

How did the digital LGBTQ+ community use nostalgia and social media to cope during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Introduction

The purpose of investigating mental health within digital queer communities is to analyse the occurrences and repercussions of the COVID-19 quarantine period. To fully understand the position of the LGBTQ+ community regarding mental health coping mechanisms, there must be an analysis of published advice, tips, and guides for enduring the emotional pressure of surviving a global pandemic by trusted peers. The research project follows four key questions:

- 1) What are the trends in quarantine habits and coping mechanisms among LGBTQ+ Twitter accounts?
- 2) What are the most popular posts from the March-August time period about quarantine habits?
- 3) What coping mechanisms do COVID-19 mental health posts promote surrounding queer communities?
- 4) Is there a focus in posts centred around nostalgia-inducing products/media?

These questions aim to identify specific commonalities across accounts and individual posts to detect the most prevalent issues and coping mechanisms identified by the digital LGBTQ+ community over the March-August 2020 period. Understanding the digital queer community's response to the mental health repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic would give insight to what alleviates emotional stressors for queer individuals in the pandemic. With this project, I hope to identify, contextualize, and critically assess the techniques and media promoted by LGBTQ+ individuals to cope with the global pandemic from a group often overlooked.

To address any areas of potential bias, I am queer transgender man and I am apart of the online LGBTQ+ community. While this may impact my critical discussion, the coding of content analysis shows strict trends and commonalities without implementing any of my own biases or conclusions. However, my place in the LGBTQ+ community and experiences with homophobia and transphobia have motivated me to advocate for the LGBTQ+ community in any way I can.

The proposed study aims to reflect on the commentaries brought forward by Gammon and Ramshaw (2020) and similar studies with strong relevance but were concluded and published before the full timeline of the quarantine period. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was little knowledge of how long the virus would remain urgent, but by Summer 2021 there will be further insights to the full ramifications of the COVID-19 virus and quarantine. Furthermore, the newly-coined term ‘COVID anxiety’ implies the toll of the pandemic on those suffering from anxiety disorders. By analysing posts from Twitter, this study focuses on personal statements that reflect the emotions of the queer community during the quarantine period. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (Brenner 2020) note that LGBTQ+ people face anxiety and depression at a higher rate than heterosexual individuals, creating a higher risk community for post-quarantine mental health repercussions and social isolation has only increased mental health stressors globally (Drabble and Eliason, 2021).

Methodology

This study aims to identify and examine trends in LGBTQ+ related media publicly published on the social media platform Twitter between the months of March and August 2020. The study population will be LGBTQ+ social media users and the sample will be collected by searching for posts including the keywords ‘LGBTQ’ or ‘queer’, ‘mental health’, ‘COVID anxiety’, and ‘coping mechanisms’ and taking a systematic random sample from Twitter’s free API Index. There will be a sample of tweets from Twitter to be individually analysed in a content analysis then the common themes will be comparatively examined in the written discussion section of the final report. Because the study is centred around online media, the demographic of individuals without access to social media, whether because of age, region, socioeconomic status, etc., are likely to not be represented within the sample; therefore, the population must only include the online LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, diversity within the LGBTQ+ community can drastically influence experiences and relative well-being. To account for this, only posts surrounding mental health and coping with COVID-19 will be included in the sample.

As the study is primarily content analysis, there is no necessity for a specific research environment. The only required materials are access to Twitter’s free API Index and a coding program to input the coding schedule. The quantitative nature of content analysis allows for

structured, objective research to analyse trends without crossing ethical boundaries. However, the study will also include qualitative components by focusing on words/phrases and individual stories to implement qualitative practices into a traditionally quantitative process. Utilising coding and content analysis for a social research project allows for interdisciplinary elements within the digital aspects as well as the theoretical and sociological aspects. Digital communities pervade countries or cultures and formulate communities with 21st century globalisation, research and attention towards these online communities are imperative to keeping up with the required isolation of the global pandemic. Before the study commences it will need to be approved by the TCD School of Sociology ethics committee. To ensure anonymity, all sampled posts will not include any information about the poster and all tweets acquired will have been publicly posted in accordance with Twitter's Terms and Conditions.

Content analysis is also easy to conduct under COVID-19 restrictions, as it can be conducted in any location with a stable internet connection and does not require any in-person interaction like that of survey research. While content analysis can be disadvantageous in biased analyses beyond strict numerical trends, the comparative discussion and qualitative aspects of this project allows for a theoretical approach to the results with opportunities to denote places for further research. The research project will be conducted individually by myself, barring weekly check-ins from my supervisor, over the research period. Over the five to six week research period, the first week will be devoted to developing the coding schedule and manual. A small pilot test will then be conducted to ensure the effectiveness and consistency of the coding process. The second and third weeks will be primarily sampling and coding sessions. The fourth week will be devoted to synthesizing and analysing the trends and findings. The final weeks will conclude with writing up the final article and discussion.

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