Verbal Visibility: An Analysis of Queer Lexical Development in Digital Fan Communities

Aiden Puccio (they/them)

Project Goals

My research questions will guide me in theorizing a "queer lexicon" as related to the linguistic culture of LGBTQ youth in online fan communities:

- How do the new modes of connectivity made possible by digital media shape LGBTQ identity exploration and community development through language use in fandoms on various social media?
- How do contemporary forms of communication impact a wider sense of queer legibility, with particular attention concentrated on the retainment, reappropriation, and restructuring of certain text styles, formats, or phrasings?
- In what ways does the recognizable propensity for younger LGBTQ people to connect digitally impact their perceptions of temporality and sociocultural belonging?

I will analyze the language of digital LGBTQ fandom environments to determine how phenomena like memes, formatting choices, and other subcultural typicalities demonstrate communally constructed language norms that contribute to a connective, identifiable, and developing queer lexicon.

Methods

My work will be centered around qualitative evaluation of the development and integration of various styles of language into the recognizable vocabulary of online fan communities. I will engage in discourse analysis to further understand the various opinions and experiences of environments that are built by large amounts of people in interconnected ways.

Following this queer understanding of media as multilayered and interconnected, my analysis will operate on three levels:

1) a review of significant literature including television show episodes, movies, interviews, and more that sparked additions to the queer fandom lexicon and highlight how certain communities are centered or marginalized (Gray 2009)

2) an analysis of complex memetic communication that requires a referential knowledge base of multiple queer cultural moments and established lexical forms

3) a synthesis of existing academic research in queer theory, gender and sexuality studies, digital humanities, and rhetorical studies with the emerging phenomenon of queer lexical legibility.

Project Significance

In majority-LGBTQ spaces like fandoms on social media, language patterns develop into phrase formatting legible to tens of thousands of people. Gay people who idolized actress Judy Garland (The Wizard of Oz) used to use "a friend of Dorothy" to signal their identity. When the popular series She-ra used the phrase "a friend of Mara" in a similar context in 2020, young fans on social media made connections between the historical slang phrase and this contemporary use. This sense of community engagement stems from the shared vocabulary developed around LGBTQ topics and becomes a part of a recognizable queer lexicon (Warner 1999). I am particularly interested in how the constancy of this digital environment allows for a sense of continued normalcy despite major social changes through maintaining a specifically identifiable and constantly growing lexicon that fosters a feeling of belonging within LGBTQ fandom through the connectivity of social media.

References
Gray, Mary L. 2009. Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America. New York: NYU Press.
Warner, Michael. 1999. The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life. New York: The Free Press.