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LGBTQ+ YouTube

YouTube has been a fairly popular platform almost from its conception back in 2005. It has been a place for people to create connections and friendships with people who share similar interests or identities. When large groups of friends gather to view the same content become connected with each other they form a community. These communities and friendships help people realize that there are other people, sometimes in their own town but also around the world, who share their interests which can make some people feel less alone. These communities could be for those who like a particular band's music, a movie or TV or book series, a style of Youtube video. There are also communities on youtube for gamers, theorists, entertainers, LGBTQ+ people, and so much more. Many of these groups use youtube as a video-based forum where the video and description of the video serve as the initial post to start a discussion that continues in the comments below the video.

In the past, "bars were often the only safer spaces for any outward same-sex affection" yet "there has been a push to increase gay social spaces outside of bars in recent years" (Goltz 9). For LGBTQ+ people, online communities help connect them with other LGBTQ+ people when they cannot for any reason go to a local LGBTQ+ center, club,

bar, or school organization. However, the online LGBT+ communities that are on forums are often only text-based which can make it more difficult to get to know the members of the community. On youtube, LGBT+ community members can post videos for others to watch and post links to their videos on other community members' videos to further discussions. These videos help LGBT+ people connect with each other because they are no longer reading text and associating it with only a screen name, they can hear the other person's voice and vocal expressions through their tone and tone shifts in addition to the visual element which can associate an art style to the person and/or show their face, facial expressions, and body language. The video format also allows people to tell more effective personal stories about their experiences being LGBT+.

Most of the videos associated with the youtube LGBT+ community are coming out videos. As you may know, these videos are of content creators telling those who watch the video that they are LGBT+, what label they identify with and what that label means to them, and how and/or when they knew that was the right label for them. These videos have become widely recognized because “[t]he coming out story is [...] an expected story from every lesbian, gay man or bisexual” and are “[f]requently presented in the first person and in an autobiographical mode, the coming out narrative is governed by recognizable genre conventions and the presentation of a linear journey” (Cover and Prosser 1).

There are several key points that many of these stories share, such as feelings of isolation or loneliness as a child, having always known one is gay as a child though not always knowing the name for it, a moment of bravery in acting on or coming out as non-heteronormative, and finding a feeling of belonging through communities online or

offline communities or through a romantic relationship (Cover and Prosser 5). These key points have developed into two tropes common to coming out stories which are, “1) I always knew I was gay from early childhood; and 2) I encountered the concept of homosexuality (in media or other texts usually) and came to realize what I had always known about myself but could not name” (Cover and Prosser 6).

Many school-age children who come out to their peers as or who are suspected by their peers of being non-heteronormative often face bullying that can be very violent, and as in the case of Matthew Shephard, can end in the child’s murder. However, in most cases, the bullying leads to depression and sometimes suicide, especially since “queer youth-support systems are minimal” (Goltz 3). Many did not know about this problem LGBT+ students face until the summer of 2010 when:

a number of gay American students tragically gained the attention of the nation by taking their own lives after enduring bullying in their schools and broader communities. These cases were all individual incidents, but the number of deaths and their close succession marked a dangerous and disturbingly growing trend (Muller 2).

A gay couple created a youtube video that was aimed at LGBT+ youth who may be contemplating suicide sending a message of hope and that “it gets better”.

This one video became an online movement that consists of several thousand videos that feature sometimes one person giving their message of how bad it (meaning life in general) was and how it got better, and other times feature several people giving messages of hope to viewers. Each of the videos has the person(s) speaking and/or looking directly at the camera as if addressing someone in the same room. Although this

method of addressing the audience as if they were in the same room helps establish a connection with the audience and increases the effect of the message, it is also dangerous. If someone knows the person in the video and sees them regularly or the background of the video reveals where the person lives, then the person in the video could be bullied or attacked for making the video therefore creators of such videos need to be careful of where they film and be aware of the potential for people they know to see the video.

Eventually, the online *It Gets Better* movement inspired rallies, a book, and an official website. However, critics of the project note that the project is too passive as it does not say how or when it gets better and should include these and other points of information. Some of these critics created the more action-oriented *Make It Better* project which is very similar to *It Gets Better* in that it started as a series of youtube videos filmed while looking at the camera talking to the viewers as if they were in the same room. Another example of their similarity is that both share the ambiguous word “better” which the videos are both explaining and “expanding what ‘better’ can/might be, the unifying theme is a commitment to reclaiming LGBTQ futures—a project of hope” (Goltz 5).

Each of the thousands of videos has at least one new idea of what “better” is or could be which complicates the ever-expanding definition of the word as several differing definitions contradict each other and “what this demonstrates is the power of co-existent contradictions” (Goltz 14). *Make It Better* is different because it tells viewers how they can make it better for themselves and others. Additionally, *It Gets Better* is more aimed at LGBT+ youth in crisis while *Make It Better* is aimed at those not in crisis Both projects are important and can be viewed as sister projects.

Just as these two projects are similar yet different, so are those in the LGBT+ community. There are many different sexual, romantic, and gender orientations and ways to express these orientations. It may be that several hundred LGBT+ people identify with the same labels, but each may choose to define their term(s) slightly differently. This is a somewhat difficult concept to explain in words, so many LGBT+ people have started using spectrums to help explain their orientation and terms to other people. One youtuber used a video series that became a book to explain many different terms and spectrums and both have the same name: *The ABC's of LGBT+*. These are both by Ashley Mardell, who has since publishing her book changed her name to Ash Hardell after marrying her wife, Grace. This nuance gives me the option of calling Ash by her old name or her legal name, to be respectful of her and her name change, I will be calling her “Ash” in my prose but will use “Ashley Mardell” for my citations as that is what is on the book.

There are so many different spectrum models that people can use and if they cannot find one that reflects their terms as well as they would like, they can create their own model. Some spectrum models come in the form of a linear spectrum which shows “to what degree a person experiences sexual attraction” or any other form of attraction or other type of identity (Mardell 29). People can plot points on the line, use brackets to indicate a range, use arrows, and more to indicate where they are on a linear model. Another type of model Ash mentions is the color wheel. She uses it to explain how someone might identify their gender when it is difficult or impossible to use a linear model with endpoints “man” and “woman”. Using the color wheel model, a person can mark many different points or areas or whatever they feel best represents them between lots of genders (or other identities) instead of only between two of them.

There is a model called The Gender Unicorn which uses several linear models to express each identity. For gender identity, gender expression, physically attracted to, and emotionally attracted to categories there are three options each: the heteronormative binary of female/woman/girl/feminine and male/man/boy/masculine in addition to one line marked other/other gender(s). Ash's friend Charlie even created a model to express their non-binary gender as a galaxy. There are so many more spectrum models out there in the world and if a person does not feel like any of these fit them, they can make their own model— just like Charlie did. Additionally, using multiple models may work to capture these spectrum nuances better than only using one model.

Just as with spectrums, there is no physical or mental health requirement that needs to be met in order to identify as an LGBT+ identity. Many do not have mental health issues but many others do. Some may have anxiety, depression, ADD, autism, multiple personality disorder, or any other mental health issue that they may be dealing with. The same is true for physical health issues: some LGBT+ people have them and others do not. One person who does is Kaley Kutie, a trans beauty blogger who uses a wheelchair. Kaley has Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy which is a muscle degenerative disorder and came out as trans in November 2013; her youtube channel shows her progress to “become Kaley” as is stated on her channel’s “About” page. The “archive of Kaley’s videos complicate notions of both transgender and disabled subject positions, which are rarely considered together in popular discourse” (REINKE 6).

Kaley’s and Ash’s videos can really open discourse on and spotlight different types of identities and how some people may express their identity while also noting that there is no “right” way to be any identity. No matter what disability or disabilities

someone has, they can still identify and express as whatever they are. So long as the person is being true to themselves and feels comfortable with their identity and how they express it their way is okay and just as valid as anyone else's.

People can use channels like Ash's to explore their own identity. Most people know that LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bi, and trans but don't know any other identities that might fit them or someone else better. New terms are constantly being made and it can be hard to know where to turn to find out what some of the lesser known identities are. Most people looking to learn more about LGBT+ identities tend to start with a google search which leads to several different websites and, depending on the keywords they used, several youtube videos. Many people may feel more comfortable watching a video to explain a bunch of terms rather than just reading about them.

If they go to Ash's channel, they will find a forty-five-video playlist plus more videos on her channel and on channels she links to in the descriptions of her videos that explain different terms. Ash has collaborated with several LGBT+ youtubers to create these videos that discuss different terms within the LGBT+ community. She has guests who identify with some of the terms explain the terms they use and they even go over some slang and some specific things within the LGBT+ community and culture that may be somewhat confusing to non-community members or to new community members. Some of these identities and terms include:

- abrosexual/romantic
- ace/asexual
- ace/aroflux
- ace/aro spectrums
- Ace of hearts, spades, clubs, diamonds
- agender/genderless
- androgyne

- androgynesexual/romantic
- androgynous
- aporagender
- aro/aromantic
- autosexual/romantic
- bicurious
- bigender
- bisexual/romantic
- CAFAB/CAMAB
- Asexy
- AVEN
- cisgender/cis
- conflate
- dimigender
- demisexual/romantic
- DFAB/AFAB/FAAB
- Diamoric
- DMAB/AMAB/MAAB
- enby/non-binary
- erasure
- female to female/FTF
- Fluid
- -flexible
- -flux
- Female to male/FTM
- Gay
- Gender confusion/gender f*ck
- Gender dysphoria
- Gender euphoria
- Gender expression
- Gender identity
- Gender indifferent
- Gender neutral
- Graysexual/romantic
- Graygender
- Intergender
- Intersectionality
- Intersex
- Lesbian
- Maverique
- Maxigender
- Male to female/MTF
- Multigender/polygender
- Neutrois
- Novosexual/romantic
- Pan/omnigender

- Pansexual/romantic aka
omnisexual/romantic
- Polyamory
- Polysexual/romantic
- Quoisexual/romantic aka
WTFromantic
- QPR/queer platonic relationship
- Recipsexuality/romanticism
- Stone, paper, paper mache
- Skoliosexual/romantic aka
ceterosexual/romantic
- -spike
- squish
- Trans man
- Trans woman
- Transgender/trans/trans*
- Trigender
- Trisexual/romantic
- Trysexual/romantic
- Umbrella term
- Zedsexual
- Zucchini

Although this is a long list, there are so many more terms that Ash discusses in her videos that are not listed here. Discussing each term in a written format can be done and done well, but often times it is more entertaining to watch them being explained in a video format and is less time-consuming for people who may be slower readers than others. A video format may also make the terms easier to understand than if they were just read on a website because of it being explained in a visual-audio format as well as being able to ask questions in the comments.

Commenters can also improve definitions, point out flaws and mistakes in definitions or presentation, and share what they think of the video. Additionally, while watching these videos many viewers may be surprised to find a term or terms they identify with. In the comments on these videos, they can start to find others who also

identify as the terms they do. They often end up forming friendships and sub-communities of people with the same or similar terms. These communities start on youtube and can extend onto other websites and even into offline meet-ups, just like *It Gets Better* did. Some of these viewers and commenters may end up making their own youtube channels within the LGBT+ community. Each of these new channels may have their creator's coming out story on them.

Each new channel made by someone in the LGBT+ community has the potential to create new communities that will help other people learn about themselves and the LGBT+ community. These new communities can then create even more communities and even create their own projects to help fellow LGBT+ people— students and adults alike. These projects can be like *It Gets Better*, *Make It Better*, Ash's *The ABC's of LGBT+*, the TREVOR project, AVEN, and so many others. Each new youtube viewer, subscriber, commenter, and creator can initiate and join these projects. The projects can be to promote further learning, find new terms, find more inclusive terms, inspire others, give people hope for a better future, help create a better future, and so much more.

All of the ideas in this paper are unique to youtube because of the complexity and uncontrollability of who views, comments, and creates the content on the site. Each person gets to interact with the content in the video in ways they could not on other platforms because of the audio-visual format and the comments sections working together to create a special blend that has become the most popular way to share ideas in video format. Forums, chatrooms, and other social media are used in the LGBT+ community, but many of those using these other sites have often found them through a youtube video or comment or from a youtube friend's invite to join it. The connections

formed on youtube in the LGBT+ community are often very deep connections and therefore last a long time because they were formed with an interactable audience-creator bond that formed because of the video format combined with the comments section.

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