

Quarantined on Twitter: How Did the Digital LGBTQ+ Community Use Nostalgia and Social Media to Cope During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Abstract

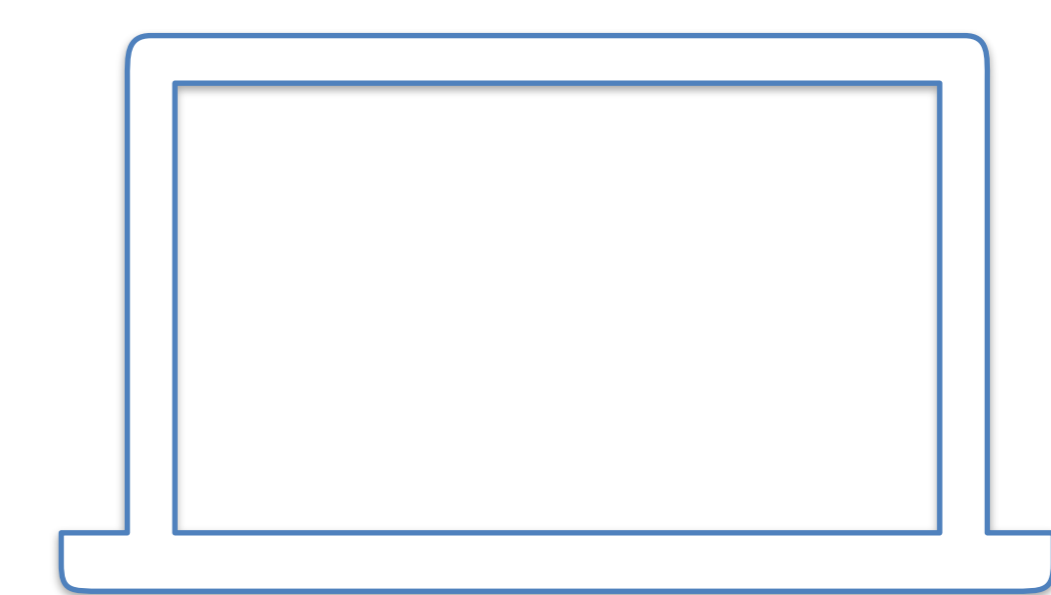
Many studies have examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health as well as the role of social media in communicating news, experiences, and emotions from lockdown. This study focuses on the LGBTQ+ community on social media and how quarantine affected mental health and nostalgic media consumption. By conducting a content analysis and thematic analysis of tweets from March - August 2020 from LGBTQ+ accounts surrounding COVID, quarantine, nostalgia and mental health, this study explores the struggles and concerns of the digital LGBTQ+ community during the pandemic. Furthermore, special attention was paid to the nostalgia-based coping mechanisms, the potential repercussions for this demographic of extended lockdown under intense emotional stress, and the changing role and impacts of different social media platforms on mental health.

Introduction

While lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people experience mental health diagnoses and disorders at a higher rate than heterosexual cisgender people, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions have exacerbated these issues (Gato et al. 2021). By utilising their strong presence on social media and online platforms, the queer community shared their experiences and de-stressing strategies during lockdown. The high increase of nostalgia-based past time habits was a strong focus for many individuals in soothing COVID-based stress (Gammon and Ramshaw 2020). The aim of this study is to explore quarantine habits and coping mechanisms shared on Twitter from March - August 2020 by LGBTQ+ accounts. There is also a focus on nostalgic media consumption and the impacts of social media as a primary space for queer people throughout lockdowns during the pandemic.

Conclusions

This study examined the emotional responses of the digital LGBTQ+ community through shared experiences of nostalgia and mental strife through the COVID-19 lockdown. Despite an overall split view on the positives and negatives of social media as a space for communication and social interaction, there was a collective appreciation for nostalgia-inducing media in the forms of television, movies, literature, and video games among others. Furthermore, when building social theory around digital queer communities, special attention should be given to the importance of escapism, community ties, and the standards set by those within the community.



Methods and Materials

A sample was taken of 300 total tweets relating to at least one of the following keywords: LGBT(Q+), gay, mental health, COVID(-19), isolation, and quarantine. Each tweet was coded based on the general relation to mental health, COVID-19 lockdown, and media consumption. Once coded, all identifying information was redacted and all tweets were anonymised. Basic information was also collected from the accounts' publicly available biographical data. Upon completion of the sample, each tweet was colour coded by the researcher and separated into categories. The categories included: mention of media, mention of mental health, COVID-19 concern, positive tone, negative tone, mutual aid resources, social media trend/popular post, and LGBTQ+ related.

'The worst part [about] the pandemic is realizing just how many people only hold a full conversation with me when they think it's a possibility that I'll sleep with them in the very near future' - User 250

LGBTQ+ Mental Health

It is commonly understood that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown negatively affected the mental health of many people. The overall wellbeing of the sample was relatively low, with many individuals feeling overwhelmed by the bleak presence of COVID-19 news in traditional media outlets and stressed by the unprecedented nature of a global pandemic. Focusing on LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, many challenges emerging from lockdown regulations on a global scale are specific to the LGBTQ+ community. Homophobia and queer fetishisation by heterosexual women also caused discomfort for users in the sample. While blatant homophobia is mentally and emotionally damaging for young queer people, the hollow romanticisation and fetishisation of queer couples portrays false allyship and creates discomfort for the recipient. Alongside the loneliness within isolation, User 250 reflected on the lack of substance and connection through quarantine in writing, 'The worst part [about] the pandemic is realizing just how many people only hold a full conversation with me when they think it's a possibility that I'll sleep with them in the very near future'. Beauty standards and preconceived expectations of queer people are highly prevalent in traditional and social media within the LGBTQ+ community (McCormick and Barthelemy 2020).

Social Media Interest

Despite higher prevalence of positive tone overall (61.1% positive, 38.9% negative), tone regarding social media was relatively split (n=13 positive, n=15 negative). Some users found comfort in platforms such as Twitter and TikTok for the purposes of comedy, self-expression, and community engagement. The prolonged separation from in-person queer communities left social media as a key tool for communication and positive interaction. Many in the sample found positive representations of the LGBTQ+ community on platforms such as TikTok that provide optimism for younger queer people who may feel trapped by certain expectations set within their household during lockdown, an observation also found by Kidd et al. (2020) surrounding trans and gender nonconforming youths mental health in quarantine. Contrasting with the positivity and community interaction fostered from online fandoms, many users also criticised social media for negatively impacting mental health with overwhelmingly negative COVID-19 news, blatant homophobia on users' timelines, and necessary breaks from the stress and standards of platforms like Twitter. Multiple users announced a prolonged leave of absence from their accounts within the sample, all citing the toxicity of Twitter and the need for a mental health break during lockdown.

Media Relation * Tone Crosstabulation

Count	Media Relation	Tone		Total
		Positive	Negative	
	No relation	11	21	32
	Film	2	3	5
	Television	31	7	38
	Youtube/Online Video	2	1	3
	Literature	11	3	14
	Social Media	13	15	28
	Traditional News Media	2	1	3
	Video Games	4	2	6
	Music	11	3	14
	General	1	0	1
	Total	88	56	144

Table 1. Media Relation and Tone Crosstabulation

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