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We're Here, We're Queer... Or Are We? Queerness, Asexuality, and Communicative Capitalism
on Tumblr

ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been an explosion of LGBT communities online, Tumblr being one of the most popular social media sites among LGBT youth. The following thesis explores LGBT discussions on Tumblr concerning the terms “queer” and “asexuals”. My main question is why these discussions create such a negative and hateful environment. I write through the theoretical lens of communicative capitalism, a concept that describes the way communicative technologies are used for profit through capitalist and neoliberal means. I relate my topic to gender performativity, queer theory, and theory around slurs and their reclamation. I find that there are three main ways that contribute to communicative capitalism in this context: creating an increasing flow of information, disabling proper communication, and attempting to stop the discussions. There are aporias within the neoliberal view on technology, as well as within the terms I am focusing on, that create an ideal environment for communicative capitalism.

CONTENTS

Figures	5
Introduction	7
Significance	8
Social Media and LGBT Communities	8
Situating My Research	10
Communicative Capitalism	10
Gender Performativity	14
Queer Theory	16
Slurs and Their Reclamation	17
Methodology	20
Analysis	22
Themes, Discourses, and Patterns	22
More Posts, Less Meaning	24
Users on Two Different Wavelengths	31
Going Against the Tide	36

Conclusion39

Works Cited42

FIGURES

Figure 1 27

Post by Tumblr user a-polite-melody.

Figure 2 28

Post by Tumblr user butchmarxist.

Figure 3 29

Part of a post by Tumblr user demisexualmeansnormal with replies by user teentranswitch.

Figure 4 30

Post by Tumblr user doctorsebastianthescientist.

Figure 5 33

Post by Tumblr user dysfunctional-robin.

Figure 6 34

Post by Tumblr user conqueror-worm.

Figure 7 35

Post by Tumblr user kitchenwitchupinthisbitch.

Figure 8 37

Post by Tumblr user egowave.

Figure 9 38

Post by Tumblr user popgothica.

Figure 10 39

Post by Tumblr user closet-keys.

With the constant advancement of new media it seems like spectacular new forms of social change become possible. Social media connect people from all over the world, stronger communities emerge, and previously unheard voices come to the fore. This democratic paradise sounds alluring but it might only be a neoliberal fantasy. After all, the Internet is not a cultural vacuum. Within capitalism there have always been power hierarchies with certain groups exploiting others. In this context, the capital is no longer money – it is information.

In the following thesis I examine the terms “queer” and “asexual” on the social media blogging platform Tumblr. These two terms are interrelated and popular topics of arguments with strong opinions on both sides. Many people argue in terms of inclusion and exclusion – whether the terminology and identities surrounding these two terms are valid and whether they should be included into the acronym LGBT (a common reinterpretation being LGBTQIA¹). This is a very current issue with a long tradition of intra-group LGBT discourse. The term “queer” is common both in everyday use and in academia – as I discuss, perhaps it needs to be thought of more critically. Asexuality is on the other side of the spectrum – as it has only recently gained recognition as a label, there is very little written about it. The few sources I have found (Brotto, Jackson, Poston and Baumle) all stress that more research is needed. What I am questioning in this thesis is why the Tumblr environment surrounding these terms is so negative – what is it about new media platforms that allows for these discourses? What about the two terms specifically encourages hateful discussions? How and why do capitalist new media motivate people to continue communicating in this manner?

¹ LGBTQIA – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual.

SIGNIFICANCE

The social significance of this topic is underscored by the massive rise in online “safe havens” for LGBT communities in the past decade. These often consist of vulnerable, potentially impressionable groups of young adults and teenagers. Tumblr has been a key platform for this kind of online LGBT youth identity exploration (Hawkins and Watson 4). My research contributes to the field of new media studies by showing how communities or subcultures can use new media for identity formation and communication. I also touch upon how minority groups deal with certain issues differently in the age of the Internet. Unlike most other scholars who have written about LGBT communities online, I situate my research in a critique of the neoliberal framework, providing an analysis of new media platforms as capitalist corporations. I employ the concept of communicative capitalism to explore the usefulness and effectiveness of socio-political online discussions.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND LGBT COMMUNITIES

Most research concerning LGBT identity on social media has been encouraging (Acosta, Drager, Drushel, Oakley, Tunnell). Some interesting recent studies focus specifically on gender and sexuality on Tumblr (Drager, Oakley, Tunnell) but these do not present a very critical angle. Hawkins and Watson present a more realistic account of LGBT online communities in their article “LGBT cyberspaces: A need for a holistic investigation”. Online spaces are especially important for LGBT youth, who can learn about their marginalized identities, browse support forums, and set up real-world meetings. Neglected issues, however, include health risks related to dating apps, easy access of these apps to minors, the lack of proper sexual education, and the promotion of unprotected sex (4). Many LGBT youth visit online forums or blogs to get information and build

their social network, but they are presented with unhealthy sexual, emotional, and bodily health advice. Most websites are self-regulated with no healthcare professionals involved (Hawkins and Watson 5). While the exact issues this article discusses is not what I focus on here, it is still a strong example of how online LGBT spaces can be unmoderated, uneducated, and harmful.

Olu Jenzen's article "LGBTQ digital activism, subjectivity and neoliberalism" shows an interesting view of LGBT activism in the digital age. Jenzen agrees that the Internet has become an important arena for sexual politics that facilitates campaigning issues, access to information, spaces for debate, connecting with people, and creative output (both satirical and celebrating the community) (Jenzen 1). Social media networks are still, however, "carefully managed spaces of civility" with commercial aims (Jenzen 2). There is a common pessimistic view of youth civic participation and digital activism as "watered down". At the same time, mainstream media fuel a positive image of participatory culture with its new social movements. Young people are assumed to grow up in a post-homophobic society (3). According to neoliberal ideology and a progressive essentialist narrative, LGBT youth must simply endure hardships before their lives, inevitably, get better. There is an implication that it is the responsibility of the individual to overcome homophobia and personal attitude is what brings success (4). Activist organizations, meanwhile, have started to act like corporations – branding social justice and selling feelings of self-satisfaction (6). Low-level "armchair" activism requires little risk, personal cost, or commitment – an example is changing one's profile picture to show solidarity (7). Jenzen opposes the dismissal of youth new media activism, pointing out important aspects like community-building and awareness-spreading, as well as the fact that many campaigns are rooted in people's lived experiences and cyberspace only adds another dimension (7). Rather than adapting the technological determinist view that media technology will increase democracy and equality by

itself, Jenzen encourages a focus on how users “negotiate – and sometimes subvert – the values and norms that technologies incorporate in order to make pragmatic use of mainstream platforms and technologies in working towards agendas of increased sexual democracy and gender equality” (Jenzen 13). I will further reflect on this perspective when discussing communicative capitalism.

SITUATING MY RESEARCH

The fundamental theoretical concept for my thesis is communicative capitalism. In this section I first discuss communicative capitalism in detail, then relate it to gender performativity, queer theory, and slur reclamation.

COMMUNICATIVE CAPITALISM

Communicative capitalism is a relatively new concept that helps to understand networked communication in terms of politics and capitalism. The most prominent author in this field is Jodi Dean. In her article “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics”, Dean presents a less optimistic view of participation in the digital age than many of her peers. Due to the intensification of communicative access and opportunity, a “post-political formation of communicative capitalism” occurs (Dean 52). Dean relies on Žižek’s idea of post-politics, which operates on the premise of consensus and cooperation (Dean 56). Issues are addressed as personal or technical rather than requiring debate and struggle. This prevents politicization because “matters aren’t represented - they don’t stand for something beyond themselves” (Dean 56). Centrism, individualism, and the importance of tolerating a plurality of beliefs (ideally) result in a lack of opposition or conflict, which are necessary for politics. Politics become understood as a characteristic of all of life, not confined to specific institutions. Neoliberal capitalist societies gain from preventing politicization (Dean 57).

According to Dean, contrary to the premises of liberal democracy (and ideas of freedom of speech and governance of people), there is no dependency between media chatter and institutional politics (Dean 52). Officials do not feel the need to respond to messages, they simply add to the discourse. Messages lose their specificity and merge together with the data flow – they are no longer actions that require responses, but contributions. The mere exchange value of messages overtakes their use value. The more popular a discourse is, the less chance one comment has of changing something, and the more shock or newness is needed for it to make an impact (58). Understanding is no longer a necessary element of communication. A message only needs to be repeated, forwarded, and it is successful if it “sticks” (59). Sometimes networked communication does facilitate political resistance, but this does not mean that it is not commodified – what defines commodities is not necessarily their usefulness, but their economic function and role in capitalist exchange (Dean 59). A fantasy of participation is common in talking about new media. People believe that they are active and that what they say matters (Dean 60). The promise of participation is not just propaganda, it reveals a fantasy of technology fixing human flaws (62). Fantasies displace users' attention from the commercial context.

In communicative capitalism, the complexities of politics are condensed into one problem to be solved. The problem is that people are not informed and the solution lies in information technologies (Dean 64). Politics are displaced onto ordinary people and their everyday actions (65). This creates a one-sided, simplistic view of political action and eliminates tricky parts like struggle, conflict, organization, and context (66). Being “active” on the Internet provides a sense of satisfaction. Arguing about minor details of a perfect future world with like-minded people feels like an accomplishment, while the actual world remains unchanged (65). Despite fantasies of a global community on the Internet, most people stay within their own bubble, surrounded by

opinions they already agree with, which increases segmentation (Dean 69). Dean's pessimistic analysis clashes with Jenzen's milder conclusion that while some critiques are valid, the value of youth digital activism should not be underestimated. In the light of communicative capitalism, the benefits of such activism highlighted by Jenzen – such as awareness-spreading and community-building – do not mean much in the bigger picture.

Ingrid Hoofd's article "Complicit subversions: Cultural new media activism and 'high theory'" elaborates on this neoliberal fantasy of increasing technological innovation being the key to liberation. There are enthusiastic calls to action, but it is never considered that the type of activism people engage in does not achieve anything, is not subversive, and is in fact in line with neoliberalism and capitalism. The Internet is perceived as a neutral, free space in which hierarchies can be overcome, but in reality class makes cyberspace possible in the first place. The neo-liberal quest for acceleration, with its fantasies of speed, mobility, and progress, underlies the machinery of the "speed-elite". The aporia within this ideology is that online activism depends on new media technologies as "an essential accelerating element of precisely that hyper-capitalist system it claims to subvert" (Hoofd, n.p.). With the increase of information comes a loss of meaning and being politically active on the Internet, paradoxically, means being less politically effective. A lack of consideration of what your actions really achieve is complicit in the politics of speed. Tumblr is a great example of the "speed-elite". The exchange of information is increasingly fast and if you are not up to date – for example you did not realize it was not alright to use a certain word or interact with a certain blog anymore – then you are excluded.

The stance I assume in this thesis goes in line with Dean's and Hoofd's views. Despite the exciting promise of participatory culture and new media activism, not much is changing in the

bigger political and economic picture. The idea of total democracy on social media is an illusion, as corporations still control and earn billions from them. Nevertheless, I find the complete dismissal of digital activism too pessimistic. Spreading awareness can occasionally result in significant consequences, even if on a small scale (note the “occasionally”, because this only really happens with viral cases). It is also important to acknowledge the role of new media in community-building, personal empowerment, and changing perceptions of minorities.

Why do the terms “queer” and “asexual” lend themselves to communicative capitalism so well? There are several reasons. As I elaborate in the following subsections, issues related to slurs and queer theory create fertile ground for debate. Many discussions on terminology in general are strongly related to communicative capitalism. These debates demonstrate the aforementioned neoliberal fantasy because they imply that agreeing on certain words will solve all problems, while being the ideal topic for communicative capitalism because they involve endless arguments about language. Most of these arguments have no influence on the real world, yet they satisfy people by making them feel like they are engaging in political activism, just as Dean and Jenzen point out. Many Tumblr users like to see themselves as “social justice warriors” who are making a difference by engaging in these debates and educating themselves and others. Moreover, because neither “queer” nor “asexual” are easily defined, people can continue to disagree about their meaning.

Tumblr as a corporation profits from its users being so passionate and angry about something that they create a buzz and a never-ending circle of writing posts and replying. Therefore, they encourage hateful discussions instead of trying to stop or moderate them. Corporations have been making profit off the LGBT community for many years now. Halberstam brings up drag kings being used by mainstream media as “freak shows”, usually without

compensation (Halberstam 158). In recent years, many companies have been selling rainbow-colored products marketed to LGBT people and allies. Brands like Absolut Vodka, Adidas, Nike, Coca-Cola, and Microsoft approach Pride Month similarly to Christmas, advertising special edition products with messages of love and support (Dupere, Highsnobiety, Rawles). LGBT communities are a large part of what sustains Tumblr but they only get performative support in return – for example, Tumblr staff decorates the website for Pride Month but flags LGBT content as NSFW² while turning a blind eye to violent or inappropriate content.

GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Gender performativity is a key concept in the theorization of the social construction of gender, originating from the academic traditions of feminism, philosophy, and sociology. It is at the base of the work of many gender and sexuality scholars (ex. Fausto-Sterling) and it provides an important foundation for understanding queer theory. The term “gender performativity” was coined by influential gender theorist Judith Butler. The text I have chosen to study is her 1988 article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”. Butler relies on phenomenological theory, according to which social agents constitute social reality through symbolic social signs (Butler 519). She argues that rather than being a stable identity, gender is constituted through a stylized repetition of acts. An important part of this identity is achieved through the stylization of the body – movements, gestures, enactments (519). Butler stresses the arbitrary character and social temporality of gender. Gender is not a natural, biological process, but a construction of identity (Butler 520).

² NSFW – not safe for work, a term for adult content.

This is influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's view of gender as a historical situation – something that gains meaning only through our culture – rather than a natural fact. Gender in this definition is not predetermined by any essence; there is an agency and a process of making concrete possibilities that are constrained by historical conventions (Butler 521). Butler makes a distinction between sex and gender that disputes the assumption that biological sex necessarily dictates certain social meanings. Her interpretation of how this cultural meaning of the body came about is that the sexual reproduction has been established within the borders of heterosexual marriage, which led to the creation of gendered roles. Gender is therefore simply a construction for the purpose of reproduction (Butler 524).

To explain the constructive nature of gender, Butler makes the distinction between “performance” and “performativity”. Performance is about acting in a certain moment or situation, implying that there is a certain kind of choice involved. Performativity, on the other hand, describes the act of constructing social reality through acting a certain way. Talking, dressing, behaving in a way that is either feminine or masculine is often seen as something natural or factual, but is actually something constantly being produced and reproduced. Certain effects and reactions are produced in people depending on whether gender coherence is presented in a successful way. If one fails to conform, they will likely be met with criticism, feelings of unease or disgust, and rejection (Butler 521).

Butler sees gender as a mode of self-definition through which people become socially intelligible. Because gender does not have a universal essence, the various acts of gender constitute it. There is a collective social agreement to perform, produce and sustain polar genders and this construction is so strong that most people believe it is both natural and necessary (Butler 522).

Performativity can be seen as the ability of all kinds of discourse to produce gendered subjects through repetition. Butler stresses that her theory does not imply that everybody can choose how to perform their gender. A style of living is never fully self-styled because living has a history that limits possibilities (Butler 521). Within the context of communicative capitalism, gender is constrained by what is profitable. The traditional performance of femininity generates plenty of money – clothes, makeup, diet, targeted content... Corporations like Tumblr also benefit from people performing their gender and sexualities, binary or not – posting pictures of themselves, for example, or text posts about being proud of their queerness.

QUEER THEORY

Gender performativity is closely related to queer theory. Many authors (ex. Jagose) have theorized queer theory since the 1970's and it has very solid foundations. Seidman's 1995 chapter "Deconstructing queer theory or the under-theorization of the social and the ethical" is a great introductory text for queer theory. Seidman explains that from the 1950's, the American idea of homosexuality had been that it has a uniform and essential meaning that represents a common human identity (Seidman 116). Since the late 1970's this notion has changed from essentialist to constructionist – the meaning of same-sex attraction was now seen as something that varies according to society, class, race, and gender. This contributed to the emergence of queer theory (Seidman 117).

Queer theory positions itself in opposition to both heterosexual and homosexual. It aims to disturb the normalization of mainstream identity politics ("we're all the same") and instead focuses on a politic of difference and pluralism (Seidman 118). Queer theory criticizes identity politics for its white, middle-class and hetero-imitative values and liberal policies (Seidman 124). It rejects

the view of homosexuality as a property that some people have because this view leaves the straight/gay binary as the main framework for identity- and knowledge-construction (126). The normalization and legitimization of homosexuality as a social minority is simply not enough to challenge this binary. Queer theory encourages the shift from thinking about homosexuality in terms of personal identity, oppression, and liberation to thinking about the cultural politics of knowledge and critically analyzing the power or knowledge regimes that shape our behaviors and desires (128). A normative view of gender and sexuality leads to the regulation of bodies and behaviors by a binary of male/female and gay/straight, which inevitably leads to hierarchies and exclusion (126). A deconstruction of binaries aims to displace these hierarchies and show their arbitrary character (Seidman 125).

While this sounds liberating, in reality, used in this context, the term “queer” allows for endless discussions about obscure terminology and what gender or sexual identity really is. Hoofd notes a contradiction in humanism: it wants to be universal but is based in very specific ideas (Hoofd, n.p.). The same could be said for queer theory. There is also a connection to the post-political idea that everybody’s opinion is valid, therefore no conflict is necessary. If gender and sexuality are social constructs, instead of trying to combat patriarchy or homophobia, should we not simply stop talking about these binary differences? These aporias are ideal for technological acceleration in politics. Discussions about what it means to be “queer” can go on in loops forever without achieving meaningful social change.

SLURS AND THEIR RECLAMATION

One of the controversial aspects of the term “queer” is that it originates as – and possibly still is – a slur used against LGBT people. Because they are tied to oppression and violence, slurs inspire

passionate debates about who, if anybody, should be able to use them. Originally used from the sixteenth century on to mean “strange” or “peculiar” (Collins Dictionary), in the nineteenth century “queer” became a pejorative synonym to “gay” (Jagose 1). More recently it has been used as a neutral umbrella term for people with non-typical sexual or gender identities (Doty xiv), but also as a separate identity in itself (Unitarian Universalist Association). Despite the fact that the term has been reclaimed by many people, some LGBT people still do not want to be referred to as queer (Unitarian Universalist Association; GLAAD). There can be multiple reasons for this. It did originate as a violent homophobic slur in the recent past, so it is not disconnected from people’s personal experiences – LGBT people older than thirty or forty are likely to have negative associations with it. Moreover, it is still used as a slur nowadays, especially in conservative parts of the United States. Some also argue that the term loses meaning when it is used as a vague, all-inclusive label, and it diverts attention from issues that specific groups of people – for example lesbians or transgender people – face.

Slurs have been theorized mostly by linguists and cultural studies scholars, many of whom see the phenomenon of oppressed groups reclaiming slurs in a positive light (Anten, Croom, Bianchi, Ritchie, Love). Eric Swanson's chapter “Slurs and Ideology” is a helpful text for understanding the full implications of using and reclaiming a slur. Swanson argues that slurs and ideology stand in a mutually supportive relation – slurs strengthen ideologies and ideologies make slurs more harmful (Swanson 1). The traditional taxonomy of language, when talking about slurs, is largely based on the idea of conversational implicatures. Swanson argues that the use of any word is associated with a family of conversational implicatures he calls “acceptability implicatures”. This means that by saying something, a person is conversationally implicating that it is an acceptable thing for them to say in the first place (3). Using negatively loaded statements

towards someone implies that they deserve to be talked about this way and that the speaker feels this way about them (Swanson 4).

Ideologies do not have to be visible to those who consent to them and even those who reject an ideology are often still constrained by it (Swanson 6). This is certainly true in the light of Butler's view of gender – everybody (or most people) perform their gender without reflecting on it, and people who reject the ideology of gender are still constrained by it. The use of slurs, according to Swanson, cues ideologies to do certain things – somebody who uses a harmful slur is signaling that the ideology can and should harm the targeted person (Swanson 9). The ideology that is invoked associates the slur with certain qualities and it includes a hierarchy (9). Most uses of the slur add to the facts that give it its properties – with each use, the word gains intensity and association with the ideology. Ideologies can provide speakers with the feeling that they are justified in using the slurs (11). A sense of solidarity forms between people who use the same slur (16). Slurs contribute to the power, persistence, and growth of ideologies (15). Ideologies also contribute to slurs' harmfulness. Slurs are used not just to abuse and intimidate, but also to portray – the speaker sees a group of people in a certain way and wants everybody else to also see them as such (Swanson 18).

Not all cases of using slurs are bad because it can part of ideology critique, mostly if done by a member of the oppressed group (Swanson 12). For oppressive groups, saying the slur itself is often harmful and not necessary for ideology critique. However, when oppressed groups use a slur, it invokes their own harms, which is a good part of ideology critique (Swanson 14). A problem arises here if part of the group disagrees about the slur being reclaimed or being a good umbrella

term. This goes to show that no group, especially as large and diverse as the LGBT community, is unified and homogenous.

Swanson warns not to overestimate the power of terminology – words are constructs and may distract us from the ideologies they represent. On the other hand, however, the relationship between language and ideology is real (Swanson 22). This is a statement I agree with – words are a social construct and there is a limit to how much they can change the world, but they are still one of the most important parts of culture and can reveal a lot about ideology, assumptions, and prejudice.

METHODOLOGY

I conduct my research using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze text posts. I have chosen my corpus by delving into four Tumblr tags and choosing the top fifty recently popular posts from each of them (after eliminating irrelevant posts). The tags I chose are “lgbt”, “queer”, “q slur”, and “ace discourse”. These tags are the most popular ones in the queer/asexual debates and each tends to have a specific viewpoint, so considering all of them results in a diverse corpus. I also analyze seventy screenshots of posts I encountered on my own dashboard.

CDA is a problem-based approach, unique in its focus on highlighting and solving social problems (Fairclough 125). It is concerned with marginalized or oppressed groups, focusing on the role of discourse in the production of dominance (Van Dijk 249). Some ways of meaning-making are dominant while others are marginal. An order of discourse is not stable and it can be challenged in interactions (Fairclough 124). To change or dismantle orders of discourse is precisely the aim of CDA. There is no single correct way to conduct CDA, but two levels of analysis should be considered: structure analysis (general themes, semantic macro-structures, etc.)

and fine analysis (context, text, linguistic strategies, etc.). My exact plan of analysis consists of five steps, a combination of several approached from Wodak and Meyer's "Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis":

1. Focus on social problem with semiotic aspect and establish contents of specific discourse.
2. Identify dominant styles, genres, and discourses.
3. Consider range of difference between styles, genres, and discourses.
4. Identify resistance against dominant styles, genres, and discourses.
5. Investigate discursive strategies, linguistic means, and specific, context-dependent linguistic realizations.

Another interesting element to consider is reaction time or the amount of time between certain posts, and relate this to impulsivity on social media and Hoofd's concept of the speed-elite. Tumblr, unfortunately, does not provide timestamps on posts, but it is possible to check the date of posting on most posts, therefore I check response time for posts that involve replies.

An inevitable limitation of my research is that my corpus only consists of posts that people have tagged "lgbt", "queer", "q slur", or "ace discourse". Many posts go untagged, whether that is because the poster cannot be bothered or because they do not want to be part of the discussion. There are criteria of validity and reliability that must be considered when performing CDA. I try to make my findings accessible both to my peers and to the social group being investigated. I also triangulate by constantly comparing immediate language to the relationships between texts and discourses, the social level, and the broader socio-political and historical contexts. Despite this,

there are certain limitations that prevent my research from being complete or representative. Aside from the limited time frame and the limitations imposed by only looking at specific tags, the critical approach I assume results in a willfully selective and, in a way, subjective research. I am critiquing the online space and inquiring how posts may reproduce certain ideas. My research is guided by my theoretical framework and therefore does not aim to be complete. Its strength lies not in taking all possible viewpoints into considerations but in analyzing language – on the micro and macro levels – to uncover certain themes and discourses. Although I am open to unexpected findings, the discourses I am specifically scanning for are those concerning neoliberal fantasies about technology, accelerated logic, and what posting and different forms of online interaction achieve.

ANALYSIS

THEMES, DISCOURSES, AND PATTERNS

I began my analysis by looking through my corpus to get an overview of the dominant themes and discourses. I initially looked at four aspects: topic (gender roles, media representation, stereotypes, identity, terminology...), tone (angry, calm, educational, mocking, passive aggressive, proud...), stance (inclusionist or exclusionist, pro- or anti-queer, trying to be neutral...), and source (opinion, personal experience, academic...). I found that the tag “lgbt” is the most generic place of LGBT discussions and the tone is mostly positive, a melting pot of insider jokes, positivity, romantic bloggers dreaming about the future, and serious, educational posts. Many posts in this tag resemble diary entries, with people briefly noting their personal opinions or feelings without necessarily expecting replies. The tag “queer”, similarly, is mostly positive, but some angry or insulting posts also appear. This tag is all about validity and inclusion (often when it comes to queer and asexual people) and discussions about terminology and identity.

The other two tags, “q slur” and “ace discourse”, are where things get more heated. Most posts in the tag “q slur” are very negative about the term “queer”, which makes sense since they tag it as a slur. This is a much more angry and bitter tag than the previous two, with no positive or romantic posts but many passive aggressive, serious, and mocking ones. Many posts are long, opinion-based “rants” that are not directed at anybody in particular, meaning that rather than interacting with each other, people are throwing around insults. The “ace discourse” tag resembles a battleground. Whereas the other tags included discussions about race, misogyny, real-life issues, and gender roles, this one is focused almost entirely on arguments for or against including asexuality in LGBT. The debate is skewed in the inclusionist direction, with twenty-one inclusionist and thirteen exclusionist posts. The tone of the posts is overwhelmingly angry, mocking, and insulting on both sides. All posts are opinion-based or assuming the “my word is final because I said so” stance. This is definitely the most toxic and least productive environment.

The posts I gathered from my own dashboard are largely mocking and dismissive, with many references to inside jokes. Compared to the four tags, there are more users trying to stop the “queer” and “asexual” discussions, often bringing up more pressing real-life issues to diminish their importance. There is a lot of indirectness, for example screenshotting somebody’s post and commenting on it to followers rather than engaging in conversation.

One discursive aspect to be considered in CDA is who the actors are: who is speaking? When it comes to Tumblr, it is difficult to say because blogs are anonymous, however many users provide personal information in their description or posts. After browsing through blogs from each tag, some patterns began to emerge. Users tend to put similar kinds of information in their description: a combination of their name, age, gender, pronouns, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. Some users

go well beyond that, listing a multitude of other attributes such as political views, dietary preferences, mental or physical disabilities, or fandoms. It seems like certain parts of one's identity are worn like a badge for visitors to see. Some examples of descriptions are "biracial", "they/them", "demi", "gender confused", "trans friendly", "inclusionist", "leftist lesbian", and "white". The age listed is usually in the early 20's, sometimes late teens. This information suggests that the main demographic for LGBT-related Tumblr consists of young adults or teenagers who are likely to have strong (political) opinions, mostly women and gender or sexual minorities.

After exploring the main themes for each tag, I identified the dominant discourse and resistance against it. I could have tried to figure out which discourse – pro- or anti- "queer" or "asexual" – is more popular, but this would not only be difficult but also eventually irrelevant for my research question. Instead, what I see as the dominant discourse is the fantasy that new media communication has the potential to bring about social change, unite humanity and solve all flaws. Resistance against this discourse could be somebody refusing to participate in the debate out of awareness that it is counterproductive for the LGBT community while being beneficial for Tumblr.

The next step was to perform a detailed analysis of ten posts from each tag that I felt were the most interesting or representative, considering various linguistic and discursive elements such as argumentation types, vocabulary, polarization, implications, and means of reporting. Based on this analysis I divided my corpus into three categories, which I discuss in the following three subsections.

MORE POSTS, LESS MEANING

The first and most common category of posts is those that encourage the constant flow of information. There are several ways of doing this. One way to make people talk is to upset them.

A very common element I found in posts that encourage angry responses is a passive aggressive attitude. Users often act as though they are making a casual observation, using phrases like “funny how...” or “... just saying”, when posting very loaded statements. This kind of cocky attitude angers opponents more than straightforward insults. Users might put terms they do not like in quotation marks to mock and illegitimize them, for example saying “aphobe” to suggest that aphobia does not exist. Many things that are said would never be heard in real-life conversations. The anonymity and protection of being behind a screen gives users confidence to say careless things and a disregard for the “other” they cannot see. Something I noticed in many posts that encourages unfriendly attitudes is polarization. This can be between any two groups of people, as long as it creates an “us vs. them” dynamic – inclusionists vs. exclusionists, real activists vs. posers, LGBT people vs. homophobes. Related to polarization is a type of behavior known as “callout culture”. If somebody says something problematic, they are publicly called out for it, shamed, and not given a chance to grow or apologize. These kinds of intolerant and toxic behaviors are mostly found in the “queer” and “ace discourse” tags.

Another type of post that encourages a flow of information is when people try to educate others by spreading awareness. I found this attitude in almost half of all the posts. Other than just adapting an educational tone, users may use many tags to reach a wider audience or write long posts with the aim of teaching people something. Tied to this type of post is the implication that social media are a good tool for (LGBT) activism. Users in the “lgbt” tag are the most optimistic about this, whereas in the “q slur” and on my own dashboard they are the most pessimistic. This makes sense considering that the “lgbt” tag has the most supportive and helpful posts, whereas the “q slur” tag is mostly focused on arguing against certain people. Elements of being positive about digital activism include seeing Tumblr as a safe space for the LGBT community, adapting the “activist”

style (for example the manifesto style, or the information leaflet visual style), and the rhetoric of linear progress, aiming for total equality in the community. Especially in the “queer” tag, a “loud and proud”, “born this way” rhetoric emerges. The environment in this tag encourages self-expression, posting selfies, and positivity posts. These posts are not usually addressed to anyone, the aim is simply to express oneself, spread love, or receive solidarity from followers. This is the kind of performativity I mentioned in the section on gender performativity: it gives people a sense of validation and at the same time generates more and more content.

An element that I came across in over half of the posts is speed. Hoofd’s idea of the speed-elite comes to mind here. Post must be up-to-date and they circulate very quickly. No matter the topic – whether it is serious or banal – posts often involve memes and inside jokes that. There are plenty of local meanings and acronyms, and new ones appear every day. Understanding all of this makes people feel like part of the community and creates a bond of solidarity between like-minded users. Responses to posts are fast. A post usually gets most of its replies in a day, unless it sticks, in which case it can circulate for years with new versions or additions being created. Buzzwords are common, especially in the “queer” and “lgbt” tags, which are more out-there and cheerful than the other tags. There are many terms and a lot of them lose meaning very quickly – corresponding with Dean’s observation that massive amounts of information become meaningless in communicative capitalism. A couple of examples are “aphobe³” and “TERF⁴”, which seem to have lost their original meanings along the way and started being used as insults. A way of typing that is typical for many Tumblr users – very speech-like and lowercase with random punctuation – also makes it easier to talk and argue more fluently.

³ Aphobe – a person who discriminates against asexuals.

⁴ TERF – trans-exclusionary radical feminist.

Below I discuss four examples of posts in more detail. The first post is by user a-polite-melody, taken from the “ace discourse” tag (Figure 1). This post is a call to action, criticizing people who try to stay neutral in the debate about asexuality. The user is offering strong, dramatic opinions, along with a “solution” to the problem. This clearly oversimplifies matters and will only anger the opposing side, encouraging more pointless arguments.

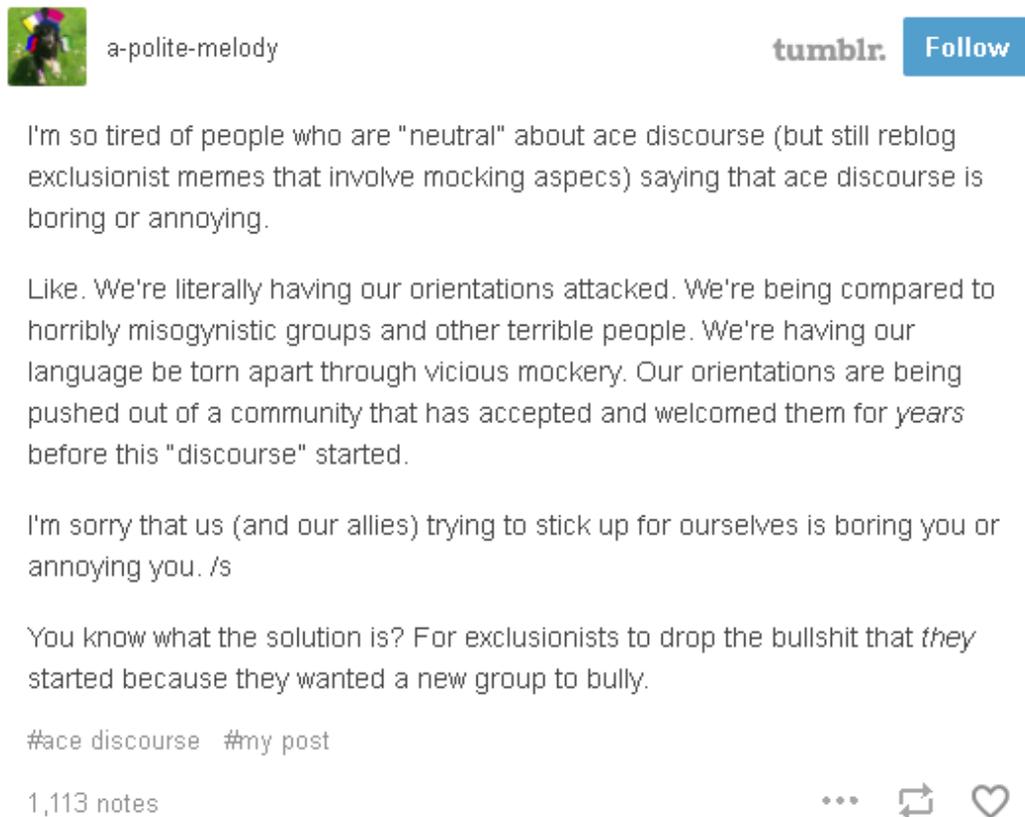


Figure 1: Post by Tumblr user a-polite-melody.

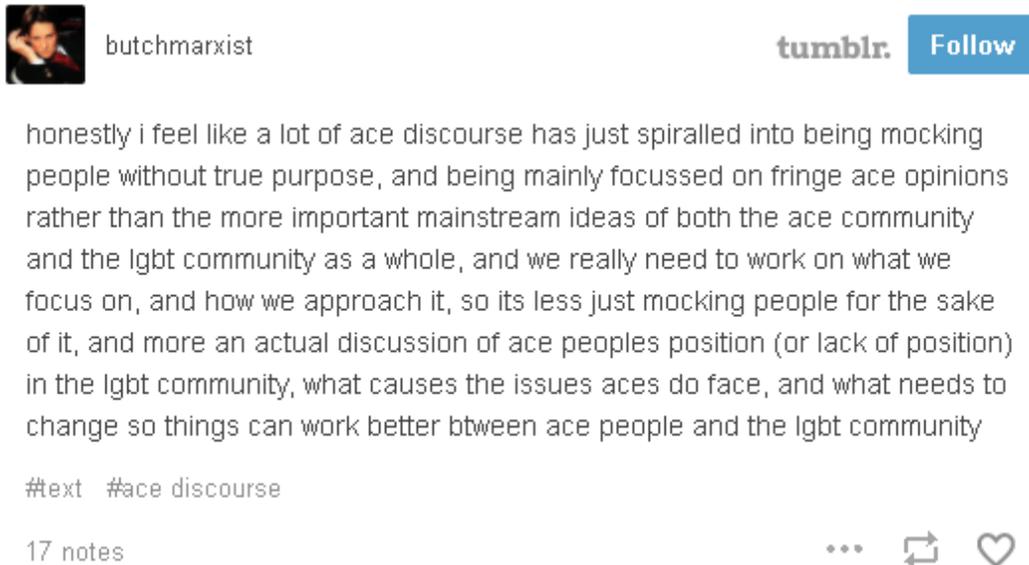


Figure 2: Post by Tumblr user butchmarxist.

User butchmarxist (Figure 2) urges for a more civilized, calm discussion because as it is, nothing is being achieved, important issues are neglected, and people are attacking each other and getting upset. Butchmarxist is invoking a sense of community and solidarity: “we really need to work on what we focus on”. The user is trying to remain neutral, using statements like “ace peoples position (or lack of position) in the lgbt community” and “both the ace community and the lgbt community as a whole” – trying not to convey inclusionist or exclusionist views and instead focusing on better communication as the key to improvement.



demisexualmeansnormal

Things that literally never happen

- "Sorry, you're not fucking enough to rent this apartment."
- "Your marriage isn't recognised in this State/country, cos you're simply not having enough sex."
- "Sorry, we ran a background check on your job application, and it seems you're not really interested in sex, and we don't think that reflects well on this Corporate Big Box."
- "sorry, we can't cover your diabetes medication, because your medical record says you're not really into sex."

On the other hand...

- LGBT people are legally denied housing, quite regularly, on the basis of being lesbian, gay, bi, or trans.
- Marriage rights for LGBT people have been contested because of local laws. (This isn't really no longer an issue in the States, tbqh, just all around. All the federal recognition of SSM rights means is there is no legal reason for any one State to deny a marriage certificate, and that federal tax filings aren't going to be contested.)
- Trans people are denied employment, and quite legally, over things as federal tax filings aren't going to be contested.)
- Trans people are denied employment, and quite legally, over things as benign as a legal name change.
- Trans people are denied healthcare, even for things that aren't related to transitioning, on the basis of being trans.

While there are certain things that are of concern to asexuals, none of it applies to what the LGBT community has been working for. Your civil rights and liberties are not being denied or threatened on the basis of simply being asexual.

If you're gay-ace, lesbian-ace, bi/pan-ace, or trans/nb-ace, then you're already LGBT, **but if you're CISgender and HETeromantic, in addition to being asexual, you are CIS-HET you have literally nothing in common with LGBT people.**

Build your own community, there is nothing stopping you, but you have no right to ours.



teentranswitch

See buddy, lgbt focuses not only on romantic attraction and gender, but sexual attraction as well.

It's like trying to say that chocolate flavoured milkshakes aren't real milkshakes cause every other flavour is based off of a fruit

Buddy, you're wrong

Figure 3: Part of a post by Tumblr user demisexualmeansnormal with replies by user teentranswitch.

The exchange between users demisexualmeansnormal and teentranswitch (Figure 3) is a typical example of a pointless, endless debate. In the original post, demisexualmeansnormal argues that asexuals are neither inherently LGBT nor systematically oppressed. This is said in a hostile and sarcastic manner, stating the “facts” and excluding asexuals from the LGBT community. Teentranswitch, in a response sent on the next day, argues against this, directly saying “you’re wrong” and sarcastically calling the original poster “buddy”. This then turns into an ugly and patronizing argument, with both sides telling each other they are wrong. The original poster claims to have authority and knowledge due to being a few years older. This is all posted on the same day. The latest addition to the post is written by the original poster a month later, presumably after

having received many replies and messages. At this point it is clear that the debate has been completely derailed, as the reply concerns people accusing the user of lying about being transgender. This is related to Dean's understanding of post-politics: issues are seen as personal rather than something requiring debate and struggle.

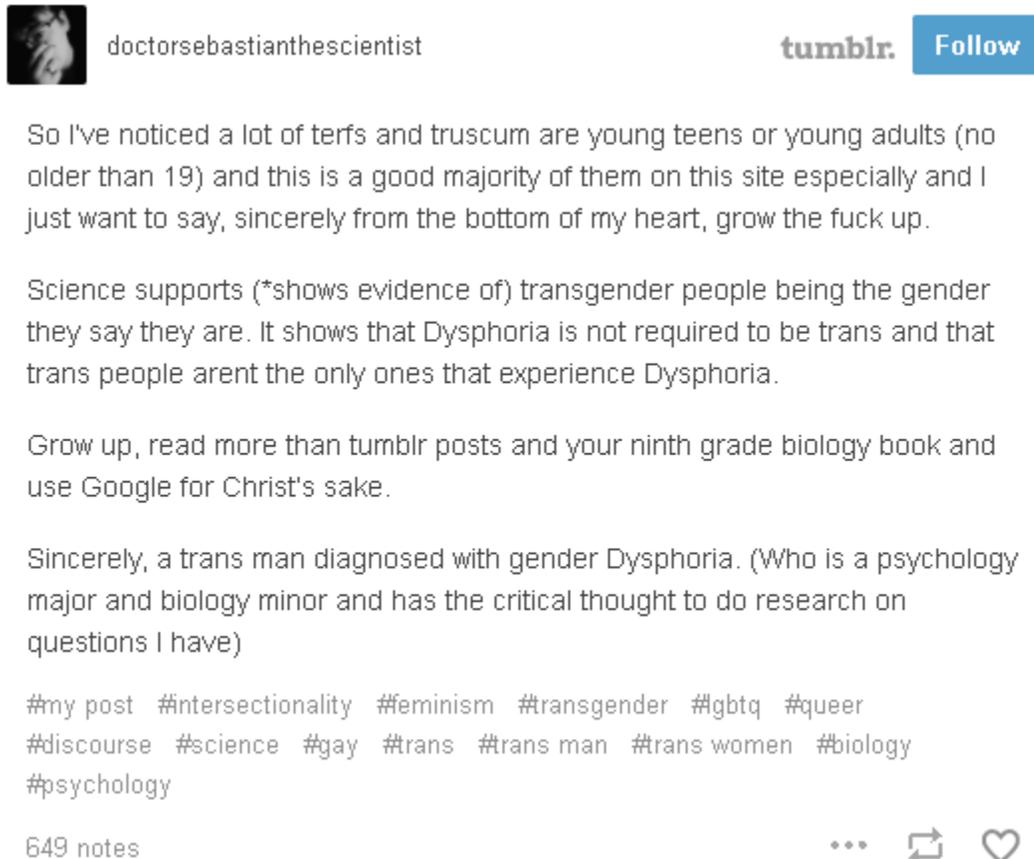


Figure 4: Post by Tumblr user doctorsebastianthescientist.

In Figure 4, user doctorsebastianthescientist utilizes his experience as both a trans man and a psychology and biology student to educate transphobes about transgender people. He tries to back his claims up, saying that science supports transgender people being the gender they say they are, as though gender is a thing that can be measured by science. Although he is technically

encouraging people to read more and get educated, he does so in a condescending and insulting way that will probably just make his opponents angry.

USERS ON TWO DIFFERENT WAVELENGTHS

The second category of posts is those that disable proper communication. What I mean by “proper communication” is two sides interacting, understanding each other, and arriving at a consensus, conclusion, or gaining something from the interaction. Out of the fifty posts I analyzed in detail, only two were backed up by sources and a few others included internal links. The discourse mostly stays within Tumblr, which, aside from, of course, being beneficial for Tumblr, keeps posts open to interpretation and opinion-based. Other than this, most of the ways in which communication is disrupted can be seen in the way people express themselves. Some users are purposely not trying to communicate or fix things, just “troll”, annoy people, or assert their own opinion. They often assume a “can’t change my mind” attitude, especially when it comes to terminology or identities that they adapt as their own. These kinds of attitudes prevail in the “ace discourse” tag, where they are present in over half of the posts.

In all tags, about half of the posts show a certain stubbornness. Users tend to act like authorities on certain topics, whether it is because of their age, experience, or for no reason. Ending a post in “...just saying” is a semantic move, a disclaimer to potential opponents – “you can’t attack me because I’m just saying”. Many users claim to be stating objective, neutral facts instead of opinions. This shows mostly in the “queer” and “ace discourse” tags, but also about half of the other posts.

Another thing that disables proper communication is being vague. Vague posts that are not aimed at anybody in particular (not tagged and most likely will only be seen by followers who

already agree) are very common. Users also generalize, for example throwing groups of people together in strings of words like “cis het white men” or “POC, LGBT and women”. Users often assign responsibility to groups as a whole, rather than specific people. This ensures that no change will happen, as, firstly, the right people between groups are not communicating, and secondly, the solutions suggested are not concrete. Being vague and generalizing is very common in all the tags, but overwhelmingly so in “queer”. This may be because the term allows for very abstract and unsubstantial discussions.

The final element that disables proper communication is disconnect in arguments. There is a lot of flawed logic, posts that clearly will not achieve anything other than making people angry or defensive, and a lack of respectful communication between groups. An example of a disconnect in arguments about the term “queer” is that many pro-queer users argue that they should be allowed to reclaim the term, whereas many anti-queer users argue that it should not be used as an umbrella term for the entire LGBT community. Because these are two very different arguments, the two groups can never come to a consensus.

Let us take a look at three examples of posts. User dysfunctional-robin (Figure 5) makes a passive aggressive, “casual” observation about the “MAGA⁵” label, implying that it is problematic and should not be used because people who identify as such are “predatory” and privileged. The way this post is worded is not open to debate, it is simply “making an observation” and if somebody

⁵ MAGA – a variation on MOGAI – Marginalized Orientations, Gender Alignments, and Intersex.

who identifies as a “MAGA gay” comes across this post, they are very unlikely to change their minds because of it.



Figure 5: Post by Tumblr user dysfunctional-robin.

 **conqueror-worm**

I just think it's funny that a queer allo person can walk into a heavily hetero space, see a bunch of PDA and talk about how frustrating it is to have heterosexuality shoved on them all the time, but if an ace or aro person god forbid talks about how queer spaces (of which they are part of period point blank end of discussion) are heavily allosexual and unwelcoming, then holy hell call the queer police because now we're homophobic or lesbophobic or whatever the fucking phobic you want to call us

yeah I just think that's fucking funny

 **alyesque**

Its almost like gay people have been socially stigmatized and had to hide our sexualities and public affection for literal centuries and straight people have never experienced that on the basis of their heterosexuality

its almost like those things are different

 **rm4rqu3s**

Literally an inch away from arguing for heterophobia.

 **conqueror-worm**

go suck a rotten egg you fucking walnut

 **alyesque**

Again, I would really rather not.

I wont insult you but will ask you to consider why you feel the need to police gay peoples sexuality in spaces meant for expressions of gay sociality.

 **conqueror-worm**

jesus fucking christ it's like you look at the queer spectrum, and decide to wipe away every single letter other than the G and L. there are 1) other people in the umbrella of QUEER other than you. 2) there are other people who belong in that space, who have been driven to fucking depression (hi! me!) and suicide ideation (hey! me! wassup!) by this allosexual mother fucking society that we all exist in. ace and aro people HAVE ALWAYS BEEN IN QUEER SPACES. ALWAYS. AL-FUCKING-WAYS. WE DESERVE TO BE LISTENED TO YOU FUCKER.

guess it's too far fucking fetched to ask people to examine how their actions contribute to a allosexual hierarchy! guess it's too much to as fellow queer people to examine themselves and their actions in any way! guess being a decent ass person is just too fucking much!!!

you're just as bad as the straight cis mother fuckers who refuse to acknowledge queer people or how their actions effect queer people. christ you're nasty

Source:conqueror-worm

3,399 notes

...  

Figure 6: Post by Tumblr user conqueror-worm.

The interaction between two users, conqueror-worm and alyesque (Figure 6), resembles the one in Figure 3. It is a heated argument concerning asexual struggles within the LGBT community, and the more replies are posted, the nastier it becomes. Alyesque is almost polite and civil, but a passive aggressive tone hides beneath. Conqueror-worm, on the other hand, is openly angry, writing in all caps, using exclamation marks, and swearing. In the end, the only thing that is achieved is that everybody gets upset. The problem seems to be that the two are arguing for two different things – conqueror-worm speaks out against asexual oppression and lack of place in the LGBT community,

whereas alyesque sees a problem with trying to police LGBT people's sexuality because of the long history of it being repressed.



kitchenwitchupinthisbitch

tumblr. [Follow](#)

LOL I'm still getting anon-hate and gate keepers trying to put me in check. Let me try and explain to everyone. *Ahem*

I'M QUEER!!! I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU SAY, IT DOESN'T MAKE ME ANY LESS QUEER. YES, I DO LEAN ACE, BUT SEXUALITY IS COMPLEX. EVERYONE AND NO ONE IS ATTRACTIVE TO ME. I DON'T GET EXACTLY WHAT ATTRACTION MEANS, I DON'T PICK UP SOCIAL CUES THAT EQUAL ATTRACTION, I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW IT WORKS. SEXUALLY OR PHYSICALLY. YES, I AM MARRIED TO A MAN AND HAVE A CHILD WITH HIM, BUT THAT DOESN'T ERASE MY WIBBLY WOBBLY SEXY WEXY FEELINGS TOWARDS OTHER GENDERS. SO YES, I AM "ALLOWED" TO MAKE SELF DEPRECIATING JOKES ABOUT MY QUEERNESS. UGGGHHH

RANT OVER

#Queer #queer women #queer women of color
 # thought we were passed this shit #ace erasure #bi erasure

16 notes ⋮ ↻ ❤

Figure 7: Post by Tumblr user kitchenwitchupinthisbitch.

In Figure 7, user kitchenwitchupinthisbitch posts a passionate, frustrated defense of her queerness in spite of “anon-hate and gatekeepers”. She stresses the complexity and flexibility of sexuality, going in line with queer theory. She uses the “loud and proud” queer rhetoric. What is interesting

here is that this woman is probably not a teenager anymore – being married with a child – but she still adapts the quirky way of typing typical of Tumblr teens – all caps, similar to speaking (“*Ahem*”), childish, and tantrum-like (“rant over”, “wobbly wobbly sexy wexy feelings”). The Tumblr environment – and, it seems, especially the “queer” tag – encourages immature behavior and offers an escape from serious, “real” politics.

GOING AGAINST THE TIDE

The last category of posts involves users trying to resist the dominant discourse of neo-liberal communication fantasies. These people try to stop discussion in different ways. Some calmly suggest that we should all get along and stop arguing. They often point out that arguments about terminology and increasingly fragmented identities are unnecessary and just create tension. This mostly appears in the “q slur” tag, which makes sense as this is where users are most critical about queer terminology. An example of this is a quote from David Halperin’s article “The Normalization of Queer Theory”, posted by user dreamy-bisexual. This quote describes how queer theory has been embraced by academia and institutions suspiciously well. “Queer” first became a harmless qualifier of “theory”, then was made abstract – distanced from labels like gay or trans – and finally became a generic badge of subversiveness with nothing “queer” left about it. Some users, mostly those who have been on Tumblr for a long time, also worry about the influence of social media, or LGBT Tumblr specifically, on young people. User brownbitchsexual, for example, is saddened by how social media encourage more and more obscure labels, causing “internalized homophobia and identity confusion” in young women.

Another way of trying to end discussions is more aggressive – insulting and trying to silence people. This could include, for example, mocking people over a certain age who “still” get

involved in “silly” arguments, or mocking people for using terms carelessly. These kinds of posts are found mostly in the “q slur” tag, which is logical if their aim is to stop the use of certain terms. An example is user justthefemthings posting “cishets calling themselves q***r is q***r because it subverts the idea that words have meanings”. Another example is egowave’s post (Figure 8). This user is frustrated by people on Tumblr who do not understand “real issues” and are focused on “basic” liberal social justice instead of subjects like capitalism, white supremacy, or misogyny. While the user expresses a desire to change those people’s minds (or “break into their homes at night and read marx to them”), there is a clear sense of feeling defeated and seeing those people as hopeless cases.



Figure 8: Post by Tumblr user egowave.

A third way of stopping discussions is becoming tired of it and opting out. This could mean refusing to participate and asking people to stop messaging them about the topic, or even quitting Tumblr altogether. User floozys, for example, refuses to answer messages about queer or asexual discourse, and suggests a rule of thumb to her followers: if you would not fight about it in real life,

do not do it on Tumblr either. User popgothica (Figure 9) implies that everybody should stop talking about “ace discourse” because it has been debated to an exhausting extent and all it does it upset people.



Figure 9: Post by Tumblr user popgothica.

Some users are aware of the influence of new media corporations on communication. There are not many of these posts, but I came across a few on my dashboard, one in the “q slur” tag, and one in “queer”. In this case it is likely that I did not find many such posts in the four tags because people who talk about this do not want to tag their content. This brings me to my last example, a post by user closet-keys. This user is trying to educate people about the fact that social media are not neutral and websites profit from a certain amount of hateful discussions. They warn readers that the Internet is not “just like this” and that companies tightly control the contents of seemingly free websites.

 closet-keys

that's one thing we discussed in my social informatics course that I wish was discussed more outside of like.. graduate level information science courses—

Companies that run online forums literally *decide* how much and what kind of racism/homophobia/misogyny/transphobia/ableism they will allow. They make the decision usually based on economics— if it generates content through controversy, they'll probably allow it through. If it makes people boycott the company or brings severely bad press to a mainstream audience, they'll probably take it down.

Commercial content moderators are hired to remove objectionable content, and that is dependent on two things:

1. Users reporting content to draw attention to it
2. Company policy about what counts as objectionable

The internet isn't "just like this." It's this level of racist because this level of racism is profitable for the company. It might shift with changing social norms, but it's an unsympathetic economic line being drawn, not one based in consideration of harm towards users.

Source: closet-keys

Figure 10: Post by Tumblr user closet-keys.

CONCLUSION

Within my corpus I found that posts from the “lgbt” tag were the most calm, positive, and diverse, while posts from the “q slur” and “ace discourse” tags were much more hateful and focused on specific terms or identity issues. This can be related to the way that slurs and queer terminology lend themselves to communicative capitalism. The aporias within communicative capitalism, queer theory, and slur reclamation ensure that debates around the terms “queer” and “asexual” are circular and endless.

I categorized the posts into three sections. In the end, all three categories of posts contribute to communicative capitalism in different ways. The first one concerns generating more and more information through upsetting people, trying to educate, the fantasy that more communication will solve things, and the need for speed. This contributes to communicative capitalism by creating more and more content. The second category concerns the lack of proper communication, caused by indirectness, generalization, stubbornness, and a disconnect in arguments. This contributes to communicative capitalism by ensuring that there is no proper, effective communication. The third category involves attempting to stop the discussions, either calmly, aggressively, or through quitting. People who think the discussions are useless, yet still post about them, are thereby still feeding communicative capitalism. The more terminology-based and obscure the discussions are, the more people struggle to communicate and the more they are unable to come to a consensus.

It is not my intention to insult or patronize the users who participate in these discussions, especially the younger ones, because they are (usually) not the ones to blame. When surrounded by a toxic and negative environment, people will respond with toxic and negative behaviors. Moreover, I am not saying that all efforts of that community are pointless; as Dean points out, sometimes networked communication does facilitate political resistance, but it is still commodified. “Proper” and effective activism is difficult, if not impossible, to practice in this space. Despite making people feel like they are being productive or changing something, all that these posts achieve politically is contribute to the flow of information and benefit Tumblr as a company. There is no simple solution to this. Even distancing oneself from the discussions or Tumblr altogether does not solve anything. What helps is being aware of the negatives and the influence of communicative capitalism, helping and supporting each other, and ignoring pointless, petty arguments. The “lgbt” tag demonstrates that it is possible to create a much more positive,

productive environment than in the other tags. In general, however, there is no way to make Tumblr a safe and productive LGBT environment for youth as long as Tumblr remains a capitalist corporation that benefits from hateful discussions.

While multiple authors have drawn interesting connections between neoliberalism and new media, there is not enough research about LGBT online spaces and how they can be affected by communicative capitalism as well as internal tensions. I hope that my findings contribute to a more critical way of thinking about LGBT activism and discussions in the digital age. What I recommend for future research is performing similar discursive analyses on a bigger scale, both on Tumblr and on other social media, as related to communicative capitalism and similar theories. There is plenty of work to be done on the way to being fully conscious of all the implications of new media.

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