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Motivations to be out online for LGBTQ+ young adults

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Motivations to be out online for LGBTQ+ young adults

Jake Sullivan '20 (Sponsor: Dr. Abbie Goldberg)



Introduction

Current Study

Explores the decision-making processes LGBTQ+ young adults describe in being out or not on social media, and how the platforms themselves affect how comfortable, safe, and empowered these young people feel in doing so. Drawing from queer theory and co-cultural theory with a feminist intersectional lens, this study explores how and why marginalized individuals decide to communicate their queer identities with one another across social media.

Why does this matter?

- 95% of youth in the United States report they have access to some form of new media, including personal cell phones and social media accounts (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).
- 45% of teens report being online nearly constantly, and another 44% reported they go online several times each day (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Benefits of social media: Queer-affirmative role models and resources; space to learn and try out newfound language, labels or expressions; conduit to come out; connection with others

Risks of social media: Online hatred, false information, people who misrepresent themselves, context collapse, etc.

Research Questions

1. How do LGBTQ+ young adults describe the decision-making process about whether and how they used social media to express their outness? How did they consider this decision-making process to change over time?
2. How did LGBTQ+ young adults perceive the platform as impacting their ability and comfort with expressing their LGBTQ+ identity? How do these beliefs affect how participants make meaning of whether and how much to be visibly queer online?

Method

- Several online platforms and snowball sampling were used to recruit.
- Interviews were semi-structured, to empower participants to share what felt important to them & to reduce implicit biases I may have had when crafting the questions, missing important experiences or prompts.
- I used a thematic analysis framework during the coding process, focusing coding on the behaviors and rationalization of said behaviors each participant described in expressing their queerness online, and how their experiences deviated from or directly opposed heteronormativity.
- In applying a feminist intersectional theory, this study recognizes that both my own identities, and the participants' affect the research process, and cannot be separated from the two parties' shared queerness. During the interviews, I took steps to reduce power dynamics.

Findings

How Participants Considered Platform's Effects on their Outness (n, %)

Publicness of Social Media Behaviors Factor

Facebook as difficult to navigate... 10 (40%)

Content-based vs. Person-based Focus of Social Media Platform

Finding freedom in content-based sites like Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, etc... 12 (48%, 8 were trans/nonbinary)

Seeing diversity in body type, racial identity, gender/sexuality, etc. for first time on social media... 12 (48%)

For many, these reasons coincided, causing participants to compartmentalize parts of their identities into different sites. Reasons were both internally and externally focused, in participants' desires to gain confidence in, explore, and solidify their own identities, as well as to help other queer people.

Reasoning Behind Choices To Be Out Online (n, %)

Role Modeling for Others

Purpose of being out to be representation for others ... 11 (44%, 7 were people of color)

Opposing Heteronormativity/Cisnormativity Through Transparency

Displaying queer identities alongside holistic and realistic portrayals of emotion ... 8 (32%, 5 were trans or nonbinary)

Feeling Left Out of Mainstream Queer Representations

Simply being connected to heterosexual and/or cisgender friends created fear... 15 (60%)

Feeling dissimilar or unrepresented by mainstream queer representations ... 12 (48%, 10 were people of color, 10 were plurisexual, 9 were both)

Fear of Being Excluded by Community

Held back engaging with queer community due to "cancel culture" ... 4 (16%)

Reasons for Change in Visibility Over Time (n, %)

Reasons for Change in Level of Visibility

Expression and outness increased over time... 17 (68%)

Establishing a queer network of visibility helped... 16 (64%, 12 were plurisexual, 7 were people of color, 6 were both)

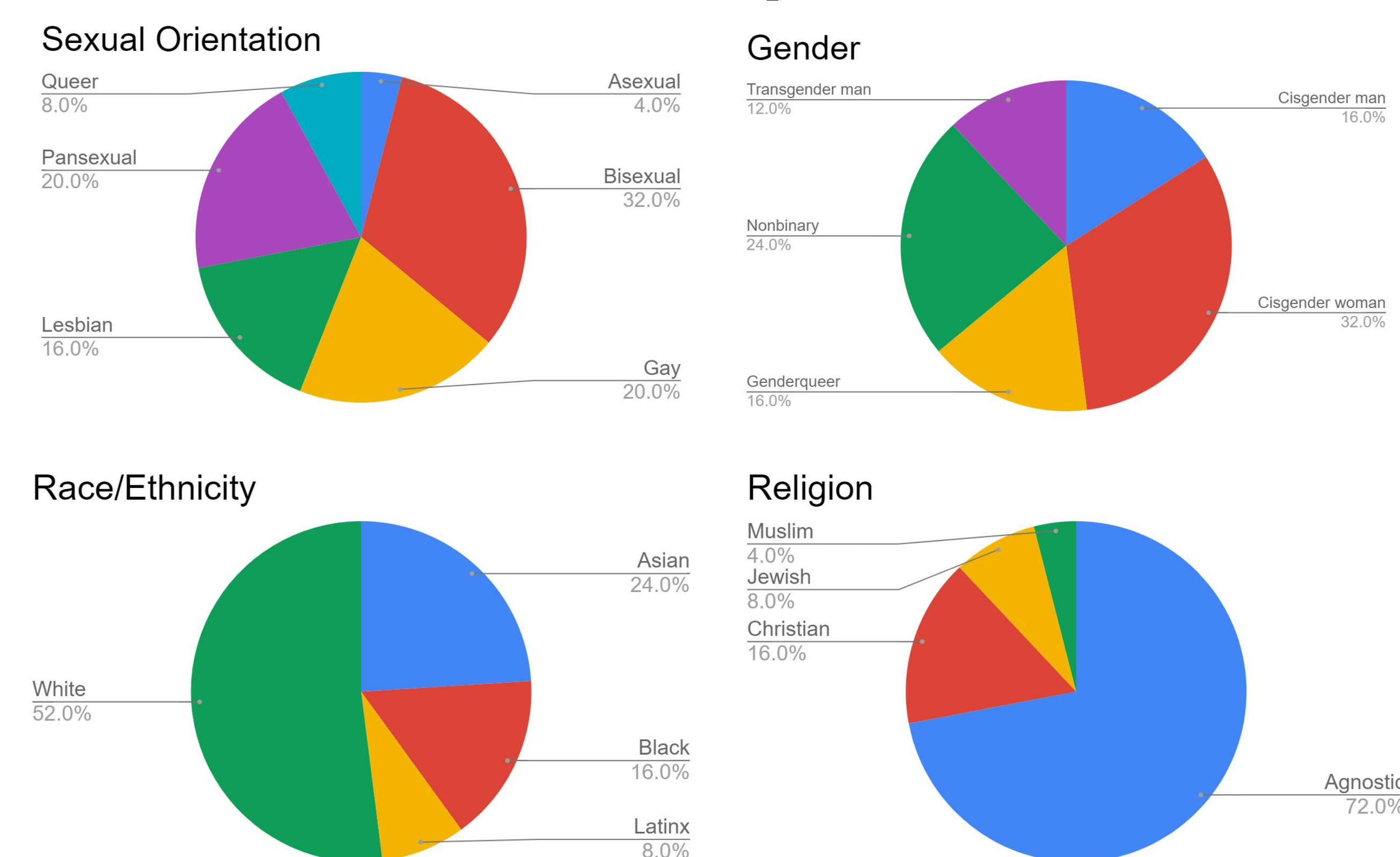
Taking on role of educator increased confidence... 13 (52%)

Altered offline circumstances increased comfort/ability... 8 (32%, 5 were people of color; 6 were plurisexual)

Weighing safety as a factor in deciding to be online... 12 (48%, 7 were trans or nonbinary, 8 were people of color, 4 were both)

Feeling empowered through education of social media functionality 17 (68%)

Sample



Note. The average age of the sample was 22.8 years old, with the range being 20 years old – 33 years old. One participant identified as intersex as well as nonbinary. Three individuals felt comfortable with multiple labels for their gender, being femme/nonbinary, nonbinary/agender, and transmasculine/nonbinary. For the two participants who differentiated between sexual/romantic orientation, one identified as heteroromantic/pansexual, and the other as aromantic/asexual. Three participants identified as feeling comfortable with multiple labels, such as gay/queer, bisexual/pansexual, or lesbian/queer.

Discussion

- Some participants ($n = 4$) felt ambivalent about being out online, either because they were private people or uninterested in social media. Some of this may be rooted in internalized homophobia or transphobia, with responses suggesting "I'm not that kind of queer," or "I'm not loud about it."
- Trans/nonbinary participants were often more attracted to platforms removed from offline identities ($n = 6$), and those more focused on content rather than networks ($n = 7$), and platforms where they had more control over their profile.
- Trans/nonbinary participants' motivations to be out included creating ways to transcend and display their conceptions of gender nonconformity online. Some approached their gender with humor to convey playfulness and fluidity, sometimes describing it as a complexly curated aesthetic.
- Queer and trans people of color ($n = 10$), described feelings of fear and invisibility at a higher proportion than their white and/or cisgender peers. Despite this, they either created or found online spaces specifically for queer and trans people of color at high rates ($n = 6$), suggesting great resiliency against oppression happening within the queer community.
- Participants' expressions of their queerness very commonly differed across social media platforms ($n = 20$), and that the interfaces themselves were integral to this decision, succeeding in doing so, but not without trial and error.

Limitations

- Recruiting online may elicit participants who may have been more likely to be out/express themselves
- Sample was mostly limited to people currently living in an urban area. Most participants ($n = 18$) attended Clark University, which may have presented more socially-progressive perspectives. Despite attempts to recruit a diverse range of racial and ethnic identities, over half of the sample was white. No MTF (male-to-female)/transfeminine folks were interviewed.

With social media in constant evolution and rapidly growing in pervasiveness, queer young people have kept up through developing entirely new forms of expression online, promoting authenticity, resiliency, and transparency in whatever they share.