

Analysis of LGBTQ Groups and Movements Based on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the role of social media in the present LGBTQ group members and LGBTQ social movement. Three major questions will be answered: the role of social media in LGBTQ identity formation, the effectiveness of social media as a tool for LGBTQ right movement, and potential risks and limits of using social media among LGBTQ individuals or in LGBTQ movement. After the review of existed studies and logical argument, the result shows that social media is important as a source of informal learning in LGBTQ individuals' self-identity production. Social media can be used as a new tool for LGBTQ social movement because of its ability to empower its users. The risks and limits of using social media among LGBTQ individuals include the potential development of internet dependency and difficulty in promoting systematic change in offline setting.

Keyword: *Queer theory, LGBTQ movement, social media, self-identity formation, social movement*

1. INTRODUCTION

The LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) has been used since 1990s. Far before that time, LGBTQ people had started their fight against the discrimination and criminalization posted on them by the society for about for over 100 years. Currently, some countries have accepted the legitimacy of same-sex marriage such as United States, Taiwan, Canada, Brazil. Other places, including Czech Republic, Mexico, Italy, have legalized same-sex partnership in different administration level. Although it is the fact that the attitudes towards LGBTQ group have changed a lot during recent years, these people still face significant burden in their life.

As the improvement and progress of internet technology, the world has entered a new era of Web 2.0 which allows people to communicate and share information at an unbelievable speed. Social networking sites, also called social media at many occasions, has become one of the most populous services especially among younger generation. It is hard to determine an accurate definition for the term "social media", since how it is easy to assume every kind of media is somehow "social". Here, however, for the purpose of this article, the range of social media to internet-based service should be limited. To be more specific, according to Obar and Wildman (2015), there are four criteria to define social media: Social media services are (currently) Web 2.0 Internet-based applications; User-generated content is the lifeblood of social media. Individuals and groups create user-specific profiles for a site or app designed and

maintained by a social media service. Social media services facilitate the development of social networks online by connecting a profile with those of other individuals and/or groups. [1]

At present, the active user of social media worldwide has reached 3.96 billion of people (as of July 2020). [2] The most popular networking sites include Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, WeChat, and Instagram, each of which has over 1 billion users around the world. [2]

The rise of social networking sites is not just a business success but posts large social impacts as well. This article will concentrate on explaining the specific influences on LGBTQ group. In detail, three questions will be answered: the role of social media in LGBTQ identity formation, the effectiveness of social media as a tool for LGBTQ right movement, and potential risks and limits of using social media among LGBTQ individuals or in LGBTQ movement.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1. The Formation of LGBTQ Identity

Throughout the history of LGBTQ study, several scholars have published their own version LGBTQ identity formation progress. Although these theories are not totally the same, they do share some similarities. Most of them would agree that LGBTQ people do not recognize their identity suddenly, but through a probably long process of formation and self-acceptance. In the beginning of their identity formation,

LGBTQ members will start to feel that they are different from other people. Most theorists would agree that such sense of difference is “motivated by comparison to others or social norms”. [3] As these individuals continue on this process, they would start to search for information in order to clear out their confusion about their own identity. In the end, they will form the self-acceptance to their new identity. At first, they may talk about their identity to close ones such as families and friends. Finally they willing to come out to more people.

From the process mentioned above, it is assumed that the most important step for LGBTQ individuals to form their identity is to collect the information to help them understand their initial feeling of difference. According to Fox and Ralson (2016), “Although some individuals may have access to interpersonal or systemic resources, such as family members, friends, school counselors, or queer-friendly organizations, many individuals proceed through these identity stages on their own”, and “they must seek out information and learn about various elements of LGBTQ identity and experiences through other sources, frequently media, to fill these information gaps.” [4] Traditional media, as literatures, films, arts, and TV series, has played this role of providing information for these individuals. It is reasonable to say that in the present setting, social networking sites have become one of the most important parts of these resources.

Scholars have concluded the reason why internet is significant to LGBTQ member into three main points. First, internet gives these individuals access to almost unlimited information so they do not need to rely limited interpersonal sources around them. Second, social media allow individuals to connect with each other through more convenient way while still remain certain level of privacy. Finally, compared to traditional online chat rooms, social networking sites are different in the way that people on these applications are willing to use their real name instead of being totally anonymous. Thus, LGBTQ individuals who have found safety in the traditional anonymous online environment may feel being challenged by such new mainstream trend. [4]

Scholars also pay attention to how social media work as a source of informal learning. Fox and Ralson (2016) have found in their study that social media help LGBTQ individuals in traditional learning, social learning, and experiential learning. [4] Firstly, the searchability of internet help individuals further explore their identity after they start feel being different from other people. The online information helps them “understand that sexual and gender identity was much broader than being gay, and that having language to describe their identities in more fluid terms.” [4] Secondly, because social media provide younger individuals with an easy way connect themselves with other LGBTQ members, those older members can be regarded as a “model” for these newcomers. By observing the behavior of older members and the sanctions they receive in the online

environment, newcomers will see these as the appropriate way to behave learn to act in the same way. At the same time, LGBTQ individuals will also find more confidence and a sense of being normal by seeing celebrities making voice for them. [4] Thirdly, social media is a platform for individuals to experience their early try of coming out. Online environment allows them to start identifying themselves as LGBTQ while continue exploring their sexualities at the same time. Online dating sites also contribute a significant part in individuals’ experience of coming out. Some of them may use online dating even before they fully recognize themselves as LGBTQ. By meeting up with another LGBTQ individual, newcomers will have clear sense of how it looks like to have a romantic relationship as a LGBTQ person. [4] After individuals form a more solid LGBTQ identity, they are willing to educate other people online about LGBTQ contents. [4] Such online experience encourages individuals to participate in offline event or meet other individuals and shift their online role to the offline identity.

2.2. From Social Media to Social Movement

The power of social media in political sphere is getting larger day by day. Not only politicians use it as a way to promote themselves and their policies, but normal citizens can also utilize social media in order to seek social change. The popularity and accessibility of social networking sites make it possible for people across large geographical range bound together in the virtual setting. The feature of social media that allows people to communicate more effectively contribute to a faster way to mobilize people as well. One example showing the power of this new technology in politics is the Arab Spring, a series of political movement and revolution in Northern African and Middle East area in 2011. It is argued by many scholars that one factor triggering such intense social change is the political communication on social media including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. [5] Other well-known example of political movements originated on social media including Black Lives Matter and #Metoo show dramatic social impacts across the world.

One significant reason why social media can help LGBTQ and other marginalized groups is that it gives an opportunity to be empowered to these people. The empowerment through internet include an individual level and community level. The former is due to the increase of one’s ability to access to more information and social resources, while the latter is because social media can help people form a virtual community or organization easily. [6] Such empowerment encourages sexual minorities to further share LGBTQ-related information, as mentioned above, to educate other LGBTQ individuals or just the general public so that their public acceptance can be potentially increased. In the end, as

Yang (2019) concluded, “social media empowerment provides, first and foremost, a sense of freedom of thought, expression, and movement that eventually makes social mobilization and social movement possible, leading to a changed social structure that benefits disadvantaged groups.” [6] Under such empowerment, everyone gets a sense that they can influence the society and contribute to the solution of these social issues.

In areas where the society still holds conservative opinions towards sexuality minority, social media and the empowerment brought by these new media provided LGBTQ individuals and groups more opportunities to speak out. For example, in China, the state rarely talks about LGBTQ right in official occasions. Same-sex marriage or partnership is not accepted in China. However, social media is actually the most vital platform for LGBTQ individuals and activists share their political appeal. A noteworthy instance for such situation is the Qiu Bai’s case in China. Qiu, a Chinese lesbian college student attending Sun Yat-sen University, sued the Ministry of Education of China because she found the contents of pathologizing homosexuality on her college textbook. The case gains attention by the public, especially by other LGBTQ individuals. Although Qiu lost the suit in the end, it is still an important moment in the history of Chinese LGBTQ movement since it stimulated the public attention on the subject of sexual minority. The intense debate around this topic appeared among normal citizens, and because traditional media, largely censored by government, could not publicly display such discussion, the main stage for this social movement is the social networking sites. Qiu Bai herself and her group members also create a public account on WeChat and pose several articles expressing their claims, though some of them are deleted later because of their sensitivity. [6] Qiu’s posts have received a great number of readers, comments, likes and shares on social media. In 2018, the Weibo account of People’s Daily, China’s state-owned news platform, posted an article which addressed the importance of ensuring homosexual individuals’ right. This is viewed as a significant evidence showing a possible change of attitude toward LGBTQ people within Chinese government. Although such change might not be the direct result of Qiu’s lawsuit, but it is reasonable to assume that it could receive indirect influence of the online discussion.

2.3. The Limits of Social Media Movement

Social media, like many other parts of internet, has its limitation and may even show harmful impacts on LGBTQ individuals. Scholars have argued that LGBTQ individuals who frequently seek information and support online are at risk of social media dependency. Han and colleagues (2019) have showed in their research that such dependency is related to one’s depression and self-identification level. To

be more specific, those who have higher depression and lower self-identification level are easier to become dependent on social media. At the same time, those who spend more time seeking online support are more likely to show social media dependency as well. Researchers also indicate that, to many people’s surprise, LGBTQ individuals’ offline depression level is negatively related to support received online. Possible reason could be the gap between the perceived support from social media and obstacles faced personally in real life. [7]

The last point also reflects one limitation of social movement on social media. As what Han mentioned, “what happens online stay online”. [7] Although social media has provided social activists a faster and more effective way to spread their claims and mobilize their supporters, it still remains in question that whether movement on social media could provoke real systematic change in the real world. Thinking about #MeToo, one of the most representative social movement originating from social media, it is true that during and after the movement many sexual offenders have been brought to the public, many of them are celebrities who have received good reputation before. However, the problem is #MeToo only bring individual cases to the public stage but does not essentially overturn the problem existing in the social system. The result is that not all of offenders mentioned in the movement have received punishment from criminal justice system. Similarly, LGBTQ movement on social media face the same burden that their actions probably contribute little change to the real world. There are two possible reasons why online LGBTQ movement, alone with other movements on social media, have difficulties post real impacts to our social system: 1) The lack of proper leadership on social media; 2) short time period of the topic being trendy online.

2.3.1. Lack of leadership

As mentioned in previous section, social networking sites empower almost everyone online. Because of such empowerment, it seems that everyone online has the same influence power. There is no obvious leadership in the online movement who can lead the movement to the desired goal because everyone seems to play the same role in the social media. Though there might be opinion leaders on social media, who provide idea base for the movement, the leaders who are in charge of the pragmatic aspect of movement is still missing. The importance of leadership in the social movement has been addressed in many previous studies. Leaders are crucial to attract more people taking part in the movement, as Valls and colleagues said, “Through sharing stories, socially constructing meanings and exploring new ideas, leaders develop the capacity to persuade other individuals to join their campaigns and movements.” [8] The role of leadership in social movement

includes to build social relationship, use narratives to build emotional base for the movement, determine the strategy, deciding the organizational structure, direct the practical action. [9] Without the proper leadership in online social movement, LGBTQ groups will feel difficult to mobilize their supporters in the offline setting and post real impacts to the society.

2.3.2. Social exposure of short time period

Online information is refreshed second by second. The fast pace of social media might make the social issue topic that once was on the top of the social media trend soon be forgotten by the users. While those LGBTQ activists or individuals, who meet these issues everyday no matter in online or offline setting, will receive little influence from such refresh of information, other people that do not belong to LGBTQ identification will gradually leave these discussions. Although many of these people are willing to support sexual minorities and during the time period that the topic is in trend, when the discussion is not popular anymore, they are very easily to move their concentration on other topic because the obstacles faced by LGBTQ individuals everyday are not these people's personal experience. Such lack of consistence of online popularity, besides the lack of leadership that is crucial in attracting more participates, make the movement not a continuous and organized activity but might be more like composed by several short time segments that cannot have the same influence as the former type of movement in real life.

3. CONCLUSION

This article is directly by three research questions: what is the role of social media in LGBTQ identity formation, how social media become an effective tool for LGBTQ right movement, and how the seeming beneficial social media can also have negative effects on LGBTQ group members. In each of the section above, appropriate answers to these questions have been provided. Social media work as a source for informal learning that help them build the LGBTQ's identification. Social media empower the users and provide a platform for LGBTQ social movement. Negative parts of social media are that individuals may show dependency to internet and have little impact on offline setting.

Although a lot of previous studies have been examined during the process of writing, one limitation of this article is the lack of more solid data show the detail of LGBTQ individuals' social media use. Future quantitative study on this topic is necessary to further study the relationship between LGBTQ movement and social media. At the same time, the speed of change on internet is so fast that it is

important to review whether the argument made by previous studies are still applicable in the current situation.

Social media is different from traditional media since it focuses more on the contents created by users themselves. A proper way of using this platform is the key to online LGBTQ movement. LGBTQ advocacy groups should also cultivate more on social media to work out a more valid and effective model for online social movement.

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