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#queer: Community, Communication, and Identity in the Digital Age

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#queer: Community, Communication, and Identity in the Digital Age



Fig. 1. “Philadelphia Pride Flag” from Philadelphia City Council and Tierney

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Senior Capstone

Writing and Rhetoric

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Division of Humanities and Communication

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Abstract

The creation and facilitation of community among LGBTQ+ people has always been necessary as a means of support, protection, and affirmation in a discriminatory society. The common perception of this community imagines the migration of people from rural areas to urban meccas like San Francisco and New York in search of likeminded people. However, the advent of new technology has allowed for community building and organizing to occur more easily without face-to-face contact. In this paper I utilize existing literature, including a large study on queer rural populations, and real-world examples such as the platform Tumblr to explore the evolution of queer community and identity via the internet since the late-nineties and early-aughts. Additionally, I examine both past and current technology usage in the LGBTQ+ community, particularly among populations that experience greater societal stigma due to identity, culture, or geography. This essay ultimately comes to three distinct conclusions: that the historical trajectory of the LGBTQ+ community made the internet an especially appropriate medium for activism and community building, that technology has created a clear divide between on- and off-line queer populations, and that the internet has altered both perception and performance of queerness.

Senior Capstone Proposal

1) Provide your name and identify your area of concentration

Margaret (Maggie) Allen-Young. Writing and Rhetoric concentration.

2) Focus: Identify the *specific* issue, problem, or question addressed in your essay. Be sure to frame as a question. Briefly explain why you chose this focus area.

How has the advent of the internet and social media influenced the response of LGBTQ+ people to social and societal discrimination, particularly in areas where these identities are still highly ostracized? I chose this topic because, as a queer person in the United States, I have seen the effects that the internet and alternate media formats (social media, podcasts, etc.) have had in LGBTQ+ community. I'm interested in researching how these online communities/movements were created and facilitated as well as how these tools are still used in other parts of the world to respond to societal stigma and persecution.

3) Alignment with Common Theme: Provide a *concise overview* of your project's *direct alignment* with this semester's shared theme of inquiry.

This class focuses broadly on crisis/opportunity and culture/community; my capstone will delve into both themes. The crisis I am investigating is both current and historical discrimination and violence directed towards LGBTQ+ people and the resulting negative impacts these acts have on individuals and communities. While these acts are unconscionable, they have also inspired the creation of communities, both real and virtual, that provide support and facilitate cohesion, safety, and greater societal acceptance. This ties in directly to the themes of culture and community, as I will be examining a specific community (LGBTQ+ people) and the online groups they have created.

4) Purpose: What is your project's primary purpose? What do you hope to accomplish through this project?

Through this project, I aim to gain a greater understanding of the history of queer communities both online and offline as well as investigate how and why technology is used in these communities. It should be noted that I am not aiming to persuade the audience whether technology and its presence in the modern world is good or bad, but rather encourage reflection on technology's influence in our lives and its ability to democratize information access/dispersal in marginalized communities.

5) Capstone Title: What is your project's working title?

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6) Working Summary: Provide a one-paragraph working summary of your project.

The project will be introduced with a brief history of LGBTQ+ social movements both prior to and during the era when consumer technology became more readily available and what these early communities looked like. I will then delve into some of the modern digital movements and communities that the reader might recognize in parts of the world where there is greater equity available to LGBTQ+ people. I will then aim to cover how technology is functioning as a community building/activism tool in areas of the world where LGBTQ+ people are still oppressed and persecuted.

7) Sources: Address each of the following:

a) In order to complete your project, what additional knowledge, insights, skills, understanding, and/or other resources and tools do you anticipate needing?

The skills I have gained as a researcher during my years as an undergrad will be useful in finding academic research papers that cover my topic. What I anticipate needing is more practice

in finding and evaluating *informal* sources, such as blogs, Twitter, and other social media, which I may need to access for this project.

b) Describe the kinds of primary and/or secondary sources you intend to use for your inquiry. This could include collecting original oral histories, analyzing government statistics, consulting scholarly peer-reviewed articles, books, and websites, among others. If you have consulted sources to get started, list them here.

I have already found several academic articles and books that may be useful to me for this project as primary sources. I also plan on seeking out non-academic sources such as testimonials, social media posts, and interviews to provide real examples of the communities I am researching. Listed below are citations for a few sources I have already collected:

Belfort, Erin L. "81.4 Social Media Use for Good: Social Justice and Support for LGBTQ Youth." *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, vol. 56, no. 10, 2017, p. S121.

Dhoest, Alexander, and Lukasz Szulc. "Navigating Online Selves: Social, Cultural, and Material Contexts of Social Media Use by Diasporic Gay Men." *Social Media Society*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2016, pp. Social Media Society, September 2016, Vol.2(4).

Manduley, Aida E, et al. "The Role of Social Media in Sex Education: Dispatches from Queer, Trans, and Racialized Communities." *Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2018, pp. 152–170.

Park, Hyojung, et al. "Sexual and Gender Minority's Social Media User Characteristics: Examining Preferred Health Information." *Health Marketing Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1–17.

Rodriguez, Nathian Shae. “Communicating Global Inequalities: How LGBTI Asylum-Specific NGOs Use Social Media as Public Relations.” *Public Relations Review*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2016, pp. 322–332.

8) Next Steps: What steps will you need to take to meet your project’s expectations, including preparation of all required deliverables? (be as specific as possible)

I have begun a detailed planning process (see below) for each step of the project, including the creation of my capstone poster. I anticipate that, provided I stick to my schedule, I should have no issue completing the project. I have already begun gathering my academic and informal sources and have made note of when each part of the project should be completed.

9) Timeline: Provide a detailed (and realistic) timeline for completion of each step required to meet the project’s expectations.

See chart on next page (note that YELLOW indicates a date material is due, as per the syllabus):

Week	Event/Other	Capstone: Essay	Capstone: Poster	Date Due
Week 4		Project Proposal Draft		9/16/19
		Project Proposal Draft DUE		9/18/19
Week 5		Revise Draft		9/23/19
		Final Project Proposal DUE		9/29/19
Week 6		Gather Sources/Research		9/30/19
		Gather Sources/Research		10/2/19

Week 7		Begin Annotated Bibliography		10/7/19
		Project Title and Abstract/Summary DUE		10/9/19
Week 8		Finish Annotated Bibliography		10/14/19
		Writing Draft		10/16/19
Week 9		Writing Draft		10/21/19
	Prepare CV	Draft Editing		10/23/19
Week 10	Donations Due	Essay Draft DUE		10/28/19
	Prepare CV	Draft Editing	Poster Formatting	10/30/19
Week 11	Resume/CV	Draft Editing	Poster Formatting	11/4/19
		Draft Editing	Poster Feedback 1	11/6/19
Week 12		Seek Revisions/Feedback	Edit Poster	11/11/19
		Seek Revisions/Feedback	Edit Poster	11/13/19

Week				
13		Editing	Edit Poster	11/18/19
		Editing	Edit Poster	11/23/19
Week				
14	Fall Break	Seek Revisions/Feedback	Poster Feedback 2	11/25/19
	Fall Break	Seek Revisions/Feedback	Edit Poster	11/27/19
Week				
15		Final Revisions	Poster Finalize	12/2/19
		Finish Revisions		12/4/19
Week				
16		Binding Today	Print Poster	12/9/19
		Final Bound Portfolios DUE		12/11/19
Week				
17	Festival Rehearsals			
	Capstone Festival			

#queer: Community, Communication, and Identity in the Digital Age

Preface:

Born in 1992, I came of age in an era where I was young enough to have spent much of my childhood and adolescence online, but old enough to remember the internet's earliest days as a consumer technology. The first computer my family owned was a massive grey tank of a monitor and a bulky tower—I can recall dragging a long string of hooked together phone cords from the desk it occupied in the living room to a dial-up plugin behind my parent's bed. I furtively explored the internet as much as one could do on a family computer in the early-aughts—playing flash games and setting up a Myspace page, carefully copy-pasting HTML to tile brightly colored anime screenshots behind adolescent musings and moody mirror selfies taken with a digital camera.

Around 2007, I used my earnings from a job as a library page to purchase a MacBook of my own. By this time the presence of social media online was ubiquitous; Myspace had come and gone, and my friends and I mostly communicated with each other via Facebook, exchanging pokes and early internet memes. But my life on the internet was not confined to interacting with the friends I spent each day with in high school—there were other places I went now that my computer habits were out of sight from the living room. It was not, as one might expect from a teenager with unsupervised internet access, a habit for porn sites. I was (and admittedly still am) a bit of a prude in that sense. But I did consider myself at that point in my life to be straight—a fact which was a bit undercut by my newfound love for lesbian romance webcomics and queer fanfiction. It wasn't until I was out of high school that the real questioning of my sexual and gender identity began, prompted in large part by joining Tumblr at the encouragement of a new college roommate. It was on this site that I found the terminology for what I could not put names

to before—bisexuality, pansexuality, gender fluidity—it was all new to me and likely never would have come my way without the internet. I had always felt there was something different, something that held me back from being my true authentic self with my peers. The internet offered me not only the language to describe what I was feeling, but access to a larger community that helped me realize I was not alone.

Introduction:

The internet is uniquely suited for the exploration and expression of queer identity. It is a space that is not bounded by geography, allowing people of diverse backgrounds and experiences to easily communicate and organize. It has been of particular service to members of the LGBTQ+ community who are further marginalized by identity factors such as race, class, gender expression, religion, ability, or geography—giving many whose voices would not have been heard in the past a platform to speak. The internet has also supplanted, in many ways, physical queer spaces that existed for organization and socialization prior to the advent of the digital age. In this paper I will be utilizing the frameworks of queer theory and examination of contemporary cultural phenomena to explore the way digital spaces and social media have shaped and changed the queer community, particularly in the United States.

This paper's intent is neither to condone nor condemn digital technology and new media. The internet and digital technology have massively changed the way society lives, works, and interacts—there are rarely arguments made today about whether electricity or telephones are societal or moral plagues. I suspect that in the future, the internet will be regarded with the same detached objectivity we apply to other utilities. Additionally, to universally condemn or lionize such broad cultural phenomena would require a level of cultural critique expertise that I do not

possess. Instead, the task I hope to accomplish in this paper is to draw a few conclusions based on my examination of prior work, specifically that:

1. The internet and digital technology have fundamentally changed the way queer identity and activism is practiced, and;
2. This has changed the way queer identity is perceived and performed.

Terminology:

For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I will here outline the terminology I will be utilizing in this paper. “Queer” and “LGBTQ+” should be assumed to be referring to the same communities, with former phrase being a general umbrella term and the latter phrase being used for its brevity as an acronym and general acceptance both in and out of the community. In addition to the general inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning, the “+” sign should be inferred to include identities such as asexual, pansexual, two-spirit, and other sexual/gender orientations that exist under the queer umbrella. In depth exploration of each of these identifiers would require a much longer paper—given this, it should be assumed that the above-mentioned terms are referring, generally, to anyone who does not ascribe to what society generally considers heterosexual (straight) and/or cisgender (conforming to gender assigned at birth) roles. This paper is not an in-depth study of any specific queer population’s interaction with technology, it is a broad survey and requires broad terms of definition.

Theoretical Framework:

Though the theoretical framework for this essay is not as vital as examining real world examples, I would still like to introduce it to both define ‘queer’ further as an academic term and outline the philosophies that this paper will be built around. Queer theory emerged as a field of criticism out of both feminist, gay, and lesbian studies. The descriptive of ‘queer,’ often used as a

derogatory insult, was reclaimed as an academic identifier and concept in the eighties and nineties (Aaron 5). Outside of queer theory's focus on LGBTQ+ people and behaviors, as a field it seeks to question existing categories and disrupt hegemonic expectations. Queer theory makes the point that power in society is drawn from enforcing binaries—with one side of the binary being given more legitimacy, social power, and privilege (Burgess). Definitions can vary within the discipline but generally in academic contexts queerness is defined as "...the resistance to, primarily, the normative codes of gender and sexual expression" (Aaron 5).

An additional element of our theoretical framework to consider here is overlap of queerness with other identities. This intersectional view can include things like race, gender, ability, and socioeconomic status. Like most academic disciplines, queer theory is a large umbrella that covers many fields of study, not all of which are included in the mainstream academic conversation. There has been noted in recent decades—with growing acceptance for LGBTQ+ people—a 'demobilization' in activism, commodification of queer identity, and a lack of emphasis on more marginalized queer people. The move towards internet communities could be considered one aspect of this demobilization, with physical spaces that generally created the central hubs of queer community being left for more intangible digital realms. In contrast, the argument could also be made that—since the internet is not hemmed in by physical boundaries—it is a sort of 'queer space' itself.

Wherever one falls on the spectrum of academic opinion about the theoretical implications of the internet or digital technology, the presence of these forces in our lives is undeniable; the study of any modern population generally requires acknowledgment of the presence technology has (or doesn't have) among its members. The queer community is no exception and having outlined the theoretical frameworks that queer studies has been built

around, I aim to lend context to the real-world examples and academic works I will be citing in this essay.

Context and History:

In the context of LGBTQ+ people, we can consider community as both a literal collection of people as well as the ability this collective provides to strengthen the individual as an active citizen and promote advocacy for marginalized communities (Gallegos 3). In the past (and presently, in certain geographic areas and socioeconomic strata) the building of this community has been reliant on the ability of queer people to communicate and interact in person. In the United States this community building tended to be focused on metropolitan centers—the originators being the San Francisco’s Castro District and New York’s West Village—though other enclaves existed throughout the United States (Gallegos 9). As early as the 1890s there was a visible and known gay presence in metropolitan areas, though these subcultures were forced ‘back in the closet’ by homophobic policing throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Chauncey 1-9). A cyclical pattern of growth in visibility followed by an increase in anti-gay policing continued throughout the first half of the 1900s.

The turning point marked by many as the first major push back against these police actions was the Stonewall Riot in 1969, when a raid of the Stonewall Inn (a gay bar catering to many of the most marginalized members of the LGBTQ+ community) was met with violent resistance (Chauncey 11). Queer communities, often centered in urban post-industrial neighborhoods, grew during the sixties and seventies and drew diverse groups from around the country (Halperin 436). Gay culture grew, transformed, and changed in these decades—it did not yet resemble the more gentrified and commodified middle-class culture one might associate with the Castro or Village today. The crossover between the old and new, the recently transplanted

and the urban veterans all contributed to a unique gay culture that thrived in low-income and working-class neighborhoods (Halperin 437). But another change was lurking on the horizon, one that would deal a crippling blow to the burgeoning queer community.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic devastated the LGBTQ+ world—in San Francisco alone some 17,000 gay men perished (Halperin 438). This massive death toll, combined with urban redevelopment and gentrification that occurred throughout the late-eighties, devastated the cultural and economic bases that had been established in urban areas. Though some middle- and upper-income members of the community could still live in the cities, countless others had either died or were forced to disperse due to the rising cost of living (Halperin 439). The effects of HIV/AIDs are still visible today, even with the advent of effective treatments it is estimated that 1.1 million people in the U.S. still live the disease (Centers for Disease Control).

It should be noted however that in the wake of the devastation came increased visibility for the LGBTQ+ community and a move towards the new digital spaces that the burgeoning consumer technology of the nineties and aughts could provide to dispersed, displaced, and isolated people. In a community that was already adept at utilizing media for activism, the internet provided another space for organization and broadcasting of vital medical information (Gillett 610). As early as the mid-nineties, websites focused on preventing or living with HIV/AIDs began to appear, providing a space for activism, escape, and support (Gillett 611).

The early days of the internet presented a utopian vision of what a society could be, as exemplified in a 1997 advertisement from MCI Telecommunications that proclaimed:

“There is no race. There is no gender. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Utopia? No, the Internet” (“Anthem” as qtd. in Reed).

Granted, this proclaimed utopia does ignore important aspects of the lived human experience and vastly simplifies the effects of human socialization on any interaction—digital or not (Reed 101). But the point remains that the internet provided a democratic space for marginalized communities to engage in ways they never had. As consumer technology and internet access became more accessible and available, the internet provided a new means of discretely arranging romantic or sexual encounters. Additionally, communities and forums sprung up, catering to a new generation of young queer people. Social media and websites such as LiveJournal (founded in 1999), OpenDiary (founded in 1998), Facebook (opened to the general public in 2006), and community-maintained forums of this era allowed for relationships to be built among people isolated by geography, culture, or circumstance (Barrett-Ibaria). Many early users recall that “[t]he support, information, advice, and love that these spaces provided answered all the questions I had growing up about why I felt so different and isolated” (Leever).

Exploring Identity and Gender in the Digital Age:

No single queer person’s experience, no matter their location or circumstance, is the same. Nevertheless, many members of the queer community who came of age in the early to mid-aughts have self-reported the extent that the internet helped them discover and accept their identity, particularly when growing up in geographically or culturally isolated areas. The internet provided a means of information, sexual and gender exploration, and escape from difficult circumstances. In the article “How the Internet Helped Me Embrace My Queer Identity,” writer Jon Shadel recalls their early internet usage in a conservative rural household, spending “...hours hogging the phone lines in the evening on forums for LGBTQ+ and curious teens, super fans of screamo bands, and the pre-Tumblr porn boards where distant strangers would post low-res nudes of themselves.” The internet offered for them a means to find both personal validation and

a relatively safe space to begin exploring their sexuality. Others, such as transwoman Sophie Schmiege recalls how geographic isolation in Germany led to her creating a simple website for other transgender youth searching for community and connection in 2004 (Barrett-Ibarria). In the absence of physical community or a safe space where identity can be expressed, the internet can provide a virtual space where the authentic self can be explored and expressed. By the mid-aughts acceptance and validation for LGBTQ+ people were no longer tied to limited geographical areas—it could be found without leaving the house. Another turning point came in 2007 with the founding of Tumblr, a social network site which at its peak was a central hub of internet queer theory and intersectional discourse (Barrett-Ibarria).

Tumblr, a social network and “microblogging” platform was built around a less formalized blog format than those offered by sites such as WordPress or LiveJournal (Zamanian 9). The main ‘Dashboard’ of a specific user’s Tumblr operates similarly to Facebook’s ‘News Feed,’ with an infinite scroll format which allows for sharing of diverse content (including pictures, text, links, audio, or video). In contrast to Facebook however, Tumblr does not require the disclosure of a real name or identity, promoting its use as a platform for various subcultures on the internet. The nature of the platform and the ease with which users could follow others with similar interests, like/reblog posts, and add commentary to existing posts made it uniquely suited for the exploration and presentation of queer identity and the building of virtual communities.

Additionally, as several studies have noted, a Tumblr user’s personal page often includes an ‘About’ box that could be used to easily share personal pronouns, sexuality/romantic interest identifiers, gender labels, race, ethnicity, and personal likes/dislikes (Oakley 2). This method of self-identification became vital within the online queer community of Tumblr—serving as a

representation of the ‘authentic self’ and a means of disclosing one’s intersectional identity. As noted by researcher Abigail Oakley, “[i]dentity construction is a multifaceted practice that is complex both in real-world and online situations...there is an apprehension regarding “authenticity” that can be magnified in the ambiguous space of the Internet” (Oakley 6-7). Tumblr’s platform allows the key points of one’s identity to be quickly displayed and categorized—this self-disclosure became particularly important in the community that sprung up around the site. Some have criticized this heavy focus on categorization as a fundamental misunderstanding of intersectionality and the fluidity of queer identity, while others point out that these labels offer a user ‘proof’ of authentic queer identity and acknowledgement of intersectional experiences (Zamanian 19). But the debate surrounding the positive or negative impact of comprehensive labeling does not change the fact that Tumblr had a major impact on the way the internet navigated queer identity. It was, for many, the first place where disclosing personal gender pronouns was commonplace—a practice that is now mainstream enough that three of the Democratic presidential candidates for the 2020 election include gender pronouns in their Twitter bios (Meyer).

Tumblr is also, unfortunately, a case study in the fragility of online communities. The site’s 2013 purchase by Yahoo and 2018 ban of “not safe for work” (NSFW) adult material led to a massive decline in users and many queer and LGBTQ+ specific blogs losing years of curated content to heavy-handed algorithms (Sarappo). Users who discovered and grew into their queer identities in tandem with Tumblr voiced concerns that there wouldn’t be a similar online community available for younger people. However, sites such as Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram have risen to fill in the gap left by Tumblr, each generating their own unique queer communities among both the ex-Tumblr users and younger LGBTQ+ people (Lewis).

Can Physical Needs be Met by Digital Means?

Outside of the sharing and confirmation of identity, a major facet of the internet's purpose in LGBTQ+ communities has been as a tool for activism and visibility. Both nationally and internationally, digital technology offers a means for organization that in prior decades required massive amounts of in-person effort or resources. A case study can be examined with the *It Gets Better* project, which was established as a digital activism movement. Founded by prominent gay advice columnist Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller in 2010 as a response to several highly-publicized LGBTQ+ youth suicides, the *It Gets Better* project featured videos of adult LGBTQ+ individuals speaking about how their lives had improved and changed since their youth, emphasizing that there was a way to grow up into a happy, healthy, and loved queer person. The project went viral, reaching far beyond the confines of insulated online queer communities and finding its way across mainstream social media and YouTube. One of the most viewed videos featured employees of the Pixar animation studio telling their own stories, the expanse of the project having reached such a level that the endorsement of a 'family-focused' company such as the Disney-associated Pixar was possible (Muller 276).

The project was not without its detractors however and was often criticized for placing too much emphasis on middle-class, privileged LGBTQ+ experiences and not pushing for change in the non-digital world. *It Gets Better* inspired responses such as the *Make it Better* project, which sought to give LGBTQ+ youth and adults the tools they needed to effect change in their lived environments (Muller 275-6). Additionally, as Jeremiah Garretson points out in his text *The Path to Gay Rights*: "...social media is unlikely to provide much of a platform for activists to communicate with those opposed to their rights...media 'bubbles' will render cross-group dialogue nearly impossible" (Garretson 237). The siloed nature of social media, where one can create a space that shuts out opposing ideas or philosophies, has meant that the internet

(and social media in particular) mainly provides a means of intercommunity communication. Likewise, many current activists have emphasized that these digital communities and projects focused on LGBTQ+ identity are, while useful for networking or increasing visibility, no substitute for the positive benefits a physical community offers (Movement Advancement Project 20). In this last section of the paper I will highlight examples of digital technology being utilized outside of the previously covered social media communities. While the internet can serve as an excellent source of identity exploration, expression, and affirmation that is not its sole purpose in the LGBTQ+ community.

A recent study by the Movement Advancement Project (MAP), a LGBTQ+ focused think-tank, estimated that between 2.9 and 3.8 million LGBTQ+ people live in rural areas of the U.S.—up to 5% of the rural population and 20% of the general LGBTQ+ population (MAP iii). Many queer people in these areas have chosen to live in these areas for the same reasons as their straight, cisgender counterparts—values of the surrounding community, self-reliance, nature, and family can all make a non-urban environment attractive (MAP 1). However, the nature of living in rural or isolated communities means that the challenges or discrimination LGBTQ+ people face in their day-to-day life are often amplified by factors such as increased visibility among a smaller population, the interconnectedness of rural life, and fewer support structures being available (MAP 9). These are compounded with the already existing issues of rural life—including addiction, lack of job opportunities, and limited access to healthcare or other services (MAP iv). What the study makes clear is that the internet is “...little substitute for the positive emotional, mental, and physical health impacts of an affirming, in-person social network and community” (MAP 20). However, when this positive social capital is not available the internet

often fills the gap by providing queer youth and adults with support, knowledge, and directories for services.

It would be easy to conclude that the internet's main function within the LGBTQ+ community is a means of 'escape' for people feeling trapped in intolerant spaces, particularly for youth who have little say in where they live. However, research done by Mary Gray has shown that even among young people online resources are often utilized "...to expand [the] experience of local belonging" (Gray qtd. in MAP 20). In other words, the internet is being used as a tool to experience the larger LGBTQ+ world and pull the knowledge gained back into the physical community. The MAP study cites the "Queer Appalachia Project" and "Queering the Map" as two examples of internet based projects that do not seek to provide digital escapes, but rather to illustrate what it means to be a queer person living in non-urban environments and offer the democratic platform of the internet as a place for these stories to be told (MAP 20). The former serves as a platform for queer people in the Appalachia and Southern regions of the United States to tell their stories firsthand and encourages the sharing of resources and activism in those communities (Queer Appalachia Project). The latter is a modified Google Maps which allows user to drop a 'pin' on spots of significant importance to their queer identity or life—giving a tangible sense of presence to people living in areas not traditionally associated with queerness. All of this is to say that—while the internet can serve isolated queer communities and people as a resource, sanctuary, or networking resource—perhaps one of its most critical functions has been as a relatively accessible platform for people to tell their stories, hear the stories of others, and disseminate information.

Though the focus of this paper has been on LGBTQ+ internet usage in the United States, the effects of digital technology on queer life in other parts of the world should not be

overlooked. In addition to the internet providing a means for people to access information in countries that criminalize or discriminate against homosexual or non-gender conforming behavior, the internet has also played a vital role in promoting organization and activism. Several studies and surveys on the importance of the internet in international LGBTQ+ life and politics have been made, focusing on areas such as South Asia, Turkey, and the international work of LGBTQ+ specific NGOs. All seem to make the general conclusion that, though the internet is a vital tool in international queer activism, it is no substitute for the boots on the ground activism that needs to occur for marginalized and at-risk queer populations to grow and thrive. As stated by Scott Kugle in his article, “Internet Activism, Internet Passivism:

People habituated to computer use sometimes harbor the illusion that just sending information over the Internet successfully transmits that information, without realizing the complex social processes of translating information into effective transformation at the grass-roots level. (Kugle)

In other words, the divide between on- and off-line populations in the LGBTQ+ community is particularly visible in communities that are further marginalized by geography and culture—promoting digital community building can be useful, but it is not enough to create positive change alone. At its core the internet is a tool; it is not a substitute for the benefits in-person community and activism provides, but rather a supplement to facilitate the works these communities do. As we defined earlier, community is not merely a collection of people—it is pooled resources, abilities, and the capability of the group to promote safety and advocacy. Though the internet can provide an excellent means of organization, if groups want to be truly inclusive and effective some type of ‘offline’ action is required.

Conclusions:

As stated in the introduction of this paper, when I set out on this project, I wanted to explore the ways that the internet had altered queer identity and the way activism is practiced, as well as how technology has changed the way queer identity is perceived and performed. From my research and examination of case studies, my conclusions about the place of the internet and digital technology in the LGBTQ+ community in relation to these goals can be summed up into three separate, but interconnected conclusions.

The first is that the historical trajectory and needs of the LGBTQ+ community made the internet especially suitable for community building and identity affirmation. In the wake of the HIV/AIDs crisis, when so much pain and devastation had run through the queer community the parallel rise in consumer technology helped queer networks rebuild, spread information, and offer support. The anonymizing quality of virtual space has allowed many to experiment with identity and identification, connect with others who share their identities, and utilize an accessible platform for organization throughout the world. The very nature of the internet as a flexible changing space made it an ideal tool for the queer community and has continued to be a vital aspect of LGBTQ+ life for the past two decades.

However, the second research conclusion I have come to has been that this move towards the virtual has—along with the instantaneous communication and ever-changing theoretical evolution that such platforms facilitate—created a clear divide between the on- and off-line queer communities that has yet to be reconciled. Though there are ongoing projects that seek to bridge or reconcile this gap, the fact remains that an online community cannot be a true substitute for physical social groups and activism. As was noted above, the needs of queer people both nationally and internationally cannot be met through technology alone—there needs to be

real, physical actions taken to promote greater acceptance, safety, and socialization of the LGBTQ+ community.

Lastly, I can conclude with certainty that technology and the internet has dramatically changed what it means to be queer in the modern world and will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future. How that will happen next is yet to be seen, but it is reasonable to assume that for new generations, identity and technology will be even more inexorably intertwined than they are now. The internet has only become more ubiquitous in the lives of everyday people and has dramatically changed how everyone, not just queer people, interact with the world. But for the queer community this change is especially notable since LGBTQ+ survival has always been particularly reliant on the intercommunity connections and relationships one forms. What the internet and technology has shown us is that the form this community takes and what functions it fulfills is as fluid as identity itself.

Annotated Bibliography

Aaron, Michele. "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction." *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, edited by Michele Aaron, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, pp. 3–14.

Written by Michele Aaron, this source is the introduction from a larger critical anthology on queer cinema and film theory. Though the text was not utilized in full for this project I have found the portion cited and quoted in this essay to be useful in several papers on similar topics, since it presents a clear and concise summary of queer theory, the 'queering' of popular culture, and what exactly queer means in academic contexts.

"Anthem." *Critical Commons*, MCI, 13 Sept. 2012, criticalcommons.org/Members/JLipshin/clips/Anthem.mp4.

This source is a 1997 television ad for MCI Communications Corp., a telecommunication company in the United States. The short video advertises both internet services and the internet as a concept, framing it as a unique space where inequalities (such as race, gender, age, or ability) can be removed and one can communicate 'mind-to-mind.' For the purposes of this paper, this source was chosen because it encapsulates the early era of optimism for what the internet could provide—without any of the pitfalls that would later become evident as digital communication rapidly changed the way the world operated. Additionally, it encapsulates the idea of the 'internet as escape' which this essay explores as an aspect of queer internet usage.

Barrett-Ibarria, Sofia. "Remembering the Golden Age of the Queer Internet." *i-D*, Vice, 3 Aug. 2018, i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/qvmz9x/remembering-the-golden-age-of-the-queer-internet.

In this 2018 article written for *i-D* digital magazine, Sofia Barrett-Ibarria describes the early-aughts era of queer internet usage via first person interviews and citation of other authors' work. Barrett-Ibarria focuses on the impermanence of these early communities and the anonymity they provided, which is held in contrast to the archival nature of social media and the new emphasis in the present day on screenshots or 'receipts' of internet interaction. This source provides excellent testimonials of early internet usage among younger queer people and was particularly helpful in my investigation of online LGBTQ+ communities pre-Tumblr, when creating these online collectives often required much more deliberate action and organization.

Brammer, John Paul. "She/Hers': In Progressive Move, 3 Presidential Hopefuls Add Pronouns to Their Bios." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 21 July 2019, [nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/she-hers-progressive-move-3-presidential-hopefuls-add-pronouns-their-n1032101](https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/she-hers-progressive-move-3-presidential-hopefuls-add-pronouns-their-n1032101).

This article on the NBC news website briefly investigates the phenomena of adding personal pronouns (i.e. she/her, he/him, they/them) to social media bios, the ethics of this practice as defined by the Human Rights Campaign and GLAAD, and the 2020 Democratic presidential candidates (Elizabeth Warren, Julian Castro, and Bill de Blasio) who have listed their pronouns on Twitter. This article was cited briefly in my paper as an example of the effect LGBTQ+ communities online have had on the larger world, since the practice of disclosing pronouns originated in the queer community.

Burgess, Susan. "Queer Theory." *The Encyclopedia of Political Science*, edited by George Thomas Kurian, vol. 4, CQ Press, 2011, pp. 1411-1412. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*,

link.galegroup.com.library2.csumb.edu:2048/apps/doc/CX1671601196/GVRL?u=csumb_main&sid=GVRL&xid=13223414.

This source, written by Susan Burgess, is an entry from a much larger online encyclopedia of political science. As with Aaron, this is a source I have utilized in past projects for its detailed and comprehensive definition of queer theory. Notably, this source provides an excellent explanation of the societal power binaries (man/woman, white/black, straight/gay) that queer theory and practice seek to disrupt. In the context of this specific paper I have utilized this text to further explain the theoretical concepts and ideas I am exploring in my research.

Centers for Disease Control. "U.S. Statistics." *HIV.gov*, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 25 Sept. 2019, hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/data-and-trends/statistics.

This website, managed by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, provides statistics, information, and resources related to HIV and its treatment. The website includes detailed overviews of what HIV is, how it can be prevented, and what treatments are available as well as relevant news items on the disease. The particular section I used for this project was a 'Fast Facts' page that cites statistics from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention on HIV diagnosis and demographics in the United States. This information was particularly relevant to the historical context section of this paper.

Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. Basic Books, 1994.

Chauncey's text provides a comprehensive history of urban gay life prior to the mid-1900s, shattering the common cultural myth that there was no existing queer society pre-World War II and the more visible activism of the 1960s. This text draws on many

primary texts such as newspapers, diaries, police reports, and inter-community literature to support its exploration of these early queer communities. In the context of this paper, this text provides vital historical context to my investigation of LGBTQ+ community building and supports my argument that there is a precedence for the use of media to maintain and facilitate these connections.

Gallegos, Christopher M. *The New "Gayborhood": Defining and Redefining the Gay*

Community in a Technological Age. 2016. University of Colorado, Master's Thesis.

ProQuest. [search-proquest-com.library2.csumb.edu:2248/docview/](https://search-proquest-com.library2.csumb.edu:2248/docview/1858569195?accountid=10355)

[1858569195?accountid=10355](https://search-proquest-com.library2.csumb.edu:2248/docview/1858569195?accountid=10355)

This text, written by Christopher Gallegos, is a thesis submitted to the University of Colorado as partial fulfillment for the author's Master of Social Science degree. The text seeks to investigate the creation and integration of physical LGBTQ+ communities with digital 'fragmented' spaces via historical context, identity theory, and observation of the changes that have occurred among queer communities since the dawn of the internet.

Though the main argument of the paper is that this change has been overall negative and has led to "a lack of interpersonal connection," the section where the author defines the purpose of community in the context of LGBTQ+ people was particularly useful for this paper.

Garretson, Jeremiah J. *The Path to Gay Rights: How Activism and Coming out Changed Public*

Opinion. New York University Press, 2018.

In this social science text, author Jeremiah Garretson documents the enormous shift in public opinion that has occurred towards LGBTQ+ people over the past 50 years. This shift was due in part, Garretson argues, to the mass coming out that was necessitated by

the AIDS crisis as well as the tireless activism that the crisis required for community survival. In the context of this project, I utilized an excerpt from the book wherein Garretson criticizes the use of social media as a tool for activism. The internet in general (and social media in particular) Garretson argues, is not a likely area for activists to change minds due to the isolating ‘bubble’ of most online social networks. This supports my claim that online communities, no matter how helpful, are inherently unstable and siloed from outside opinion.

Gillett, James. “Media Activism and Internet Use by People with HIV/AIDS.” *Sociology of Health and Illness*, vol. 25, no. 6, 14 Aug. 2003, pp. 608–624., doi:10.1111/1467-9566.00361.

In this paper, author James Gillett investigates internet usage and activism of people with HIV/AIDSs. The article identifies four specific themes for these sites (“autobiography, expertise, self-promotion, and dissent”) and makes the argument that there is a direct connection between the media-savvy queer activism that was necessitated by the AIDS crisis and current internet usage by people with HIV/AIDS. For my own project, this paper provided vital evidence of early queer internet usage via its documentation of HIV/AIDSs centered ‘webrings’ in the mid-nineties and supported my conclusion that the historical trajectories of the queer community made the internet a natural extension of ongoing activism.

Halperin, David M. *How to Be Gay*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012.

David Halperin’s text makes the argument that gayness is a cultural practice and that gay men specifically have a cultural ethos that exists outside of mainstream heterosexual society. The author also criticizes what he sees as the ‘assimilationist’ goals of current

queer activism (and the presence of social media, to a certain degree) as undermining distinct gay cultures that have existed for decades. I utilized this text primarily as a historical resource, drawing from the last chapter of Halperin's text ("Queer Forever") to further flesh out the historical context of the LGBTQ+ community in the pre-internet era.

Kugle, Scott. "Internet Activism, Internet Passivism." *Trikone Magazine*, vol. 15, no. 4, Oct. 2000, p. 10. *ProQuest*. search.proquest.com/docview/224755129?accountid=10355

This 2000 article by Scott Kugle for *Trikone* magazine investigates internet usage in South Asia among social activists, particularly gay and lesbians in India. Kugle makes the argument that, though the internet has provided a liberating space for many queer people around the world, it has clear limitations. In this paper, I draw on a quote from Kugle which points out that those accustomed to using the internet often forget its limitations for activism in the real world—particularly when it comes to reaching the most vulnerable members of a community. This point supports one of my final conclusions, that the internet has created a clear divide between those who can and cannot readily access digital technology.

Leever, Dani. "Online Safe Spaces: How the Internet Can Change the Lives of Queer People." *SBS*, SBS, 2 May 2017, sbs.com.au/topics/sexuality/agenda/article/2017/05/02/online-safe-spaces-how-internet-can-change-lives-queer-people.

In this article from *SBS*, an Australian media conglomerate, Dani Leever investigates the use of digital spaces among young queer people and others isolated by culture or circumstance. The article utilizes several quotes as well as the author's personal experiences to support the use of digital communities as a gateway for young people into the larger queer world and emphasizes the importance of internet as an escape and space

for expression. Like Barrett-Ibaria, this source provided me with important first-person testimonials that I could draw on to provide examples of positive online queer communities and demonstrates the importance the internet has come to have among LGBTQ+ people.

Lewis, Rachel Charlene. “How Gay Tiktok Became Gay Tumblr for Gen Z.” *i-D*, Vice, 2 Oct. 2019, i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/zmjqew/how-gay-tiktok-became-gay-tumblr-for-gen-z.

In another article published via online magazine *i-D*, Rachele Charlene Lewis covers how many younger LGBTQ+ people have—since the large exodus of users from Tumblr—established a new queer internet hub on the video app TikTok. The article provides quotes from several popular gay TikTok users and considers the growth in the site’s community since Tumblr’s NSFW policy changes. This article provided me with further context for the instability of internet communities and provided an interesting example of how online communities change.

Movement Advancement Project. *Where We Call Home: LGBT People in Rural America*. April 2019. lgbtmap.org/rural-lgbt.

This report published by the Movement Advancement Project, a LGBTQ+ specific think tank, investigates the presence of queer people in rural areas, assesses their specific needs and challenges, and offers recommendations on how to better serve these communities. In addition to challenging the myth that LGBTQ+ life is based exclusively around urban areas, the report offers invaluable perspective on the unique needs of queer rural communities. I utilized this report extensively in my paper as both a statistical resource and support for my claim that technology and internet communities cannot meet every need of LGBTQ+ people. Additionally, the paper provided excellent insight into what the

internet *can* provide these communities—access to a broader base of resources and knowledge that can be pulled back into physical spaces.

Muller, Amber. “Virtual Communities and Translation into Physical Reality in the ‘It Gets Better’ Project.” *Journal of Media Practice*, vol. 12, no. 3, Feb. 2012, pp. 269–77. *Crossref*, doi:10.1386/jmpr.12.3.269_1.

This 2011 article by Amber Muller from the *Journal of Media Practice* explores the founding, influence, and criticism of the ‘It Gets Better Project,’ founded by Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller in 2010. Muller provides both a general overview of the project and its criticism as well as academic and theoretical analysis of the project as a community support effort. For my purposes, this article provides examples of real-world community building efforts via the medium of the internet and highlights the limitations of such projects. It served as invaluable support for my claim that the divide between physical needs and digital means has yet to be bridged entirely; though the internet is a democratic platform, it does not provide the direct support that vulnerable members of the LGBTQ+ community often require.

Oakley, Abigail. “Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labeling on Tumblr.” *Social Media + Society*, July 2016, doi:10.1177/2056305116664217.

This article by Abigail Oakley examines identity disclosure, ‘authentic’ queer identity, and labeling practices on microblogging platform Tumblr. Oakley builds on previous scholarship surrounding the construction of identity and examines the nuances of the nonbinary identifiers created and utilized by Tumblr users. This article provided

important academic context and support in my exploration of Tumblr as an online queer community as well as the criticisms that often were aimed at the site.

“Queer Appalachia.” *Queer Appalachia*, Electric Dirt Collective, queerappalachia.com/.

The Electric Dirt Collective and their ongoing “Queer Appalachia” project seeks to celebrate and offer a platform for queer voices in Appalachia and the South via art, writing, activism, and expression. The project publishes an annual “Electric Dirt Zine,” runs several social media accounts, and facilitates other programs that focus on harm reduction and technology access for rural populations. In investigating this project, I concluded that it is a prime example of the convergence of digital and physical community building. In utilizing the democratic nature of the internet as a relatively accessible platform for magnifying voices the Electric Dirt Collective facilitates real-world activism in the communities that need it the most.

Reed, T. V. *Digitized Lives: Culture, Power, and Social Change in the Internet Era*. Second Edition, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

In this text, author T.V. Reed explores the massive changes the internet and digital communication have created in the way people live their lives. The book is a broad survey of the many ways the internet has altered everyday life, covering diverse topics and illustrating each with extensive citations and examples. In the context of this paper, I drew on Reed’s interpretation of the earlier cited “Anthem” advertisement and some of the author’s more general points about the culture of the internet.

Sarappo, Emma. “How Tumblr Taught Social Justice to a Generation of Teenagers.” *Pacific Standard*, 13 Dec. 2018, psmag.com/social-justice/how-tumblr-taught-social-justice-to-a-generation-of-teenagers.

In this article for the *Pacific Standard*, an online magazine with an ethos of social justice, author Emma Sarappo explores the unique queer culture that sprung up in the early 2010s around Tumblr. The article utilizes first-person testimonials and focuses specifically on the liberal politics of the site, which served as many user's introduction to the tenets of social justice and activism. I drew on this article for this project as a historical source investigating both Tumblr as a LGBTQ+ community hub and the decline of the service as a centralized queer space. Sarappo's writing also supports my conclusions that the internet has had a major impact on what it *means* to enact and perform queerness, having been a central shaper of many LGBTQ+ people's ideology.

Shadel, Jon. "How the Internet Helped Me Embrace My Queer Identity." *Them.*, 1 Oct. 2018, them.us/story/internet-queer-haven.

In this article by Jon Shadel for the online queer magazine *them*, the author focuses on their personal experience growing up on the internet as a geographically and culturally isolated queer person. The author recalls their early forays into gay websites and video chats with other young queer people as a major force in shaping and affirming their identity, particularly as a closeted teen in a religious household. This article provided another testimonial attesting to the effects of the internet on LGBTQ+ life and identity, particularly among young people who have grown up with accessible consumer technology.

Zamanian, Parisa. *Queer Lives: The Construction of Queer Self and Community on Tumblr*. 2014. Sarah Lawrence College. Master's Thesis *ProQuest*, search-proquest-com.library2.csumb.edu:2248/docview/1535729447?accountid=10355.

This final source is a thesis written by Parisa Zamanian as part of their Master of Arts degree at Sarah Lawrence College. The paper utilizes ethnographic strategies to analyze the politics of queer identity presentation on Tumblr and theorizes that the efforts on the site to facilitate a queer ‘utopia’ inadvertently create negative circumstances for many community members. In this project, I used this source to further understand Tumblr as a queer community space and explore the criticisms and pitfalls that are inevitable in community building. Additionally, the source offered differing perspectives via first-hand accounts of actual Tumblr users which were particularly helpful in framing the ongoing debate over the positives and negatives of online community.

Final Synthesis Essay

Over the course of this semester our Capstone section discussed and reflected on the themes of crisis, opportunity, culture, and community. We read and watched a variety of sources that provided critical insight into how community is formed, facilitated, and responds to the rapid change and forces that shape society. The texts we explored were as varied as the projects that came out of our section, but all reflected unique perspectives and diverse interests. At the beginning of the semester I was unsure what direction I would end up taking in this project, but my own research as well as class discussions offered me insight and guidance during the extensive process of creating this piece.

I appreciated the format of the class Dr. Nguyen created, encouraging all of us to take the reins on a specific reading or topic and direct the week's class discussion. The discussion I facilitated with another classmate was on a chapter of Rebecca Solnit's text *A Paradise Built in Hell*, a record of the violence and social fragmentation that occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Leading the conversation about this text and speaking with my classmates when others were facilitating gave me new perspective into what our Capstone themes encompassed. Solnit's text in particular emphasized that neither crisis nor opportunity are inherently positive or negative phenomena—a crisis can generate instances of societal good while opportunity can capitalize on the misfortunes of others. Like New Orleans after Katrina and the development of Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine, sometimes the opportunities larger societal forces seize upon are detrimental to existing communities. I worked throughout the semester to be an active contributor to the discussion as well as reflect on the viewpoints my classmates offered.

Though there was little direct opportunity for collaborative work during my project, this class did offer me a chance to work directly with Dr. Nguyen and Dr. Stromberg on planning the Capstone Festival. I enjoyed this extra responsibility and the experience I gained in helping to plan a small part of the Festival. The actual work for my research project was mostly done independently, requiring me to be disciplined in gathering sources, researching, and synthesizing my points into a larger essay. In retrospect I wish I had chosen a slightly narrower theme—I often felt overwhelmed by the amount of material I found. But overall, I was able to utilize the skills I have gained throughout my time at CSUMB to work efficiently and produce a project I am happy with.

My project meets, in my opinion, the criteria and standards for a good to exemplary research essay as outlined by the rubric in the Senior Capstone Guide. I met deadlines and provided Dr. Nguyen with updates as they became available, though I could have been timelier in producing a full draft for review. I took feedback from my peers and Dr. Nguyen into account as I wrote and revised—particularly when formulating my Capstone presentation and poster. My project addresses the themes and intentions of the class in a unique and interesting way by considering the specific forms and functions community takes among a specific group of people. My sources and citations have been assessed for relevance and credibility and are cited in accordance with MLA style. My main critique of my essay, and an aspect of the writing process I struggled with throughout the semester, is *organization*. I have done enough work over the past two years to know how to critically write at length and in detail about a subject, but organization and cohesion are aspects of academic writing I still struggle with—particularly in longer papers. Though I am satisfied with the final product, there are areas that I would like to improve once I have gained more experience as a writer. I had a feeling throughout the Capstone process that my

academic research and writing skills have plateaued—but with further time, effort, and practice I can take them to the next level.

My specific project deepened my understanding of our Capstone themes by giving me new and different perspectives on what the purpose of community is and what forms it can take. As a socially anxious LGBTQ+ person who grew up with access to the internet, my attitudes towards my own identity and community were irreparably shaped by the way I interacted with digital queer spaces. That being said my feelings towards the internet and its relative societal value are neutral—I believe that the internet is a tool that can yield good or bad results depending on its use—but this project offered me new perspective on how exactly digital technology has radically changed the larger LGBTQ+ community and the ongoing academic and critical reflection on these spaces.

It is undeniable that the internet has offered a means of escape for queer people from hegemonic binary standards and can be a vital force in both spreading important information and amplifying marginalized voices. However, it is equally undeniable that community cannot and should not exist solely in the intangible space of the internet. There are needs in every LGBTQ+ person's life, no matter their circumstance that require physical relationships and spaces. Though the internet can supplement that physical space, it cannot supplant it. Reflecting on all the texts we explored throughout the semester as a class and my own independent research, I have come to realize that community is not only the people who comprise it or the resources they share it but the *space* itself. Whether that space is New Orleans, Los Angeles, New York, Appalachia, or the Castro District—the politics and culture of people inside and outside the physical spaces they call home is something that can never be entirely replaced by the changing intangible geography of technology.