

Queer Voices in the Digital Barricades: Exploring Social Media Use in Information Resistance

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates how queer people use the Facebook group Queer Exchange to build community and meet information needs. Research indicates that queer people face social exclusion in mainstream society, which leads to health injustices. Social media can then become a space to build inclusion, necessitating the study of queer virtual space. The study consists of 12 semi-structured interviews with queer adults living in rural communities in Western Massachusetts. The themes identified include community-sourced information, community building by identity, and reproducing offline oppressions. The paper uses de Certeau's theory of tactics and Chatman's small world theory to frame the research. The study concludes that Queer Exchange plays an essential role in the digital information worlds of rural queer people.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Information needs, information seeking, specific populations, social media, social justice

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Rural information seeking, queer communities, information resistance

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INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that social media is a crucial resource for queer people in information seeking and community building (Han et al., 2019; Hanckel et al., 2019; McInroy et al., 2019).

The literature also indicates that queer people face significant barriers to information seeking. One tactic that queer people use to circumvent these information barriers is to come together in queer community (Stewart & Davis Kendrick, 2019). The Facebook group Queer Exchange (QE) offers a unique landscape to study information seeking and community building because it is a digital space specifically engineered to help queer people build connections with one another and facilitate information sharing. Studying this platform adds to research on queer tactical resistance to information barriers. This study yields data from a digital space that has yet to be explored by the scholarly community. Given the physical health, mental health, and informational challenges that queer people face due to daily exclusion and oppression, additional study into how these communities are creatively resisting and thriving is necessary. QE, launched in New York City, has spread communities nationwide. Research shows that queer and trans people have significantly worse health outcomes, including higher rates of depression and suicidality but also non-mental health-related diseases like cancers (James et al., 2016; Tamargo et al., 2022). These health injustices result from a lack of social safety. People live in constant stress until they receive signs of acceptance from the group (Diamond & Alley, 2022). Queer people receive daily messages that they are not a part of the group, and this exclusion damages their health. Facing daily exclusion, social media becomes a place where queer people can safely be together and build social inclusion. This study provides necessary data on queer tactical resistance using digital space to build community and find essential information.

Research Questions

RQ1 What, if any, are the challenges of Queer Exchange that impede the functionality of the platform.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Chatman and de Certeau consider how marginalized populations respond to institutional force and offer a framework for addressing the abovementioned conceptual gaps. Knowing that queer community could be defined as what Chatman calls a small world offers insight into how participants use QE in information seeking. Chatman is concerned with how information circulates, or fails to circulate, in small worlds, and I turn her theory onto what I see as another small world. De Certeau's theory of strategies and tactics helps us understand QE as a site of queer resistance. Chatman and de Certeau are concerned with how communities strategically respond to hostile institutional forces. Chatman writes of the defensive behaviors people in small worlds use to insulate themselves from what they see as harmful outside forces. However, when applied to queer people, Chatman's defensive behaviors could fall into deficit thinking about the community. Chatman's defensive behaviors are reactive and operate from a place of scarcity. Her theory calls to mind precarity with its very naming. Applying de Certeau's theory of tactics with their playful refusal of institutional force offers a way to reframe queer communities' informational behavior as a creative and intentional resistance rather than a defensive response. Chatman offers a lens through which to understand the positionality of queer communities, and de Certeau describes the tools with which the community fights against oppression to build community, meet information needs, and thrive.

METHODS

The setting of the study is three counties in Western Massachusetts: Hampshire, Franklin, and Berkshire counties. The study considered the rural communities in these counties. The researcher recruited participants through purposive and snowball sampling, including flyering at local businesses and libraries, handing out flyers at events, and posting on the author's social media accounts. They also advertised the study in QE and other Facebook groups in the area with moderator approval. They collected data between April and June of 2023. They interviewed 12 participants using semi-structured interviews that lasted an average of 50 minutes. The author used data saturation to conclude interviews when no new themes or ideas emerged in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews took place in person and over Zoom, depending on the participants' preferences. The researcher compensated participants with a \$15 gift card for their participation. The IRB considered this study, Pro00125835, exempted and did not request informed consent. The target population was LGBTQ+ people over 18 years old who live in rural Western Massachusetts and use QE. All participants identified as queer. I use the term "queer" throughout this paper instead of "LGBTQ+" to discuss participants with the language they use to describe themselves. All participants identified as white, with two identifying as Ashkenazi Jews. Participants ranged in age from 25-45. Three participants identified as disabled or chronically ill. All participants lived in Franklin or Hampshire Counties. The author inductively coded data using Nvivo software. The researcher coded in three stages, whereby they assigned preliminary codes in the first round. Subsequent rounds of coding condensed coding and clarified the coding schema. An initial 99 codes narrowed to 78 final codes. The codes align with the theoretical framework by identifying tactics, per de Certeau's theory and information seeking within small worlds and mistrust of authority based on Chatman's theory. The coding followed Saldana's dramaturgical coding, dividing codes into attitudes, conflicts, emotions, subtext, and tactics (Saldana, 2021). The 77 codes all fit within the five categories identified by Saldana. The researcher chose this coding schema because of its alignment with the theoretical framework and research questions. The researcher assigned all participants a pseudonym and included quotes directly from participants with their consent. They did not analyze the posts on QE due to the ethical problems of using data from a closed Facebook group. A second LIS scholar coded 20% of the transcripts, and compared both coding sets to achieve intercoder reliability (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

FINDINGS

Community-Sourced Information

Participants relied heavily on information sourced from other queer people when seeking information. Information seeking on QE took many forms, including seeking housing and queer-friendly employment and finding information about queer events. Participants agreed that Queer Exchange was helpful for information seeking, and Isaac called the platform an "information hub." Almost all participants used Queer Exchange to find information about queer-affirming providers. Participants noted that finding provider recommendations from other queer people and people who shared their intersecting identities was important. Notably, participants wanted those sharing information to have first-hand experience of the resources they were sharing. Some participants noted the need for experience from those with intersecting identities beyond queerness to determine if the information was relevant. April shared, "I think it's probably because I fit into a lot of times, like a similar demographic as the people who are giving the recommendation... So if someone in queer exchange has had a really positive experience, I feel

like there's a good chance that I will, too.” Participants employ tactics in using the information found on QE to navigate their physical and information worlds in Western Massachusetts. Resisting gentrification and rapidly rising housing prices, participants leveraged QE to stay in the region they loved despite dramatic cost increases.

Community Building by Identity

Several participants noted using QE to connect with others and create groups around shared identities. Groups that formed out of QE include an anti-Zionist Shabbat group, a group for femme queers, and groups for disabled and chronically ill people. All participants agreed that QE facilitated the formation of their group and several participants noted that the groups would not be possible without the assistance of the platform. Isaac shared that they wouldn't know where to look for Jewish community outside of QE: “I don't know where I would look... You know, I probably could have connected with the same people if I was going to more mainstream Jewish events...I don't tend to show up at those things.”

Reproducing offline oppressions

There are norms to QE that align with the values of the queer community. One of the group's primary functions is to offer and request mutual aid. This interaction presupposes that wealth accumulates based on racist and classist determinants and that those with wealth have a moral obligation to share with those who, because of their societal positioning, have less access to capital. Still, behavior played out on QE that cannot be explained by the norms of queer community. Many behaviors contradicted the group's values, such as the reproduction of racism and classism and a gatekeeping of who has access to resources and space. QE replicated a toxic culture where people are publically shamed for their lack of knowledge about leftist values. The clustering of resources in Northampton and limited availability outside of the Northampton area disadvantaged queer people who cannot afford the higher cost of living in Northampton. When posters assume that all other people on the platform live in Northampton, the platform becomes less usable by queer people living in more rural and poorer counties. Elise said “There is so much assumption in that group that Western Mass just exists like consists of like Northampton...And I think it can be frustrating at times to people in (County) and (County)...people won't even see the location of things because they just assume that you're in Northampton, or like, within 15 minutes of Northampton..”

DISCUSSION

Re-Framing Small Worlds These findings that queer people prioritize community-sourced resources in information seeking aligns with the conclusions of Kitzie et al. (2022) that queer people most heavily rely on health recommendations from other queer people. This finding also aligns with Chatman's theory that people within isolated communities trust resources from those within the community over those of experts not within the community. The researcher considers de Certeau's theory to reframe information practices not as defensive behavior but as protective tactics. Rather than limiting an influx of information and leading to poor quality and a limited flow of information, relying on community-sourced information is a way to guard against information from outside experts that could be dangerous to the community. Many participants felt that experts did not know about the community's needs. Protecting against information from outside the community was a way that queer people keep each other safe. Participants' actions were tactical in that their actions were intentional, resourceful, and protective. Just as de Certeau

described how cities could be resistantly navigated in ways not intended by the institutions that designed them, participants demonstrated resistance in navigating their information worlds by building webs of community reliance and circumventing traditional information channels. This paper proves the utility of pairing Chatman, one of the most cited LIS scholars, with de Certeau to understand information practices within marginalized communities better. Pairing these two theorists allows for a better understanding of information practices that highlight community strength and resilience and do not rely on deficit thinking about marginalized communities.

Considerations of Space

Rhetoric of what identities deserve space played out on QE with the formation of the femme group. In contrast to the vitriol caused by the post forming the group, there was no pushback around starting a group for Jewish people or disabled people. It was taken for granted that these two identities had certain positioning and needs that justified a closed space. Counter to a broad acceptance that these identities needed space together, many group members felt that a femme-only space was exclusionary. Participants expressed why they needed the femme group: to be in a space where their queerness was not questioned, to find joy in shared identity, and to process the toxic patterns that sometimes played out in their masc/femme romantic relationships. This difference in response highlights that there is no disagreement over whether or not identity-based groups need closed space but which particular groups deserve that space. There was more gatekeeping around who counts as a particular identity and which identities deserve space among queer identities than around other intersectional identities such as faith or disability.

Queer Joy

Much research into the social media practices of queer people considers how social media is used in identity formation. Research focussing on this period of identity formation has the unfortunate consequence of implying that to be queer is to be anxious, afraid, and depressed. These studies ignore that for some queer people coming into queerness is a joyful process of awakening and embodiment. All participants were confident of their identities and came into QE looking not for counsel about queerness but access to information and community. Rather than focusing on queerness as something distressing, on QE, queer identity becomes the key to unlocking information that is hard to find outside the platform. Participants discuss the benefits of belonging to QE. The most impactful benefit is access to mutual aid. Participants also recall smaller acts of generosity, such as offering a free queer-affirming haircut or pet-sitting for free. Access to QE means access to resources not easily found outside its context. This access means there are direct benefits to queerness, a fact that scholars often overlook. QE is not a place to process difficult emotions but a space that uplifts queer joy.

Resistance in Virtual Action

The decision to move out of Northampton to live farther away from a college town subverts expectations about the value of space, with cultural centers like Northampton holding more social value than rural communities. A primary function of QE is the exchange of mutual aid, which resists capitalist and neoliberal ideology about self-sufficiency and labor expectations. On QE, people are not punished for being unable to work. They are supported by their

community and empowered to survive despite societal expectations about who lives and dies. The theory of necropolitics argues that states have institutional control over survival and use social and political power to ensure that specific kinds of people do not survive (Mbembe, 2013). Scholars have identified mutual aid as one tactic for marginalized communities to resist the deadly state power of necropolitics (Demos, 2020; Dziuban & Dziuban, 2020; Löfgren, 2022). Using QE to exchange mutual aid is a resistant tactic that queer community can leverage to help community members survive despite institutional strategies to ensure they will die. Combining necropolitics with de Certeau's tactics allows for framing actions like mutual aid as resistant tactics intentionally taken to fight back against institutional power.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that QE is a rich virtual space for information seeking and community building. Participants face significant barriers to information retrieval that QE, with its community-based information-sharing model, alleviates. Participants trusted information sourced from community within QE over information from experts outside of their queer communities. Community building was sometimes purely social but often occurred along the lines of intersectional identities. While participants found QE an essential resource, the platform is not immune from conflict. QE reproduces oppressions found offline, such as racism, classism, and femmephobia. The finding about resisting gentrification through rural communities and using QE opens the door to research on the role of digital space in the queer fight against gentrification and the loss of queer physical spaces. Knowing the value of QE, further research could employ participatory action research to co-construct information spaces like QE in communities lacking them. This research has important implications for librarians and library educators. Librarians commonly recommend traditional sources of information to patrons. These findings indicate that queer people prefer community sourced information and might use the library more regularly in their information seeking if librarians provided more community based resources. Library educators can teach MLIS students in how to find, highlight, and recommend resources more relevant to marginalized communities than ones traditional found in libraries.

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