YOUTUBE AS AN ALLY OF CONVENIENCE: THE PLATFORM'S BUILDING AND
BREAKING WITH THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

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YOUTUBE AS AN ALLY OF CONVENIENCE: THE PLATFORM'S HISTORY WITH THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Through documentary film, this thesis investigates the importance of the video-sharing platform, YouTube, to the LGBTQ+ community's connection, identity-formation, and coming out practices since its founding in 2005. The film is a compilation of original interviews informed by gender studies and communications literature and found footage posted to the platform, itself. Both the film and this paper, together, expose the impacts of YouTube's inconsistent policy implementation on the LGBTQ+ community that has benefitted so much from the platform's accessible, public nature. This project also presents the demands for accountability and responsibility put upon YouTube by its LGBTQ+ content creators and raises questions about monetization versus representation, performative personalities online, and LGBTQ+ content's historical conflation with adult content. This project aims to call attention to YouTube's outward "ally" presentation, posting annual Pride videos while also failing to mitigate the negative impact of their algorithms and policy implementation practices.

*When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less
and less important whether I am afraid.*
-Audre Lorde

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The research, production, and writing of this thesis is dedicated to those who took the time to
share their stories and frustrations with me. We will continue to work to hold platforms
accountable.

Many thanks,
Jill Fredenburg

*

*One man's blasphemy doesn't override other people's free-speech rights, their freedom to
publish, freedom of thought.*
-Dan Savage

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis consists of a film and companion paper, both sharing the title "YouTube as an Ally of Convenience: The Platform's Building and Breaking with the LGBTQ+ Community," and serves as an investigative exploration into the recent impacts of YouTube's algorithmic oppression on LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, etc.) educational information sharing and community building. YouTube is by far the world's largest video-sharing platform, with nearly 2 billion monthly viewers.[1] A significant portion of its LGBTQ+ content creators have complained publicly through the platform itself and discussed in the comment sections of other websites and apps. Journalists have written about the oppression of LGBTQ+ creative content, and, in 2019, the LGBTQ+ communities formally issued as a lawsuit against YouTube and its parent company, Google.[2] The cited grievances include the uneven manner in which the platform enforces its policies, the unfair preference to producers with large audiences, and the promotion of content (through advertising) that is actively hostile to gay, lesbian, and other LGBTQ+ communities.[3] By documenting both the important role YouTube has played in the lives of many LGBTQ+ people and its current controversies within the community, this project will serve as an accountability tool and motivator for other platforms to avoid similar behaviors.

This research project will review the literature from experts studying LGBT identity formation, examine LGBTQ+ media culture, and discuss the algorithmic injustice. This written documentation fits seamlessly with the accompanying film's real-life oral histories of both

[1] Geoff Weiss, "YouTube Hits 2 Billion Monthly Users, As Number Of Channels With 1 Million Subscribers Doubled Last Year." (TubeFilter, 2019).
[2] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube Complaint, Case 5:19-cv-04749 (2019).
[3] Greg Bensinger and Reed Albergotti. "YouTube discriminates against LGBT content by unfairly culling it, suit alleges." (The Washington Post, 2019).

LGBTQ content creators and consumers. In addition to the information provided by the extant literature, these stories highlight the positive historical impact of YouTube's presence within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community. Employing YouTube videos posted publicly on the platform, interviews with people who have used the platform as a strong source of LGBTQ+ education and community, and text from a 2019 lawsuit regarding this topic, this research investigates the extent to which YouTube's ally-ship (brand of support towards a community) towards the LGBTQ+ community is simultaneously imperative and in jeopardy.

YouTube has played a key role in the modern LGBTQ+ movement. Though the community has successfully fought for many rights, winning the fundamental right to marry in 2015[4], people still live in communities where the majority of their access to real, relatable LGBTQ+ people and information is on YouTube.[5] The unique and arguably authentic nature of the videos posted to the platform allowed for to the creation of a space to discuss difficult issues around gender and sexuality and to achieve greater understandings around previously superficial ideas. Precisely, the intimacy of conversation that these videos provide gains the viewer's trust and feelings of authenticity towards the video creators' work.[6]

Efforts like those of the *It Gets Better Project*[7] and the *Trevor Project*[8] used social media, YouTube in particular, to engage in outreach to LGBTQ youth who may be in crisis, connecting them to people who could offer unconditional acceptance and support. Platforms like YouTube

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[4] Brian McBride, "Four Cases That Paved The Way for Marriage Equality and a Reminder of the Work Ahead." (Human Rights Campaign*,* 2017).
[5] Mary L Gray. "Negotiating Identities/Queering Desires: Coming Out Online and the Remediation of the Coming-Out Story." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14, no. 4 (July, 2009), 1181.
[6] Matthew O'Neil, "Transgender Youth and YouTube." *Queer youth and media cultures.* (Edited by Christopher Pullen. Springer, 2014), 40.
[7] "About." (It Gets Better, 2017).
[8] "About." (The Trevor Project, 2020).

are hugely important to the community formation of LGBTQ+ youth because youth spend much more time and have more friends online than non-LGBTQ+ youth, and many who are not Out in their physical lives are Out on some websites and platforms online.[9] By closely examining the technological and sociological affordances of YouTube as a community-building platform and its benefits to the LGBTQ+ community, the significance of the accused discrimination becomes apparent. In order to comprehend the extent of YouTube's role in the LGBTQ+ communities, the following questions must be addressed:

- What is YouTube's history with LGBTQ+ populations?

- In what ways does YouTube promote itself as an ally to the LGBTQ+ community?

- In what ways does YouTube discriminate against both creators making LGBTQ+ content and the users who seek this type of education on the platform?

- How has YouTube addressed these problems previously and how does Youtube plan to do so in the future?

Through the answers to these questions, this project will shed light on the weight of the decisions made by the platform's algorithms that have imposed limitations on content creators and constrained information access by users.

This research helps to expand the scope of the studied aspects of LGBTQ+ representation on YouTube by asking questions about LGBTQ+ content's effect on the viewers. In "Stories like Mine: Coming Out Videos and Queer Identities on YouTube," Wuest concludes that a significant number of people are consuming these videos without vlogging themselves. While representation

[9] Stephen Tropiano. "LGBTQ Youth and Social Media." Q*ueer youth and media cultures,* Ed. Christopher Pullen (Springer, 2014), 49.

on this platform, particularly that of the *It Gets Better Project*, has not been proven to prevent LGBTQ+ youth suicide, the use of this platform remains significant in its assertion that young people are forging a community in this space. A closer look at this LGBTQ+ place-making can help us understand LGBTQ+ agency.[10] In a column responding to Billy Lucas' suicide, Dan Savage in 2013 wrote, "Gay adults aren't allowed to talk to these kids. Schools and churches don't bring us in to talk to teenagers who are being bullied. Many of these kids have homophobic parents who believe that they can prevent their gay children from growing up to be gay… by depriving them of information, resources, and positive role models." Beyond reassuring viewers that they can survive their current states of otherness, coming out videos equip Queer youth with models of media production and identity formation to help navigate hetero-centric societies.[11]

This thesis specifically will add a close examination of YouTube to this discourse. YouTube has been one of the largest contributors of LGBTQ+ education (both formal and informal), and the current allegations surrounding its algorithmic discrimination is negatively impacting the LGBTQ community's trust in the platform.

The explanation of YouTube's policies, the lawsuit between LGBTQ+ content creators and Google-YouTube, and the academic work mentioned within the following literature review all impacted the questions I chose to ask the interviewees in the film. These articles also informed the found footage I chose to include in the film as additional narrative support. Thus, the film both results from the standing research and contributes its own data to the conversation. A description of documentary filmmaking as a method in its own right and the processes that went into the production of the film are outlined in the Methods section. The Analysis chapter

[10] Bryan Wuest. "Stories like Mine: Coming Out Videos and Queer Identities on YouTube." *Queer youth and media cultures*. Ed. Christopher Pullen (Springer, 2014), 30.
[11] Wuest 31.

invokes questions of further research while also explaining ideas and comments that were

brought up in the film. The Appendix of this paper lists helpful information about the project's

participants.

YOUTUBE'S POLICIES

Though many Google-YouTube policies that have affected the LGBTQ+ community are

worth discussing, "Demonetization" and "Restricted Mode" are those that organically came up

most frequently throughout the interviews for the film. These policies are also those brought up

most often by video content-creators in their videos on YouTube. Demonetization is the removal

of ad revenue from particular channels or specific videos on a channel.[12] "Restricted Mode" is

determined when YouTube screens all videos for potential "mature content."[13] A video can be

demonetized, restricted, or both if the video is deemed inappropriate for minors or for

advertisers. YouTube's Community Guidelines and monetization rules state that videos that

include the following will be demonetized:[14]

- Spam, deceptive practices, and scams
- Nudity and sexual content
- Child safety
- Harmful or dangerous content
- Hate speech
- Harassment and cyberbullying

These particular policies alone are solid preventative measures that, if implemented consistently

and without algorithmic disadvantages, keep YouTube clear of the harmful content above. What

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[12] "Advertiser-friendly Content Guidelines" (*YouTube Help,* 2020). Retrieved from
https://support.google.com
[13] "Disable or enable Restricted Mode"(*YouTube Help,* 2020). Retrieved from https://support.google.com
[14] "Policies and Safety" (*YouTube About,* 2020). Retrieved from
https://www.youtube.com/about/policies/#community-guidelines

is alleged in the following lawsuit and mentioned repeatedly in the film, however, are the ways in which these policies conflate LGBTQ+ content with the bulleted concerns above. The policies turn the same algorithms that allow for efficient, LGBTQ+ education into disruptive tools of censorship.

LGBTQ+ v. GOOGLE-YOUTUBE

A group of LGBTQ+ content creators filed a lawsuit in August, 2019 against YouTube and its parent company, Google. In this case, (Case 5:19-cv-04749), plaintiffs included the following creators: Divino (GlitterBombTv.com's GNews!), BriaAndChrissy LLC (BriaAndChrissy), Chase Ross, Brett Somers a/k/a AMP (Watts the Safeword), and Lindsay Amer (Queer Kid Stuff). In November of 2019, the suit was amended to also include plaintiffs Stephanie Frosch (ElloStephExtras and StephFrosch), Sal Cinquemani (SalBardo), Tamara Johnson (SVTV Network), and Greg Scarnici (GregScarnici and UndercoverMusic).[15] While none of these creators were mentioned by name in the film, some of the found footage used comes directly from these creators' channels. The exclusion of creators' identifications allows these interviewees' experiences of current YouTube policies to be mentioned in the project without fear that their participation would impact the lawsuit.

The case provides in-depth information regarding what the lawsuit calls YouTube's "Tool Kit of Unlawful Speech Suppression." These tools include Restricted Mode, advertising restrictions, artificial intelligence (AI) filtering under Restricted Mode and advertising restrictions, deletion of LGBTQ+ content thumbnail images, cancelling and stopping new video notifications, excluding LGBTQ+ related content from the "Up Next" recommend application, recommending anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech in the "Up Next" recommend application directly

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[15] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, ii.

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alongside the LGBTQ+ plaintiffs' videos, including anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech in the "comments section" of the LGBTQ+ plaintiffs' videos, and other unlawful speech-restricting tools.[16] The suit further alleges that the LGBTQ+ creators' data regarding gender and sexual orientation were used against them, in direct violation of the users' civil and consumer rights.[17] These issues and other examples of problems from both the suit and the found footage are discussed further in the "Current Problems" section of the literature review.

The new freedom of speech claim introduced by LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube alleges that YouTube applies "subjective, vague, and over-broad criteria which give Defendants unfettered and unbridled discretion to censor speech for arbitrary, capricious, or nonexistent reasons" while simultaneously designating itself as a public place for free speech "define[d]" by "four essential freedoms" that govern the public consumer's use of the platform: "Freedom of Expression," "Freedom of Information," "Freedom of Opportunity," and "Freedom to Belong," promising users that "everyone's voice" will be heard and subjected only to neutral, content-based rules and filtering that will "apply equally to all."[18]

These complaints are further complicated by YouTube's evident performance as an ally to the LGBTQ+ community, posting annual LGBTQ+-Pride videos of remixed content from the site's most popular LGBTQ+ creators.[19] In the film, one of the interviewees, Ari Drennen, states,

> It's really hard to take it seriously when YouTube puts out Pride videos because they leave up a lot of videos that are quite hateful towards LGBTQ people. It really seems to me that their biggest interest is advertisers… it seems like a weird advertising ploy to say they're particularly LGBTQ friend… they seem pretty cautious in a way that's not hospitable to LGBT content creators.

[16] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, i.
[17] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, 41.
[18] "Policies and Safety," 2020.
[19] "#ProudToBe: Celebrate Brave Voices this Pride." (2017). YouTube Official. Retrieved from YouTube.com, 2020.

The lawsuit, as of April, 2020 has yet to be decided. The complaints mentioned within its pages, however, were explicitly mentioned in terms like "Restricted Mode," "Demonetization," and "hate speech" by the interviewees of my film without direct prompting, suggesting that these conversations have been prevalent on the platform and impact far more viewers and content creators than are represented by the lawsuit alone.

LITERATURE REVIEW

LGBTQ+ Identity Offline

To best understand the way that YouTube, specifically, has played a role in LGBTQ+ experiences and education, examination of models of identity more generally, both online and offline, is valuable. Cass' model in "Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model," describes six stages for successful coming out that include each of these elements: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis.[20] Identity confusion, when someone begins to become aware of their own sexual or gender preferences as different from heterosexual or cis-gender, usually comes first, quickly followed by a desire for comparisons. Successful identity tolerance and identity pride both stem from community-seeking and building, giving individuals the space to truly begin identifying with the sexual minority community and prioritizing how they are perceived by *that* community, rather than by heterosexuals.[21] Despite recognizing discrimination against these communities of which they are now a part, the newly self-identified LGBTQ+ may begin to disclose their gender fluidity and/or sexual minority identity to others. Finally, identity integration involves an individual fully interacting with allies and/or supportive heterosexuals,

[20] Vivienne C. Cass. "Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model." *The Journal of Sex Research 20*, no. 2 (May 1, 1984), 147–153.
[21] Cass, 147.

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eventually incorporating their gender fluidity and/or sexual preference as one of their identities

rather than the predominant one, allowing this to become an understood element of themselves

for themselves.[22] The opportunity to form identity within these steps is unequivocal on YouTube,

with users' abilities to search using keywords specific to their own interests and experience. This

platform can help users understand LGBTQ+ vocabulary, seek advice for dealing with adversity,

and witness others coming out, all of which are incorporated into Cass' identifying categories.

The accessibility of the platform to anyone with Internet access also places this platform in an

opportunistic space for education.

YouTube is often a platform of expression for individuals who are not only queer, but

who also are likely to be discriminated against based on race, ability, or other aspects of their

identity. By examining the popular black queer Web series *No Shade* and *If I Was Your Girl,* as

well as pilots *Twenties* and *Words with Girls,* Day and Christian found that YouTube contributed

significant watch numbers to the visibility of queer women of color. Indie producers and fans

collectively, through YouTube, created new performances of blackness and queerness, defying

legacy broadcast and cable television networks that continue to largely ignore intersectional

black identities through inaccessible content development processes.[23] The work of both content

producers and consumers on YouTube reveals how networked (digital, peer-to-peer) distribution

reconfigures the realities of black production, performance, and fan reception in legacy network

(linear, one-to-many) development. The creation of queer Web series gives fans the option to

choose these over solely consuming legacy network productions. This newer avenue of content

creation queers the way media is given value, affecting the operating system of the television

[22] Cass, 147-153.

[23] Faithe Day and Aymar Jean Christian. "Locating Black Queer TV: Fans, Producers, and Networked Publics on YouTube." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 24 (June 1, 2017), 1.1.

industry itself. YouTube has allowed these creators to divert the norms of viewership, opposing

reliance on legacy corporate networks or even indie producers. Because of advertisements, this

platform is free to all for viewing and posting; a legacy network does not need to approve

content based on assumed popularity. This absence of assumed popularity as a criterion for video

posting contributes to YouTube's importance to the queer community because offline

representation of LGBTQ+ people outside of white, cisgender depictions does not occur as often

as online.[24]

Physical location also affects accessibility to queer representation offline. In "Negotiating

Identities/Queering Desires: Coming Out Online and the Remediation of the Coming-Out Story,"

Gray presumes that rural youth in the United States are removed from LGBTQ identity

formation. Culturally, most people are raised to assume that individuals are heterosexual (and

'male' or 'female') until "proven," or give evidence intentionally or unintentionally, that they are

not. Because many rural communities depend on a traditional and familiar family structure, value

is placed on conformity. Most young people now can easily learn via the Internet what "gay"

means, but to many this identifier is seen as counter to their rural physical surroundings.[25]

"Beyond a moment of visibility provided by mainstream television and film, genres of queer

realness circulate compelling images of peers on a similar quest for verity and viability."[26] This

authenticity and validation is crucial to rural areas where community members rely on the idea of

familiarity to their formation of communities. Internet-based genres of queer realness offer rural

youth to an opportunity to acknowledge their queerness within familiarity, pulling these ideas

from mainstream media into an online space that is viewed as more real and tangible.[27]

[24] Day, 5.4.
[25] Gray, 1181.
[26] Gray, 1182.
[27] Gray, 1182.

According to Bandura's "Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication," people are self-organizing proactive, self-reflecting, as well as self-regulating. People are not solely moved by environmental events or their own inner desires. Human beings are able to self-develop and adapt because these abilities are an element of the design of our social systems. Personal agency is impacted by a large network of socio-structural influences. Everyone is both a producer and a consumer within these systems.[28] Through the recognition of a model's behavior, a person may engage in more courses of action that are deemed permissible by the model or by a series of models. The types of models who predominate within a social milieu determine, at least in part, which qualities and behaviors are performed by observers. These actions are selected from many alternatives because the observer is able to witness the positive results of the actions.[29]

LGBTQ+ Identity formation offline can be hindered by many obstacles. Confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis are all elements of coming fully into oneself that would easily be thwarted by a lack of accurate media or live-person representation. YouTube and other online media platforms help people who are questioning their identities maneuver past some of these issues related to information access.

LGBTQ+ Identity and Online Media

Constructing a sexual identity is one of the major developmental elements of each individual's adolescence. A study by Bond, Hefner, and Drogos which looked specifically at how self-identifying lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals used media during their sexual identity formation found that the most common tool used in the process was the Internet. Their data supported the hypothesis that media would be used more frequently than any face-to-face

[28] Albert Bandura. "Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication." *Media Psychology* 3, no. 3 (August 1, 2001), 266.
[29] Bandura, 282.

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interpersonal relationships as a source of information during this sexual identity formation and announcement process.[30] Almost half of the sample reported using the Internet as their *primary* source of information during their coming out process.[31] (Coming out is often thought of as the biggest step in modern discussions about LGBTQ+ identity, but many informal learning opportunities exist within the topics of gender and sexuality.)

Queer Identity Online: Informal Learning and Teaching Experiences of LGBTQ Individuals on Social Media examines a range of LGBTQ+ identities and their place in online new media. With chapters about "Coming Out" videos, self-disclosure, and visual validation, the contributors consider the allowances and potential harms of new media phenomena on those in the midst of constructing or reconstructing their LGBTQ+ identities. This collection has provided insight into both mainstream and independent media that young people use in ways similar to their interaction with YouTube. Prioritizing the discovery of someone with similar experiences, for example, is a large draw of social media.[32]

These social media interactions are closely examined in "Queer identity online: Informal learning and teaching experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals on social media."[33] This text explains the ways in which LGBTQ individuals use online resources to learn about their emerging identity. This kind of education, often referred to as "informal", helps LGBTQ+ individuals engage in identity construction and learning online. Many report teaching others about their identity using social media platforms (sharing information with others about their experiences as

[30] Bradley Bond, Veronica Hefner, and Kristin Drogos. "Information-Seeking Practices During the Sexual Development of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals: The Influence and Effects of Coming Out in a Mediated Environment." *Sexuality & Culture* 13, no. 1 (March 1, 2009), 43.
[31] Bond, 43.
[32] Christopher Pullen. *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ;: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[33] Bond, 43.

an LGBTQ+ individual). In addition to informal education, Fox and Ralston identified three other types of learning tied to online information-seeking. The first, *traditional learning*, comes from looking for specific information about LGBTQ+-related issues. The second, *social learning*, comes from observing online role models and studying their behaviors and experiences. The third, *experiential learning*, involves relationship formation through dating apps or sites that allow people to experiment within the contexts of their online-to-offline interactions.[34] These online platform learning processes are key sources for informal learning among LGBTQ people. Increasing their accountability to these communties may result as the industry and and the public become educated about the significant roles that media play in this education process.

Internet-based new media is increasingly accessed by young people. Craig and McInroy used grounded theory to determine some of the ways in which this phenomenon influences identity development in LGBTQ+ youth. They found that new media enabled participants to access resources without fear, explore their individual identity, find examples of likeness, and digitally come out as LGBTQ+. The participants also mentioned the possibility of bringing these developed identities into their offline experiences. Nearly all participants cited new media as crucial in accessing resources relevant to their LGBTQ+ identities. Offline access to LGBTQ+ resources can be severely impeded by concerns around safety and stigma. New media offer an unlimited pool of relevant, realistic material without the limitations or risks that can come from seeking resources offline. Participants emphasized that accessing these resources had supported a

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[34] Jesse Fox and Rachel Ralston. "Queer Identity Online: Informal Learning and Teaching Experiences of LGBTQ Individuals on Social Media." *Computers in Human Behavior* 65 (December, 2016), 635–42.

crucial stage of sexual identity development online.35 This documented use of new media by

LGBTQ+ youth well-substantiates YouTube's unique position as an audio-visual resource.

In "A YouTube of One's Own", the manifestation of a particular genre of coming out

narratives on YouTube, all signaled with familiar tropes becomes apparent. Most coming out

videos contain both contexts around the disclosure (the reason for finally identifying with a

sexual or gender minority identity) and normative instructions for others hoping to take similar

actions. Coming out videos adopt a distinctive YouTube form that leans into the site's dominant

modes of confession and surveillance, many of which come from the bedrooms, living rooms,

kitchens, cars, and other personal surroundings of the content creators. Searching the term

"coming out" on the platform renders thousands of videos and playlists collecting public

admissions. These videos stand as representations for real-life management of the personal and

social elements of sexual and gender identity in online spaces, particularly around self-

identification.36

Individual coming out videos are not often viewed or commented on in a silo, but are

more widely accessed when linked to a venue for "database watching", where rapid sampling of

the digital video files are sequenced and ranked by grouping algorithms. The Human Rights

Campaign, recognizing the power in this aggregate analysis, moved to provide a more orderly

database of videos for the LGBTQ+ community by creating a National Coming Out Day video,

which in turn fueled response videos that established a new Coming Out Archive on YouTube.

The mechanism of calling up videos on YouTube through the interface of its search bar and other

35 Shelley L Craig and Lauren Mcinroy. "You Can Form a Part of Yourself Online: The Influence of New Media on Identity Development and Coming Out for LGBTQ Youth." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2014), 95–109.

36 Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Lost. "A YouTube of One's Own?' "Coming Out" Videos as Rhetorical Action." *LGBT Identity and Online New Media.* Edited by: Pullen, C. and Cooper, M.37–50. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 36-50.

browsing features depends on the logic of keywords, metadata, statistics, and outside sponsorship arrangements. These coming out videos are subject to the platform's architectures of control that filter certain forms of queer expression and representation. Nevertheless, the nature of these videos is rhetorical: They are oriented around a transformative narrative, often add to community building practices, and recognize ambiguities around the construction of sexuality and gender. The collection of videos invites queer participation in ways that lend to authenticity, contesting heteronormativity and disseminating new narratives.[37]

Using focus groups made up of people between 13-19 years of age, De Ridder, Sander, and Bauwel argued that forms of often-unrecognized emotional labor put limits on self-reflexive storytelling for queer teens more so than on heterosexual ones. While queer teens can tell their own stories in social media places, these experiences are often mitigated and unequal to those of their heterosexual peers. Concerns over representation are better understood by looking at mediatized youth cultures that are contextualized within gender, sexuality and relationships.[38] The findings of De Ridder, et al, illustrate how discourses on LGBTQ+ behaviors are attached to media cultural complexities in popular social media channels. Their data revealed that both "accepting" and "silently homophobic" discourses were built around cultures that privilege heterosexuality. However, teens were more concerned with authenticity in mediated places, particularly with regard to being 'honest' about sexual identity. Youth also recognized the existence of a queer-realness genre that could potentially be appropriated to uncover someone's minority sexuality. Queer teens are left with a complex set of norms, not knowing how to behave in popular social media places while simultaneously thinking about peer group acceptance.

[37] Alexander, 36-50.
[38] De Ridder, Sander, and Sofie Van Bauwel. "The Discursive Construction of Gay Teenagers in Times of Mediatization: Youth's Reflections on Intimate Storytelling, Queer Shame and Realness in Popular Social Media Places." *Journal of Youth Studies* 18, no. 6 (July 3, 2015), 777–93.

Additional complexities around imagined and actual audiences also results in a fear of telling and

publishing certain intimate stories.[39]

Computer-mediated Conversation (CMC) facilitates networking between individuals that

may have the above-referenced fears, who have other concerns due to social stigma, or who have

limitations due to physical incapacity, such as reduced mobility or geographical location.[40]

YouTube has become the most popular media platform for user-generated content of all kinds,

and its popularity is just as pervasive within the LGBTQ+ population. By presenting a

combination of sound and moving image, this platform has expanded the ways by which

members of the LGBT community can experiment with, shape, and perform their online identity.

YouTube has also been a place for agents within the community to provide support for those

who are having difficulty coming to terms with their sexual and/or gender identities. The *It Gets*

Better Project, for example, was a massive movement that began on YouTube.[41]

Using a grounded theory methodology adopted for a close analysis of content to reveal

patterns and concepts in YouTube video data, researchers at the University of Kent classified the

main themes in a group of videos and used content analysis to identify instances of these

themes.[42] Identified themes focused on experience, opinion and information dissemination,

beliefs, empathy, and exhortation. Using this classification, the researchers found that video

creators talk in candid detail about themselves and their life experiences. They also found that

video disclosure is able to disseminate more information than text-based methods because the

video format limits the amount of meaning interpretation that a viewer must accomplish.

[39] De Ridder, 793.
[40] Michael Green, Ania Bobrowicz, and Chee Siang Ang. "The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Online: Discussions of Bullying and Self-Disclosure in YouTube Videos." *Behaviour & Information Technology* 34, no. 7 (July 3, 2015), 704.
[41] Green, 704.
[42] Green, 705.

Viewers understand feeling and emotion from both the way the disclosure is spoken and the creator's non-verbal cues.

The research also found that the dissociation between face-to-face conversation and the public nature of the video to a wider audience allows contributors to detach from synchronous rhetoric. These elements altogether allow contributors to have a conversation with an audience that they may not be able to have in person, making the experience more authentic for both creators and consumers.[43]

Algorithmic Bias

Platforms are a newly predominant type of business model designed to bring various groups together. Google (and YouTube, by proxy), for example, connect advertisers, businesses, and everyday users.[44] Data comprise the basic commodity that drives these platform businesses, and data gives them their competitive advantages. Thus, platforms like Google, YouTube, Facebook, and more are designed specifically to extract data. These platforms provide an infrastructure through which groups can communicate without a paywall monitor and extract lucrative data gained from the interactions between these groups.[45] One of main reasons why platforms are effective is their capacity to generate the network connections that are most beneficial to the business. The more users interacting on a platform, the more socially and economically valuable that platform becomes for everyone. This size effect of the user pool results in a winner-takes-all market, filled with large monopolies, such as YouTube. These

[43] Green, 710.
[44] Nick Srnicek. "The Challenges of Platform Capitalism: Understanding the Logic of a New Business Model." *Juncture* 23, no. 4 (March 2017), 254.
[45] Srnicek, 254-255.

powerhouses become virtually unimpeachable by any competitors, making the communities that

use them vulnerable to the whims of the platform.[46]

In *Algorithms of Oppression : How Search Engines Reinforce Racism,* Noble asserts that

Google is not a platform that equally presents all forms of ideas, identities, and activities via its

search engine. The combination of the promotion of specific websites because of financial gain

and Google's monopoly status leads to biased search algorithms that privilege whiteness and

discriminate against people of color. Noble documents the claims via an analysis of textual and

media searches as well as extensive research on paid online advertising. Discoverability (the list

of links that results from an individual's use of a platform's search feature) is presently

programmed in a way that enables a culture of racism and sexism. Noble details how to

understand the causes of these trends and to begin working to reverse them, and her suggestions

have largely influenced the organization of this study, including its methodology. While this

study specifically examines YouTube, the platform is owned by Google, which is a main subject

in Noble's book. Noble's work explains the ways that private interests affect the promotion of

certain websites and contribute to the monopoly status of YouTube and its company, Google.

These inequities promote a biased set of search algorithms that privilege certain groups of people

over others.[47]

Current Problems

In the LGBTQ+ versus Google-YouTube Complaint from 2019, a group of Queer content

creators and viewers filed a lawsuit to:

> redress Defendants Google/YouTube's discrimination, fraud, unfair and deceptive
> business practices, unlawful restraint of speech, and breach of consumer contract rights

[46] Srnicek, 256.
[47] Safiya Umoja Noble. *Algorithms of Oppression : How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

on behalf of themselves and other Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, or Queer persons (collectively referred to as the "LGBTQ+ Community") who use the global social media site.[48]

Chris Stokel-Walker explains the ways YouTube's reliance on algorithms has taken much of the nuance out of the platform. Because YouTube's algorithms and methods are notoriously opaque, journalistic sources and lawsuits have the most up-to-date estimates of the current state of YouTube's relationship with its LGBTQ+ content creators and consumers.

What is often just called "the algorithm" by irritated content creators is a black box of YouTube's design that keeps people watching, but grows more complicated as the platform increases in popularity. Because the algorithm is made up of deep neural networks[49], the basis of the algorithm is computer logic that cannot differentiate words from intent. Though designed by human engineers, the algorithm is automatically updated by computers that control the recommendation systems with which users interact. The recommendations are based on the user's prior viewing history, the popularity of the individual videos, and the content creators.[50] "The more videos that are watched, the more ads that are seen, and the more money Google makes."[51]

YouTube is not quick to apologize for the prioritization of revenue-generation over policy enforcement. YouTube personality Steven Crowder's consistent racist and homophobic tirades against Carlos Maza, a queer journalist at Vox at the time of the abuse, coincided with a slow moving shift in YouTube's policy toward hate speech. The handling of Crowder's content

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[48] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube Complaint, Case 5:19-cv-04749 (2019), 4.
[49] Paul Covington, Jay Adams, and Emre Sargin. "Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations." In (*Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Recommender Systems*, ACM, 2016), 191–98.
[50] Chris Stokel-Walker, "Algorithms Won't Fix What's Wrong With YouTube*." The New York Times*, 2019.
[51] Stokel-Walker.

proved YouTube's inconsistencies – YouTube initially asserted that Crowder's videos weren't

inciting harassment. Public outcries were necessary from both Maza and YouTube's LGBTQ+

audience, in addition to Crowder's off-site selling of homophobic T-shirts, to convince the

platform's C.E.O, Susan Wojcicki, to apologize to the queer community and restrict Crowder's

content. These problems, as well as the complaints filed by the LGBTQ+ group against

YouTube, have suggested that greater human involvement is necessary for the improvement of

equality and nuance in the automated recommendation process. YouTube does have some human

moderators looking at so-called "borderline" content to train its algorithms, but touches of anti-

bias trained human thought and empathy could possibly rectify many of the issues with the

current process.[52]

Two of Youtube's automated processes include "Restriction Mode", designed to keep

adult content inaccessible to children, and "Demonetization," designed to remove ads from

videos deemed inappropriate for advertising. The same group of LGBTQ+ individuals who filed

the lawsuit also claimed that YouTube systematically demonetizes and restricts queer content

that is non-sexual.[53] The LGBTQ+ group also spent four months working to reverse-engineer the

algorithm, experimenting to see if LGBTQ-related vocabulary truly was disproportionately

triggering these modes. YouTube's algorithm, they allege, flags videos with random words, but a

full third of titles tested specifically for queer content did, indeed, trigger the flagged modes.[54]

> The group began to investigate YouTube's demonetization system in response to
> growing community frustration with the way the site automatically demonetizes videos
> — meaning those videos won't feature ads and the creators can't benefit from YouTube's
> ad-based revenue system. Collecting ad revenue from their videos is the predominant
> way many YouTube creators make a living off the platform, so demonetization is a big
> deal, especially when the algorithm operates in what appears to be an unclear or unfair

[52] Stokel-Walker.
[53] Aja Romano, "A group of YouTubers is trying to prove the site systematically demonetizes queer content" *Vox*, 2019.
[54] Romano.

fashion. It's not a mere annoyance; for creators reliant on YouTube payouts, demonetization means literally losing income.[55]

After testing over 15,000 words, the group concluded in a Demonetization List Project that YouTube had been automatically flagging videos with a large range of queer-friendly words.

The group tested this theory by taking 100 titles from the top search results for "gay", "lesbian" and "LGBTQ" and uploading them to see if they would be flagged as inappropriate. The demonetized titles were then modified by replacing LGBTQ terminology with "friend" and "happy" to see if this changed the outcome. According to the results, 33 out of the 100 titles tested that were LGBTQ+ related, but not sexual, were demonetized. The list of demonetized titles includes the following examples:

"Gay and Lesbian Guide to Vienna - VIENNA/NOW"
"LGBT Tik Tok Compilation in Honor of Pride Month"
"Top 10 Lesbian Couples in Hollywood Who Got Married"
"Lesbian Princess"
"Lesbian daughters with mom"

When the group re-tested these titles after replacing the LGBTQ terminology with "friend" and "happy," each video was monetized.[56] While the classifying systems might eventually be able to fully recognize the context of LGBTQ+ words given enough training data, the amount of noisy data within the platform would benefit from manual review. However, some LGBTQ+ videos that mention sex, as well as several anti-LGBTQ+ videos, have been cleared through the manual review process. Thus, YouTube needs to work towards being consistent in differentiating between acceptable and unacceptable content in order to reduce the number of LGBTQ+ videos being unfairly demonetized.[57]

[55] Romano.
[56] "Demonetization List Project" (Beurling, Ocelot AI, 2019), 4-5.
[57] "Demonetization List Project"

METHODS

The primary method of research for this thesis is documentary film, incorporating

participatory modes to gather oral history data and found footage on YouTube's platform. The

purpose of the film is to present several of the sources of the complaints against YouTube

discussed in this paper, directly allowing viewers to see YouTube video content. The film also

renders the opinions of those directly affected, as well as provides some context and visual

storytelling elements to this algorithmic and wider cultural problem. The participants, data

collection, editing process, reliability, and limitations of this project's method assert the need for

further academic exploration into algorithmic discrimination towards the LGBTQ+ community.

To make a film without manipulating the information discovered in the process of its

production is not possible. In the same way that writing a research paper on a topic involves

strategic editing for narrative flow, efficient information sharing, and proof of argument(s),

documentary film tells a story about real life while prioritizing story and affect.[58] This film can

arguably fit into a few subgenres. The film takes an investigative, problem oriented approach that

focuses on representative individuals who discussed their relationship with YouTube. In this

way, the film suits the subgenre of public affairs.[59] The film was made to educate and inform its

audience of YouTube's current status quo compared to its past, motivating viewers to hold the

platform accountable. Thusly, the film could also be categorized in the advocacy subgenre.[60] The

historical subgenre suits this film, as the film includes key objects (the videos posted to

YouTube) to evoke certain periods of time and to archive the research together into one

[58] Patricia Aufderheide. *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction.* (*Oxford University Press,* 2007), 2.
[59] Auferheide, 56-57.
[60] Auferheide, 78.

argument.[61] Each of these genres, like documentary film itself, is made up of choices. The film, "YouTube as an Ally of Convenience: The Platform's Building and Breaking with the LGBTQ+ Community" is not excluded from this limitation. The description of the method to follow will, ideally, underscore the intended purpose of the film and provide ample reasoning for these choices.

Participants

The interview is a controversial but vital device in documentary filmmaking. For this project, interviews were necessary to convey crucial information regarding the current state of the YouTube-LGBTQ+ community relationship and to develop characters with whom the audience would empathize.[62] The five participants interviewed for the film (Kashir (Kash) Aboud (they/them), Gabriel Resendez (they/them), Ari Drennen (she/her), Dr. Bryan Wuest (he/him), and Alessandro Nigro (he/him)) were directly contacted by phone after they expressed awareness of and/or concern around YouTube's LGBTQ+ demonetization controversies in response to a public call for subjects posted to Instagram and tagged with LGBTQ+ keywords. Aboud and Resendez took part in an early, short version of the film (called "Restriction Mode").[63] Aboud was interviewed in their home in Washington, D.C., and Resendez was interviewed in their hometown, New York City. This film was posted to YouTube in June of 2019, and this thesis is an expansion of that project. Both Aboud and Resendez took part in a shorter version of the film in June, 2020 and were asked to participate because of their

61 Auferheide, 91.
62 John Hewitt and Gustavo Vazquez. *Documentary Filmmaking: a Contemporary Field Guide.* (*Oxford University Press,* 2014), 93.
63 Jill Fredenburg. *Restriction Mode.* (YouTube, 2019).

relationship with YouTube as a tool of identity formation. They both identify as gender non-binary, which was the primary identity researched for the original short film.

Dr. Bryan Wuest was contacted by e-mail to record the film's digital interview after I discovered his paper, "Stories like Mine: Coming Out Videos and Queer Identities on YouTube." Dr. Wuest's work includes the most current analysis of YouTube's relationship with the LGBTQ+ community that I have been able to find. Drennen and Nigro were both asked to be part of the film after they expressed interest in the subject matter after I posted about the project on Instagram. I realized that their contributions would help YouTube's controversies be understood as affecting a wider range of people than just those who identify as gender-nonbinary. Additional information regarding the participants can be found in the appendix.

Data Collection and Evidence

To collect open-ended but relevant data for the film, the following questions were asked of each participant:

- When did you discover LGBTQ+ content on YouTube? How did that discovery impact your views of your own sexual-orientation or gender identity?
- What do you think are the allowances YouTube gives to viewers over other forms of media/representation?
- What do you know about YouTube's policies regarding content?
- Do you think YouTube's content policies affect the LGBTQ+ community more frequently than other communities?
- Does this impact the identity formation process? How would this have affected you?
- Is pushback against the inconsistent implementation of these policies important?

Dr. Wuest was also asked: "Can you walk through YouTube's Coming Out Video history and the *It Gets Better Movement* on the platform?" Personal history interviews are valuable not only because they tell us about events that normally do not get written down, but also because

they tell us what these events *meant* to the people who recount them.64 This benefit of recounting is present in both the original interviews recorded for the film and in the footage taken from videos posted to YouTube.

While I asked each participant the above questions, I let the conversation flow naturally. By asking follow-up questions when the participants responded to my inquiries with information for which I did not have context or prior knowledge, I raised additional questions that are discussed in the analysis section of this paper. The bulk of these interviews took place in June, 2019 and in March, 2020. The gear and locations used were all personally owned and operated, with the exception of Resendez's location, which was rented from Peerspace. The interviewees, equipment, and locations all impacted the editing process. Archival (found on YouTube) footage was included to back up the testimony of the interviewees, allowing the audience to understand and witness the impacts that YouTube has had on the LGBTQ+ community.

Editing Process

The film production was largely a solo project. An assistant operated a second camera during the Aboud and Resendez's interviews. While the solo work made some of the practicality of production difficult, working alone helped with the editing process. Often, documentary editors are not on the location shoots, so the editor only knows the story from what was filmed.65 Because I assumed all the necessary documentary production roles, I was able to assemble combinations of shots and manage the audio with an understanding of what I had filmed and what I would need to discover online.

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64 Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro. *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning*. (*Rutgers University Press*, 2011), 43.
65 Hewitt, 193.

In the film, footage from each of the participants was grouped together and organized broadly by topic. By prioritizing the questions that came up in the interviews, I was able to steer the film through the participant narratives, rather than through my own, discovery-oriented, perspective. This prioritization and the remixing of original interviews with found footage from YouTube, adds to the conversation of algorithmic discrimination and platform accountability. Audio, for the majority of the film, lines up with the speaker, and found footage either plays over its original audio or is synched to audio from the participants. Some music heard in the film comes from the found footage, while the rest was produced by LGBTQ+ artists who gave permission for its use. Without the music and remixing of images, this thesis would appear similar to a video-essay, whereas the rich narratives and the introduction of additional questions better serve the intended format of documentary film.

The footage and audio were collected using my personal DSLR camera (in parentheses you should put the manufacturer of the camera) with an attached Zoom microphone (again, put the manufacturer of the microphone). Colected footage was edited using Adobe Premiere Pro. Long pauses and mispronunciations were removed in favor of a smooth narrative flow. Some footage was removed entirely for the sake of keeping the film efficient. No ideas or suggestions about YouTube's relationship with the LGBTQ+ community were completely cut from the film. If an idea was brought up in the film, but not explored in-depth, an attempt to acknowledge these ideas and questions resides within the Analysis section of this paper. Animated titles were created in Adobe After Effects and integrated into the Premiere timeline in order to section the film into parts so that viewers can have ease of access to particular information if they wish to reference the ideas mentioned within the project.

Limitations

The limitations for this project include limitations of footage, limitations of funding, and limitations of access to both people and information that may have made YouTube's particular policy-implementation processes more clear.

In an attempt to respect the privacy of the participants, I avoided asking them to show pictures of themselves before they began presenting their genders in particular ways or before they realized that their sexuality did not need to dictate their decisions around clothing or appearance. Because Resendez documented the way that their hormones impacted their appearance and posted this publicly on YouTube, I felt these type of LGBTQ+ issues are important to discuss. However, these issues can also be incredibly sensitive for those who have felt active discrimination or hate because of their sexuality or gender. Thus, I sought permission before asking particular questions regarding the participants' pasts on-camera, thereby impacting the resulting film. I believe that being mindful of the participants' privacy did not negatively affect the finished product, but instead built trust between the participants and myself in a way that aided the candor of the conversations.

Due to limitations of funding, the only participant outside of the D.C.-Northern Virginia area that I was able to film in-person was Gabriel Resendez. Dr. Wuest is located in Los Angeles and teaches at the University of California. This physical distance and the inaccessible cost of travel led his interview occurring via a recorded Skype session. I was pleased with the audioquality of this interview despite its web-based format, but would have much preferred to engage with him in person.

YouTube's policys are listed publicly on their website (see "YouTube's Policies"), and YouTube has released white pages that describe how their flagging and recommendation

algorithms work[66], but this information is frequently contested by video content creators. I

reached out to YouTube on multiple occasions throughout this project over both phone and e-

mail and received no response or comment. Without adequate access to the step-by-step process

through which each LGBTQ+-related video moves through the approval process for

monetization or becomes flagged for demonetization or restriction, the only evidence I was able

to use was that posted by content creators. Although this information may have been biased,

YouTube has publicly admitted that they need to find a solution to these problems.[67]

ANALYSIS

The key points expressed in the oral histories and found footage are that the LGBTQ+

community has concerns about YouTube's policies, that YouTube has a history of outward

performance as an ally to the LGBTQ+ communities, and that the LGBTQ+ community is

uncertain whether YouTube will continue to take advantage of a community that values the

platform's many positive attributes. After conducting five interviews, organizing found footage

from over fifty LGBTQ+ related YouTube videos, and editing together the 20-minute film, I feel

able, upon the review of the literature and the participatory discussions, to assert these further

questions.

"Coming Out" as a Rhetorical Action (or Performance)

Dr. Wuest was invited to be interviewed for this project largely because of the expertise

he demonstrated in his video, "Stories Like Mine: Coming Out Videos and Queer Identities on

[66] Covington, 1-7.
[67] Rich McCormick. "YouTube apologizes for hiding LGBTQ users' videos in its Restricted Mode." (*The Verge,* 2017).

YouTube."[68] In the film, he mentions his research into the history of coming out videos posted to the site. He does not suggest that the action of coming out online could change the performative nature of the person revealing this fact, but asserts the benefits of practicing and finding acceptance online before coming out in the real world. In the film he states, "I think some people's impulse was to offer advice. Some people were just like, 'I need to say this out loud.'" He cites the *It Gets Better Project* as a catalyst for many of these videos, but adds in both the film and his article that people had been Coming Out on the platform long before the project's launch.[69] The public nature of these videos, however, may change the way an individual would typically talk about their sexuality, since looking to the other posted videos for outlines or guidance of what to talk about could influence which information is revealed or withheld.

The legacy of the *It Gets Better* network debuted on YouTube in 2010, leading more queer content creators on YouTube to operate with distinct cultural repertoires and distinguishable community vernacular. Similar narrative tropes appear in most LGBTQ+ videos, such as coming out, struggling with depression or self-harm, the processes of transitioning, confirming a relationship, or announcing a breakup. In many instances, LGBTQ+ creators use the rhetoric of responsibility, protection, and advocacy when addressing their subscribers, especially those they imagine to be looking for guidance in coming out, themselves.[70] Future explorations into the following questions are warranted: 1) How does the rhetoric of responsibility felt by creators add to the conversation about LGBTQ+ representation on YouTube? 2) How do the pressures that come from needing to fit into particular identity narratives affect LGBTQ+ representation on YouTube?

[68] Wuest, 20.
[69] Wuest, 20.
[70] Crystal Abidin. "Yes Homo: Gay Influencers, Homonormativity, and Queerbaiting on YouTube." *Continuum* 33, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 614–29.

Alternative Platforms for Monetization

In her interview, Drennen briefly mentioned the existence of platforms like Patreon, that provide artists a monthly income by having "Patrons" support creative work on a monthly or a by-project basis.[71] Though these platforms enable YouTube content creators to earn money without restriction, the policies of these platforms may also be worth questioning in future academic studies. When YouTube cracked down on videos that involved gun use and removed gun ads from a number of channels, many people started accounts on Patreon to regain lost revenue, allowing them to continue exactly what they had been doing before.[72]

Despite the potential for violation of policy issues, at least 45 projects live on Patreon with the acronym "LGBTQ" in their titles. The creators of the YouTube channels BriaAndChrissy and Queer Kid Stuff both have active Patron accounts. The benefits that platforms like Patreon, Memberful, and Buy Me A Coffee can provide for LGBTQ+ content creators have yet to be studied.

Many LGBTQ+ YouTube accounts additionally rely on brand sponsorships, rather than revenue from advertisements. Sponsorship removes some of the pressure to avoid topics with keywords that YouTube's algorithm may deem inappropriate. Creators may include paid product placements or endorsements, but must disclose these contributions to their viewers as "Paid Promotion" in their video content.[73] Sponsorships were not organically mentioned by any interviewees in the video portion of this project, so I believed them to be beyond the scope of this thesis.

[71] "What is Patreon?" Support.Patreon.com
[72] Julia Alexander, "YouTube looks to demonetization as punishment for major creators, but it doesn't work" *The Verge,* 2019.
[73] "Paid product placements and endorsements." *YouTube Help*, 2018.

Monetization as Representation

Another issue raised by this project is whether YouTube's monetization processes directly impact the representation opportunities for LGBTQ+ creators on the platform. As mentioned in the lawsuit and in Resendez's narrative (see "YouTube's Policies" and "LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube"), monetization serves more as validation that LGBTQ+ content is not inappropriate than as motivation for creating videos.[74] The other complaints, Restricted Mode, advertising restrictions, AI filtering under Restricted Mode and advertising restrictions, deletion of LGBTQ+ content thumbnail images, cancelling and stopping new video notifications, excluding LGBTQ+ related content from the "Up Next" recommend application, recommending anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech in the "Up Next" recommend application alongside the LGBTQ+ the plaintiffs' videos, including anti- LGBTQ+ hate speech in the comments section appearing on the same screen as the LGBTQ+ plaintiffs' videos, and other unlawful speech-restricting tools, seem to hold at least equal weight with demonetization in the eyes of both the LGBTQ+ creators in the lawsuit and the participants interviewed in the film.[75] Further studies could investigate the perception of monetization as a form of representation, but for the purpose of this study, demonetization served as just one example of YouTube's inconsistent policy implementation.

LGBTQ+ vs. Adult Content

In the film, both Dr. Wuest and Ari Drennen address the historical conflation of LGBTQ+ content with "Adult" content. The origin of the assumptions that queer people are hypersexual and often predatory deserves elucidation. We can look specifically at media in the United States for enlightenment. Historical examples of misleading, homophobic propaganda

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[74] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, 9.
[75] LGBTQ+ v. YouTube, 20-33.

pieces exist that affect the LGBTQ+ community even today. Propaganda films like *Boys Aware*[76] labeled gay men as sexual predators. The Hays Code, along with many other discriminatory rules, banned homosexuality in films (unless those characters were represented as anti-social, criminal or mentally ill) and labeled homosexuality as "sexual perversion" well into the 1960s.[77] Still today, many arguments are made against transgender bathroom bills, all filled with language the promotes misgendering of trans-individuals and fearmongering against the wider LGBTQ+ community.[78] Dr. Wuest notes the 2009 Amazon book controversies around authors selling narratives with LGBTQ+ content[79] and the still-present cultural resistances against teaching children about LGBTQ+ rights in schools, though these conversations would contribute valuable lessons about civil rights.[80]

Drennen adds that finding trans-related content that was not pornographic or hypersexual was difficult to access before she discovered YouTube. Rather than finding relatable and decipherable information about transgender issues and experiences, much of what she saw in other media spaces was confusing or upsetting to her. This lack of relatable information worried her to the extent that she feared not being able to maintain a career or a healthy relationship while also being herself. YouTube's search mechanisms and algorithms allowed Ari to find examples of non-hypersexualized content creators like NikkiTutorials[81] and Contrapoints.[82]

[76] Sid Davis. "Boys Aware." 1973. *Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/BoysAware*
[77] Leanne Dawson. "Queer European Cinema: Queering Cinematic Time and Space." *Studies in European Cinema: Queer European Cinema* 12, no. 3 (September 2, 2015): 186.
[78] Mike C. Parent and Kevin Silva. "Critical Consciousness Moderates the Relationship Between Transphobia and 'Bathroom Bill' Voting." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 65, no. 4
[79] Brennon Slattery. "Amazon 'Glitch' Yanks Sales Rank of Hundreds of LGBT Books." *PCWorld.com*, 2009.
[80] "Laws that Prohibit the "Promotion of Homosexuality": Impacts and Implications." GLSEN Research Brief, 2017. GLSEN.org
[81] NikkiTutorials. YouTube Channel. YouTube.com
[82] Contrapoints. YouTube Channel. YouTube.com

While these mechanisms and algorithms are helpful in this way, however, some disadvantages are extant.

Algorithmic Disadvantages

YouTube, much like its parent company, Google, shows search results based, at least in part, on consumption. The more people consume a particular video, the more "relevant" the consumed video becomes. In the case of LGBTQ+-related videos, this consumption volume basis of the search algorithm seems to be the problem: the demand for and financial gain behind some videos pushes other videos to the margins. According to the plaintiffs in LGBTQ+ v. YouTube, their videos also do not show up in recommendation systems if keywords like "LGBTQ+," "lesbian" "gay," bisexual," "transgender," or "queer" are used. As a result, YouTube content-creators like BriaAndChrissy and Chase Ross have self-censored, using less helpful keywords, instead of those referencing the LGBTQ+ community, in order to avoid YouTube's censorship practices. This self-censorship makes it harder for the channels' intended audiences to find this content.[83] Even worse, the plaintiffs in the suit have reported that YouTube has recommended anti-LGBTQ+ homophobic hate speech in the "Up Next" application alongside their videos, played anti-LGBTQ+ related advertisements immediately before their LGBTQ+ videos, and has not done enough to curb hate speech in the "Comments Section" of LGBTQ+ videos.[84]

The electronic artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms that review video content have been identified as the antagonist to YouTube's relationship with the LGBTQ+ community. YouTube claims that these algorithms are "viewpoint- and identity-neutral," and YouTube ensures that the

[83] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, 28.
[84] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, 28-30.

"same standards apply equally to all." In addition to the AI algorithms, YouTube claims to have

employees who conduct "manual reviews" to supplement the electronic filtering and regulation

of video content.[85]

The evidence presented in LGBTQ+ v. YouTube, however, including statements by

YouTube's employees working with both the algorithmic and manual filtering on the YouTube

platform, suggests that YouTube's algorithmic filtering tools are "embedded with code that

regulates content based on purely subjective, viewpoint, topic, and identity animus, and other

unlawful criteria."[86] YouTube's employees who operate and administer Restricted Mode,

including engineers and content reviewers, have also reported working in a dysfunctional work

environment, which could lead to biases and poor judgement.[87] These and the other complaints

both made in the lawsuit and in the found footage included in the film imply that change is

needed for the LGBTQ+ community to regain trust in YouTube as a platform.

Platform Responsibility

On the topic of hate speech and unequal restriction, Dr. Wuest asserts,

> This is a systemic, YouTube-wide problem. And it's not by accident. It is the product of
> YouTube's choices, and the way it chooses to not enforce its anti-harassment policy. This
> isn't happening on every platform. It's happening on the platforms that abdicate the
> responsibility to enforce the policies they've created. Their first reason for being is not to
> be a platform for content, but to make money.

This comment calls the question of responsibility. Should YouTube be held accountable for

profiting in branding and recognition from posting Pride videos inspired by their online content

creators while simultaneously restricting their freedoms of expression? In the film, Aboud

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[85] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, 25.
[86] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, 25.
[87] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, 25-26.

explains the benefits of *seeing* and connecting to content creators with similar identities and experiences, noting that seeing people who have been thorough the process and who look like them has been more helpful than Googling around for information. Nigro adds that finding examples of LGBTQ+ couples on YouTube was the foundation for his confidence that he could eventually be in a happy relationship. Drennen mirrors this sentiment, saying that watching these videos "was a way to feel like I knew people who were how I wanted to be able to see myself in a couple of years."

YouTube's strong financial motive for restricting the reach of third-party content did not become apparent until the beginning of 2016.[88] Before 2016, YouTube was a sort of a "wild west," according to Dr. Wuest. With no specific monetization model, the platform was more of a place for storytelling. YouTube is now in a better position to benefit from disregarding the principles of free expression upon which the platform was founded. In 2016 YouTube began to profit not from consumers and their video content production, but from the company's own content and the sale of advertisements, securing for themselves a market share of the revenues that previously had been reserved for YouTube's users and consumers.[89] YouTube induced consumers to create video content and build a large platform audience for them by promising to neutrally host and regulate the video content of others.[90] YouTube's unlawful content regulation system, promoting and monetizing only the content that serves the company, selectively applies rules and restrictions in a manner that subjects its consumers to discriminatory content regulations and restrictions.[91]

[88] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, 18.
[89] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, 18.
[90] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, 18.
[91] LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube, 19.

Although YouTube has publicly apologized for the mishandling of the AI and manual systems that restrict the reach of LGBTQ+ content, active changes to these systems and the mishandling of homophobic hate speech need to occur before the LGBTQ+ community can fully celebrate the platform as an ally once again. As Aboud states in the film, "The YouTube demonetization of LGBTQ videos is basically a form of gatekeeping. The people in power… are just kind of saying what is okay and what's not okay, and to give people that power is pretty dangerous."

CONCLUSION

"YouTube as an Ally of Convenience: The Platform's Building and Breaking with the LGBTQ+ Community" both documents YouTube's historical significance to the LGBTQ+ community and provides an explanation of the current controversial nature of this platform to this group. My hope is that the film and companion paper will expose the impacts of algorithmic discrimination and inconsistent policy implementation on groups already marginalized systemically and culturally in the real world. Demands for accountability and responsibility are important to prevent similar behaviors from other platforms. The Jekyll and Hyde behavior that YouTube displays towards the LGBTQ+ communities, outwardly performing like an ally while also failing to mitigate the negative impact of their algorithms, should be scrutinized to discourage further alienation of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly because this platform has proven to be so integral to many young peoples' identity formation.

Close examination of YouTube's history of LGBTQ+ education and the current problems between YouTube and the LGBTQ+ communities together help demonstrate the ways in which offline biases and fears can be brought online. LGBTQ+ individuals are not threats to child

safety, nor are they inherently harmful or dangerous or sexual. The existence of LGBTQ+

individuals does not justify hate speech. Apparently, YouTube's AI and manual systems do not

agree with these truths except when celebrating LGBTQ+ individuals can make the platform

look good, particularly during the national month of Pride. These conflicting realities

demonstrate that YouTube is only an ally of convenience to the LGBTQ+ communities. To

maintain even this superficial status, YouTube will need to take more responsibility, rather than

continuously apologize for behavior they can control.

APPENDIX

Kashir Aboud (they/them) is a designer, brand manager, storyteller, linguist, sneakerhead, and 2019 graduate of Georgetown's Communication, Culture, and Technology program. Aboud has used YouTube videos both to understand their own non-binary gender identity and to help their parents understand what this identity means to Aboud.

Ari Drennen (she/her) is a press secretary at the Center for American Progress. She is a Trans-woman and advocate who used YouTube to get comfortable with the idea of transitioning, to search for an LGBTQ+ community, and to learn about more "feminine" presentation when she was not able to easily find that support.

Alessandro Nigro (he/him) is a Master's candidate in the Communication, Culture, and Technology program at Georgetown University. He found YouTube at a critical moment in his identity formation, when he needed positive representation of LGBTQ+ couples who were not miserable or steeped in negative stereotypes.

Gabriel Resendez (they/them) is a nonbinary LGBTQ+ advocate who has been publicly documenting their medical transition on YouTube since October, 2014. Resendez also runs a transmasculine Facebook group with over 10,000 members and an advice column for transgender and nonbinary people. They provided first-hand commentary about the experience of being restricted and demonetized by YouTube's algorithms.

Dr. Bryan Wuest (he/him) is a 2017 graduate of the Cinema and Media Studies program at UCLA, where he wrote a dissertation about LGBT media distribution companies from the 1980s to the present. At the time of filming, he was a lecturer at UCLA and Loyola Marymount University, and his expertise in LGBTQ+ media extends to YouTube's history of hosting coming out videos.

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