that hypotheses and theories concerning cultural data are attainable via inductive reasoning of systematically collected and analyzed data (Bernard 2011, 430). I moved from overarching codes such as mental health support, sexual exploration and critical discourse to more focused ones, such as trauma bonding, migration and online/offline behaviors until it became reductive to further specify them. I crafted my codes directly from this set of data and the context informants offered in interviews. Quotes from my informants further evidence the salience of these codes. The coding continued throughout the interview process, which allowed me to adjust subsequent interviews to explore the themes emerging from prior research. Through these methods, I sought to hold space for my informants to share their stories and understand online Queer communities from the lived perspectives of those driving them. As seen in Chapters 3 and 4, I highlight the schemas and themes of the data with certain exemplar quotes. Bernard thinks that “Besides displaying models, one of the most important methods in text analysis is the

presentation of direct quotes from respondents - quotes that lead the reader to understand quickly what it took you months or years to figure out” (Bernard 2011, 438). This strategy was essential to not only present solid examples of my findings, but also to center my informants’ voices.

1.4 Overview

In this chapter, I have delved into the theoretical background for this research. I have explained how I pulled from the existing literature within Queer theory, digital ethnography, and social capital to craft this project and add to prior work in those areas. I outlined the historical background of the online communities themselves and the unique role the Queer community of the 90s and 00s played in transitioning outlets for socialization and activism online. These pioneers worked tirelessly to create spaces for themselves and the next generation, all in the midst of social unrest for the Queer community. Additionally, I explained my methodological approach, sampling methods, and coding strategies.

In Chapter 2 I will outline issues of Internet accessibility for Queer rural youth, the current political landscape in rural America, and the subversive strategies Queer youth use to navigate policies. At this moment, Queer people around the country face oppression, and hate bubbles startlingly close to the surface in many communities. I link the current vibrancy of online Queer communities to early stages of social media, when Queer people from around the country and world sought refuge from real-world policing by escaping to the relatively un-policed new frontier of the Internet. A full

discussion of modern Queer social movements and socialization online requires the historical context of exactly how prior generations of Queer people shaped the contemporary social media landscape.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I lay out the results of my analysis of my investigative data (Kozinets 2015), in the form of public social media posts on Reddit and Twitter. I break the analysis into subtopics to highlight some of the main research findings; they also include prime example posts and quotes from my informants in defense of these findings. It was helpful to use my interactive data (Kozinets 2015) from the interviews in conjunction with the textual analysis, because the informants knew much more about these communities than I do. The main focus of Chapter 3 is how Queer rural youth engage with virtual communities online. I discuss online dating and friendships, sexual exploration online, the prevalence of spam in virtual communities and how Queer youth use humor to bond.

One key finding, discussed in Chapter 4, is that the Internet provides a network of social freedom and unique opportunities for creatively expressing and engaging with identity. Youth are able to build bonding social capital with peers hundreds or even thousands of miles away and learn social techniques that they would otherwise neglect. However, this often comes at the large cost of youth categorizing themselves into even tighter boxes to fit in with the communities they view as their last resort. When there is nowhere else to turn, people are much more likely to go along with the perceived interests and needs of the group. When the Internet forms such an integral part of these youths' lives, the distance between them and their online peers means relatively little.

Some of these relationships are more important to them than those they maintain in their real lives. Another finding is the subversive strategies that youth use to interact with their peers and establish their identity online, against the wishes of the adults in their lives. Other findings include how youth use the Internet to date and form lasting friendships online, how young adults explore their sexuality online, the role of spam in these online spaces, and trauma bonding online through memes and other outlets of humor.

In Chapter 4, I explore how the Internet causes significant changes to real world actions and behaviors. The interviews reveal the unique stories, lived experiences, and cultural schema of the community through the voices of the informants themselves. Several interesting findings include that the Internet is driving migration to urban centers on the West Coast and production of online ideals in youths' offline lives. The sections cover subtopics emerging from my research findings, and I incorporate data gathered from the ethnographic activities and the interviews themselves. These activities often provided richer context for the information already revealed by the interviews, but they were just as likely to uncover previously neglected details.

Finally, I will conclude the thesis with a summary of my key findings, discussion of the implications for the bodies of theory I engaged with the study, and suggestions for future research potential. I also point out possible applications for the data that could benefit the Queer community. I include a reflection regarding whether this research, thesis, and academic discipline can alter the course of policy and social structure at all or if I need to seek other avenues to return this research to my

stakeholders and their communities. According to many of my informants, academia does have the potential to alter the world, and their community, for the better or worse. I discuss how to ensure that my research and future work will benefit them, rather than harm.

Chapter 2 Politics, Subversion and the Struggle for Internet Access

2.1 Overview

This chapter addresses the current state of internet access in US K-12 classrooms, as well the experience of Queer rural youth in their daily lives at school and home. Then, I consider how the history of Queer activism as well as the current political climate shapes how youth interact with the world. Finally, I explain how Queer rural youth subvert certain policies and roadblocks to their Internet access, often by sharing tips and learning from other users.

2.2 Internet Access

The Digital Divide

According to the American Community Survey and the US Census (2020), more households possess high quality access to the Internet than ever before. If these numbers serve as a baseline for internet access within the country, it would appear that today is a golden age for connectivity and free information. However, the survey does not consider the quality of access and, when surveys factor in socioeconomic status, it becomes clear that a digital divide still exists in the United States (Lai 2021). Wealthy white urban families hold an advantage over others both in terms of quality of internet connection and free time to engage with the internet for leisure activities. For instance, adults and children living through impoverished conditions, which are more common in rural areas (Lai 2021), spend more time working full-time or multiple jobs, and have little time to casually peruse the Internet even if they pay for a subscription. Internet

access did rapidly change the past few years, especially with the COVID-19 global pandemic and the growing popularity of remote, work-from-home alternatives. However, that still does not account for the role of power, control, and surveillance in manipulating how different people interact with the internet and navigate intricate virtual communities.

Internet Access in US K-12 Schools

Youth face unique barriers to free internet access, both at home and in the classroom. Various tools such as content filters, parental controls, and even screen and search history monitoring function to police the actions of youth in digital space. For instance, if schools even give students the chance to freely browse the internet during school hours, blocking certain non-pornographic sites deemed “inappropriate” simply because an automated filter caught them would certainly restrict these students’ movement and might unintentionally cut off access to innocuous websites. The constant reminders or threats of surveillance influence what students do online (Scott et al. 2017, 4). It simultaneously teaches them that they should hide certain behaviors or facets of their identities, specifically same-sex sex. The shame that this restriction embeds in youth harms them and is entirely avoidable. Queer youth face significant difficulties accessing sex education (Rabbitte 2020, 530; Tran et al. 2023). My research suggests the importance of considering alternative methods that protect youth from ‘inappropriate’ content without pressuring them to limit engagement with their personality, identity, and interests.

Youth experience significant barriers to Internet access and exploration, but Queer youth bear even more of the strain. My informant Carson, a bisexual man from Northern California, said, “Part of it’s that the teachers are already rude to me. I try to stay in line because they won’t let me off easy.” The tools of control used to police movement online, such as content filters, too often block non-pornographic content relevant to minorities. In many cases, the problem is actually the inherent bias built into the algorithms of these blockers and other tools (Scott 2017, 3). School administrators might not realize that their attempts to protect students potentially block them from accessing important means of support such as suicide prevention hotlines and sex education resources (Berger 2022; Miller 2017). This argument in no way justifies youths’ exploration of Internet pornography, but content filters and other tools do sometimes accidentally weed out important resources.

The Pros and Cons of Restricting Youths’ Access

Since the advent of the Internet, parents and school administrators continue to devise new methods of filtering, restricting, and otherwise exercising control over children’s social media and Internet use. Parents that establish such policies assume that unrestricted Internet use will negatively impact childrens’ social and academic performance (Parasnis 2022, 2). And, to be fair, there is plenty of cause for concern (Berson 2002, 51). There are other dangers including but not limited to predatory behavior, stalking, and harassment. However, although ample research highlights the negatives of adolescent social media use (Berson et al. 2002), the current literature

offers equivalently thorough investigations into the positive effects of the Internet on youth (Chew 2011, 730; Cserni and Talmud 2015). Several researchers explore Internet use from the perspective of youth themselves while placing the issue in the context of the more systemic knowledge and power struggles at play beneath the surface.

The commonly held assumption that the Internet is bad for children relies on a white, cis, heteronormative experience, which is not the reality for every youth (Simpson 2016). For instance, non-white children living in primarily white rural communities often have little opportunity for socialization with peers of similar demographics. Aside from interactions with their family, the internet can act as a bridge for children undergoing the same struggles that they are (Cserni 2015). To take this idea further, sexual minorities miss out on opportunities to learn about their community's history, safe sex practices, and suicide prevention resources (Schmitz 2022, 278). The same school policies based on protecting students from predatory behavior, "lewd" content, and cyberbullying can actively harm the students that school administrators are seeking to aid. For instance, what happens when content filters block students from learning about HIV/AIDs because the same article mentions male/male sexual activity? Content filters are fallible, and children rarely ask for exceptions. From an institutional perspective, changing these policies will take time, but that makes research into this topic all the more important. Youth are impressionable, with developing interests; the Internet serves as a valuable tool for identity development if we properly understand its effects. As they stand today, school internet policies lean upon archaic understandings of the effect of the internet on a youth's development and require facts-based

improvement (Greenfield 2004, 755). In many cases, the solution could be as simple as allowing youth a way to anonymously ask for access to a banned site, after further review of administrators.

To lend further credence to this argument, it seems that the “shelterist” approach to sex education hinders child development when applied to their in-person communities (Knox 2020, 28). This strategy does not work for managing online interactions, either. Assuming that school administrators have students’ best interests in mind, plenty of evidence supports a more liberal approach to Internet access. When students have the opportunity to freely explore a full range of information, they come out with a deeper understanding of themselves as well as the experiences and struggles of others (Bozkurt 2016, 157). This argument parallels the longstanding book-banning debate in the country: should we allow children to actively explore controversial information and give them the tools necessary to analyze it critically, or keep them entirely sheltered?

We should understand the history of Queer communities online to truly weigh the pros and cons of loosening control of youths’ Internet access. As communities blossomed online faster than they could in person, it attracted as much negative attention as it did positive. The anonymity of the Internet offers considerable protection from real-world repercussions, which makes it an invaluable tool for both vulnerable populations and hecklers alike. “Trolls” (people or bots who use the Internet, and especially forums, to harass innocent users) are a latent part of the Internet ecosystem today and they got their start in the earliest days of forums. They are largely benign and

mainly attempt to draw attention in spaces that users typically use for serious discourse. Their main driver seems to be destroying comfort. Early Internet communities and users also handled actual predators, who would often pretend to be someone they were not with the intention of harming people psychologically or in real life (IRL). They are particularly dangerous to young adults and children. These predators continue to prey on youth today, as my informants suggest in Chapter 3.

Initially, these trolls and predators used the novelty of the Internet to lure and trap vulnerable people. Spam posts evolved alongside the broader Internet (just think of the email chains in the early days of AOL and other forums). Internet spam today is often much more insidious and clandestine. Bots reflect intelligence more than ever given the current state of AI. It is sometimes difficult to determine what is real or fake as a real user of these sites as well as in studies such as this. Trolls present an even more troubling case - their intent is to blend in as well as possible. They can do so more naturally because they are, in fact, real people on the other end. These people potentially lurk for years in these subcommunities, preying on victims and, in this case, careless researchers. Over time, stories of these predators and trolls spread throughout the Internet and even into popular culture and news broadcasts. The spread of this information neutered a lot of predators' techniques and encouraged both schools and parents to either educate their children on the potential dangers of this important new tool or encourage abstinence from the Internet entirely. Today, predators in the form of people and corporations (both legitimate and illegitimate) use even more creative techniques (or scams) to prey on the most vulnerable populations of the Internet,

especially the elderly. However, many members of the Queer community are frequent netizens of the Internet and know how to navigate around these dangers (Groves 2014).

I personally found some of these platforms challenging to navigate. People consider Reddit and Twitter as “troll farms” and I sorted through dozens of spam posts (see Figures 8 and 9 in Chapter 3 for examples) throughout communities on these platforms before uncovering the cultural data I sought. Unfortunately, no one knows how much troll activity takes place on these platforms and at least some spam likely made its way into my textual analysis. Both actual and spam posts provide valuable data, however; Queer young adults also sort through this material in their own day-to-day experiences within these communities. In a way, the spam forms part of the culture itself. For example, my informant Gabriel mentioned that “I don’t think about spam much but I know that it’s there. A few days ago I saw a tweet that Markiplier [a famous YouTuber] came out as gay. I took it at face value and only realized it was a fake when someone replied to my retweet saying so.” Clearly, people have varying capacities for filtering spam in their brain and go about much of their life never knowing which posts are accurate or not. The real question is whether the celebrity fake news, which users often quickly disprove, is as serious as the spam that changes how people view entire categories of people in society. A fake post that convinces an adolescent of a false reality is in fact very real for that unsuspecting person, and the spam can influence their actions or even identity.

As it stands today, the early Internet communities of the 90s and 00s evolved both into massive social media communities, as well as more niche ones. There are

subreddits for gay men, gay men looking for friends, gay men who game, trans women who crochet, and the list goes on. Unfortunately, none of these communities are safe from illegal behavior. It is easy for crime and predatory behaviors to go unchecked in these communities, under the cover of anonymity, made only more dangerous by the fact that young adults consider these spaces safe havens to supplement their lack of in-person support. For instance, a predator's job is unfortunately easier when they know that the people in a space are young adults struggling with the adults in their life. Those potential victims are likely less willing to tell their parents about a strange 'friend' on the Internet. These youth learn from other people in these spaces how to avoid dangers and behave because users quickly condemn bad behavior.

Additionally, the Internet as it stands today offers new challenges not sufficiently addressed by dated policies. For instance, the Internet increasingly acts as a platform for extreme right-wing radicalization, and unique forms of cyberbullying, doxxing, and negative social interactions occur daily across the Internet (Berson 2002). Should we reject Internet access completely, or provide more practical education on how to safely navigate these dangers, which will only continue to beleaguer young adults and children as they grow?

Anthropology and other related interdisciplinary fields can address the topic of institutional control in the American educational system. Foucault stands as one of the seminal authors on control within the field and any comprehensive discussion of institutional control is incomplete without including his work. In his piece "Panopticism," Foucault touches upon the tendency of individuals to act within the expected

parameters of their “guards” when they believe they are under surveillance (1979, 205). Many modern school policies insist upon surveillance and punishment, and internet filters along with other tools convince students that they are *always* under supervision. This surveillance not only manipulates the movement of students within virtual spaces, but it also teaches them, both consciously and subconsciously, that certain aspects of their identity and life are condemnable. In other words, these controls are not just physical barriers, but they lead to behavioral changes that are not conducive to a healthy exploration of personal or group identity.

Queer rural youth rely on the Internet to remain in touch with active social movements online. Highlighting Hara’s (2011) work is essential in order to bring this discussion more in line with the specific problem of controlling Internet access. Their work outlines the patterns characteristic of social movements online, as well as how various organizations police them. As information becomes more easily accessible and shareable, global movements can begin and end almost overnight (Hara 2011, 495). Although they focus on large-scale control and mobilization in their article, these same ideas apply at a micro-scale within rural school systems as well. Barring restrictions on their access, students easily communicate with people they know in real life as well as peers with whom they engage exclusively online.

Another widely disseminated argument against youth internet use is the assumption that it affects attention and engagement within their real life communities. However, scholars must research more deeply whether social media usage affects in-person engagement and socialization. Chew explains the ambiguity of this issue. Their

own research in conjunction with previous studies reveals that the time or interaction with social media itself does not affect youths' community involvement, but rather the qualities of their unique social media experience and the specific online communities with which they engage (2011, 736). Going forward, school policymakers should consider the complicated nature of this problem and broach more open discourse around whether schools should actually *encourage* some social media interaction for student health and socialization. Again, students using social media is not the problem, but rather a lack of education about how to effectively and safely navigate it.

2.3 Rural Life: The Queer Online Experience and Current Politics

The current digital divide results in slower connections, limited access to online resources (Skinner 2003, 876) and a general sense of isolation (Escobar-Viera et al. 2022, 4) for the Queer youth who need them most. Escobar-Viera asserts that "Social isolation in rural areas is prevalent and LGBTQ youth living in these areas are at compounded risk for perceived isolation and associated negative mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety and suicidality" (2022, 6). In some cases, young people can entirely shut down when they experience challenges both with connecting to others who share their experiences and with accessing the support they need either online or offline. For instance, two of my informants, Travis, a 22-year-old, white, gay man from Ohio and Jacob, a 21-year-old gay man from Kansas (who preferred not to share information about his race), mentioned a moment in their life when they lost their internet access. According to Travis, "Losing the internet was like losing a life-line, or the only thing that

really kept me going. I feel like if I never knew about that life-line, I would have been repressed but not as depressed as I was.” Jacob said that “When my parents took my phone, I couldn’t talk to any of my online friends. It was even hard talking to my high school friends; I felt completely isolated.” They are thankful that later they did regain access to the Internet. They used it to socialize but also to research and apply to college and move to different states.

The experience of Queer rural youth is a multifaceted and often overlooked aspect of Queer studies. While the LGBTQ+ movement gains visibility and acceptance in many urban areas, Queer rural youth individuals face unique challenges as well as unique opportunities. Understanding the rural Queer experience requires a knowledge of the disparities and shared experiences that shape the lives of Queer individuals in different settings.

In the context of Queer rural life, why do Queer youth reach out for socialization and support online in the first place? How does access to the Internet and digital spaces affect the experiences and opportunities available to them throughout their life? For many, the internet offers a vital connection to supportive communities, valuable resources, and a means to explore their identity which is not available to them in person. However, the quality and accessibility of these online connections can vary significantly in different parts of the country, potentially limiting the transformative potential of digital spaces.

Rural Queer people often face distinct challenges, including, but not limited to, social isolation, limited access to Queer resources, and heightened discrimination. The

conservative values prevalent in many rural areas cause or exacerbate most of these problems. Social isolation is particularly prevalent in rural communities, where smaller and often tightly-knit populations mean that a rejection from one social group often leads to rejection from them all (Chew 2011, 730). It is often challenging to find a supportive Queer community in rural parts of the country (Escobar-Viera et al. 2022, 3). Local policies as well as popular opinion can also limit access to essential services and support.

In contrast, urban Queer people tend to experience fewer barriers to access for Queer resources and support networks. Cities often have established Queer communities, pride events, and organizations that make Queer youth feel tolerated and even embraced. Importantly, these youth more than likely perceive their Queer identity as “normal” because they interact with these organizations either directly or indirectly on a daily basis. Contrast this with rural Queer youth, who venture to urban centers for events and opportunities and thus associate them with distant safety. Urban environments typically offer a more diverse and accepting atmosphere, providing a greater sense of belonging for Queer young adults. Additionally, even red-state cities tend to have more progressive policies and legislation in place to protect Queer civil rights (Fetner 2016, 24-25). Red state politicians actively discuss and enact laws to limit protections of Queer youth. Queer youth see the opposite going on in urban centers, specifically on the west coast, which often encourages them to move. See more about the current trend of Queer rural youth migrating to urban centers in Chapter 4.

For many youths, the issue is that their parents do not understand the importance of maintaining their Internet access in the first place. The quote below provides an example of how a Queer youth on the r/Lesbiangang SubReddit asks for help convincing their parents of the validity of their experience. They use their online support communities to create support in their homelife.

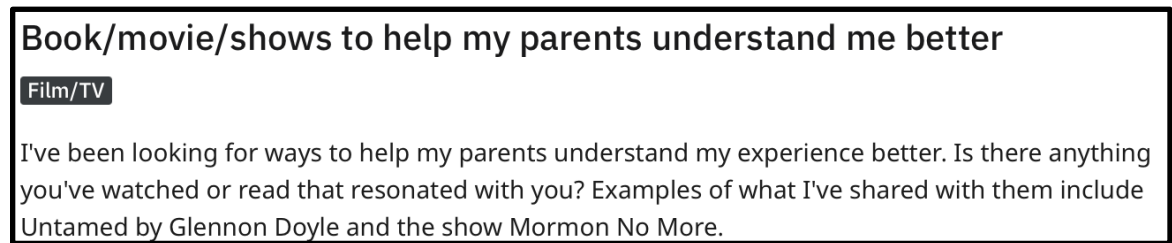


Figure 1. A Reddit user asks for examples of Queer media to share with parents.

Without access to the Internet, this user may not find an answer for their question.

Although this post did not receive much attention aside from upvotes, one person suggested, "There's one series on YouTube called the other love story, it's my favorite but I don't know if it'll help people understand better." This person may or may not have succeeded in educating their parents, but clearly they trusted this online community enough to seek advice there.

Many of my informants reported feeling isolated and unaccepted in their real life, rural communities. The limited number of openly Queer individuals in rural areas led the youth in my study to feel alone and invisible. Anders, who identifies as non-binary, bisexual, and white, is a 23 year old from Idaho who met their partner of 5 years online. In their experience, "It was difficult going without gay friends. I felt pretty isolated and like I was hiding some huge secret all the time. I don't think I would've

made it without my online buddies.” The challenges they faced in accessing supportive online spaces due to limited internet connectivity or restrictive school policies compounded their isolation. Even worse, most of my informants with older friends or siblings, both within and outside of the Queer community, had experienced institutional pain throughout their school years. My informants felt that the entire culture of their communities worked against the Queer community. Despite these obstacles, most of my informants maintained a commitment to connect with others who shared their experiences and to find supportive communities online. Only Michael let these policies and histories keep them from accessing these communities until they got to college.

Social media platforms and online forums became critical spaces for self-expression, identity exploration, and the forging of connections with other Queer individuals. These digital spaces provided much-needed validation and affirmation for their identities, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness. My informant Sarah, a 19-year-old, lesbian, Asian woman from Ohio, started a new subreddit with their other Queer friends; they communicated with each other while also interacting with other Queer friend groups online. In Sarah’s words, this “strengthened our friendship and helped us weed out one friend who we didn’t even realize was a bad person. They did something that I really don’t wanna talk about and I found out through another friend online and we dropped them.” These online relationships do not always exist in a bubble. Instead, they inform and influence in-person relationships and decisions.

Online communities have led to the formation of strong friendships and support networks that extended beyond the digital. Several interviewees shared stories of meeting online friends in person or attending LGBTQ+ events together, further solidifying their connections and sense of community. Pru met someone on Facebook in 2019 who happened to live only 10 miles away. She talked to them for months before building up enough trust to eventually meet them, and they are still friends in 2023. These relationships significantly impacted the overall well-being and confidence of my informants.

Online friendships could cross over into offline ones at any point. Some informants wished to meet online friends after only a few months because they had a dangerously weak in-person support network. This occurred with Pru's friend, who Pru says, "Became a really close friend when I didn't have that many around." Others met friends during college after knowing each other online for over 5 years, and many have no intention of meeting at all.

However, freely accessing the Internet means more than just bonding with other Queer youth. Cserni and Talmud posit that online social networks expose youth to actors of various socioeconomic, ethnic and religious backgrounds. In his words, "In the case of LGBT teenagers and youth, these social networks revolve around the LGBT common sexual orientation/gender identity. This could serve as a base for the formation of bonding social capital, as it is typically structured on homophily" (2015, 164). The diversity of the Queer community creates avenues for Queer youth to expand their world views, not only about sexuality, but rather a wide range of topics. Engagement

with their online communities already vastly improves Queer rural youth's mental health (Berger et al. 2022, 12); youth derive support from the valuable resources available via the formation of this social capital.

Despite the advantages of urban life, rural Queer youth might stand to gain at least something from their experiences in their local communities. After navigating their identities, and facing discrimination universal among Queer people, my informants found themselves feeling more empathetic to other Queer people and the strife of minorities in general. Jordan said, "Dating apps suck! Some of the guys are homophobic against themselves, and racist too. They only want guys that look like them - no fem tops, no pandas [asian gay men with a bulky body type]. I don't understand why we can't be better." Many Queer rural youth (though maybe not those on the other side of those conversations) put their identities in conversation with other worldviews and identities. Moreover, rural Queer young adults often develop a unique resilience, as they must confront adversity and isolation. Their ability to build support networks and find acceptance within their rural communities, despite the odds, demonstrates their strength and determination. In the case of my informant Pru, they proved that living in a rural community is no excuse for not forming and engaging in positive community development. I will explain her experience in greater detail in Chapters 3 and 4. Others lean on the Internet to mentally escape from their daily challenges or to build on existing in-person social networks. These areas require radical reform, which these youth can only offer when they choose to stay.

The Queer rural experience is a complex facet of American Queer life that deserves recognition, understanding and research. While rural Queer individuals face unique challenges, they also exhibit remarkable resilience and strength. Going forward, Queer theory stands to learn a great deal from comparing the experiences of rural and urban Queer youth. The American Queer community encompasses a diverse set of realities and identities, and Queer people throughout all parts of the United States require continued support, acceptance, and advocacy.

Queer youth in rural areas navigate complex digital spaces, restrictive school policies, and precariously fragile support systems. Most of my informants shared their experiences with policy subversion, highlighting their frustration at the barriers they faced in accessing supportive digital spaces and emphasizing the importance of these resources in their lives. Their resourcefulness in bypassing these restrictions demonstrated their determination and skill at navigating the Internet to seek the support and connections they needed. As policymakers, educators, and community members work to address these challenges, they cannot ignore the voices and experiences of Queer rural youth themselves. Their stories offer valuable insights into the unique obstacles they face, as well as the strength they demonstrate in overcoming these barriers. While students can subvert these barriers, it comes at a cost; it is simpler to foster inclusive and accessible environments for all students instead.

2.4 Queer Activism

Historically, the American Queer community quickly adopted digital forms of communication as soon as they became widely available (Groves 2014, 390). This is unsurprising given the historical context of non-heteronormative people subverting oppression in their personal lives. Most often this might manifest by remaining in the closet well into adulthood or even indefinitely and opting for anonymous social and sexual encounters with other members of their community. Online spaces provide the opportunity to engage in open discourse, which was next to impossible for non-heteronormative people in the past few centuries. Most of this discourse is accessible to this day, either in-situ or through various means such as the 'Wayback Machine,' an archival tool that displays websites as they were at prior dates. It will even display deleted webpages of the Internet.

The history of the Internet and the Queer community's involvement with it is inseparable from digital expressions of sexuality such as online pornography, fanfiction, and sexting. Sexuality and, specifically, NSFW content, is central to the landscape of the Internet (Southerton 2021, 925). With that reality in mind, it can be difficult to ensure that underage Queer youth avoid harmful content. There is plenty of disagreement over which came first: Internet use for sex or supportive socialization. According to Breslow et al. (2020) and other scholars of online sexual behavior, the Internet is a place for fast, efficient, and thorough explorations of sexuality and it was only natural for gay men in the 90s to use it as an outlet for eroticism. However, scholars such as Vytiniorgu (2022)

and Scheadler (2022) document that the backbone of online socialization and sexuality is a desire for support and social engagement.

As Breslow (2020) admits themselves, sexuality is a bridge to deeper social connection; instead of viewing it as an independent behavior, it is better to consider it as a valid means by which adult gay men seek community. It is important to not reject this part of the origin story of Queer communities online - society simultaneously sexualized and categorized gay men based on sexuality. Sexual minorities and heterosexuals behave fairly similarly online, despite scholars' and the public's obsession with the sexual lives of gay men in particular. From here on, I refer to sexual forms of community-building and spaces as Not-Safe-For-Work, or NSFW, and safe spaces for minors or the general public as Safe-For-Work, or SFW. These are common terms used on social media to differentiate pornographic content from all other content. These are terms widely used within online communities to distinguish between the two and protect youth.

Queer people, in the early years of the Internet, needed to defend their lives along with their sexuality. Although many NSFW influencers and communities performed activism in their own right, a significant number of early online Queer communities focused on social activism specifically. Many of these groups were meeting in-person in large urban centers such as San Francisco and New York. The Internet provided the perfect opportunity to supplement their infrequent, and often risky, in-person meetings with online forums and planning sessions. It also gave members valuable time and space to get to know each other outside of typical club activities.

Online message boards and forums were very conducive to forming bonding social capital (Cserni 2015; Kozinets 2015) and led to friendships and even relationships between members of the activist communities (Kaun and Uldam 2018, 2101).

Many of these early activist forums existed alongside closely affiliated or unaffiliated non-activist forums. Community-building was easier online because, unlike in the real world, getting to the new community did not involve finding an address and physically traveling there (Kaun and Uldam 2018). Members could simply post a link from one community to another and they instantly opened a new bridge. For instance, people in a hate-crime focused forum could just as easily access forums on safe-sex practices, coming out of the closet, or affirming transgender identity (Groves et al. 2014). Alternatively, people could start their own forum from the ground up and find participants in their other communities, either from within the same site or from another. Thanks to modern tools like the 'Wayback Machine,' one could presumably directly trace the lineage of modern forums and subcommunities back to these originators.

The state of digital activism continued to evolve alongside separate communities (Groves 2014). Some groups within the broader Queer community have attained more rights than others in the past decade. The fight continues for others, especially the trans community, who face a disproportionate amount of hate crimes and political pressure (Austin et al. 2022). Right wing states and rural areas are particularly hostile (Kline 2022, 1397). For the trans community, it is more so a matter of life and death compared to gay men and lesbian women, who face less discrimination than they did 10 or 20 years ago

(Fetner 2016, 20). Many of the activist communities and influencers for trans-rights work hand-in-hand with African American rights groups and it is disturbing to consider the struggle of individuals whose trans and racial minority identities intersect. In many ways, these online communities are their outlet and hope for navigating life and death struggles IRL.

Youth today still use the Internet to educate others and organize against anti-LGBTQ companies. For example, the following post appeared in the “popular” Reddit tag on r/gay during the 2022 holiday season.

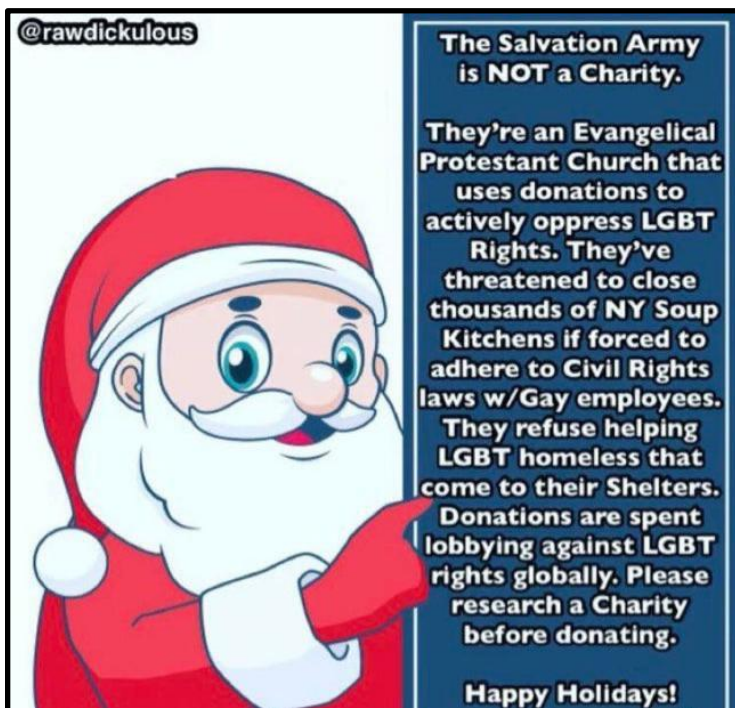


Figure 2. A Reddit image post provides information about The Salvation Army’s stance on LGBT rights.

Posts such as Figure 2 elicit all kinds of interesting responses from users, but a large number of them are guidance on alternative organizations to support. One commenter

said, “Instead, donate to your local United Way. They have seen an increase in clients, including LGBTQ+ clients, and are always willing to help with odds and ends like food and basic hygiene, and most will help find shelters and safe spaces, too. <3.” A response to this post further down the thread said, “Well thanks for the tip! I’m going to go research the United Way right now! :D.” People learn about companies/organizations to avoid and share meaningful information about alternate options.

Moving forward, digital activism’s future is in question. Several of my informants mentioned the growing problem of ‘shadow banning,’ (Salty 2020) where the algorithm surreptitiously pushes out some of their favorite content creators. In some instances, the algorithm does not even advertise their posts to their closest followers. These shadow bans (Salty 2020) seem to occur after they make posts critiquing the government, social media companies, or warfare. Whether the bans are intentional or not, it seems to only make my informants more sure that these content creators are in the right. However, it’s interesting to consider which content creators are never pushed to people in the first place and how workers at social media companies make those decisions. Inherently biased people design these algorithms, and there is currently no way around their influence (Askanius 2012). Queer rural youth experience and navigate these problems in their daily online interactions. Scholars must better research the existing landscape, through which Queer rural youth traverse.

2.5 Subversive Strategies

As online spaces become increasingly important for Queer rural youth's socialization and development, they also become spaces of subversion where users can resist and challenge dominant systems of oppression. Private chats, social media platforms like Twitter and Reddit, and even gaming communities offer Queer rural youth opportunities to create their own networks and support systems beyond the physical confines of their real life communities. School administrators and parents experience more difficulty tracking these communities than activity within the school, especially when students access them on home computers or phones. All of my informants detailed their common engagement with communities and activities that their parents or school administrators discouraged.

Online communities offer Queer rural youth the ability to subvert and resist systems of discipline and power in ways that may not work in the physical world. Frequently, youth can use anonymous, online profiles to express themselves in ways that adults in their lives may deem inappropriate or unacceptable. These profiles allow youth to explore and challenge their ingrained norms and expectations of gender and sexuality through their communities, and to create a sense of agency and empowerment. My informant Pru said, "When I'm online, I can act like my true self. I don't worry about what my mom will think of me, or what my brother has to say. I can just be me." Mitchell, a 19-year-old, gay, white man from Ohio, took this further, saying, "On Reddit, I get to speak up because no one's right there to judge me. In school, if I talk about what really interests me, like makeup and fashion, I have to say that stuff only to

my closest friends. But online, I can say it to the world and it feels great. Sure, there are haters online, but there's some distance between me and them and that isn't the same at school." These youth open up online because they perceive a "distance" between their expression and their audience. When they receive positive feedback on their posts, they feel good about themselves. When they receive negative feedback, they take it in stride.

Often Queer youth face larger obstacles to their Internet activity than their parents. Most educational institutions employ access restriction, especially through filtering software to restrict access to certain websites. These filters excel at protecting youth from what adults in their life deem truly dangerous content, such as the plethora of pornography and unrealistic beauty standards found in all corners of the Internet. However, broad restrictions often include benign websites that offer support, education, or community connections for Queer youth (Southerton et al. 2021, 924). This results in an environment where students feel unsupported and unable to fully explore their identity (Southerton et al. 2021, 920). It seems that many youth, especially those adept in the Internet and the community discourse taking place there, find ways to work around these filters or contribute to the development of entirely new online spaces. All of my informants said that they either went directly against school or parent policy to access information they considered critical to their identity development or found some sort of work around. Pru went so far as to say, "I searched for Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) as many times as it took until I found one that made it past my school's filter. It honestly didn't even take that long." The alternative likely

explains this behavior. If these youth did not subvert policies to find community, they would have no means of forming identity and camaraderie with peers (Cserni 2015, 163). Cserni (2015) views this camaraderie as essential to building social capital, and thus a safety net in life. The Queer rural youth who lack Internet access also often lack those meaningful peer connections.

Despite the obstacles, Queer rural youth demonstrate the ability to tenaciously adapt and find ways to subvert restrictive policies and access the online spaces they need. Travis and Amy, a 22-year-old, lesbian, Asian woman from Oregon, said that they often share tips and tricks with other youths on how to bypass filters, utilize VPNs, or seek alternative sources of information and support. Travis said, "I told all of my friends when I found a new VPN. My school even banned YouTube, so I got popular fast." In regards to sharing tips with online friends, Travis said, "Smarter people than me share tricks for breaking school filters. I see reposting them as my special way of paying it forward." Amy also mentioned finding tricks online first and sharing them with her real-life friends. These strategies demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of Queer youth in rural settings and the success of their subversive practices. My informants do skew toward the tech-savvy demographic, and these tech-savvy youth help their in-person friends access the same content and communities. This displays the potential of the Internet as a useful tool for further subversion and organizing.

In the context of policy subversion, the implications of these practices immensely impact the overall experiences of Queer rural youth in K-12 schools. While circumventing restrictive policies can provide access to resources that youth find

essential, it can also place Queer young adults at risk of disciplinary action or otherwise exacerbate feelings of marginalization. These factors heavily weigh on the mental and emotional well-being of Queer students, as well as how to minimize damage to their well-being from dangerous parts of the internet or social media. My informants Carson, a 23-year-old, Mexican-American man from California who identifies as bisexual, and Thomas, a 22-year-old, bisexual, white man from Oregon, said that the constant navigation of school policies actively traumatized them. Thomas said, "I didn't have a lot of friends back then. YouTube was a good outlet for me, but I didn't try to get to the sites they [his school] blocked. When they blocked YouTube, I had to find a way back on but I was so scared of getting into trouble. Thinking back, it was pretty fucking traumatizing." Carson spoke more bluntly, saying, "There wasn't a single day where I didn't think about getting caught and punished for ignoring rules that shouldn't be there in the first place." While Queer youth can navigate the existing policies for their social benefit, that navigation often taxes their mental health.

More broadly, Queer rural youth learn solutions to problems they face in their daily lives online. These online spaces offer youth a sense of safety and privacy, where they can freely express themselves without fear of backlash from their real life communities. Private messaging allows for the sharing of resources and support that may not be available in the physical world. My informant Anders outlined his own use of r/gaybros to seek advice about watching YouTube at school when the school policy banned it. In his words, "My school blocked YouTube at the beginning of the year, so I tried to find a backdoor way in. The year before, I had started to watch a lot of

Youtubers like Matthew Lush and Shane Dawson. It wasn't the same sitting in the library everyday without watching it. Thank God Reddit wasn't banned because I used it to find out about Vimeo. Somebody reposted Shane's videos there a few days after he posted, so I kinda pirated them there." This alternative video platform, Vimeo, allowed Anders to watch videos about gay culture between classes, in the library and at lunch. Interestingly, r/gaybros still has plenty of posts about getting around school policy filters. See Figure II for an example of one of these posts:

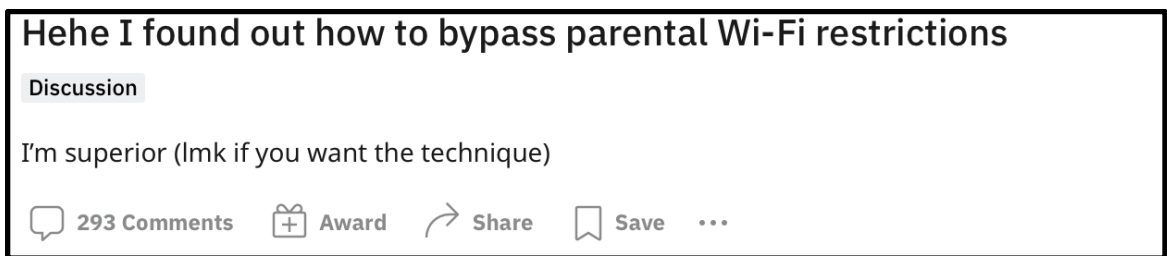


Figure 3. A Reddit post that highlights a user's filter-bypass methods.

This user offers to share their experience with others, who clearly also subvert restrictions using their own strategies.

Certain youth, such as my informant Nicole, a 22-year-old transgender black man from Illinois who identifies as gay, go even further to subvert policies. His parents monitored his internet activity while at home. "Somebody at school said that they used a VPN to get past their parents' content blocker." Nicole started a hunt to get such a VPN, which involved using Wikipedia in place of typical social media sites and articles about Tweets about VPNs. According to him, "Their filter caught any articles about VPNs, but Wikipedia slipped past." Finally, he was able to find a VPN service that also blocked his parents' content filter. He said, "I couldn't believe that it worked and, to be

honest, I still haven't told them about it." The Internet offers countless avenues for learning and sharing subversive strategies.

Queer youth actively subvert power and policy to meaningfully better their lives. Jacob questioned his identity for much of his young adulthood. An avid gamer, when he was 16 he happened to play a match of Fortnite, a popular massively multiplayer online (MMO) game, with a gay person. This match sparked a longtime friendship between the two of them, and Jacob joined numerous Discord channels to meet other gay people. Jacob said, "After a while talking to James and Khari, I decided to come out to my [in-person] friends Melissa and Olivia. I figured they always knew I was gay because they trusted me to talk about guys around me, but I didn't have the courage to say anything before. Somehow my sister found out, though, and my parents started thinking that my online friends were part of the problem." His parents then tried to restrict his access to video games. They already believed that they were bad for his mental health and, to them, his coming out only confirmed their suspicions. Jacob said, "I could still hop on Discord at school and talk to James there, but it wasn't the same without games." He made it through the rest of the year, thanks to the support of these friends, until his parents came around to understanding his sexuality. According to him when asked about his online friends, "It was an extremely depressing time and I don't think I could've made it without their help." Each of these stories show that subversion can take many forms depending on the type of oppression it faces. These youth faced different challenges from the institutions present in their lives, and each found a unique

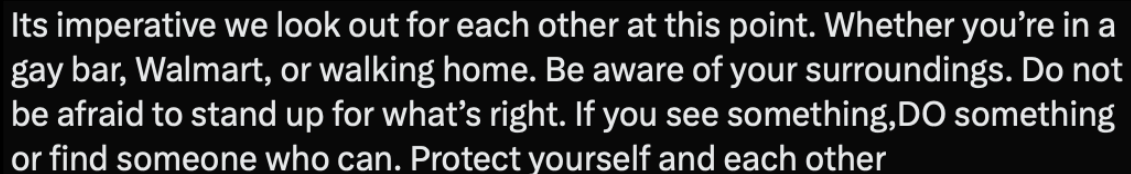
way to circumvent the rules. All of them assured me that their social and mental health would have suffered if not for this subversion.

Although my informants mention quite a bit of conflict with their parents at times, it's reassuring to hear that their families often come around sooner rather than later. In one case, Pru taught her mom about trans rights by showing her some websites and YouTube videos. "She came around. It took a lot of time but I showed her some videos and things about trans people. I love her and I know she loves me too. It's just hard when she doesn't fully understand who I am." Different generations possess different access and knowledge of the Internet, meaning many Queer rural youth must either indirectly or directly educate their parents. Although I did not interview parents for this research, it seems clear that they are concerned with the safety and wellbeing of their children more often than not. The same goes for school administrators, who are often beholden to parents and the community. Content filters certainly can shield children from the horrors of the Internet and are a valuable tool *when* used appropriately.

Although rural Queer youth creatively implement subversive strategies using new tools, the patterns and forms of their subversion are not novel. Michel Foucault's concepts of power and resistance highlight the ways in which individuals resist and challenge dominant power structures through their own actions, identities, and the tools available to them. Foucault argues that power belongs to more than those in positions of authority; it is a dynamic force that is present in all social relationships and interactions (1978). Thus, subversive actions by queer rural youth online act as a form of

resistance to the dominant power structures at play in their real life communities. My informants' stories of subversion reinforce the notion that the struggle against power does not only focus on direct authorities, but also friends and family, who sometimes, acting out of love and with their kids' safety in mind, unintentionally limit or harm their children.

In Figure 4 from Reddit, one sees that Queer people online offer safety tips for moving through the real world. This extends to virtual communities as well. Parents try to help their children by blocking dangerous Internet content. On the other hand, Queer people preserve and build precious social capital. The data shows that youth consistently and creatively subvert content filters and policies. Once they bypass various roadblocks, they often use the space to share safety tips.



Its imperative we look out for each other at this point. Whether you're in a gay bar, Walmart, or walking home. Be aware of your surroundings. Do not be afraid to stand up for what's right. If you see something, DO something or find someone who can. Protect yourself and each other

Figure 4. Reddit comment that demonstrates popular use cases for filtered websites, which includes physical safety information, as well as sexual health information and community building.

Private chats, social media platforms, and gaming communities provide rural Queer youth with opportunities to subvert and resist systems of oppression, anti-LGBTQ+ companies, and content filters. These online spaces allow for the formation of networks of support and offer a sense of agency and empowerment through subversive actions such as those described above. As Foucault's concept of power and resistance suggests, these actions could be a form of resistance to the power structures in place in

their rural communities. With that in mind, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the Internet *can* be a dangerous place. That is more reason for youth to have a strong support network there, as well as in the real world.

Chapter 3 Queer Virtual Community Engagement: Online Personas and Behaviors

3.1 Overview

This chapter examines and analyzes data about queer rural youth and the online communities in which they participate. I gathered the data from ethnographic interviews and social media posts on forums and subcommunities centered around the Queer community, such as the Reddit communities *r/gay*, *r/lesbian*, *r/trans* and various similar user-created locations on Reddit and Twitter. Over the course of three months, I was able to systematically filter through hundreds of thousands of recent posts. These posts provide rich insight into the cultural discourse and schema at play in online communities centered around rural youth members of the Queer community. This snapshot of these online communities in early 2023 indicates the historical factors that drove them where they are today and provides a glimpse of the future. Rural Queer youth engage in all sorts of discourse online and form bonding and bridging social capital (Cserni and Talmud 2015), depending on their unique identities. This social capital results in real world support systems, which influence their lives and actions.

The data presented in this chapter contextualizes the lived experience of rural Queer young adults. I asked interviewees questions related to social media posts and posting habits to fully understand the landscape and those participating in it. My examination includes topics such as online dating and interpersonal relationship management, sexual exploration online, how spam becomes real, trauma bonding through online comedy and the subversive strategies youths use to survive.

3.2 Online Dating and Friendships

Online social media platforms serve as a tool for Queer rural youth to seek romantic relationships or friendships. These sites allow them to connect with others who share their identities and experiences and expand their selection of dating options. In this section, I explore how individuals navigate these platforms and the benefits and drawbacks they describe. I also consider how the platforms influence broader issues of building community, relationships, and social practices.

On Tinder, one of the most popular online dating apps, a user first creates a profile, then swipes left or right on potential matches based on their photos and short bios. Ward et al. (2016, 1647) found that Queer youth who used Tinder reported higher levels of social support, self-esteem, and life satisfaction compared to those who did not use the app. This suggests that Queer rural youth can use online dating platforms to grow social connections and build social capital, when they would otherwise feel isolated in their communities. The following post demonstrates how desperate youth can be for connection. I found Figure 5 in the recently posted section of r/lesbian. There were no responses to this post, meaning they possibly turned somewhere else to find this information.

Where to find other gay girls?

Travel

Hiii, I (F21) am trying to meet more girls in my area but have really been struggling recently and am looking for reccomendations. I don't really get approached at the gay bar and apps like HER and LEX are dead asf.

Figure 5. A reddit post shows how difficult it is for Queer youth to find relationships in their physical locations.

It is important to note that, just like in person, Queer rural youth do not always successfully find their answers.

My informants each used dating apps, either for genuine romantic connection or to casually explore available options. For example, Anders met their current partner of 5 years on a dating app. In their words, “If it weren’t for Tinder, there was no way I would find someone to spend my life with. My current partner identifies as nonbinary too, and it’s so hard for people like us to date. Before Miles, I had no hope, and now I think I really found someone who cares and listens.” These youth often have no alternative to safely flirt or approach people in rural offline contexts. Sometimes, they find partners who live across the United States or even the world. In other cases, they use these apps to uncover who is closeted in their area. Anders said, “Before I found my partner, I met up with a lot of older guys. It was the only option most of the time. A lot of people look for a good time and not a long time until it happens by accident.” Dating and hook-up apps are sometimes the easiest ways to meet other Queer people in rural communities, where they are less likely to express their identity openly. Queer rural youth often use them for short-term sexual relationships, rather than long-term romantic partnerships.

Online dating can also cause stress and anxiety for some Queer rural youth.

Lambert et al. (2020) reported that participants felt pressured to present themselves in a typically desirable way on dating apps. The pressure to conform can lead to insecurity, self-doubt, and a sense of disconnection from their rural identities. For example, Mitchell told me that, in 2022, they pretended to be something they were not in order to date someone they considered above their league. They had recently moved to a new city, and felt that getting into a relationship was a very important thing for them.

Mitchell said,

It's a lot of obsessing over looks - how you look, how they look, and how you'd look together as a couple or just out in public. I dated this guy for maybe 3 or 4 months and I never felt like myself once. I had to change who I was not just for him but for myself. You know, back to your question about rural identity, I had to pretend that I was more cultured or 'from the city' than I really was. I guess I just sort of associate my rural identity with being ugly and dirty sometimes. I didn't know how to get out of that cycle until he broke up with me and I had to sort of reinvent myself.

Clearly, despite the potential for benefit, relationships that started online come with unique challenges. Gay men face a considerable amount of pressure from society and within the Queer community itself, especially in the way of beauty standards. Mitchell elaborated on this when he said that "Gay dudes are obsessed with looking hot. We go to the gym, diet, do literally everything to fit in because we have to." That is a hefty amount of pressure for young people to face, and the Internet unfortunately

perpetuates it. Figure 6 below provides an example of someone in the Queer community calling out this problem.



Figure 6. A post demonstrating the pressure that the Queer community, and especially gay men, put on their physical appearance and the emotional toll that it takes on them.

Considering the number of upvotes on this post, many gay men agree with the author's sentiment. However, one commenter's solution was "Step 1: get off Instagram."

Another said, "I'm on Instagram. I just don't follow "influencers' or "hot" gay men - I only follow others who post about music I like, art, books, politics, craft ale and architecture. My interests that have nothing to do with my appearance or sexuality."

The diversity of opinion is broad. Regardless, it is a point of heated discourse in the Queer community at this time.

Similar struggles arose in non-romantic online relationships. Like Mitchell's story of dating, other stories revealed struggles with friendships that arose from online interactions. For example, Thomas met someone on Bumble BFF, a platonic friendship-oriented spin-off of the dating app Bumble, who they thought would make a great friend. He said, "They seemed so cool and were from the city. They knew that I was from a rural area but I tried to act like I was more used to city life than I was. I'm still friends with them now, but I notice that, when we hang out, I'm always changing how I act in subtle ways." When I pressed further, they continued to say that "I feel like I act differently around everybody I know, depending on if they're gay or straight or other things. I act so differently when it's somebody from the city vs. someone from my hometown. I get really coy and even try to act rich, I'd say." My informants' experience growing up in rural areas influenced not only how they viewed people from the cities, but also how they assumed they needed to act in order to fit into an urban environment. They did not always find the behavioral changes comfortable.

Despite these challenges, online dating platforms offer great opportunities for Queer rural youth to build meaningful relationships and friendships. These platforms can provide a space for Queer rural youth to explore their identities and connect with others who share their experiences, regardless of geographical location. For those who have not moved to a city and never plan to, it is a great way to meet other people in the same circumstance. Pru never left her hometown and said that "I had a small circle of

gay friends in my area. We knew that other gay people existed, so we tried to either find them online or find people across the world if we had to. Half the time I just wanted someone to talk to and understand what I was going through.” Some of my informants who still live in rural areas say that, even if they met their friends offline, most of their interactions occur online through platforms like Discord, Twitter and Instagram. Blake, a 21-year-old, asexual, white man from Texas, said, “I live down the street from my friend Ma, and we probably talk on Discord more than we do in person.” Interacting online is by far the easiest way to communicate with a large group of friends when geography is a concern, and often even when it is not.

The Internet provides as many opportunities to exit toxic relationships as there are chances to enter them. Figure 7 is an example of a Reddit post from r/gaybros where the user asks for advice on what they view as an abusive relationship.

advice regarding one year old relationship

Sex/Dating

Hey guys how are you?

Today I am writing this post because I would like some advice on my current relationship. I have been with him for a little over a year now and I am confused regarding how I am feeling or the best course of action for me in the future.

To start off I would like to say that I do love him and that he is a very good person with good values and family. I always feel welcomed, listened and that he loves me deeply.

The last six months or so he has been starting to go downhill in every aspect of his life culminating in the last time we saw each other he confessed to me that he feels depressed. He is failing everything in his life, he fails every college course, he eats bad food all the time, he stopped working out, his only motivation seems to be hanging out with friends and being high. He does NOTHING of his life except going to his college courses which he fails each and every one of them. He has a severe lack of motivation, discipline and will to become better. I have several times challenged him to do things with me that could wake him up a bit like I don't know coming to workout with me or I try to push him towards his interests and he fails to respond to any. He has also money issues as he is a student so I either have to pay for most of the stuff we do or at most go eat to a cheap place where we can split the bill. He depends entirely on his family financially and he doesn't seem to care to get even a minimum wage job to lift him up and get some money for himself. Last semester of 2022 he was also failing every class and changed what he studied saying he didn't like the other one, guess what this year so far has been the exact same. Their parents threatened him of stop paying his rent and force him to return to his hometown but I don't see them following through. His mom forced him to go to a psychologist but it seems the minimal progress he makes then falls again at the same stuff of doing nothing and watching cartoons while high with his friends.

This weekend, after failing all of his exams, and next week having two more exams he invited one of his friends and his cousin to his house and they have done nothing but be high all day. Right now I am a bit angry to be honest because over the week he was all depressed and such and I had to play the role of trying to encourage him and now it's the weekend he got a little bit better over the week and now waste all the progress by doing nothing. I can only imagine tomorrow when is alone again he will fall over the depression side again.

Figure 7. One Reddit user's recounting of what he believes to be a toxic relationship.

This user wants advice on how to handle their relationship. Most of the comments on this post encouraged the poster to go with their gut and leave the relationship if it was not working. One person commented bluntly, "Sounds like a loser. Dump him." Users treat these spaces as a place to share all sorts of honest opinions, especially when people feel anonymous. Not only does the Internet provide space to vent, but also for

broader communities to offer their input. Pru explains, “People say what they want online because they know that no one can stop them.” It seems that the victims are typically more accessible online, while the persecutors protect themselves with relative anonymity. In other words, it is easier to make a burner account and harass someone than it is to protect yourself from every bad actor online.

My research revealed that not all online platforms include or support Queer identities. Some of my informants reported that they experienced harassment and discrimination on dating apps such as Tinder and Grindr, a gay male-focused hookup app. To paraphrase, Nicole and Pru both said that these companies created these spaces with a certain demographic in mind - gay and straight men. These platforms offer few, if any, protections for trans and nonbinary people. Nicole reported receiving at least one harassing message a week on Grindr for identifying as a black trans man. Sometimes, the harassment targets his gender identity, sometimes their racial identity, and, more often, both. He does not feel safe in these spaces, and yet he needs to access them to maintain the possibility of finding romantic and sexual relationships. His experience highlights the need to create safe and welcoming online spaces for Queer rural youth, especially those who may face additional forms of marginalization based on race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

It is vital for researchers, platform designers, and community members to work together to maintain safe and welcoming online spaces for Queer rural youth and continue exploring the potential benefits and drawbacks of these platforms for Queer youths’ mental health and wellbeing. They seem to be the bridges to future

relationships, both platonic and romantic, so they hold a very critical role in shaping the lives of Queer rural youth.

3.3 Sexual Exploration Online

Online discourse communities play a significant role in sexual exploration and identity formation for Queer young adults, particularly for those living in rural areas. These communities provide a relatively safe space for individuals to express and experiment with their sexual identities. In addition to offering support for users who are undergoing similar experiences, they allow some youth the opportunity to better understand their offline sexual encounters or to engage in new ones online. My informants used platforms like Twitter and Reddit as essential tools in their sexual development, specifically for understanding their preferences and participating in discussions that they would have found uncomfortable or inappropriate offline.

The limited or nonexistent access to physical LGBTQ+ spaces in rural areas forces many young adults to turn to online communities for sexual education and self-discovery. These virtual spaces serve as a source of sexual education for rural Queer young adults who receive little LGBTQ+ related sex education in school. Sarah said that, “In my school, the only time someone brought up gay sex in sex ed was when some asshole straight guy joked about it. The teachers never took it seriously and it was never considered a real option, only a perverted one.” Michael suggested that “The Internet’s different. You can learn about sex however you want, at your own pace. And you don’t have to worry about a 50-year-old [a sex-ed teacher] leaving out the important stuff.”

Each school and teacher have their own approach to sexual education, but it seems that the problem of singling out or, more often, not acknowledging gay students at all, is prevalent across the country (Rabbitte 2020, 533). In some cases, it is illegal for them to explore these topics, even if they wanted to (Kline et al. 2022). This issue is regional and deeply multi-faceted.

Unfortunately, schools throughout the United States, and especially those in rural communities, often rely on abstinence education and other sex-negative arguments as the core of the curriculum. Not only do these policies not delay sexual activity, but they also create a sentiment of shame around sexuality (Tanne 2007). Travis said, "Our sex ed teacher was the math teacher, and they didn't even bring up the possibility that two gay guys could exist and have sex. I felt singled out because everyone in the room joked about me being the only gay guy. Or, at least, the only out gay guy." In practice, many schools around the country operate as though gay and trans acknowledgement harms children. In 2022 alone, at least 20 states introduced "Don't Say Gay" laws, which are "restricting public school teachers from discussing LGBTQ+ history or people in public elementary schools" (Sosin 2022). As discussed in the introduction, these dynamics will persist in the future, as more anti-LGBTQ+ laws and policies crop up throughout conservative states in America. For now, online spaces are one of the few options available to many Queer rural youth.

However, not all online communities provide accurate or safe information about sex. Some online communities may normalize dangerous sexual practices, particularly among minors. Mitchell said, "Twitter and Tumblr were not the best places for me to

learn about sex. I saw a lot of guys having bareback sex [sex without a condom] and assumed that that was just the norm.” Nearly all my informants noted that they could easily find porn when they were underage. Disputing the conception that porn impedes adolescent development, my informants Alex, a 23-year-old, bisexual white woman from Kentucky who moved to Los Angeles when she was 18 years old, and Jordan, a 21-year-old, nonbinary, pansexual individual from Michigan who moved to New York City for college, believed that porn provided them with a healthy understanding of sexuality and their own bodies. Their parents did not allow them to participate in their schools’ sexual education programs, so they needed some way of learning practical sexual knowledge and safe sex practices. According to Alex, “If it wasn’t for the Internet, I’d have no idea how two women have sex. It helped shape how I feel about myself and my body early.” The Internet is an effective enough tool for sexual education, when there is no in-person alternative. However, that does not mean it is the ideal avenue for exploration.

My informants felt ambivalent about viewing online pornography. Some of those who identified as women or trans women said that watching porn at a young age harmed their mental health and self-perception. Pru and Anders believe that learning about sex online did not replace having proper sex education in schools.

Many young adults online worry about the presence of sexual predators, but the Queer community faces unique issues. Members of the queer community, and specifically trans women, face novel forms of predation and violence. For instance, predators may target vulnerable minors who visibly struggle with their sexual or gender

identities online by pretending to be queer to gain their trust. Some of my informants fell victim to sexual predators who pursued them with private sexual messages even when they knew of their real age. My informant Pru outlined one traumatic event in her youth where a straight girl from her school pretended to be a man. "Somehow a girl found the Snap account I used for sexting. She pretended to be a guy, got my defenses down, and we sent some pics back and forth. A month later, I found out that she showed my pictures to every other girl at school. It got so bad that my parents and friends saw it. Honestly, it was fucking devastating." This case shows the fragility of internet "anonymity." Indeed, Berson (2002) highlights how anonymity can create a dangerous environment. Additionally, older peers or strangers may coerce youth to share sexual content online, leading to exploitation and victimization. Many of my informants mentioned messaging adults sexually at least once when they were in high school. Jordan said, "I absolutely messaged guys I shouldn't have been messaging. Guys that were 10, 20, 30 years older than me. They never asked but there's no way they didn't know how young I was. I didn't realize how abusive that was until a few years ago." For a long time, young Queer adults suffered in silence because some sexual activity seemed better than none, even if the power dynamic was abusive. Jordan elaborated, "Back then, it was better to get some attention online than none at school. I sexted guys my age too, I just wasn't picky one way or another." Sexual education in schools should at least go so far as helping these youth identify predatory behavior both in person and online.

In follow-up questions, my informants and I found some easy solutions worthy of consideration. First, to ensure the safety of young people, online communities must prioritize safety measures such as age verification and content moderation. Second, parents and educators must prepare their children for the potential risks associated with online sexual exploration. They should provide comprehensive sex education to young people so that they can make informed decisions and avoid potentially dangerous situations online. Additionally, when teachers educate youth on navigating the Internet, they should not ignore the issue of negative self-perception. In Mitchell's words, "I don't feel hot after I scroll through Instagram; I feel like the ugliest person alive." These spaces perpetuate the American ideals of body standards (and even create new ones), which do not align with the reality of most youths' bodies.

In summary, online discourse communities play a significant role in sexual exploration and identity formation for queer young adults, particularly those living in rural areas who lack adequate sexual education from their parents and schools. Online platforms do provide a form of sexual education, but they expose youth to sexual predators. The majority of my informants recognized the risks and still affirmed the value of online sexual encounters in the absence of other venues to develop a healthy relationship with sex. Anders said, "At the end of the day, I learned what I needed to. I still use social media to look at porn and now I know not to be the creep preying on high schoolers." As a society, we must prioritize the safety of young people and take necessary precautions to protect them. Sexual minorities bear the brunt of regressive

educational policies and institutional neglect and remain key stakeholders when institutional changes occur.

3.4 The Prevalence of Spam in Virtual Queer Communities

As mentioned above, spam is an ever-growing problem in all online communities, but especially in minority occupied spaces. It is often difficult to understand the full scale and purpose behind spam campaigns, but, regardless, they have a real and significant effect on people, who often do not perceive them as spam. Spam is often simultaneously inflammatory and inconspicuous. It can quickly and effectively manipulate the behavior of witnesses. One tongue-in-cheek example is the rumor that RuPaul, a famous American drag queen, died in June of 2018. Other users quickly disproved this rumor within a day and made it into a joke. This was, however, only after unsuspecting users spread it widely as fact beforehand. In this section of the textual analysis, I rely on interview data and the anecdotal stories of my informants to show the prevalence of spam in virtual Queer communities, and how users navigate this now ubiquitous piece of the Internet landscape.

Figure 8 is an example of what a bot post looks like. This post was made with no context and seems designed expressly to trigger SEO (Search Engine Optimization). In an attempt to avoid revealing identities, here are some fake example bot names:

“Staceybotting12345,” “MariatwitterX123,” and “TwitterUser15744.”



Figure 8. A potential spam post on Twitter.

Bot accounts attempt to generate engagement on their posts by using terms that search algorithms are more likely to present to human users as top results, as shown in Figure 8.

Two of my informants in particular, Travis and Michael, represent the range of spam-conscious people. Some people easily identify spam, while others are either willingly or unintentionally oblivious. Although I attempted to exclude spam from my textual analysis, it is still an active part of the social media environment and capable of influencing how people think and interact in the spaces. Travis, my spam-conscious interlocutor, remarked that “There isn’t a single time when I log into Twitter and don’t think about if some of the people I’m following or the posts I’m seeing are real or not. Sometimes it’s obvious but a lot of times you just don’t know, and that’s really spooky.” On the other end of the spectrum, Michael said, “To be honest, I don’t think about it. My friends always joke about bots and I know there was that big bot removal a few

weeks ago [Early January 2023], but it just doesn't matter. I figure if somebody wants something from me, they're gonna get it whether it's through an ad or a bot. Why worry, anyway?" These two opposing viewpoints both admit that there seems to be no hope in fully curtailing spam, especially as technology develops further.

Michael's point is valid, but most of my other informants agree with Travis that the implications of hidden spam and bots are huge. According to Sarah, "There isn't a single day where I not only run into spam, but see others believing it. For every bot post making up a story about trans people in public bathrooms, there are thousands of commenters waiting for a bot to confirm their worldview. In my community, people will see an AI-generated image or post and take it at face value. The other day, one of my followers retweeted a fake JK Rowling account apologizing for her transphobic comments, but it never really happened! People called it out, but what about the people in that thread who took it at face value? It's such a big problem and we don't even know how deep it goes." At that point, the spam fools those who did not see the correction. Who knows how far the ripple effects of this spam go, or what implications they have not only on politics and public health, but also the development of our world's youth? How many people will decide to take *everything* at face value, and how many will decide to believe nothing, at the expense of the 'true' truth?

When I pressed my informants on what they do to expose bots or mentally filter spam, most of them used their own knowledge rather than a specific tool. Anders said that "When you grow up with the internet and see how the spam develops over the years, it's obvious what's real and what's not. There are a lot of exceptions to that,

especially with AI taking off lately, but I have almost always been able to use my own judgment to avoid believing fake posts.” When I asked Anders if they could think of any examples, they answered that “Just today I was on Twitter for 2 or 3 hours. There are a few very popular accounts that get retweeted a lot and they use these sort of canned lines or strange language that a normal person just wouldn’t use. Other times it’ll be responses. I’d say it’s responses and quote tweets more than regular tweets - the reply bots are everywhere. The most obvious example aside from those two is all of the accounts that follow 5,000+ people and have a hot girl in the photo along with a weird profile name. Like sorry, Britnye1337299, I know you’re not real.” From our conversations, it seems that Anders and my other informants are confident in their ability to mentally sift out the spam in their social media feed.

Many social media communities do their best to protect their members from spam internally. The post below is from a moderator of r/gaybros, who attempts to alert

users to a common spam tactic on the forum.

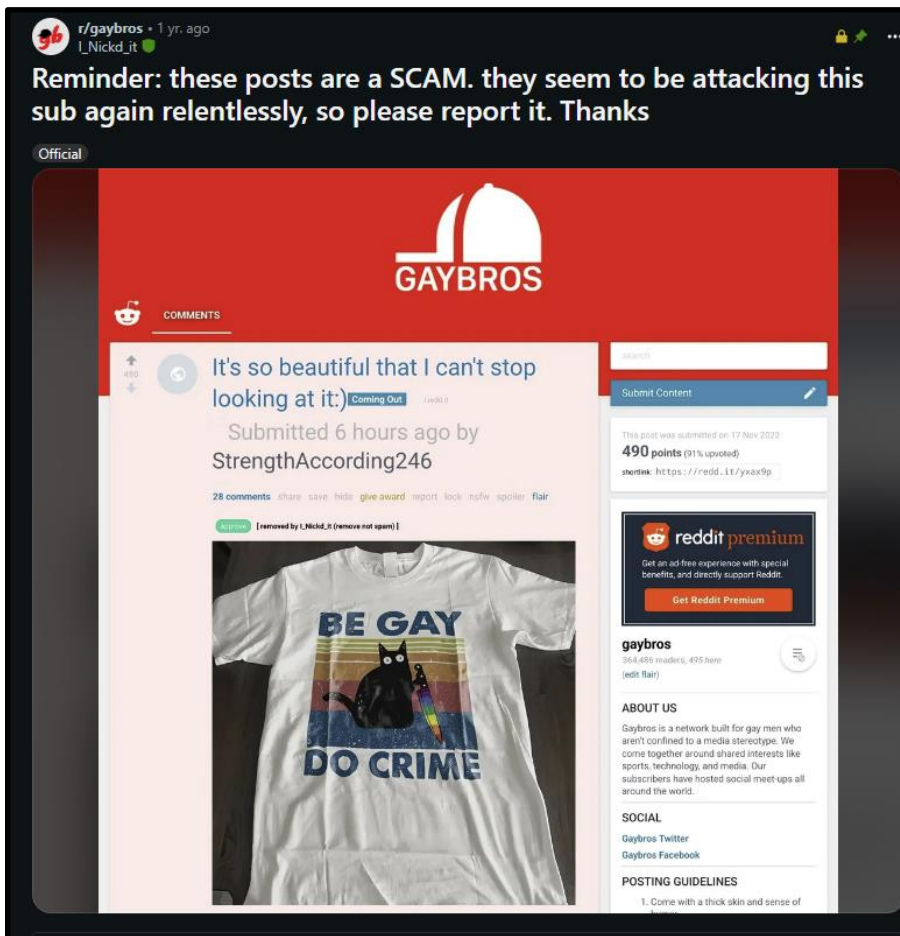


Figure 9. A Reddit post (made by a moderator) discussing spam.

This form of self-policing is common on subreddits. In this case, the moderators pinned this post to the top of the forum, meaning everyone sees it the moment they open the page. This post warns about a spam link to protect users from deception.

Clearly, many of my informants do think about spam and try their best to filter it out, whether their methods are effective or not. Unfortunately, with improvements in AI technology, it will likely become harder for people to know what is really spam. If they already have such clear distinctions between what spam is and what it isn't, then

what happens if spam starts to slip into the truth, or what people blindly accept as truth? There is room for more research into when and why certain spam slips through the cracks as truth, and how long it takes people to realize it is false (if ever). It seems that communities are quick to disprove spam and share the truth widely afterward. However, the problem of spam is developing at a rapid pace alongside technology and will not slow anytime soon.

3.5 Humor: Trauma Bonding Through Comedy

Humor plays an important role in fostering social connections and emotional resilience, particularly in marginalized communities. In his book *Custer Died for your Sins*, Vine Deloria Jr. states that “One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh” (1988,146). In the context of online Queer communities, humor serves as a powerful tool for building solidarity, coping with trauma, and resisting oppression. My informants all felt that humor plays an essential role in online community building and that most of their engagement on social media is through memes or entertainment.

One way that queer individuals use humor to connect with others online is through the creation and sharing of memes, which are self-contained media that people share widely, often with subtle variations. Queer people often use memes to comment on shared experiences or to poke fun at dominant cultural narratives that perpetuate homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination. This is similar to what Deloria outlines in regards to Native American humor, where he says, “The more

desperate the problem, the more humor is directed to describe it. Satirical remarks often circumscribe problems so that possible solutions are drawn from the circumstances that would not make sense if presented in other than a humorous form” (1988, 147). Through the production and circulation of Queer memes, individuals can assert their identities and challenge dominant norms, while also building a sense of community with others who share a similar perspective. As the example Tweet in Figure 10 portrays, these memes often directly relate to the political news at the time of posting. This tweet references the yearly battle every June between the corporation Target and anti-LGBTQ+ protesters who threaten to boycott over the company’s pride line.



Figure 10. A Twitter meme comparing rainbow shirts at Target with the homoeroticism of American football.

The Meme in Figure 10 is an excellent example of how Queer people take the news of the day and spin it with humor. By juxtaposing the traditionally masculine sport of football with provocative images of attractive and homoerotic football players, this post points out how absurd it is to worry that the sight of a rainbow t-shirt might awaken a Queer identity in a child over something more overt and culturally normalized. In particular, Queer people use memes like this one to criticize political opponents and highlight their logical fallacies. With this case, the poster expresses that anti-LGBTQ+ protesters boycott Target while simultaneously idolizing masculine activities like playing football, which is often homoerotic. It is not clear whether the original poster's primary intention was to incite anger in their political opponents, simply share something funny with peers, or get the other side to see the error in their thinking. It is likely that they were hoping for all three if the post went viral. In this case, the post did not.

Queer online communities often use humor in addition to memes to cope with trauma and build resilience. This is particularly relevant for individuals who have experienced marginalization, violence, or other forms of harm due to their sexual or gender identities. By using humor to confront difficult experiences and emotions, individuals can find ways to reframe and make meaning out of their struggles, while also connecting with others who have had similar experiences. This behavior can create a sense of trauma bonding within the community, where people share their traumatic stories with others to simultaneously cope and form bonds. Individuals develop a shared sense of understanding and support through this trauma bonding (Kramer 2013, 637).

Below is a post (Figure 11) and response (Figure 12), which serve as an interesting example.

have you ever heard a good "Trans joke"?

I always hear comedians make the same "trans jokes". Like, "trans women can't shave or mask their voices" or "all trans women are creeps and rapists" or "I self indenify as an attack helicopter and my pronouns are fly/ing". Then when you criticize them, they say your just an offended liberal snowflake. No, I not offended because I'm trans. if anything, I'm offended because your jokes are bad and unoriginal. And if you can't take criticism, your more of offended snowflake than I am.

That being said, have ever heard a good "trans joke" at the suspense of the community. Preferably made by cis person.

Figure 11. A Reddit post asking how trans people view humor targeted at them.

Someone responded to the original poster's question in Figure 12 (below):

Yeah, a cishet male comedian made a really good joke once.

"You know how I know trans women are women? Because when we have sex they don't finish either"

Figure 12. A Reddit comment about a 'good' trans joke.

The original poster and commenter are engaging in an active discussion (the response came less than a day after the original post's publication) and sharing their personal anecdotes. This specific topic is typically a sensitive point but, because people within this Subreddit perceive camaraderie, they feel open to freely discuss the problem using irony, humor, sarcasm, and other tools. They are able to find comedic relief for the group, whereas they might not bring up this topic around cisgender people and would certainly handle the discussion differently if they did.

Despite the benefits of humor and trauma bonding within queer online communities, it is important to recognize that humor can also perpetuate systems of exclusion and harm. For example, some forms of humor may rely on negative stereotypes or further ingrain oppressive attitudes towards certain groups. In addition, individuals may feel social pressure to engage in humor even when it makes them uncomfortable or reinforces negative experiences. According to Anders, "A lot of times I'll see posts that just go way too far. I disagree with Republicans like a lot of gay people, but I feel like there's a slippery slope between making fun of them and literally harassing them. It's really personal to me because I had a conservative cousin kill himself over bullying at college and online." As such, it is vital for queer online communities to reflect critically on the ways that they use humor within their spaces and to actively work to create spaces that are welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all. Of course, considering the decentralization of many of these communities, that responsibility lies mainly with individuals in the groups.

Overall, humor and trauma bonding through comedy play a crucial role in the formation of online queer communities. Through the use of humor, individuals can assert their identities, challenge dominant cultural narratives, cope with trauma, and build a sense of community with others who share their experiences. At the same time, it is important that Queer online community members be mindful of the ways that humor can perpetuate or insight harm, and to work towards creating spaces that are inclusive and supportive for all members.

3.6 Conclusion

After conducting a thorough examination and analysis of the gathered data, I found that Queer rural youth are vibrantly active online and engaged in a variety of discourse depending on their unique identities. The posts and interviews presented here provide rich insight into the cultural discourse and schema at play in online communities centered around the Queer community, but this data on its own is not enough to fully contextualize the lived experience of rural Queer young adults.

The analysis in this chapter shows that online Queer communities are critical to the development of Queer rural youth. My sample population had little to no access to in-person support while growing up. While many of the behaviors observed in online Queer communities are sarcastic or light-hearted, it is important to recognize that these behaviors are part of larger subversive strategies used by Queer youth to navigate and resist systems of oppression both online and offline as well as manage their unique trauma. My informants revealed that these are not just spaces to unwind after a long day at work or school, but rather institutional to their identity and growth. While these online communities are often a place for fun, they also provide a critical platform for subversion and resistance. Youth use the Internet to form lasting friendships, romantic relationships, and social groups or clubs. In some cases, they use it to survive their offline reality when they otherwise could not.

I continue my analysis in Chapter IV, which focuses on how online and offline activity interplay; offline experiences are inseparable from this data and is necessary for a complete understanding of the landscape and those participating in it. What happens

online does not end at the time these youth log-off. Instead, it drives them to behave and act in their daily life based on what they learn and interact with on the Internet. At what point do we draw the line between the “real” world and Internet activity? Is that line growing blurrier?

Chapter 4 Social Media as a Driver of Real-World Actions and Migration

4.1 Overview

In this analytical chapter, I delve deeper into the complex relationship between online identity and offline reality, particularly focusing on how online interactions lead to real-world change. This chapter explores how social media trends and messaging drive migration, the interplay between online and offline personas, and the ways young adults reproduce online ideals in their physical realities.

First, I examine the role of social media in shaping the migration patterns of Queer rural youth to and from cities. I discuss how exposure to diverse queer communities and experiences on social media platforms can inspire young adults to seek out more accepting and inclusive environments elsewhere. I also analyze the role of online resources, such as support groups and Queer friendly city guides, in facilitating the migration process. Furthermore, I consider the potential drawbacks of social media-driven migration, including unrealistic expectations and challenges related to relocation. Rural Queer youth often experience a “grass is greener on the other side” effect and opt to move..

I continue by delving into the intricate relationship between online and offline personas. I explore how online platforms offer individuals the opportunity to express their identities more freely, experiment with various aspects of their selfhood, and form connections with like-minded individuals. Additionally, I examine the potential consequences of maintaining distinct online and offline personas, such as the impact on

mental health, the pressure to conform to online expectations, and the risks associated with disclosing one's identity in a rural setting.

Finally, I investigate how young adults incorporate online ideals into their offline lives. I examine the ways in which queer rural youth draw inspiration from online role models, content, and advertisements to express their identities, navigate relationships, and create supportive communities in their physical environments. I also discuss the potential challenges and pitfalls associated with striving to achieve online ideals, such as the impact on self-esteem, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and the risks of oversharing personal information.

Throughout this chapter, I analyze social media posts and interview data in conjunction with existing literature to present a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted relationship between online identity and offline reality for queer rural youth. I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which online communities and interactions shape the lives of queer rural youth and inform their experiences in the physical world.

4.2 Social Media as a Driver of Migration

Social media trends and Internet usage have the power to radically reshape lives, particularly for Queer individuals in rural areas seeking social interaction and more inclusive environments. This section explores how online platforms play a critical role in influencing the migration of queer rural youth toward coastal urban centers and between states, often because they perceive greater acceptance and support across

state lines. The post below highlights one example of a rural gay man’s intention to move because of a small gay community (at least, a small community of young adults). In this case, he hopes to find a relationship, rather than a large support network.

Being a rural gay man sucks...

I'm planning on moving because goddamn there's no locals around my age hardly either there too young or way too old. Hear in the deep South you have 50 year old married guy's, barely legal guys, and a small selection of guys my age. The really attractive guys who do hit me up are not near me so moving is my only option it seems.

Figure 13. A Reddit post about feelings of isolation and loneliness, which encourage gay rural men to seek out community in other physical spaces.

Often, finding relationships and friendship circles go hand-in-hand. According to Michael, from North Dakota, “Most of my friend-group knows each other from past relationships. It can be a little dramatic when someone gets jealous, but I think it brings us closer together.” In that sense, finding relationships does often lead to deeper connections with a broad network of people over time, increasing both bonding and bridging social capital. Social connections on social media are important because they often eventually lead to offline connections. The above Redditor might be searching for a relationship specifically but could possibly find meaningful friendships along the way.

One key factor that drives Queer individuals from rural areas to migrate to coastal cities is the belief that these urban centers offer more inclusive and welcoming communities. Social media platforms and online forums contribute significantly to this perception by showcasing thriving queer communities in large cities like Los Angeles or

New York City and highlighting the resources available in urban areas, such as support groups, healthcare services, and social events. For many queer rural youth, the stories and images shared online inspire them to seek out these more supportive, urban environments. Because many of the posts about events in urban areas receive more attention than similar but smaller events in rural areas, rural youth might see these posts and assume that the only possibility for queer socialization in real life is in urban centers. The below tweet is one example of the ongoing discourse around moving to large metropolitan areas.



Figure 14. A Twitter post about onward migration to larger coastal urban centers.

In Figure 14, a Twitter user asks for advice on where to move to other than their current city, Portland. In some cases, people move to a city or a larger city to find a more substantial Queer community and migrate onward again rather than adjusting their expectations. Bialas and Sohail discuss this onward migration behavior, explaining that “Focus on continuity, endurance, and balance undervalues the ambivalent transformative potential of migration. What we are trying to suggest is that flight—particularly the traumatic kind—might better be thought of as a transformative, destructive experience” (2022, 490). The data indicates that my informants and their friends did often flee their hometowns as a response to trauma. That trauma does not

disappear in the new place and, when they find that these triggers also exist in their new city, it is easy to continue the journeying in search of an imagined utopia. Alex's friend, Robin, seemed to follow this pattern. According to Alex, "Robin moved to Cincinnati back in 2018 because her parents didn't accept her and she didn't really have any friends. She had trouble finding friends there too, so she eventually moved out to LA. Everybody my age ends up in LA or New York at some point." Online communities seem to inform the decision to move and affirm the view that worthwhile gay culture occurs exclusively on the coasts.

My interviews with Queer rural youth, including individuals like my informants Sam, a 20-year-old, bisexual, white woman from Kentucky, and Alex, revealed the impact of social media trends and online connections on their decision to migrate. These young people discovered vibrant LGBTQ+ communities in coastal cities through various social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. The glimpses they caught of life in urban centers fueled their desire to relocate to places where they thought they could feel more connected and supported in their identities. In particular, Jordan said, "I follow so many Ru-girls [Drag Queens starring on Rupaul's Drag Race] and YouTubers that live in LA and New York. Vloggers show their whole lives in the city, and they looked a lot better than what I had at home." Social Media influencers who made their own move to cities often mention where they lived before and contrast it with what a great place their new place is for Queer people. A significant number of influencers moved from the Midwest or the South and mentioned how positive the move was for them. One example is Connor Franta, a YouTube influencer who moved

from Minnesota to Los Angeles. In several videos, he shares what it was like living in Minnesota and the adjustments he made to live in a much bigger city. Importantly, influencers heavily curate the content they post to their social media pages. Forbes observed that, “Not only do influencers need to be well spoken and understandable, but also the way they visually present the verbal information can make an impact on how well it will be received by consumers. All the influencers have a significant following, which leads the viewer to believe that they are successful” (2016, 84). While Forbes (2016) discusses sponsored advertising in particular, influencers have a penchant for hyping whatever the topic of conversation happens to be in each post. This tendency also applies to discussions of where they live.

Another driving force behind this migration is the increased access to information about Queer-friendly housing, employment, and educational opportunities in urban areas. Interviewees like Alex and Jordan reported using online resources and friends to gather information and plan their moves to coastal cities, drawing on the experiences and advice of others in similar situations. Alex said, “It’s not that I didn’t already want to move to the city before, it’s that seeing everyone else successfully move and post about it on YouTube or Snapchat convinced me that I could follow through with it, too.” These digital tools enabled them to take control of their lives and pursue the sense of community they craved. At the same time, it seems that users witness positive stories more than the negative ones. Jordan said, “Influencers loved talking about the good things before I moved but it’s funny because, once I moved and started dealing with the problems, everybody started posting about the problems. It was a little

too late!” It can be difficult for youth to overcome these social media content biases and “filter bubbles.” This evidence seems to go against Talamanca and Arfini’s (2022) findings, which suggest that filter bubbles do not exist. In their opinion, people maintain immediate access to opposing viewpoints while online, which further solidifies their own worldview (Talamanca and Arfini 2022, 2). Instead, Jordan’s experience suggests that it is easier to seek out or cherry-pick affirming information when researching a move and easier to find or notice negative posts when faced with reality. In Alex’s case, things ended well. She said, “I’m still happier here. The problems are worth it and I’d have just as many back home.” They did not touch on what social media posts they saw following the move.

For some, moving to an urban center also offered the chance to reconcile their online and offline personas, as they could express their identities more openly in accepting and diverse environments. Sam, Alex, and Jordan each shared that living in cities allowed them to integrate their online experiences and connections into their daily lives more seamlessly, resulting in a more genuine and fulfilling life. However, it is common for rural Queer youth to experience a “grass is greener on the other side” effect. The Reddit poster in Figure 15 tells his story of moving to the city and meeting even more hate. He ultimately moved back to his hometown, rather than migrating onward (Bialas and Sohail 2022).

I moved to Northern California from North Eastern Oregon. I went there expecting I'd be able to express myself away from the very conservative area i am from. However I didn't know that my new job was going to be with a bunch of more conservative people and that I was going to live around conservative people as well. I came out as ace to one of my work friends because in my mind there is nothing really major about being ace, but nope, she outed me to the rest of my coworkers and I got constant offers to help "fix" me. I worked in a hospital so most of them were offers of prescribing me drugs or to get me into counseling cause obviously something happened to make me ace. I never came out as any of my other identities to them. Covid hit while I was there and housing became non existent so I moved back to my small home town where I knew I had a place to rent and a job I could get. I have absolutely no plans to come out to any one any more except my best friend who knows of some of my identities. Online became my only place to talk to people who were more open.

I definitely recommend moving some place where you can be yourself, just make sure to do the research to make sure the place isn't full of closed minded people

Figure 15. A Reddit post about migration regret.

This poster in Figure 15 is using the space to share his negative experience, highlighting the fact that social media is helpful for learning both the pros and cons of migration.

While Queer rural youth can find community in places outside their hometowns, bigoted people live everywhere, including cities.

Pru offers one alternative to moving to a city: make a thriving and inviting community for queer people where you are from. That is certainly easier said than done and some rural towns are literally too remote for a Queer community to flourish. However, in Pru's town of 7,000 people, she was able to organize a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) as well as a monthly Queer meetup with some of her close Queer friends. Pru's community hosted most of these events online through the COVID-19 pandemic, and Pru says, "People are coming out of their shells again now that we started in-person meetings again." Because of the Internet, Queer youth from towns nearby also stop by for the support and socialization the community offers. Pru hopes that this sets an

example for other people who feel let down by their local communities but also do not want to leave their family and friends behind. In her words, “We have a responsibility to take our hometowns, the good and the bad, and make it better for all of us.” While many Queer youth choose migration as a valid choice, Pru sets an excellent example for how Queer youth can create community in their hometowns.

The trend of Queer rural youth migrating to coastal urban centers highlights the influence of social media and Internet use in shaping perceptions and aspirations for an improved life. By understanding these drivers and incorporating insights from Queer youth, policymakers could work towards creating more inclusive and supportive environments in both rural and urban areas, ultimately reducing the need for migration and promoting a sense of belonging for all LGBTQ+ individuals. On the other hand, Pru’s organizing shows that the queer community itself is capable of banding together, even in sparsely populated rural areas.

4.3 Digital Advertising: Reproducing Online Ideals In Offline Reality

How do the offline and online personas of Queer rural youth vary? The reality is that these identities and realities are not, in fact, distinct. As technology becomes more and more integral to everyday life, online communities are converting from private, anonymous outlets for socializing to an integrated facet of individuals’ personality and lifestyle. Simultaneously, as online communities become more open to public engagement rather than closed for those meeting specific membership criteria, people still need more than just online spaces to engage with the world around them. The

ways in which individuals construct and express their identities are changing as well. For young adults who have grown up in a world where social media and other digital platforms are ubiquitous, the online world deeply influences their personality, lifestyle, and political opinions. Humans need interpersonal attachments (Baumeister 1995) and, when they are not available in-person, youth take whatever route necessary to find them.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant for Queer rural youth, who face unique challenges when it comes to forming connections with like-minded individuals and creating communities that reflect their experiences. Along with these struggles connecting, Queer youth face serious issues with identity formation and are more likely to suffer from personality disorders and other mental health problems (Meyer 2003, 675). In many rural areas, Queer individuals may face significant social isolation and discrimination, making it difficult to find support and validation given their physical surroundings. Pru said that “We [her other gay friends] had to seek out people like us; they didn’t wear rainbow shirts to school. I felt excluded and alone for a long time.” Over time, this social isolation deteriorates the mental and, ultimately, physical health of Queer people (Austin 2022). The damage is not only detrimental, but lasting.

The Internet acts as a powerful tool for these young people to connect with others who share their experiences and create a sense of belonging. Online communities can provide a safe and anonymous space for individuals to share their stories and seek advice, and social media platforms can amplify marginalized voices and challenge dominant narratives about what it means to be Queer in rural areas. For

instance, the subreddit r/gaybros is full of posts about unique problems that Queer rural young adults face and advice for how to solve them. Below is an example of one such post, where a user shares a story of their generally homophobic mother saying something surprising about gay people.



Figure 16. A Reddit user shares a story about their Christian conservative mom.

Through the Internet, people feel connected to a community of similar people, which can help them feel comfortable sharing stories and asking, or receiving, advice. Here is one of the responses to this post:

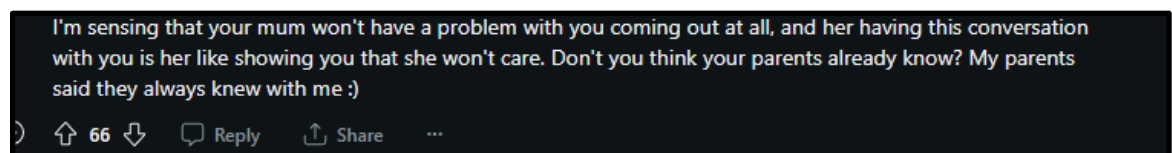


Figure 17. A response to Figure 16, advising them to come out to their mom.

Sharing stories in response teaches Queer rural youth how tense interactions can go better than they think they might. This user advises the OP (Original Poster) that they might need to reconsider their decision to not come out to their mother.

Similarly, r/trans focuses on some of the challenges Trans rural young adults face, and grants youth a space to freely ask what only other Trans people could answer. Below is one example of someone asking for advice in r/trans.



Figure 18. A trans Reddit user asks for advice from older trans people.

Online spaces give Queer rural youth the opportunity to engage with members of their community outside of their age group as well, which can offer a unique perspective for the problems these youth face. In many cases, such as the example in Figure 18, Queer youth ask for advice from their elders. They understand that those who came before might have valuable wisdom and information and reaching out for that helps them save time and avoid solving problems that already have solutions. This suggests that these

online communities aid youth in their accumulation of bridging social capital (Cserni and Talmud 2015), by opening channels to communicate with a broad range of people.

While many of these communities are insular by design, users actively seek the opinions and perspectives of the various niches within the broader group.

Yet these digital spaces generally also present a unique set of challenges for young people. The pressure to conform to certain ideals and present a curated version of oneself can be overwhelming, leading to a sense of anxiety and self-policing. Carson said, “You’re your own worst critic, right? I never feel like I’m good enough because there’s always someone hotter. I think I see too many hot people on TikTok, I don’t know. I even stopped wearing sweatpants because someone in a video said it looked broke.” Moreover, the line between online and offline life is becoming increasingly blurred, leading to a sense of constant surveillance and scrutiny from peers as well as individuals. Amy said, “You never feel alone anymore. Everyone has a camera and if you say something bad it’ll be online by tomorrow.” It seems that youth feel the effects of a social panopticon (Foucault 1977), where their peers enforce the ideal standards of morality and behavior touted online. This enforcement applies even to behaviors that are unrealistic in the real world.

Another factor is online advertising. Algorithms determine the people and communities most heavily influenced by which products. Companies target certain products, especially different brands of sexual health products, at queer people. The Reddit post in Figure 19 (below) appears in r/mildlyinfuriating.

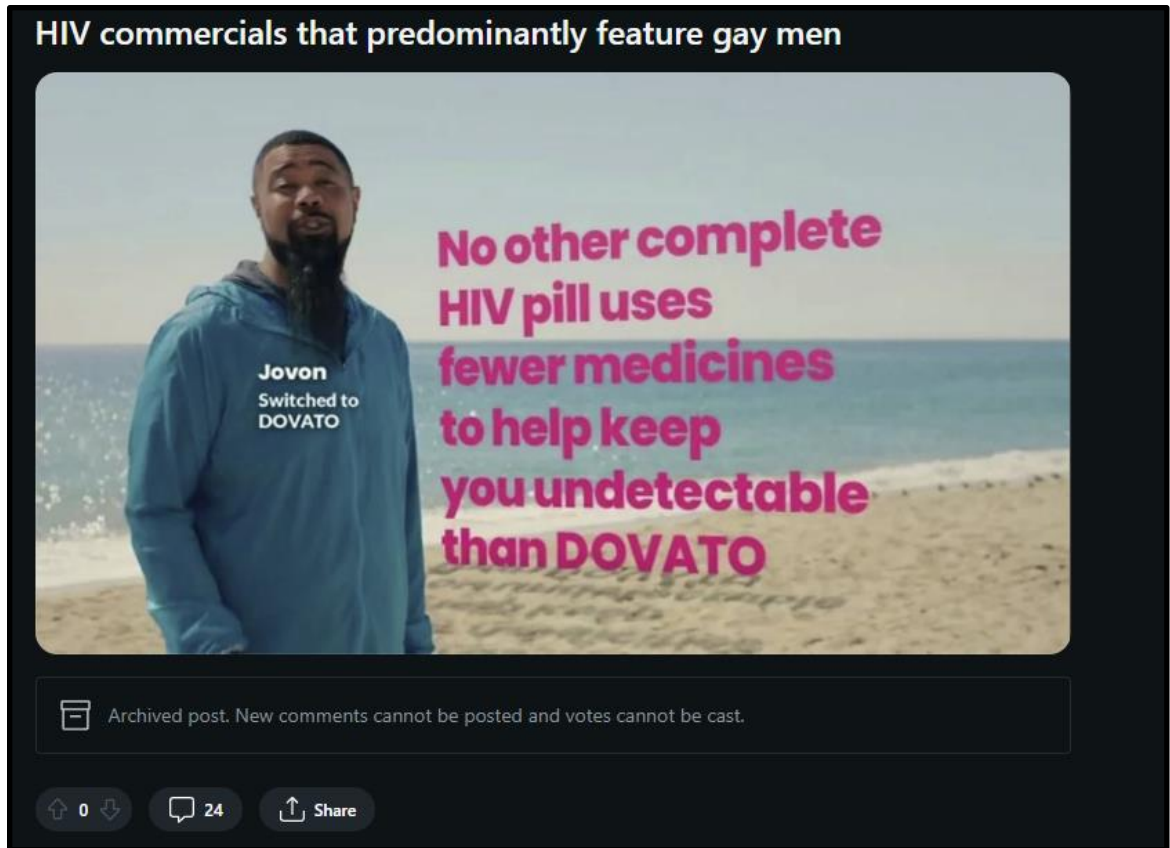


Figure 19. A Reddit post about HIV commercials, which often feature gay men.

While researchers consider gay men an “at risk” population for developing HIV, the HIV virus can infect straight people as well. This user is pointing out how common it is for HIV medication ads to target gay men and trans women, rather than the rest of the US population. There is a very active discourse in this thread, with varying viewpoints.

Below are a few examples:

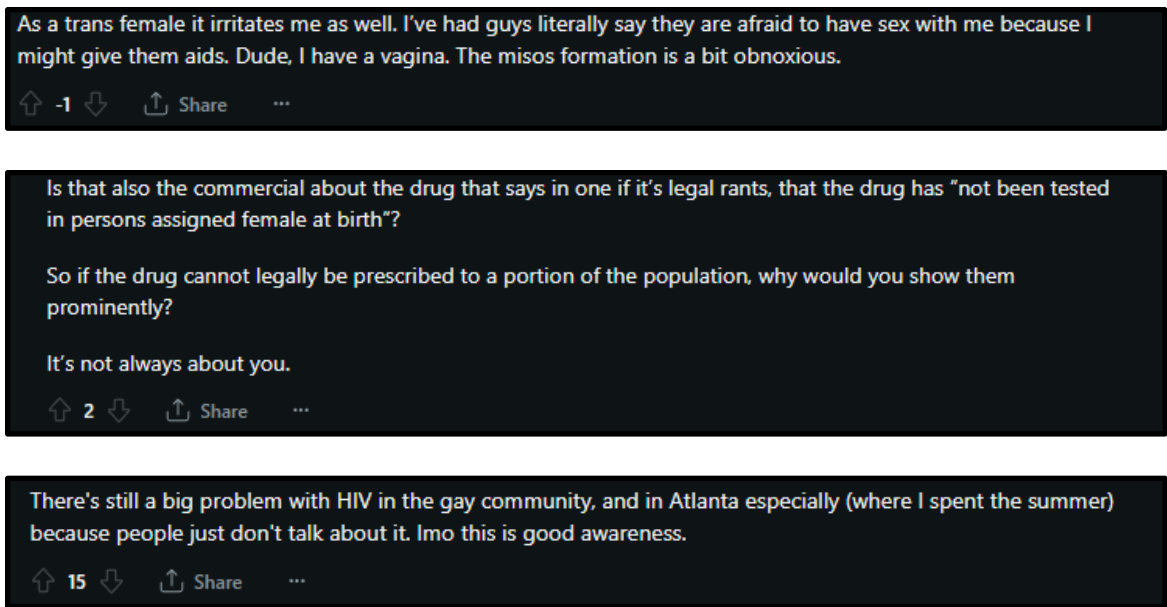
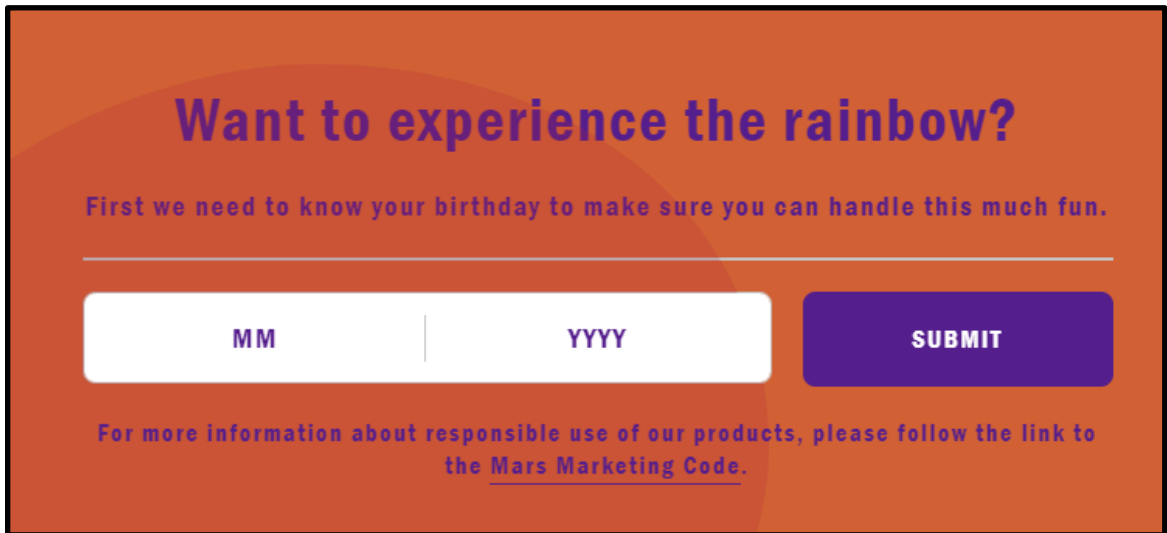


Figure 20. Twitter posts reflecting the range of opinions in the Queer community.

These users seem to understand that they face targeted advertising. However, they disagree on the facts and whether or not the targeting is helpful or not socially and medically. For instance, in the first comment, a trans woman says that they cannot contract HIV because they have a vagina. This is false, and the negative upvotes suggest others within the community know it and do not support her statements.

Gay-targeted advertisements go much further than sexual health products. Entire advertising agencies cater to clients interested in the LGBTQ+ demographic. [Commando](#)'s front page asserts that it "helps you engage with the LGBTQ+ audience on the most relevant social, web, and dating platforms with compelling ads that speak to them." Certain advertisements, like the skittles one below, make it clear that they target the Queer community. As of December, 2023, one can access this ad at [this link](#), but

only after passing an age-verification pop-up.



Want to experience the rainbow?

First we need to know your birthday to make sure you can handle this much fun.

MM | YYYY

SUBMIT

For more information about responsible use of our products, please follow the link to the [Mars Marketing Code](#).

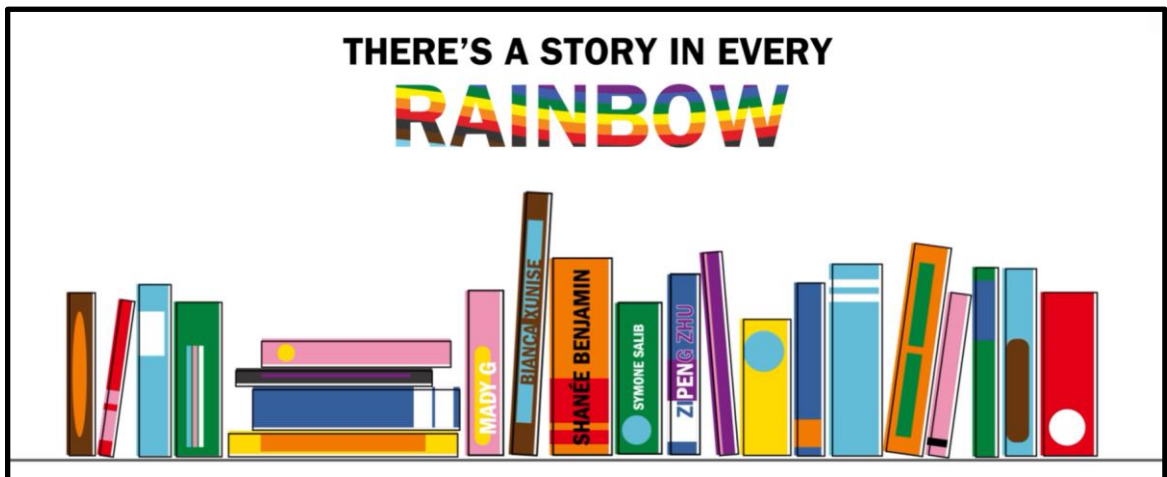


Figure 21. Photos from Skittles' Pride advertising campaign.

Advertisers and Internet providers restrict Queer identities and information behind age verifications. Youth can sometimes not access even innocuous advertisements, if they are blatantly Queer-related. However, in many other cases, it is up to the algorithms to determine what advertisements the Queer community, as a whole, should view to make companies the maximum profit. For instance, Thomas consistently faced an advertisement for the movie Mamma Mia 2 until he finally “broke” and watched it. He

said, “Honestly, I didn’t care about it, but I saw the ad so much that I kinda wanted to see it and stop thinking about it.” The “breaking point” for these advertisements drives people to make choices that affect their lives, however small the effect may be. This behavior aligns with the viewpoints of both Baudrillard (1994) and Goffman (1979). Goffman found that companies first create a product, then use existing beliefs and perceptions to advertise those products and create an entirely new ideal for which its consumers strive (1979, 25-30). By using this method, companies not only advertise a product, but a whole new identity, the membership to which is contingent upon consumption. Baudrillard (1994) highlighted a similar occurrence, albeit on a less superficial level. In his view, our entire reality is a mere simulation constructed from self-affirming and self-perpetuating human symbolism and signs. Advertisers carefully warp the existing “simulation” until they successfully create a new ideal around their product (Baudrillard 1994, 10). Thankfully, this can work for good as well; Jacob said that, “I see a lot of advertisements everyday. I don’t register a lot of them anymore. But I remember seeing an ad for Truvada [PrEP] in college and asking my doctor about it. I was real wild back then and if I didn’t start it when I did I probably would’ve caught AIDS [you “catch” HIV, which can later develop into AIDS].” These subtle influences compound over thousands of advertisements and years of time until past advertisements and consumer decisions shape virtually all of a person’s life choices. The reality in which Queer youth find themselves is inseparable from the products and companies advertised to them. In a world where users repost and share media at the

speed of a computer mouse, might the Internet shape and contort reality and identity faster than the advertisements of the past?

Despite the myriad of challenges, many Queer rural youth are finding ways to harness the power of digital technology and the growing augmentation of online and offline reality to their advantage. They use social media platforms to create and share content that reflects their experiences and challenges dominant narratives about what it means to be Queer in their rural areas. By doing so, they not only shape their own identities, but also challenge the norms and expectations of their communities. Further, they provide a positive example for future generations of Queer rural youth. Below is just one example of a Reddit user sharing a snippet of their life, in the hopes that it will inspire others.

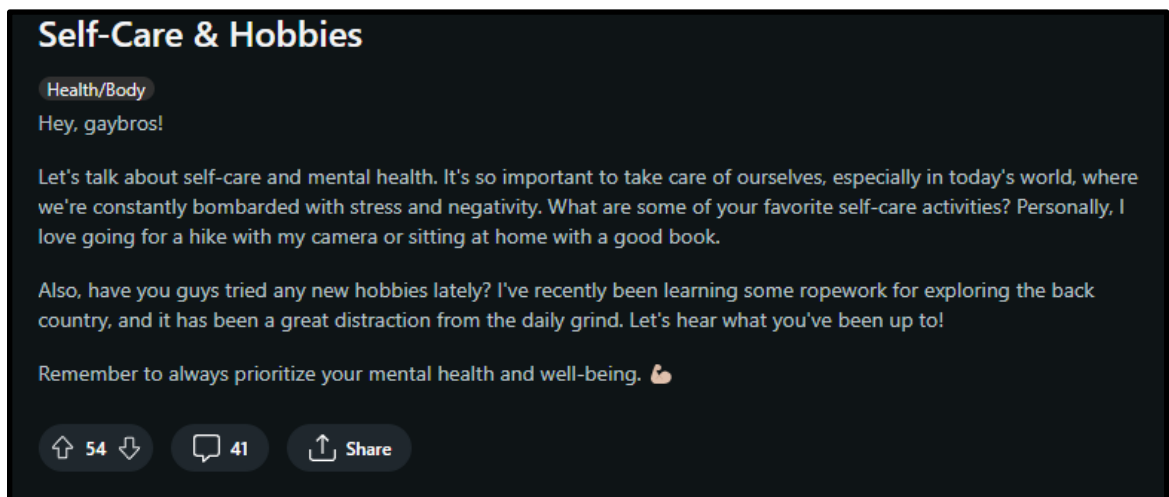


Figure 22. A Reddit post about the importance of self-care and hobbies.

Aside from this, Queer rural youth use their online communities to find role models or expand their worldview. These users encourage others to take up hobbies and interests

that eventually influence the type of people they become. The following are several comments on this original post.

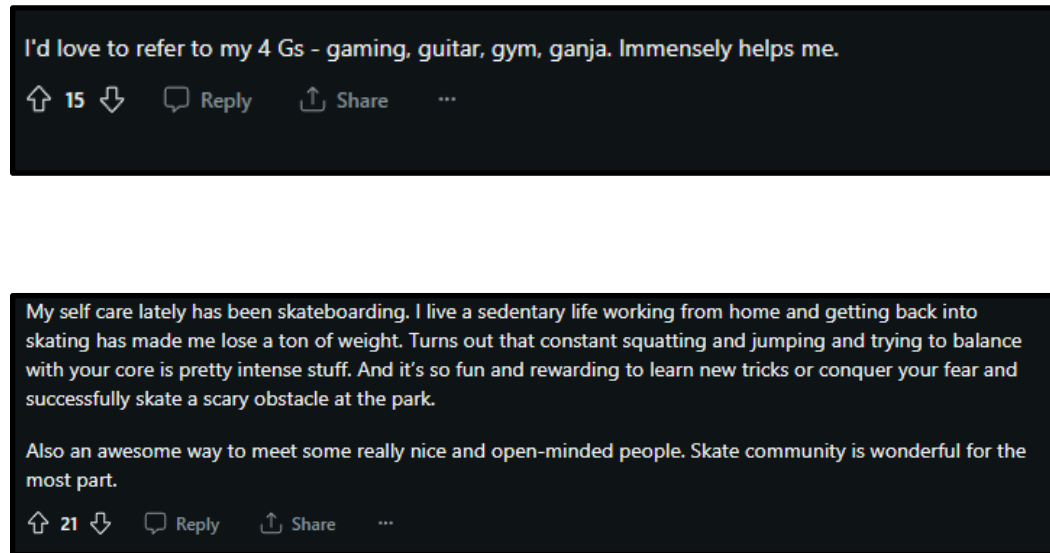


Figure 23. Reddit comments, which provide examples of self-care activities and hobbies.

Posts such as those in Figure 23 provide youth a variety of potential new interests to make friends within their physical spaces. Upvoted posts are the most likely posts for users to see, which means youth are most likely to see what other Queer people insist are “good” ideas. According to Sam, “I don’t think there’s a lot of critical thinking going on online. When somebody popular says something’s the next new thing, it already is.” In that sense, these communities are self-fulfilling spaces where the community’s ideal becomes each individual’s reality or, at the very least, a cause for comparison and anxiety.

The impact of digital advertising and influencing on identity formation and behavior is complex and multifaceted. For instance, not all individuals have equal access to technology, and some may face considerable barriers to participating fully in online

communities. Of my informants, 5 explicitly mentioned that their Internet access was not reliable throughout their adolescence. How does inconsistent access affect their development compared to youth with better Internet? Young people must be fully aware of the risks of online harassment, cyberbullying, and exploitation, but also the effect of advertising on them. Digital technology is constantly evolving, and we still do not fully understand its impact on young people's identities and experiences. As the use of social media and other digital platforms continues to expand, scholars must continue studying their impact on individual and collective realities. By focusing on the experiences of Queer rural youth, we can gain a better understanding of how digital advertising is shaping our individual and collective realities, how it affects real-life actions, and how we can harness its potential for positive change.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter covered the ways that online influence and interactions cross over to affect offline behaviors and choices. Social Media, in particular, drives Queer rural youth to change the items that they purchase, concepts with which they identify, and, frequently, where they live. The Internet serves as both an outlet for personal opinions and struggles and a filter bubble that feeds youth others' opinions and values. Often, the algorithm of these Social Media sites determines the content users ultimately see on their timeline. However, users maintain some autonomy through curating who they follow or engaging with posts when that is an option. The posts and advertisements that impressionable youth see online eventually shape their choices, habits, personality, and

identity. Today, youth are more likely to be on their phone than socializing in real-life; the line between real-life and online identity grows narrower with each iPhone or VR headset release.

My informants explain how traversing adolescence with technology molded their identities and experiences. It actively changed the course of their lives. Several patterns stand out: (1) Queer rural youth depend on modern technology and Social Media to build supportive communities, both in-person and online, (2) the Internet changes how they view themselves and other Queer people, (3) seeing how other Queer people live around the United States helps them put their own experience into context, and (4) these factors inspire Queer rural youth to behave, act, and decide how they live their lives. According to my informants, Social Media played a mostly positive role in their early life; however, Queer youth who derive their socialization and development primarily from the Internet face innumerable manipulating forces when they log on. We must further consider the effect of generative AI, spam, and advertising on these youth.

Chapter 5 Conclusions

5.1 Summary of Arguments

In recent years, the Internet played a critical role in shaping the lives and experiences of American Queer rural youth. The data presented here substantiates that, for these young adults, online spaces offer a unique opportunity for connection, identity exploration, and support that is often absent in their immediate physical environments. However, the digital landscape also presents a variety of challenges and dangers that these youth must navigate, and it is often a battle fought alone. By delving into the complexities of online engagement, this research sheds light on the ways Queer rural youth negotiate, build, and maintain their online spaces and the implications for their overall well-being and development.

This research depended upon the foundation of a rigorous theoretical framework and methodology. In specific, Grounded Theory was a key guiding principle, allowing for an inductive reasoning approach to systematically collect and analyze the data. This framework enabled me to develop a comprehensive understanding of the cultural dynamics and patterns that emerge within the online spaces frequented by the research population.

To properly conduct and contextualize this research, it is important to acknowledge the need for responsible analysis and attention to the unique socio-political positioning of the Queer community and its various subcategories. This was possible only through a deliberate research design and plan, which included textual analysis, digital ethnography, and inductive coding of the data. This methodological

approach ensured that the data collected was representative, unbiased, and accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives of the research population.

One of the primary arguments made here is that online communities serve as a vital source of both bonding and bridging social capital for this population (Cserni and Talmud 2015). By participating in digital spaces, these people are able to forge connections with others who share similar identities and experiences. This sense of belonging and understanding can be especially important for young people living in rural areas, where they may feel isolated or lack access to supportive networks. Through online dating and friendships, Queer rural youth are able to build social capital that can be transformative in their lives, providing them with a sense of validation, camaraderie, and agency. However, there is often a great deal of stress involved in maintaining access to these spaces given current educational and legal policies in primarily conservative rural states (Kline 2022). Navigating these unique barriers is challenging, but Queer rural youth turn to their online communities to subvert restrictions to their access.

It would be an understatement to say that the Internet is a double-edged sword when it comes to sexual exploration. On one hand, digital spaces provide Queer rural youth with the opportunity to learn about their desires, boundaries, and identities in a relatively safe and anonymous environment. They can engage in discussions, access resources, and connect with others who may be going through similar experiences. On the other hand, these online interactions can expose young people to potential risks, such as exploitation, harassment, and inappropriate content. Unfortunately, sexual harassment and assault occurs in virtually all human communities, including the rural

communities where these youth are logging in. However, the Internet presents a novel landscape for criminals to exploit. While the Internet offers a valuable platform for sexual exploration, potential dangers exist, which Queer rural youth may face in these otherwise supportive and safe spaces. If it is harmful for them to lose access to supportive online networks, then the logical solution is to educate them on contemporary dangers so they stand a chance against them.

Sexual crimes are not the only concern for young adults interacting online. Spam is a growing problem and it is difficult to fight, particularly because it is difficult to pin down. My research shows that flaws in human perception is how spam is able to exist and thrive in online spaces - spam is so exceedingly successful at appearing real today that people often take spam at face value. As spam content infiltrates online communities and convinces users of its authenticity, it can have a significant impact on the development and perpetuation of culture and news within these spaces. Spam content shapes the online experiences of Queer rural youth, and they need to critically engage with the information and narratives that circulate in digital environments. Scholars must study these topics more deeply in the future, especially considering the speed with which AI alters the digital landscape.

In addition to these main arguments, this thesis also examines the role of humor and trauma bonding in the lives of Queer rural youth online. By engaging in humor as a coping mechanism and sharing experiences of adversity, my informants are able to build connections and foster resilience in the face of challenges. The research suggests that the use of humor for trauma bonding can serve as powerful tools for community-

building and support within these digital spaces, thus contributing to the overall well-being and development of Queer rural youth. However, too many of my informants found themselves leaning on online friendships and communities in lieu of seeking professional mental health treatment. Queer youth who use both support tools, rather than just one, are more likely to be happy and healthy as a result.

A pivotal aspect of the Queer rural youth digital experience is the complex interplay between their online enacted identities and offline realities. The research suggests that the Internet provides these young people with opportunities to shape and experiment with their identities, which can then have a profound influence on their experiences, perception, and behavior in the physical world. In particular, I want to highlight the role of social media trends and Internet use as drivers of migration, especially to coastal urban centers, where Queer rural youth often move in search of more supportive and accepting environments and institutions. Social media users present these cities as safe havens, creating a self-fulfilling simulation of reality (Baudrillard 1994) and instilling in youth the belief that the grass is greener on the other side, far away from their own small towns.

Furthermore, this thesis delves into the methods by which young adults produce online ideals in their physical realities, incorporating aspects of their digital personas into their everyday lives. By examining the unique experiences of Queer rural youth, the data underscores the transformative potential of online spaces in shaping personal identity and self-expression, as well as the challenges these people face in reconciling

their online and offline selves. In many cases, youth must present a different facet of their personality depending on their audience at any given time.

This thesis provides a comprehensive examination of the complex and often capricious nature of online spaces and their influence on the lives of Queer rural youth. By considering the myriad ways in which they engage with digital platforms, the data illuminates the potential for both empowerment and vulnerability as a result of frequenting these spaces. Ultimately, this research contributes to a greater understanding of the experiences of Queer rural youth in an increasingly connected world, shedding light on the potential avenues for support, intervention, and policy development that can better address the unique challenges they face.

5.2 Implications of Research

This research offers important insights and breaks ground into Queer theory, particularly in the context of rural youth and their experiences within online spaces. I build off of Cserni and Talmud's (2015) work into bonding and bridging social capital, to show how important it is for rural youth to accumulate both and that Queer youth do indeed build both by participating online. By examining the diverse ways in which these young individuals navigate and engage with digital platforms, the thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Queer identities and the unique challenges faced by those living in rural areas, building off of the work of Escobar-Viera et al. (2022). The work adds depth to the discourse on the fluidity and complexity of Queer identities and the role of the internet in shaping, negotiating, and expressing these identities (Gro

2014). The data reveals that Queer rural youth face unique challenges and utilize unique strategies to overcome them.

Furthermore, the thesis demonstrates the intricate relationship between online and offline realities for Queer rural youth, building off of the work of Escobar-Viera et al. (2022). By highlighting the transformative potential of online spaces, the data underscores the need for Queer theory to adapt and evolve in order to remain relevant and responsive to the ever-changing digital landscape. For instance, how will AI change the ways people interpret spam and how will Queer rural youth persist if politicians further restrict their access to Queer media?

The research closely engages with the fields of Netnography and virtual ethnography, specifically exploring the impact of Social Media and online communities on the lives of Queer rural youth. This thesis investigates the role of digital platforms in fostering social connections, shaping personal identities, and driving migration patterns. In doing so, it provides valuable insights into the growing significance of online spaces in contemporary society and their potential to both empower and marginalize certain communities. It revealed that, although the Internet offers the perception of social freedom and unique opportunities for creatively expressing and engaging with identity, it has the tendency to shove people into a box just as much as the broader society (if not more). Social media forces youth to go along with the categories placed upon them in online spaces because there is nowhere else for them to turn and, according to my informants, it just feels right to go along with a group they respect.

Through the examination of online spaces as sites for identity formation, sexual exploration, and social support, the thesis contributes to the broader body of work in sexual theory that seeks to understand the implications of technology on human behavior and relationships. It builds off of the work of Berger (2022) and Breslow (2019), who identified how gay men navigate the Internet, as well as Turkle's (1997) research into online identity. By shedding light on the unique experiences of Queer rural youth in this context, the research also highlights the need for these fields to consider the diverse experiences of marginalized communities in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of digital sexuality and its impact on human behavior and sexual practices.

The concept of social capital is another important theoretical framework engaged within the research. The thesis explores the ways in which online communities and social media platforms can act as important bridges to social capital for Queer rural youth, helping to mitigate the isolation and marginalization they may experience in their offline lives. Through the analysis of online dating, friendships, and other forms of social interaction, the research highlights the potential for digital platforms to foster connections and build social capital for these young people. Moreover, the thesis investigates the role of online spaces in facilitating access to resources, information, and support networks that can prove invaluable for Queer rural youth as they navigate their lives. By examining the ways in which these young individuals leverage digital platforms to build bonding and bridging social capital (Cserni and Talmud 2015), the research

contributes to the broader discourse on the role of technology in shaping social relationships and networks in contemporary society.

In addition to the aforementioned theoretical frameworks, the thesis also has important implications for education, particularly in the context of policy subversion in K-12 schools. The research highlights the ways in which queer rural youth navigate restrictive internet policies in order to access vital online resources and spaces, demonstrating the need for educational institutions to reassess their approach to digital access. By examining the strategies employed by these young individuals to bypass restrictions, the thesis contributes to the broader discourse on the role of technology in education and the necessity for inclusive and equitable access to digital resources. Schools could use some of this information to better empathize and support students of diverse backgrounds, rather than restricting their access entirely. There is a line between caution or safety and overbearing surveillance, which schools clearly need to consider more deeply. Scott (2017, 3) discovered that school policies further marginalize minorities, specifically people of color. School policies similarly entrench existing stigma against Queer rural youth.

The findings of the thesis also have significant implications for the study of cyberbullying, which is a growing concern as technology advances and people explore the functions of new technologies. By exploring the experiences of Queer rural youth in online spaces, the research reveals the unique challenges they face in terms of bullying and harassment, as well as the ways in which they seek support and protection. This insight underscores the need for greater awareness and understanding of the specific

vulnerabilities of marginalized communities in online environments and the development of targeted interventions to address these issues.

The concept of the "realness" of online experiences, as illustrated by the examination of spam and the perception of truth is also important. By exploring the ways in which Queer rural youth perceive different online information and experiences as real or fake, the research contributes to the broader discourse on the nature of reality in the digital age and highlights some startling realities in modern social media. This insight has important implications for the study of media and communication, as it highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which people interpret and engage with online content. On that note, the data also reveals the complex relationship between humor and trauma bonding in online spaces, and how they often play off of the spam present in the space. Queer rural youth use humor to navigate and cope with difficult experiences and it is important for them to share laughter and camaraderie to foster group and individual resilience and solidarity. This finding has broader implications for the study of humor online, as it highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of humor in the lives of marginalized communities online (Kramer 2013) and the ways in which it can be both empowering and healing.

In conclusion, this thesis makes significant contributions to a wide range of theoretical frameworks. By examining the unique experiences of Queer rural youth in online spaces, it not only adds depth to the understanding of the challenges and

opportunities these young individuals face, but also has important implications for the broader discourse on the role of digital platforms in contemporary society.

5.3 Limitations and Avenues of Future Research

This work sheds light on the experiences of Queer rural youth and the significant role that online spaces play in their lives. However, as with any research, there remain areas for further exploration that can deepen our understanding of these phenomena. This section will outline the limitations of this study, as well as highlight several fruitful avenues of future research.

My study focused on Queer rural youth between the ages of 18-25. Although my informants all have different backgrounds, roughly half of them identified as 'white' and those who did not wanted to discuss their Queer identity rather than race. It is likely that a younger group of informants would respond to the same interview questions differently, as many of them socialized primarily online during the COVID-19 pandemic. My informants were a convenience sample and they do not represent the experience of all rural Queer people, let alone the entire Queer community in general.

First and foremost, we are currently living at a time when new, exciting, disruptive, and often scary technologies emerge everyday. The field is actively shifting as recent advances in AI technology disrupt the virtual space on which these communities depend. In the next few years, the landscape could radically change. Considering the data show how inextricably linked online and offline behavior is, these transitions online will ripple into offline society and relationships. Queer rural youth around this country

depend on online communities to socialize and solve in-person challenges - how will these changes affect them directly?

As digital technology continues to evolve, so too will the online spaces with which Queer rural youth engage. Future research will need to keep pace with these changes, examining the ways in which new platforms, tools, and technologies are shaping the experiences of Queer rural youth. Studies might explore the impact of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality or artificial intelligence, on the ways in which Queer rural youth connect, communicate, and express themselves online. Additionally, research might investigate the ways in which Queer rural youth navigate issues of privacy and safety in an increasingly interconnected digital landscape.

Alongside the discussion of technological change, the primary focus of this work was experiences of Queer and specifically gay, lesbian, trans and non-binary youth in rural areas. While the accessibility of data and the distinct discourses within these groups motivated this decision, it is important to acknowledge that the Queer community encompasses a wide range of identities. Future research could expand the scope of inquiry to include other Queer identities, such as bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and intersex individuals, among others. By broadening the range of identities studied, researchers can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Queer rural youth and the specific challenges they face. However, that also presents the challenge of defining sexualities and navigating personal perceptions of identity.

Additionally, over the course of the research, I tried to consider the viewpoint of school administrators and parents as well. As a foundational structure in the lives of

Queer rural youth, the school often provides their only viable internet access. My informants said that school administrators policed their internet activity. Bridging the gap between school administrators, whom many of my informants view as “haughty” or “overbearing,” and Queer rural youth is not easy, but further research into their differing worldviews will certainly help.

This research highlights the various ways in which online communities can serve as a lifeline for Queer rural youth, offering opportunities for social connection, self-exploration, and self-expression. However, there is still much to learn about the impact of these online spaces on the mental health of Queer rural youth. Future studies could examine the ways in which participation in online communities affects mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and self-esteem, among this population. Moreover, research could explore potential protective factors and strategies that Queer rural youth can employ to foster resilience and maintain mental well-being in the face of potential online stressors, such as cyberbullying or exposure to harmful content. In order for these studies to be successful, scholars need to implement an interdisciplinary approach to understand the issues from psychological, sociological, and anthropological perspectives.

Considering that online spaces often serve as crucial sources of information and support for Queer rural youth, it would be valuable to investigate the impact of these spaces on their educational and professional development. Future research could explore the ways in which online communities contribute to the acquisition of valuable skills, knowledge, and resources that can aid Queer rural youth in their pursuit of higher

education or career opportunities. Additionally, studies could examine the role of online mentorship and networking in facilitating the professional development of Queer rural youth, as well as the challenges and barriers they may face in leveraging these online connections to achieve their educational and career goals. Are youth more or less likely to succeed if they actively engage in online discourse?

Another area that warrants further investigation is the role of online spaces in shaping the political attitudes and activism of Queer rural youth. This thesis touched upon the ways in which online communities can foster a sense of belonging and provide a platform for sharing experiences, but future research could delve deeper into the ways in which these spaces contribute to the development of political consciousness and engagement among Queer rural youth. Studies could explore how online discourse influences political beliefs and values and the ways in which Queer rural youth participate in political activism, both online and offline. In addition, future research could also investigate the impact of online advocacy and activism on rural communities themselves. For instance, studies could examine the ways in which online campaigns have led to changes in local policies or cultural attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals in rural areas. Moreover, research could explore the challenges and opportunities associated with translating online activism into tangible, real-world change in rural contexts and the distinction between rural and urban Queer activism.

While this thesis primarily focused on the United States, it is important to recognize that Transgender and homosexual rural youth exist all around the world, and their vastly different cultural, political, and social contexts shape their experiences and

lives. Future research could adopt a comparative approach to explore the experiences of Queer rural youth in the United States compared to similar identities around the world, shedding light on the ways in which global and local forces intersect to shape the lives of non-heteronormative individuals in rural areas. Such research could contribute to the development of more effective and context-sensitive policies and interventions aimed at supporting Queer rural youth in America.

Lastly, it is crucial to recognize that the experiences of Queer rural youth are diverse and multifaceted, and as such, future research should employ a variety of methodological approaches to capture the richness and complexity of these experiences. Building upon the netnographic and digital anthropological methods employed in this thesis, future studies should incorporate additional qualitative and quantitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, surveys, or experimental designs, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of Queer rural youth in the digital age. By continuing to explore these topics, researchers can contribute valuable knowledge, which stakeholders can harness to inform policies, interventions, and support systems aimed at fostering the well-being and empowerment of Queer rural youth.

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Appendix

Informant	Gender/Sexual Identity/Race	Background
Anders	Nonbinary (He/they)/Bisexual/White	23 years old, from Idaho. He met his current partner of 5 years online.
Pru	Transgender Woman/Heterosexual/White	24 years old, from Ohio. Pru stayed in her hometown even when close friends moved to cities.
Nicole	Transgender Man/Gay/African American	22 years old, from Illinois.
Jacob	Man/Gay/Preferred not to answer	21 years old, from Kansas.
Mitchell	Man/Gay/White	19 years old, from Ohio.
Thomas	Man/Bisexual/White	22 years old, from Oregon.
Sarah	Woman/Lesbian/Asian	19 years old, from Ohio.
Michael	Man/Gay/White	20 years old, from North Dakota. He met his partner online.
Alex	Woman/Bisexual/White	23 years old, from Kentucky. She moved to Los Angeles at 18.
Jordan	Nonbinary (They/them)/Pansexual/White	21 years old, from Michigan. They moved to New York City to attend college.
Blake	Man/Asexual/White	21 years old, from Texas. He uses online communities to keep in touch with real-world and online friends.
Travis	Man/Gay/White	20 years old, from Ohio.
Carson	Man/Bisexual/Mexican American	23 years old, from California.
Amy	Woman/Lesbian/Asian	22 years old, from Oregon.

Sam	Woman/Bisexual/White	20 years old, from Kentucky.
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Table 1. A list of my informants with demographic data.

Focus Area	Examples of Questions and Probes
Identity (Racial and ethnic, sexuality, gender)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How would you describe your identity within the overall queer or trans community? - If you have multiple minority identities, how do you see them in relation to one another? - How does your background influence your worldview? - How would you describe your racial and ethnic background?
Physical Community (Queer and non-queer affiliated)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How socially active are you in public in physical communities vs. online communities? - Please describe your hometown and how you would define “rural”. - How would you describe your personality and behavior in public spaces in your rural town? - Could you list several locations where you typically socialize? Who do you meet there? How often do you go? - Could you list several communities you are obligated to have in your life? For example, schools or work. - How do you present your queer identity in these spaces?
Access to Internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could you please explain your childhood memories of the internet? - Could you go into detail about your experience with rural life? How did it affect you? - Did you ever experience issues accessing the internet? - When did the internet become readily available for you in your own home? - What restrictions have parents, school administrators, or other authority figures put on your use of the internet? - Have you ever actively avoided going on certain sites to protect your identity, especially before you came out?
Virtual Community (Queer affiliated)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How would you describe your personality in public in virtual communities? - Could you list several forums or subcommunities where you regularly interact? How do you socialize with people

	<p>there? How often do you log on?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you present yourself online? Do you have any burner accounts? - How have you dealt with bullying and spam in online communities? - Do you feel safer online or in person? Do you feel safer in some communities over others? - Do you have any fully online friends? How close would you consider your online relationships compared to Face to Face ones? - How do you feel about some of the dangers of online interactions? - How do you keep in touch with your virtual communities? How does it relate to keeping in touch with physical communities and people? - How do these virtual communities support or burden you? What difference have they made in your life?
<p>Social Media’s Influence on Real Life Activity + Choices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which community type do you prefer and why? Do you prefer specific modes of interaction for different types of activities? - Has this preference changed in recent years, especially since the pandemic? - Would you say that your social media interactions, engagements and overall activity has led to any changes in your in-person behavior or actions? These could be minor or major. - Has seeing others’ experiences in virtual communities caused you to rethink your own life choices or even make a big step that you wouldn’t have without that influence?
<p>Building IRL Connection through Virtual Communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have you met any of your online friends in person after meeting them over social media? - Have you attended any in-person meetups, concerts, or other events, which you found through your virtual communities? - Do you see any of your virtual communities as temporary until you have stronger in-person relationships or communities?
<p>Engagement with Other Virtual</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could you describe your overall engagement with other social media content, unrelated to your queer identity? - How is your interaction different on these other parts of

Communities	social media?
Past vs. Future Social Media Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - At what points in your life have you used social media the most? - Do you currently use social media more than you ever have before? - How do you think you will incorporate social media in your life in the future? - How involved do you <i>want</i> to be with social media in the future? - How do you balance social media and face-to-face interactions? - Do you keep your online identity separate from your real-world one? Why or why not? - Would you say that social media use has been a net positive or negative for you?
Final Thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Please share any final thoughts or stories you have on this topic.

Table 2. The interview schedule for my semi-structured interviews with informants.