

Online Communities as Adoptive, Supportive Cultures for LGBTQ Individuals

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ABSTRACT

LGBTQ individuals worldwide are often forced to conform to their geographical culture's norms on sexuality and gender. This often leads to a double life in order to hide their sexuality which can often come at the detriment of their mental health. Support systems are crucial to continued wellbeing and one space where these individuals are receiving this support is in online communities. When their daily lives are surrounded by cultures which oppose much of who they are, these individuals choose to join or make their own communities with distinct cultural norms and rules that better fit their worldview. Aspects of culture such as masculinity, femininity, collectivism, and individualism are oftentimes swapped in these online communities. Individuals from highly individualistic cultures with masculine elements develop alternative online cultures encompassing aspects of collectivism and displaying more feminine qualities. Problems these groups face and the reasons they choose to turn towards online support systems are also discussed in the paper.

KEYWORDS

LGBTQ, COVID-19, Culture, Individualism, Masculinity, Internet

INTRODUCTION

Around the world homosexuality and other non-hetero sexualities are often deemed unacceptable. Using *Figure 1* from the Pew Research Center we can see that while homosexuality specifically is seen as more acceptable in the western world, it's still not a welcome way of life in many other countries. LGBTQ individuals in highly masculine cultures often have to hide their sexuality and ideals in order to fit into their both individualistic or collectivist cultures. The punishments for having non-conforming sexualities often pushes these groups into hiding, exasperating feelings of isolation and loneliness. This idea of a culture you must conform to isn't isolated to LGBTQ-unfriendly countries, many times the ideals and "cultures" present in one's own personal circle can be just as damaging. Some LGBTQ individuals that feel trapped in these situations, unable to find the support they need, turn to online alternatives to obtain that support. These online

alternatives can be incredibly diverse. Choices can range from online games, social virtual reality platforms, to any number of online social media sites. While oftentimes large-scale online spaces can harbor hate and harassment for women and disenfranchised groups [3], LGBTQ individuals are often able to create self-moderated online spaces where they can receive the support they need in an online community that reverses the norms present in the real world that they had to take refuge from.

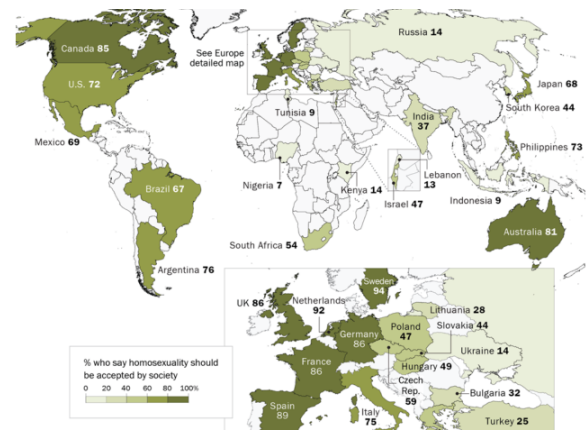


Figure 1. Percentage of given populations which think homosexuality should be accepted. Darker colors indicate higher percentages.

CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Views on homosexuality and other sexualities differ from country to country and even from one local community to another. Within these areas, the prevailing cultural views often shape how expressive one can be in regards to their non-traditional sexualities and views. When the surrounding culture's ideals differ from what the individual personally believes, they can feel a push away from their local cultures and communities. This often leads to isolation, mental health issues, and a search for alternative cultural systems to be adopted into which better embody their views and ideals.

Masculinity

Masculine cultures tend to be less accepting of homosexuality than more feminine cultures. When it comes to LGBTQ ideals and their lives within more masculine cultures such as areas in the Middle East, these groups often

find themselves hiding their true sexualities as a response to laws and cultural norms. Even in more accepting feminine cultures, transexual individuals can often be seen as exceeding the normality after standards changed as a result of accepting gay individuals [13]. In regards to overall culture, anything that tries to deviate from the norm is seen as something that is a threat to the pre-established culture. As a result, persons will be tolerated as long as their self doesn't undermine the prominent culture they're residing in [13].

Individualism

The second cultural dimension relevant to understanding LGBTQ issues is individualism. Similar to masculine cultures, in collectivist cultures as long as the individual doesn't attempt to overturn the prevailing culture, they're less likely to have issues with the in-group//. In a way, both these dimensions are intertwined. The more masculine and more collectivist a culture is, the less you want to express yourself if you're part of a disenfranchised group. Likewise, in a much more individualistic culture, expressing yourself as an LGBTQ person and deviating from the norm and standing out is more acceptable.

Collectivist cultures, and more so those cultures which are both collectivism and masculine present challenges to LGBTQ individuals seeking support and validation. Someone living in such cultures might still want a primarily collectivist culture around them. While a more individualistic culture might allow them to express themselves with less risk, features of a collectivist culture such as stronger family ties, the valuing of relationships over tasks or work, and valuing the whole instead of oneself might still be important to certain LGBTQ individuals. In these cases, when a more individualistic culture might not be what the person is looking for, and when their own more collectivist culture is non-accepting, LGBTQ individuals often have to find alternatives to retain these feelings of community and family [11].

CHOOSING TO GO DIGITAL AS AN LGBTQ PERSON

LGBTQ groups have taken to the internet in an attempt to carve out spaces with a different culture which better aligns with their ideals and needs. The internet has become a new avenue used to create new exclusively online cultures which aim to give disenfranchised groups a new home. Places like Facebook [17] and other social media sites [15] have become hotbeds for large groups of LGBTQ individuals from around the world who are looking to share their experiences with allies who will understand their struggles. Additionally, in these online communities, individuals can choose to mold their spaces however they wish. Many times, taking a more collectivist approach to community building by using the group to push out opinions and ideals that are contradictory to what they believe, and prioritizing the group as a whole and it's wellbeing as opposed to the wellbeing of the individual.

Choosing Culture

Can one say that these online groups have a culture all to their own? While traditionally, one might say no, when one looks at these groups, they feature much of what a traditional idea of culture might include. Most importantly, they serve a similar purpose to a culture you might find in a country. They shape the individual, provide them with a set of ideals and opinions, and serve as a group structure that they can be a part of.

These online cultures are not exclusive to LGBTQ communities either. As computers and the internet became more accessible and people spent more time online, online subcultures grew and thrived for various groups. There are online groups with their own customs, their own imagery, their own way of speaking, their own achievements they're proud of, and their own history. The commonality between these types of online spaces is that people chose to become part of that group and culture. They concluded that the values, ideals, and or customs of these online cultures were something they wanted to be a part of, something they wanted to contribute to.

With disenfranchised groups especially, they might not get to feel as if they're part of the "offline" culture they were born into as they're often seen as a threat to it. Online alternatives serve as a second home to these groups. They help shape identities and push ideals forward [17] much like an "offline" culture might do. They protect them and give them a space to connect with others who share similar ideals, giving them a second system which they can rely on.

Support Spaces

Online communities are an overwhelmingly great source of support for LGBTQ individuals [9]. This support can be as simple as having someone to confide in, or someone who has gone through the same issues they have [9]. Many adolescents note that internet sources allowed them to explore their gender identity as well as describe their gender experiences [9]. Having the support of others can be incredibly important to navigating the challenges that come with being an LGBTQ individual [14]. Being connected with, and getting support from similar people also has greater effects on mental health than having just general support [14]. These benefits of online communities are incredibly important as LGBTQ individuals, and specifically transgender adolescents, are more likely to be adversely affected by serious mental health effects [6]. Additionally, one of the biggest benefits of online support systems is that many times the support one person receives stays online and can end up helping multiple people in the community instead of just one [16].

The Idea of Family

Many LGBTQ individuals receive scorn or rejection from their families. Parents can be relayers of cultural norms and ideals and can fail to accept their child. Even when the rejection isn't overt, many parents tend to describe their

transgender child's identity as a medical condition or a lifestyle choice [7]. Common behavior that damages the mental health of their LGBTQ child ranges from refusing to use their child's new name or pronouns, to failing to show empathy during their child's struggles [6]. These are some reasons why LGBTQ individuals choose to create new familial connections online. Online groups act as found families, providing support systems, connectedness, and answers to questions LGBTQ individuals may have about their gender or sexuality [9]. Having the ability and comfortability to share their true identities with others also allows individuals to form more authentic friendships [9]. The idea of a second family isn't a new concept. If asked, many people could probably bring up at least one person who they value and consider as close as "family". For LGBTQ individuals who have been rejected by their real families, left without support and unable to confide in anyone, online alternatives become the space where they can make strong connections which become their main source of familial support.

Virtual Reality

Online communities have evolved alongside the technology used to access them. From simple message boards, social media sites, and online games, there is now a variety of online spaces people can go to connect with similar people. Virtual reality however, is one of the least explored spaces for interpersonal interactions at the moment. Virtual reality can provide a more personal, face-to-face interaction, and other benefits for the mental health of LGBTQ and specifically trans individuals. In online games with character creation features, trans individuals can choose to create and represent themselves as their ideal selves [12]. This aspect of customization of gender and sex is incredibly important as body dysphoria has been noted to change and fluctuate over time [8]. With a character creating system, the individual can change their representing character whenever they wish to, in whatever way they want to. Virtual reality pushes these positive effects even further. Individuals struggling with gender dysmorphia can experiment with a new digital body which is a more correct representation of themselves and control that avatar through their real-life movement.[1]. Currently, even without virtual reality, many players of online games which allow for personal character creation feel that they live more authentic lives because of their involvement in these online spaces [5]. The benefits of these virtual experiences also seem to carry over into the real world [5]. By increasing the immersion the individual feels when participating in these virtual worlds, through the use of virtual reality, one can assume that these benefits might increase as well.

EFFECTS OF COVID AND ISOLATION

One topical point that needs to be brought up is the effects of COVID-19 on LGBTQ individuals. Lockdowns have caused LGBTQ youth to be hesitant to use voice based

communication methods to contact support systems such as therapists due to the chances that unaccepting parents might overhear [4]. Additionally, because of the inability to leave their homes, some youth have become stuck living with non supporting parents, isolated from social connections [4]. Especially with the higher rate of mental health issues present in some LGBTQ groups, being able to connect with an accepting community helps alleviate stress and increases feelings of belongingness [10]. Virtual alternatives as explained in this paper have become of great use to youth in keeping these connections present during this period of isolation [4]. These spaces which were once used by individuals who could not find support outside of the virtual world have now become invaluable to those who now cannot meet with their "real life" groups.

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

As long as there is a culture or community which pushes aside disenfranchised groups, online alternatives will continue to exist. I believe that the next step in these communities is truly virtual reality. Multiple companies have continued to invest in virtual reality hardware, with Facebook's Quest 2 being the newest budget alternative for those looking to dive into the virtual world. If virtual reality continues to decrease in price, and it's adoption increases alongside that price drop, I would assume groups dedicated to the inclusion and support of multi-national LGBTQ individuals will increase. Additionally, with more openness towards gender and sexuality exploration, the internet will surely play a part in delivering that information.

CONCLUSION

LGBTQ individuals worldwide have turned to the virtual world for communities which better represent their ideals and goals. Those stuck in unaccepting masculine cultures, or those who'd prefer a more collectivist cultural experience can find online alternatives which they can adopt. These online communities have become important sources of support not only for those stuck in unaccepting culture but also for many youth currently unable to meet with their support groups due to COVID-19. These online spaces will continue to exist for individuals who need them, and their importance for those exploring their gender identity and sexuality will just increase over time.

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