



A Discourse of Hate: A Content Analysis of Responses to Queer Representation in Online Social Media

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Abstract

This study examined public responses to Elle Magazine's Facebook post titled "30 LGBTQ+ Celebs You Really Should Know" to reveal common rhetoric towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, and two-spirit (LGBTQIA2S+)-based discussion on social media. A content analysis of 100 comments uncovered several themes in negative reactions to queer representation in the media sphere including: preferred ignorance, lack of understanding, blatant distaste, religious bias, the view that queer identity is unnatural, an illness, an identity crisis, a trend, and a trauma response. Of the 100 comments examined, 86 responses were negative. The most prevalent theme was preferred ignorance, where respondents favoured keeping queer representation out of public discourse.

Keyterms: homophobia, LGBTQIA2S+, victim, social media, gender norms

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Introduction

Gender identity and sexuality have always been a topic of debate. As the line between gender and sex continues to blur, and with increased social acceptance of homosexual relationships, an influx of people are openly affirming their gender or sexual identity. In Euro-Canadian cultures, sex has traditionally been used to depict biology where a person is assigned as male or female at birth based on sex characteristics while gender refers to traits associated with being female or male (Symbaluk & Bereska, 2022). These definitions are framed by a gender binary which rests on the assumption that there are two opposite categories (Symbaluk & Bereska, 2022) rather than a spectrum where people might possess various traits associated with either sex. To untangle gender and sex, one must look at how gender is a social construction that is cast onto sex to confine and restrict one into one side of the traditional gender dualism (Butler, 2007). In this sense, gender illustrates the performance of the black-and-white confines of gender roles which maintain the deep-rooted system built on cisgender-heteronormative standards (Butler, 2007). The social acceptance of the polarity of gender reinforces the belief that sex is gender and, further, that gender comprises only two categories of male and female. This stance has cast non-conforming individuals as defying the necessary structure of social roles or as depicting the unnatural (Butler, 2007). Like the social construction of gender binarism, heterosexuality has been deemed the “natural” and “necessary” union in society. Heterosexist regimes have created a divide situating queer individuals as the other. The normalization of gender and heterosexuality has established a cultural framework that leaves LGBTQIA2S+ individuals outcasted and even subject to hate by those who conform to it.

In a cisgender-heteronormative society, straying from traditional gender and heterosexual norms leaves non-conforming individuals vulnerable to the victimization of hate crimes and harassment (Elipé, Espelage & Del Rey, 2021). Oppressive attitudes towards the queer minority are related to the beliefs about the regimented gender system (Bettinsoli, Suppes & Napier, 2019). Great strides have been made to create not simply a tolerant society but an accepting and celebratory environment for queer-identifying individuals. In many areas, we have established a more welcoming environment with the rise of queer support organizations, increased representation, and pride events. Although there has been a rise in public acceptance and celebration of members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, there is still a great deal of hatred directed at them. Social acceptance of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals has improved; however, statistics reveal it is far from unanimous support (Kite, Whitley, Buxton & Ballas, 2021). Homophobic bullying, in particular, has grown to be so common it is more prevalent than bullying (Elipé, Espelage & Del Rey, 2021). The climbing numbers of harassment on social media platforms give rise to the issues inherent in the digital world.

Society has become incredibly reliant on technology in many aspects of everyday life. The embrace of digitization has unlocked unprecedented conflicts to arise, such as the online homophobic discourse of hate (Cazelatto & Cardin, 2017). Using social media as a platform to spread negative opinions and beliefs has become so easily accessible in recent years with the rise of mass media. What is seen by some as a platform to express oneself is a platform to outright express their prejudice. A screen has become a defence mechanism against the potential repercussions of such harassment. The anonymity on online media has granted users some level

of protection from leaked identity and gives them comfort in non-confrontation. As the digital world expands and the victimization of queer individuals continues in the online media sphere, the question of the nature of the homophobic discourse of hate in social media arises.

Method

Sample

The sample collected was comprised of public responses to a video posted by Elle Magazine on Facebook that showcased celebrities that identify as members of the LGBTQ community. Facebook was the source used to collect the data because it is a social media platform that is used by a vast majority of the population where diverse opinions can be shared. Elle Magazine's page seemed most appropriate to capture a wide range of opinions as it has established a large audience since its establishment in 1945 (Elle, 2009). Its content mainly focuses on fashion, beauty, lifestyle and popular culture. Although it is not a queer, run or queer-focused magazine, it best serves the purpose of the study because it allows for a greater diversity of opinions to be shared in response to the video.

Sample Selection

The specific post was selected because it presented thirty celebrities whom all identified differently as LGBTQ members showcasing a diverse array of pronouns and identities such as pansexual, bisexual, transgender, lesbian, and non-binary. Additionally, the post has 4300 comments providing a large sample to select from. Under the post, the "newest comments" filter was selected to limit the sample size.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Of the 4,300 comments, the 100 most recent comments that fit the following criteria were included in the sample. All replies to comments were excluded from the study. Because of the ambiguous nature of online discourse, the true meaning of some of the respondents' comments could not be deciphered. These comments were counted as neutral and were not included as negative or homophobic. Responses that were in a different language or were completely unrelated to the post were also omitted from the analysis.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study was the vocabulary to identify patterns and themes in the hateful language projected toward individuals in the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

Setting and Materials

Internet access was essential to obtain and observe the data. A Facebook account was not necessary to access Elle's Facebook page because it is open to the public. A smartphone was used to access the source and take screenshots of exemplary responses. The data collection took place in the principal researcher's home.

Coding Procedures

Each comment that expressed negative attitudes towards homosexuality and gender non-conforming identity was open-coded. Comments, where the true meaning the respondent intended could not be discerned, were coded as neutral and were excluded from the content analysis. After the comments were coded concerning the nature of the response, each comment was then examined to identify prevalent themes and reoccurring vocabulary present in the respondent's reactions to LGBTQ identity.

Results

Findings showed that most commenters sent bigoted comments. Out of the 100 most recent comments included in the sample, 86 comments were homophobic or intolerant to gender non-conforming celebrities and individuals. The results revealed several patterns in the respondents' reactions to Elle's video post. The eight main categories identified were: Ignorance, Religious Bias, queer identity as a trend, an illness, unnatural, stems from confusion, trauma response, or just a blatant distaste for their identity.

The most prevalent theme among the respondents to Elle's video post was *ignorance*. The representation of LGBTQ celebrities was overwhelmingly met with a response of preferred blindness. The comments were suggestive that the public wants no part in the celebration or even the recognition that LGBTQ celebrities or ordinary people exist. Examples of this type of comment are "who cares" and "I am so sick of it being crammed down our throats."

The second most common type of response was the belief that LGBTQ identity is *unnatural*. In a cis-heteronormative society, homosexuality and gender defiance are seen as oppositional to the deeply rooted and traditional gender roles society has embraced. These types of comments alluded to the reproductive capabilities of a heterosexual male and female union and the illegitimate union of a homosexual union. Further, failed adherence to gender norms was cast as a foreign and unnatural choice that goes against necessary societal functions. An example of this type of comment is "madness everywhere it's either male or female the rest is foolishness." These responses presented a strict adherence to dualisms.

The view that LGBTQ identity is an *illness* was the third most common response. These comments were based on the belief that queer identity is a mental illness as opposed to a valid identity. An example of this type of response referred to the featured celebrities as "sick degenerates."

The fourth most common category was a *lack of understanding*. These comments displayed misguided understandings of queer identity and reasoning for concepts such as pronouns. Comments such as “I’m a dog cat mouse and identify as a mouse cat dog” reflected the trivial depth of knowledge concerning LGBTQ identity.

The assumption of an *identity crisis* as a reason for the celebrity’s identity was the fifth most prevalent reply. These responses denied queerness as a valid identity. Responses tended to depict some level of confusion inherent in identifying as an LGBTQ member. Comments of this type claimed that the celebrities “look like they don’t know who they are” and admitted they only see confused people.

The next most common response was a *blatant distaste* toward LGBTQ people. Comments of this nature tended to consist of remarks such as “LGBTQ is sh*t” and they included puke emoticons. These responses did not reveal any explanation for such reasoning but rather expressed some level of hatred and aversion.

The idea that LGBTQ identity was a *trend* marks the seventh most prevalent response category. Because the post featured celebrities, assumptions of publicity stunts and desperation to stay in the public eye were made. These responses consisted of questions such as “No self-publicity involved then” and statements like “how very trendy.”

Religious bias constituted the eighth most common response. These comments tended to reflect traditional beliefs based in religious teaching. Comments such as “Lord has mercy” and “an abomination in the eyes of the lord is nothing to be proud of” depict the nature of religious beliefs toward the message in Elle’s post.

The least prevalent but still identifiable as a thematic response was the assumption that identifying as queer is a *trauma response*. Comments of this type tended to see queerness as a behaviour that develops out of trauma. A respondent remarked, “I wonder how many of them have been molested as a child.”. See Table 1 for a summary of the prevalent themes found in responses to LGBTQ celebrities and some examples that capture the rhetoric of animosity against the video post’s content.

Table 1: Examples of Facebook Comments by Theme from Most Prevalent to Least

1. Preferred ignorance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Who cares” (C5, 2021). • “What ever sexual orientation you choose to be is your business but I’m so sick of having it crammed down everyones throat constantly it really gets old” (C15, 2021).
2. Unnatural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This is really disturbing you born a man be a man you born a woman be a woman” (C29, 2021). • “Madness everywhere its either male or female the rest is foolishness” (C48, 2021).
3. Queerness as an illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sick mofs” (C32, 2021). • “Sick degenerates” (C92, 2021).

4. Lack of understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Alphabet people” (C62, 2021). • “I’m a dog cat mouse and I identify as a mouse cat dog...” (C22, 2021).
5. Identity crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Confused people is all I see” (C66, 2021). • “Looks like they don’t know who they are” (C69, 2021).
6. Blatant distaste for the LGBTQ community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “*Puke emojis*” (C27, 2021). • “F**kem” (C1, 2021).
7. Queerness as a trend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “No self-publicity involved then?” (C24, 2021). • “How very trendy” (C21, 2021).
8. Religious bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Selling oneself to the evil agenda for attention and money...to each their own” (C65, 2021). • “You are all demons in God” (C12, 2021).
9. Queer identity as a trauma response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I wonder how many of them have been molested as a child...” (C19, 2021).

Discussion

This study examined public responses to online queer representation and sought to uncover the nature of the rhetoric in response to LGBTQ representation on social media. While social media can foster a positive network to find acceptance and community as there are opportunities to meet new people and share experiences, online platforms often invite opposing ideologies to clash. The findings indicate that conversations pertaining to queer identity are often met with negative beliefs and biases against members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community and their lifestyle choices. A vast majority of the comments discovered were a kind of preferred ignorance. These comments noted how conversations about LGBTQ people infringed on the media content the respondents preferred to see in their feeds. Commenters favoured keeping queer representation out of public discourse. Remaining shielded from LGBTQIA2S+ people and their issues was their main concern as they felt it was not their business and they did not need to be aware of others’ sexuality or gender identity.

Previous studies on online harassment and hate have uncovered the problematic essence of the digital sphere. Cazelatto and Cardin (2017) reaffirm the premise that the increased digitization of our everyday lives has allowed extreme intolerance to resurface and manifest itself in a new way. The anonymity and freedom granted to the public allow for the continued fostering of harmful attitudes towards vulnerable communities such as LGBTQ members. Marginalized groups are more susceptible to nasty commentary on social media, and as digital platforms rise, online harassment is becoming more likely. The open and unrestricted nature of the internet does little to protect minority groups from harassment since harmful opinions are seldom met with repercussions. Elle's post demonstrates how media can serve as a tool to inflict maltreatment.

There were several limitations that confined the external validity of the study. Specifically, the sample size was limited to only 100 comments. It is unclear whether the most recent comments represent the overall nature of comments to this post or whether some earlier comment triggered other like-minded respondents to join the conversation. It is also unknown whether Elle's Facebook followers represent an inherently homophobic subgroup of the wider Facebook user population. Similarly, it is unclear as to what kind of person typically follows Elle Magazine's page, and therefore the plethora of negative responses could be representative of the type of people who follow Elle Magazine as opposed to a neutral look at the nature of the rhetoric concerning LGBTQ individuals online. Finally, only one post was examined to obtain data on the discourse of hate regarding queer individuals. Further research should include more posts to establish a more exhaustive study. Additional platforms and posts could provide greater detail, increasing the generalizability of the findings presented here.

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