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LGBTQ YOUTUBE: COMMUNITY AND BRANDING THROUGH NEW MEDIA

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Table of Contents

List of Figures v
List of Tables vi
Abstract vii
Dedication viii
Acknowledgments ix
Chapter One: Introduction 1

Terminologies 4
LGBTQ Media Narratives 7
Dissertation Overview 12
Chapter Two: Theoretical and Empirical Engagements 18

Media Reception and Production 18
Marketing and Branding 23
LGBTQ Media Studies 26
Project Directions 35
Chapter Three: Digital Ethnographic Methodologies 40

Observational Approach and Offline Methods 42
Online Texts and Case Selection 48
Interviewing and Rapport Barriers 53
Chapter Four: Branding YouTube and Regulating LGBTQ Stories 57

YouTube's Precarious Partnerships 60
Branding LGBTQ Diversity and Social Change 67
Content Regulation: Ad-Friendliness and Community Guidelines 73
Chase Ross: Trans Education, Age Restriction, and Demonetization 89
Hartbeat: Black Lesbian Sexuality and Account Termination 93
Conclusion 97
Chapter Five: Production Strategizing and Personal Branding 99

Algorithmic Imaginaries and Production Strategies 102
Personal Branding on YouTube and Beyond 120
James Charles: Homonormative Branding 132
Gigi Gorgeous: Transnormative Branding 136
Conclusion 143
Chapter Six: Community Building and Storytelling 145

Media Interpretations and Representation Matters 148
Annie Segarra: Intersectional Activism and the Future of Accessibility 159
Shane Dawson: Mental Health and the TanaCon Failure 165
Bye Sister: Antifandom and James Charles 171
Conclusion 178
Chapter Seven: Conclusion 179

Revisiting Questions and Contributions 179

Future Research 185
Implications 188
Appendix A: Recruitment Message 192
Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Video Creators 193
References 194

List of Figures

Figure 1. Evan Greer's Tweet on Pride Branding 10
Figure 2. "#ProudToCreate: Pride 2018" Video Thumbnail 70
Figure 3. YouTube's Creators for Change Role Models 71
Figure 4. YouTube's Flagging Menu for Community Guideline Violations 80
Figure 5. Chase Ross' Tweet on Anti-Trans Algorithm 91
Figure 6. Hartbeat's SimLivNColor Lesbian Nudity 94
Figure 7. "The 'Boyfriend' Tag (ft. Troye Sivan) | Tyler Oakley" Video Thumbnail 125
Figure 8. "Makeup en Español con Kimberly Loaiza!" Video Thumbnail 133
Figure 9. "Gregory Gorgeous' Makeup Routine" Video Still 137
Figure 10. "HOLIDAY FAVES + My Biggest Giveaway EVER!" Video Thumbnail 141
Figure 11. James Charles' Subscriber Count Livestream Still 175

List of Tables

Table 1. VidCon Event Attendance 46

Abstract

LGBTQ YouTube: Community and Branding through New Media

Julian A. Rodriguez

Since the late twentieth century, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people have become a familiar presence on the media landscape. Drawing from sociology, LGBTQ media studies, feminist media studies, and cultural studies, this dissertation interrogates broader narratives about LGBTQ media representation, using YouTube as an entry point. Through digital ethnography and content analysis, I provide three key findings. First, I illustrate that YouTube brands itself as a progressive company by strategically representing advertiser-friendly LGBTQ video creators (also known as YouTubers) who vary in their identities, yet the platform algorithmically discriminates against YouTubers producing controversial content that threatens its digital presence and advertising relationships. Second, I show that video creators modify their production and algorithmic strategies to navigate the platform's restrictions, and some creators then use YouTube to develop personal brands that grow beyond the platform. Third, I underline the communities and social bonds that form because of LGBTQ creators. By sharing stories of identity development, pride, and belonging, these YouTubers inspire viewers to accept their own identities and, in some cases, become video creators themselves. Creators persist in their community engagement and media production despite working within platforms structured by algorithmic bias, capitalism, and heteronormativity. This dissertation ultimately suggests that media is polysemic and the site of ambivalent, contradictory politics.

Dedication

For Anneliese Snow White

(August 26, 2002 – November 28, 2016)

Acknowledgments

It seems like an impossible task to properly acknowledge everyone who contributed to this work. Still, I owe much to the LGBTQ YouTube users who shared their stories with me directly and indirectly. Their words transformed me as a researcher and educator, and I could not have completed this dissertation without their openness.

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during my years at UCSC. They inspired me to recognize the spectrum of LGBTQ identities and experiences, as I hope this dissertation shows. And as I watched them persevere, I felt motivated to persist alongside them. If any of you are reading these words, know that I am proud of you, always.

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all of my Rodriguez and Juarez family. Even if you did not fully understand what I do, I always felt your love and encouragement.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my niece, Anneliese Snow White, who passed away at age fourteen on November 28, 2016. The loss echoed across every aspect of personal, professional, and academic life. My work came to a standstill many days. Yet when I could eventually return to this research, I thought of her often. Her spirit and memory are part of every page that follows.

Chapter One: Introduction

I officially joined YouTube on April 11, 2006, at the age of fifteen. Before this date, I was already using the platform to watch comedic skits, dance compilations, and '90s music videos. What prompted me to create my account was the arrival of EmoKid21Ohio, a British YouTuber[1] and vlogger[2] masquerading as an angst-ridden teenager from Cleveland, Ohio. At the time, the YouTube community felt small, with videos garnering view counts in the few thousands, and he was one of the most public figures on the site. While some YouTube users voiced their support for him, others expressed harsh criticism that he seemed "pathetic" and "gay." I felt compelled to join the conversation and defend him, suggesting that he needed support and understanding while he was going through a difficult time in his life. My messages did not go unnoticed: A different YouTuber posted a now-deleted video referring to me as an "idiot." Even so, as a gay youth I felt a kinship with EmoKid. I identified him as a fellow gay figure who was honestly sharing the details of his life.

By 2010, I was watching the rise of the It Gets Better Project, started in response to a rash of suicides among bullied lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and

[1] "YouTubers" (also YouTube "producers," "content creators," or simply "creators") refers to individuals who produce videos for the YouTube platform. I use the more general phrase "YouTube users" to refer to individuals who use the platform for video consumption or production, with or without signing up for an official account. Thus, a YouTube user may not fall under the category of YouTuber.

[2] "Vloggers" refers to people who create video blogs. According to Burgess and Green (2009:145), vlogs are "[t]ypically structured primarily around a monologue delivered directly to camera." Vlog content "ranges from reasoned political debate to impassioned rants about YouTube itself and the mundane details of everyday life" (Burgess and Green 2009:145).

queer (LGBTQ) teens. I heard rumblings about thirteen-year-old Seth Walsh, a gay youth in my home county who took his life and whose story would become one of the inspirations for the project. At the same time, I saw YouTubers, celebrities, and political figures create montages and videos emphasizing that life for LGBTQ youth would improve. Among those involved was former U.S. president Barack Obama. "You are not alone. You didn't do anything wrong. You didn't do anything to deserve being bullied, and there's a whole world for you filled with possibilities," he explained in his video (The Obama White House 2010). Even then, Obama's efforts and the broader It Gets Better Project illustrated to me the online support networks tied to LGBTQ experience.

As an avid YouTube user and now researcher, I have witnessed YouTube brand itself as a diverse, progressive company despite policing and harming LGBTQ content creators. During every Pride Month since 2013, YouTube has shared public blogs and videos in support of the LGBTQ community. However, after followers of the neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer* inundated a queer content career with homophobic and anti-Semitic comments, YouTube did not intervene (Courthouse News Service 2019). The platform also abruptly terminated the account of Transthetics, a company that provides penile prosthetics to transgender men. Although the Transthetics channel[3] presented product background and educational information to this historically underserved group, YouTube emphasized that it was

[3] A YouTube "channel" refers to a YouTuber's public page where they upload videos and messages.

"not the place for nudity, pornography or other sexually provocative content" (Transthetics 2018). Just a few months later, YouTube permitted anti-gay advertisements to precede LGBTQ creators' videos, with one of the ads describing homosexuality as a harmful sin (Hills 2018).

While I offer my experiences and observations in these opening pages, *LGBTQ YouTube* is not about my story.[4] Rather, this writing is about the narratives that have solidified in LGBTQ media scholarship, activism, production, and consumption. When taken separately, I emphasize that these narratives omit the nuances and challenges of contemporary media engagement and politics. I thus use YouTube as an entry point into broader discussions about LGBTQ media[5]. I ask the following: How do branding imperatives and practices shape LGBTQ new media production? How do LGBTQ new media producers negotiate and engage with branding imperatives? What forms of community develop through LGBTQ new media production and reception? To answer these questions, I undertake a digital ethnography of YouTube. In doing this, I acknowledge that YouTube is the most widely used online video-sharing service and the second-most visited website globally (behind its parent company site Google Search) (Alexa 2021). Like other

[4] I refer to stories as "discrete and bounded accounts of events with a clear beginning, middle, and end" while narratives are a "coherent system of stories" (Reinsborough and Canning 2017:21). That is, narratives contain many smaller interrelated stories. My distinction between story and narrative contrasts with my earlier synthesis of LGBTQ media scholarship (Rodriguez 2019).

[5] When discussing "LGBTQ media," I am referring to media that LGBTQ people produce as well as media that explicitly or implicitly represents LGBTQ identities, individuals, or characters.

scholars, I maintain that the platform is an important part of the media landscape that calls for further examination (Burgess and Green 2009; Wasko and Erickson 2009), especially given its fraught relationship with LGBTQ issues and creators. Before outlining the LGBTQ media narratives that this dissertation addresses, I define relevant terms below.

Terminologies

When using the term *new media*, I highlight the use of online technologies and computer software for the production, distribution, and consumption of textual and audiovisual material. New media can take the form of websites, blogs, chat rooms, message boards, email, instant messengers, search engines, video games, mobile applications, video-conferencing programs, livestreaming services, and social networking platforms, to name some. Like Jenkins (2006), I do not propose dichotomy between new media and legacy (or "old") media (the latter of which includes, for instance, radio and print newspapers). I acknowledge that the two categories often converge, and the concept of new media is evolving.

My use of the acronym *LGBTQ* encompasses politically contentious identities and terms. Throughout this dissertation, I often refer to LGBTQ video creators and people. In these cases, I use LGBTQ as a shorthand for LGBTQ-identifying. Under the LGBTQ umbrella, I include asexuals: individuals who lack sexual attraction but may experience romantic interest (Scherrer 2008). As I discovered during my fieldwork, asexual creators identified with the LGBTQ community, and LGBTQ

YouTubers advocated for asexual inclusion.[6] As Scherrer (2008) explains, asexuals and other LGBTQ people share online community practices, and the process of coming to asexual identity parallels the process of identifying with other marginalized sexual identities. My choice to include asexual YouTubers (namely Ahsante Bean and Chandler Wilson) reflects these intersections.

I understand *transgender*, or *trans*, as a term "conceptualized by both scholars and activists as inclusive of the identities and experiences of some (or perhaps all) gender-variant, gender- or sex-changing, gender-blending, and gender-bending people" (Davidson 2007:61). Depending on the author, activist, or organization, the subcommunities and identities that fall under the transgender umbrella vary. During my research, self-identified trans YouTubers and viewers identified with terms including agender, nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, transfeminine, transmasculine, transwoman, transman, male-to-female, female-to-male, and transsexual. For my purposes, *transgender* incorporates these varied identities.

Queer is a fluid term that broadly refers to that which is "politically radical, rejects binary categories (like heterosexual/homosexual), [and] embraces more fluid categories" (Raymond 2003:98; see also Doty 1993). LGBT people have begun identifying as queer regardless of their political intentions or radical leanings. When I refer to queer people, I am describing those who self-identify as queer. When I mean queerness in the sense of radical, nonbinary, and fluid, I specify my intended meaning

[6] See Ahsante Bean's Twitter page, accessed April 8, 2021, https://twitter.com/AhsanteB/status/1055611100694302720.

at the appropriate points. This is most relevant in my review of queer media scholarship in Chapter Two.

I define *community* as a social network based in shared identity, experience, and media engagement. I extend scholarship that identifies communities of media consumers, fans, and antifans (Bobo 1988; Gray 2005; Jenkins 1992, 2006; Radway 1984). I chiefly focus on social networks that provide psychological and social support for its members. In this respect, I foreground social-psychological literature that illustrates how media influences LGBTQ people's coming out process as well as feelings of belonging, comfort, and connection (Cabiria 2008; Craig et al. 2015; Evans 2007; Fox and Ralston 2016; Gomillion and Giuliano 2011; McInroy and Craig 2015; McKee 2000).

I also extend the overlapping concepts of *heteronormativity*, *transnormativity* and *homonormativity*. I understand heteronormativity as the invisible organization of social relations that marks heterosexuality as natural, oppresses non-heterosexuals, and reinforces a sex and gender binary (Kitzinger 2005; Warner 1991). Following Glover (2016:344),

> a definition of transnormativity [is one] in which transgender people are led to believe that they too can achieve successful inculcation into dominant society by situating their gender embodiment, grooming practices, physical appearance, sexual practices, and sexuality (heterosexual preferably) alongside heteronormative standards and acceptable behaviors.

Relatedly, I understand homonormativity as a "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions […] while promising the possibility of a […] privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption"

(Duggan 2002:179; see also Stryker 2008). Thus, transnormativity and homonormativity signal incorporation into heteronormativity in terms of institutions and behaviors.

Finally, I describe *branding* as the process where corporations and individuals package, promote, and sell themselves as commodities, in turn developing and increasing consumer engagement (Banet-Weiser 2012; Whitmer 2019). *Branding imperatives* refers to the pressing need for individuals to engage in this process, with new media serving as a tool to facilitate branding (Whitmer 2019). At the same time, I understand that social media companies like YouTube must simultaneously present themselves to new media advertisers and users while carefully managing these groups' needs. In this regard, branding imperatives also shape the practices of social media platforms themselves.

By bringing these disparate terms together, I mean to show that LGBTQ new media production and reception are increasingly fraught enterprises. As will become clear in the following sections, I illustrate the commodification and heteronormative incorporation of LGBTQ people through branding, but I equally demonstrate LGBTQ people's honest storytelling and community building through the YouTube platform.

LGBTQ Media Narratives

As mentioned earlier, I hope to intervene in the narratives that have solidified in sites of LGBTQ media engagement: scholarship, activism, production, and consumption. In the following chapters, I name and detail these narratives, centering media scholarship. My intention here is to trace some narrative details to frame this

writing and illustrate how these narratives circulate across sites. With these goals in mind, it is important to note that LGBTQ media scholarship influences and overlaps with other forms of media engagement. Organizations that campaign for LGBTQ representation, such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, often call upon researchers in their work (see, for example, Consalvo 2003). Scholars also take media activism, industries, production, reception, and use as topics of study; they in turn contribute to broader media narratives, as I hope to do with this work. Some scholars advocate for LGBTQ cultural recognition and contribute to the production of media texts (Christian 2018; Russo 1987). To elaborate on one example, activist and film historian Vito Russo toured widely in the 1970s with a lecture on gay and lesbian U.S cinema, culminating in his book *The Celluloid Closet* (Russo 1987) and a Peabody Award-winning documentary of the same name.

Across media sites, one prominent narrative is that media plays a crucial role in the development of LGBTQ communities and identities, especially LGBTQ youth identities. My EmoKid and It Gets Better stories from this chapter's opening pages are part of this narrative, for instance. Similarly, McInroy and Craig (2015) illustrate that online video blogs about gender transitions contribute to transgender youth's sense of belonging and community. This process aligns with Fejes and Petrich (1993:396) assertation that "persons who are 'coming out' search both the interpersonal and media environment for clues to understand their feelings and sense of difference." Cultural consumers and organizations have pointed to the misrepresentation and lack of representation of LGBTQ people, urging for more

"positive" and "fair" stories that will psychologically benefit community members. GLAAD has tracked the televisual presence of LGBTQ characters for 24 years, producing an annual report to "combat negative and dehumanizing headlines." The report, GLAAD suggests, is necessary because media serves as a "powerful vehicle" for LGBTQ people to live as their authentic selves (GLAAD Media Institute 2020). The LGBT Fans Deserve campaign—started because of the death of a lesbian character in the show *The 100*—has released similar inventories of televisual recognition to educate people on the lack of "positive" LGBTQ stories (LGBT Fans Deserve Better 2019).

A competing narrative underlines the capitalist dangers of media recognition. Scholars contend that the rise of LGBTQ images reflects the expansion of capitalism and the need to identify new markets of media consumers (for example, see Chasin 2000; Clark 1991; Sender 2004). In this way, media and cultural industries welcome LGBTQ people as consumers but not as social subjects, ignoring LGBTQ histories and keeping oppressive systems intact (Clark 1991). Beyond academia, critical journalists and media consumers have fostered this narrative. As Radin (2019) writes for *Teen Vogue*,

> Pride month has hit peak commercialization and this year it feels like brands are capitalizing on it more than ever. […] While fostering conversations around LGBTQIA+ rights, creating further visibility for the community, and raising funds for queer-focused non-profits are signficant [sic] and commendable gestures, these efforts are also diluting queer narratives.

In a similar manner, Evan Greer, director of the digital rights group Fight for the Future, underscores the inequalities and abuses that corporate brands attempt to conceal with Pride campaigns (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Evan Greer's Tweet on Pride Branding[7]

The capitalist narrative also reflects a concern that media industries perpetuate heteronormativity by distancing and regulating controversial aspects of LGBTQ life, such as gender nonconformity and explicit sex (Gross 2001; Peñaloza 1996). Media scholar Larry Gross (2001:61), for instance, maintains that "any sign of queerness will trigger a more restrictive rating" under the U.S. film industry's "alphabet soup" system (ranging from G to NC-17 ratings). Cultural scholars, critics and commentators have further underscored that LGBTQ people are aligning themselves with heteronormative ideals by relinquishing their subcultural distinctiveness. On this point, *New York* magazine writer Daniel Mendelsohn claims that gay culture is now

[7] Evan Greer's Twitter page, accessed April 8, 2021, https://twitter.com/evan_greer/status/1134237799132094467.

distilled into a set of product choices, demonstrating a "heterosexualization of gay culture" (as quoted in Chasin 2000:45–46; see also Sender 2004).

I am uneasy about these contradictory narratives: a critical narrative of capitalist and heteronormative threats, on the one hand, and another narrative of community and psychological wellbeing, on the other. My concern is that our ideas about LGBTQ media have become commonsense and taken for granted. In a similar manner, Gray (2009) calls into question whether LGBTQ media images and access necessarily result in social change. By exploring LGBTQ youths' use of new media and avenues for political engagement, she recognizes that media is "supplementary" for some—that it is one element integrated into day-to-day existence. In turn, she challenges the narrative that media leads to a straightforward, positive change in the lives of LGBTQ youth. Like Gray, I am wary of efforts to simply infuse the media landscape with more "positive" LGBTQ stories and images.[8] I recognize that these media representations are deeply intertwined with market practices and lead to skewed representation along axes of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, ability, and mental health status. Yet, in contrast to a more critical narrative, I also recognize that media can serve as a crucial resource for individuals struggling with their identities, allowing them to feel deeply and vulnerably seen. I acknowledge, then, that media

[8] Hall (1997) similarly asserts that the strategy of positive representation, even while expanding the range and complexity of what is represented, does not displace the negative. He maintains, in the context of black images, that reversing stereotypes does not overturn or subvert them: "Escaping the grip of one stereotypical extreme […] may simply mean being trapped in its stereotypical 'other'" (272).

can buffer discriminatory rhetoric from outside the media landscape, including from family members, religious leaders, educators, and political officials.

Dissertation Overview

I organize the following chapters thematically, with illustrative case studies (Davey 1991) presented in the empirically driven chapters. In Chapter Two, I detail my engagements with previous scholarship. I elaborate on the four narratives that have solidified in the interdisciplinary subfield that I call LGBTQ media studies: (1) *the victim*, (2) *the community*, (3) *the queer*, and (4) *the assimilationist*. To bridge and bolster these narratives, I draw from feminist media reception scholarship, the detailing of online "participatory" media production, and the elaboration of social media algorithms and content management. I also extend research on branding, focusing on the growth of corporate and self-branding across the new media landscape.

In Chapter Three, I trace my research process and methodologies and situate them in media scholarship and methodological literatures. More specifically, I explain my digital ethnographic methods and the challenges I encountered while researching new media. I expand on my offline fieldwork at an annual YouTube convention, my selection of texts and case studies given the immense amount of online textual materials, and the challenges of recruitment and rapport building for online interviews.

Chapter Four extends and updates the assimilationist narrative. I demonstrate YouTube's selective incorporation of LGBTQ creators and their content. I suggest

that the company relies on an increasingly fragile profit model that forces YouTube to carefully manage competing demands from its partners, which include press, developers, creators, and especially advertisers. This profit model, I highlight, leads to strategic branding and diversity efforts meant to ensure the company's online presence and growth. I specify the advertising and community guidelines that protect YouTube's brand and contribute to the policing of creators who are working on the periphery of YouTube's profit model. I provide case studies of two queer creators: Chase Ross, a trans vlogger and sex educator, and Hartbeat, a lesbian producer and skit comedian. I argue that YouTube has censored their content for challenging the company's branding as a diverse yet advertiser-friendly, uncontroversial space. In Ross' case, his content has focused on transgender bodies and experiences while Hartbeat's content has included nudity and sexual comedy.

Chapter Five echoes yet complicates the assimilationist narrative. I illustrate how LGBTQ creators contest, negotiate, and engage with YouTube—rather than merely accepting the selective recognition the platform offers them. I detail how creators call attention to the human bias involved in YouTube's algorithm[9] while also adjusting their production processes to account for the platform's inconsistent policing. On the other hand, I highlight the strategic branding practices creators use to further their recognition inside and outside the YouTube platform. I provide case studies of two creators who leveraged their identities to develop profitable careers:

[9] YouTube likely has many algorithms to sort and label material on the platform. Even so, the video creators discussed in this writing referred to the varied algorithms as "the algorithm." I use the same language.

gay beauty influencer[10] James Charles and trans lifestyle vlogger Giselle "Gigi Gorgeous" Getty. I argue that these creators engage in *homonormative self-branding* and *transnormative self-branding*, respectively.

Chapter Six then expands on the community narrative. I illustrate two different forms of community development among video creators and their audiences. First, I show how LGBTQ creators share personal stories related to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, ability, and mental health, contributing to subsequent storytelling and community building among viewers and fans. In this line of thought, I explore the online presence of Annie Segarra, an intersectional disability activist who launched the #TheFutureIsAccessible campaign, and I illustrate the fan activities related to Shane Dawson, a bisexual documentarian who has openly discussed his mental illness. Second, I turn to look at "antifandom" that involves the dislike of a media personality (Gray 2005; J. Gray 2003). I specifically explore an antifan community that developed against James Charles due to allegations of his business deceit and sexually predatory behavior.

Chapter Seven reviews my main arguments and situates them in the context of my research questions and LGBTQ media scholarship. I then explain this study's limitations and provide cases that offer possibilities for further research. I end by considering the implications of *LGBTQ YouTube* for understanding and engaging with media.

[10] Beauty influencers (also beauty YouTubers, Beautubers, or beauty gurus) are creators who post videos related to makeup, cosmetics, and fashion.

Taken together, the chapters explore how YouTube manages the LGBTQ presence on the platform, and how LGBTQ creators and their audiences engage with YouTube and each other. I argue that YouTube polices and ultimately harms LGBTQ content creators. The platform profits from their work while facilitating anti-LGBTQ hate and stifling their attempts to educate and entertain viewers. Yet YouTube does not entirely determine LGBTQ YouTubers' video production and reception. Rather, these creators negotiate YouTube's practices and technological infrastructure to not only build their own brands but to develop networks of support and understanding. Based on these findings, I intend to speak to scholars who are invested in LGBTQ media in any capacity. I underline that LGBTQ media simultaneously commodifies, victimizes, affirms, and mobilizes LGBTQ people. My hope is that we move away from the presumption that media has a single role in LGBTQ cultural politics, pushing us to reevaluate why and how we advocate for historically aggrieved people.

LGBTQ YouTube is a collage of theories and methodologies, but I identify it principally as a media sociology and LGBTQ media studies project. The subfield of media sociology is fragmented and holds a marginal position in the broader field, in part because self-identified media sociologists have dispersed into related disciplines (Revers and Brienza 2018; Waisbord 2014). Yet I understand the sociological study of media as linking an "analysis of media industries, text, and audiences to questions about stratification, order, collective identity, sociability, institutions, domination/control, and human agency" (Waisbord 2014:15). *LGBTQ YouTube* follows this research agenda: I use an analysis of a YouTube, producers, texts, and

viewers to speak to questions of cultural identities, minoritized communities, media institutions, and structures of inequality that manifest online. Of course, other media scholars have adopted a "sociological sensibility" (Waisbord 2014), and media sociology has historically intersected with the disciplines of communication, journalism, media studies, and cultural studies, among others (Brienza and Revers 2016). Likewise, this project is interdisciplinary. My contention is that scholars need interdisciplinary work because narratives about LGBTQ media travel within and across disciplines.

This dissertation is also a decidedly feminist work. That is, I center the agency and experiences of historically marginalized communities while interrogating systems of inequality and possibilities for cultural change. To this end, I extend the work of feminist scholars like Janice Radway, Jaqueline Bobo, bell hooks, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Sarah T. Roberts, Safiya Umoja Noble, and Alfred L. Martin, Jr., among others. Following feminist media reception and production studies, I illustrate the diverse stories and perspectives of people engaged in media practice, highlighting video creators who vary by race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, ability, and mental health.

Before turning to the chapters, I would like to note a limitation of this work. As Noble (2018:10) explains in her analysis of Google's algorithms, scholars "working in the fields of information, communication, and technology struggle to write about specific moments in time, to crystallize a process or a phenomenon that may shift or morph into something else soon thereafter." Indeed, Noble recognizes

that her work will become out of date upon printing. Similarly, *LGBTQ YouTube* captures a snapshot of LGBTQ branding and community building. My findings will become outdated: YouTube will modify its diversity tactics, community guidelines, and algorithms. The public reception and interpretation of LGBTQ YouTubers will change. Some creators discussed herein will shift in terms of their sexual and gender identifications. Even so, I have made my best effort to reflect YouTube's practices, public reception, and creator identities at the time of this writing.

Chapter Two: Theoretical and Empirical Engagements

In this chapter, I elaborate on my engagements with previous scholarship. As the introduction shows, this dissertation began with a personal investment in, and uneasiness with, scholarly (and popular) narratives about LGBTQ media. Thus, I provide an overview of LGBTQ media scholarship, which I explain below as a rich and energetic subfield that is nonetheless limited in several ways. I draw from two interdisciplinary literatures—feminist media reception and production scholarship as well as marketing and branding studies—to nuance the LGBTQ media studies subfield. My aim in this chapter, then, is to survey and bridge literatures relevant to the cases and histories discussed in later chapters and point to the importance of this work.

Media Reception and Production

Media sociology, media studies, and cultural studies have given considerable attention to media reception and production. These disciplines developed in different directions, and their theoretical and methodological approaches vary. However, I outline in this section which histories are central for my project: a shift toward feminist audience and fandom research, the detailing of online "participatory" media production, and the elaboration of platform content management and algorithmic influences.

The rapid shift in the scale of mass media communications from the 1920s to the 1950s prompted significant academic inquiry. Early academic accounts considered the power of these communications over public and intellectual life. This

interest led to quantitative studies of the effects of media on audiences, and public opinion research ran parallel to these studies, with similar concerns about the psychological and behavioral effects of media (Brienza and Revers 2016; Ruddock 2001). Scholars often characterize these approaches as relying on a "hypodermic needle" model of media analysis, which is based on the presumption "that media are so powerful they can directly inject their ideas into the audience's heads" (Ruddock 2001:40). In a different context, media interest in the field of cultural studies manifested in accounts of the ideological power of media, especially film, with much critical attention given to uncovering and identifying ideological messages and assumptions within media forms, particularly with regards to the reach of capitalism (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno 1944). This model assumed audiences only inhabit ideological positions (A. Gray 2003).

In part as a response to these models, feminist scholars have emphasized the autonomy of media audiences and the polysemic nature of media texts (Bobo 1988; Hooks 1992; Martin 2021; Radway 1984). Owing to Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, these audience and reception studies have examined the role of media in individuals' day-to-day lives and have emphasized that social networks and personal histories inform media consumption and interpretation. Highlighting that audiences engage with media much more critically than expected, these accounts caution against the mischaracterization that people are "cultural dupes" who blindly accept the capitalist, racist, and heteropatriarchal messages that media industries offer to them. To illustrate, Bobo (1988) examines the ways that black women adopt "oppositional

readings" to the film *The Color Purple*, bringing their various viewpoints to bear on the film to reconstruct its meaning and empower themselves. Similarly, Radway (1984) finds that women read heterosexual romance novels while actively differentiating between what they consider "good" and "bad" works, and most read every day as a form of independence from their domestic positions under patriarchy. Audience research like Bobo's and Radway's has received criticism for diving too far into the realm of individual interpretation (Ruddock 2001); nonetheless, it has richly accounted for the diversity of media engagement and the influence of social locations (especially those tied to gender, sexuality, and to a lesser extent race) on this engagement.

Interest in those passionately involved in media consumption culminated in fandom studies in the early 1990s. With roots in feminist audience scholarship and studies of subcultures and subcultural communication (e.g., Hebdige 1979), these fan scholars have similarly emphasized the range of media reception while simultaneously combatting the public perception of fans as social outcasts and mindless consumers. A group of researchers developed the fandom field (including Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992), but Jenkins (1992, 2006) is credited with popularizing it. In a widely cited work, he details "textual poaching," or the process by which fans rework mass culture "as the basis of their own cultural creations and social interactions" (Jenkins 1992:18). Fans, then, are active creators of meaning and gather strength and courage from their shared interests. Gender and sexuality have remained key topics since the development of the field, mainly through feminist

detailing of heterosexual women's fan practices, including their creation of homoerotic "slash fiction": fan-produced fiction that pairs popular characters of the same sex from media like *Star Trek* and *Beauty and the Beast* (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992). If fandom scholars differ from previous generations of audience scholars, they have given less attention to the influence of racial identity on media reception while putting greater emphasis on the building of community and connection. This has even manifested in studies of antifans and antifan communities where consumers share their active hate or aversion to select media texts and celebrities (Gray 2005; J. Gray 2003).

The growth of the Internet and web-based platforms has facilitated new forms of media practice and fan activity. Early web adopters and academic proponents believed the Internet would allow all users to communicate openly and develop democratic "virtual communities" (Barlow 1996; Turner 2006). Paralleling these sentiments, later scholars have detailed the possibilities of new media, often leveraging terms like "participatory culture" to talk about the link between user-generated content and newly accessible digital platforms (Burgess and Green 2009; Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2006; Marwick 2013). Jenkins et al. (2006) define participatory culture as

> a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. (P. 3)

They continue, explaining that the culture is one in which members feel a degree of connection to others and believe their contributions matter. Additionally,

participatory culture, as Jenkins (2006:3) notes, "contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship," and invites fans to create and more easily circulate content by textually poaching or other means.

Yet other new media scholars have pointed to the political and commercial underpinnings of the Internet and web-based platforms, nuancing and at times directly challenging notions of participatory culture. Most notable for my purposes, social media scholarship has underlined that platforms always moderate and manage user-generated content, and algorithms hold tremendous influence over what user materials are available for reception and production (Bishop 2018; Gillespie 2010, 2015, 2018; Noble 2018; Roberts 2016). Mostly with feminist and anti-racist aims, researchers highlight that social media companies and owners have begun to facilitate the circulation of content that is consistent with their commercial and branding goals (Kim 2012)—even if some of that content is racist, misogynistic, or otherwise harmful (Noble 2018; Roberts 2016). For example, Roberts (2016) illustrates how a "MegaTech" social media firm allowed images of blackface to remain online despite protest from some employees; as Roberts explains, platforms like MegaTech risk losing users by appearing too restrictive, thereby losing the ability to offer users to advertisers. Even so, social media companies intend for these interventions to become invisible to users (Gillespie 2018; Roberts 2016). As Gillespie (2018) notes in his discussion of content moderation, the "fantasy of a truly 'open' platform is powerful, resonating with deep, utopian notions of community and democracy—but it is just that, a fantasy" (5). Yet studies still elaborate on the web's potential to empower

media producers and fans, including from historically marginalized groups, but with greater attention to marketing imperatives and social hierarchies (Christian 2018).

Altogether, these fragmented fields and subfields offer key insights that I carry forward and extend in the rest of this dissertation: first, that audiences, fans, and content creators engage with popular media forms in critical ways; second, that various axes of identity, such as gender, sexuality, and race, always inform media engagement; third, that media offers outlets for the development of community through consumption, production, fandom, and antifandom; fourth, that new media, including social media, creates avenues for people to more easily create and circulate content; and fifth, that corporate commercial decisions and algorithms both facilitate and restrict the online materials that social media users can openly share and consume.

Marketing and Branding

Marketing and branding have become a critical line of inquiry in the disciplines of critical media studies and cultural studies. Indeed, by now scholars have now charted the general trajectory from mass marketing to niche marketing to branding, including practices of personal branding. To begin, then, marketers' emphasis on the mass market goes back to the American industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century (Banet-Weiser 2012; Turow 1997). Modern advertising agencies, developed simultaneous with the production of mass-market goods, treated consumers as a unified subject. In turn, advertisers emphasized consumer conformity and homogeneity in the pursuit of middle-class ideals. Yet by the 1970s, the transition

to more niche-oriented marketing was solidifying. Advertising agencies, in conjunction with businesses and corporations, emphasized that they should reach different types of people in different ways and began segmenting people into increasingly smaller niche markets based on presumed lifestyles along the lines of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexuality (Banet-Weiser 2012; Chasin 2000; Martin 2021; Ng 2013; Turow 1997). This broader market segmentation has carried over into the new media landscape and has become a key influence in the production of minority media representations and images (Campbell 2005, 2007; Ng 2013; Turow 1997).

Still, more accounts suggest that niche marketing has given way to a cultural logic of branding (Banet-Weiser 2012; Klein 1991; Marwick 2013; Whitmer 2019). Underlining branding across sites of creativity, politics, and religion, Banet-Weiser most clearly articulates this position: "Branding in our era has extended beyond a business model; branding is now both reliant on, and reflective of, our most basic social and cultural relations" (4). This branding has become the foundation of corporations and businesses, as Banet-Weiser notes, for instance, with Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign and "green" bottled water campaigns. In contrast to earlier eras of marketing, branding is aimed at building deeper connections between brands and consumers rather than selling specific products (Banet-Weiser 2012; Jenkins 2006; Whitmer 2019), and this idea is readily apparent in discussions of brand "communities" composed of brand admirers, such as those of Macintosh and Ford (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). To be sure, social media and online platforms have

become vital spaces for brands to foster consumer engagement and support (Jenkins 2006; De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012).

A group of scholars has traced the branding of the self, with the concept of "self-branding" characterized as an extension of corporate branding practices. Self-branding, or personal branding, refers to a strategic promotion of one's identities such that one's self is a like a brand ready to be packaged, marketed, and sold (Marwick 2013; Whitmer 2019). Since the late 1990s, the idea of self-branding has exploded, and Tom Peters is credited with popularizing the term in his *Fast Company* article, "The Brand Called You." Writing in response to the rise of internet access, Peters (1997) urged everyone to identify the qualities and characteristics that made them distinct from their "competitors," arguing that "[t]oday, in the age of the Individual, you have to be your own brand" and offering suggestions for "what it takes to be the CEO of Me Inc." The article spawned hundreds of how-to books, business meetups, self-branding experts, and career counselors offering direction in these pursuits (Banet-Weiser 2012; Marwick 2013). As detailed in both trade texts and scholarly works, new media plays an often-crucial role in these practices, and individuals must navigate new media platforms, particularly social media like Facebook and Twitter, when branding themselves (Banet-Weiser 2012; Lovelock 2017; Whitmer 2019). As Whitmer (2019) explains, this branding imperative pushes individuals—particularly professional and creative class workers—to engage in constant self-promotional behaviors on and off social media, but there remains no guarantee that these efforts will be rewarded.

For my purposes, I again take several key ideas: first, the influence of corporate efforts (including marketing and branding) on the production of minority media representations and media products more generally; second, the growth of self-branding; and third, the importance of social media for corporate and personal branding.

LGBTQ Media Studies

Scholars have examined the significance of LGBTQ media recognition for more than half a century. This subfield, which I refer to here as LGBTQ media studies, spans hundreds of works and has distinct characteristics, as I explain in more detail elsewhere (Rodriguez 2019).[11] First, scholars consider varied dimensions of LGBTQ media production, reception, and use. Second, works discuss a range of media, especially newspapers, magazines, television, film, and more recently Internet platforms. Third, LGBTQ media studies is highly interdisciplinary, moving outside the boundaries of media studies proper and drawing from disciplines like sociology, psychology, history, communication, Internet studies, literary studies, gay and lesbian studies, transgender studies, and women's studies, to name only some. Last, given this diversity, methodological orientations, theoretical frameworks, and findings differ significantly.

Even so, I have identified four key narratives that have persisted in these interdisciplinary conversations: (1) *the victim*, (2) *the community*, (3) *the queer*, and

[11] Portions of this chapter are reproduced from "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Media: Key Narratives, Future Directions," Julian A. Rodriguez, *Sociology Compass* 13/4, Copyright © 2019 John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

(4) *the assimilationist*. While media scholarship is my focus and entry point, this dissertation necessarily touches on other sites of media engagement given that scholars have taken production, reception, and use as their topics of study.

The Victim

Speaking on the significance of film and television, media scholar Larry Gross succinctly remarks that one of the only positions that gays and lesbians could occupy in mass media is that of the victim (Gross 1984, 2001). For much of the twentieth century, mainstream media routinely ignored and denied the existence of the LGBTQ community. When their existence was eventually acknowledged, mass media selected narrow stories and roles in which LGBTQ people could fit. Attempting to counteract this process, early activism and scholarship primarily aimed to uncover and then challenge the media invisibility and limited roles of gays and lesbians (as reviewed in Fejes and Petrich 1993). Historically, the victim narrative manifested in several tropes in print, cinema, and television. For instance, media industries portrayed gays and lesbians as having gender presentation and behavior worthy of ridicule. In turn, as Russo (1987) explains, early mainstream film used transgender (or, more commonly used terms for the time, "transvestite" and "transsexual") existence interchangeably with homosexual life, and images of "sissies" were used to suggest homosexuality in men (see also Gross 2001). At the same time, mainstream news and entertainment outlets drove a stereotype of lesbians as "burly" tomboys and "dykes" (Alwood 1996; Gross 2001; Russo 1987; Streitmatter 1995).

Despite increased media recognition, the victim narrative has not altogether disappeared, and media industries and media users have resumed it when portraying bisexual and transgender people (Schoonover and Galt 2016). Even more, the victimization of LGBTQ people and accounts of this victimization have also trailed the rise of newer media technologies. In turn, scholars and web users have underlined the everyday occurrence of anti-LGBTQ discrimination in online communities and platforms (Brookey and Cannon 2009; Gray 2011; Pullen 2010a; Pulos 2013; Wakeford 1997). These technologies have enabled abuse ranging from the defacing of LGBTQ individuals' public profiles to name-calling, bullying, and slurs targeted at LGBTQ people. For example, Brookey and Cannon (2009) note that players in the online video game *Second Life* attacked gays and lesbians for their perceived association with bestiality. In a similar vein, Wakeford (1997) explains the targeted censorship of LGBTQ message boards and emailing lists.

The Community

From the development of gay and lesbian publications to the rise of subcultural homosexual film to the more recent emergence of LGBTQ online spaces, community has played a unique role. Remaining largely invisible to society for much of the twentieth century, LGBTQ individuals turned to media to nourish a sense of community as self-conscious and politically engaged people. It seems intuitively understood that media plays a role in the wellbeing of LGBTQ individuals, with the coming out process signaling the recognition of a key identity to oneself and the rest of the LGBTQ community. As Fejes and Petrich (1993:396) explain, "persons who

are ‘coming out’ search both the interpersonal and media environment for clues to understand their feelings and sense of difference.” This process has often formed the basis for media advocacy aimed at presenting out role models and affirming media examples for the community (Fejes and Petrich 1993; Gross 2001; Streitmatter 1995). This concern resonates with psychological scholarship that addresses media’s relationship with the self-acceptance, identity development, and feelings of belonging among LGBTQ people, particularly LGBTQ youth. Cabiria (2008), for instance, argues that gays’ and lesbians’ experiences in the online video game *Second Life* allow them to explore their identities and develop self-esteem and optimism. Similarly, transgender youth in McInroy and Craig’s (2015) study report a feeling of support and belonging after watching other transpeople’s online video blogs about the transition process (see also Craig et al. 2015; Evans 2007; Fox and Ralston 2016; Gomillion and Giuliano 2011; McKee 2000).

Relatedly, community has become the basis for LGBTQ online spaces as well as research about them (Edwards 2010; Gross 2001; Pullen 2010b; Thompson 2014; Wakeford 1997). As with other early proponents of the internet, some researchers were optimistic about the rise of web-based communications in the 1990s given its potential benefits for minority communities. In Gross’ (2001:227) words, “the Internet offers opportunities for individual engagement both as senders and receivers. […] Notable among the interests served by this (so far) uniquely egalitarian and open medium of communication are those represented by sexual minorities.” Indeed, online environments can foster a sense of belonging, acceptance, and connection; act

as sites for political activism; provide opportunities for virtually coming out; and create outlets for expressing and sharing self-stories through blogging and other web platforms (Pullen 2010a). For instance, (Pullen 2010b:19) underlines that online materials shared in response to the murder of young teenager Lawrence King in Oxnard, California, created a "copresence" based in mutual understanding, shared experience, and empathy.

The Queer

Scholars of LGBT media practice have increasingly taken on the queer label and approach. There is no consensus on the meaning of "queer," yet it broadly refers to that which is "politically radical, rejects binary categories (like heterosexual/homosexual), [and] embraces more fluid categories" (Raymond 2003:98). In activist spaces, groups adopted the queer label to signal their defiance; Queer Nation, for example, became known for its militant tactics, such as unifying hundreds in marches and publicly outing gay individuals, including prominent government officials, through community press (Alwood 1996; Gross 2001; Streitmatter 1995). The queer category has similarly propelled art and media from the LGBT community, from the Queer Resources Directory of LGBT websites and e-mail lists (Wakeford 1997) to online gay comic strip (also) called *Queer Nation* and started by former Marvel writer Chris Cooper (Gross 2001). In the academic arena, queer theory surfaced and has proliferated, drawing attention to queerness throughout culture and questioning the constructions and functions of sexuality and gender (Raymond 2003).

The category of queer has reverberated in media scholarship, echoing and at times overlapping with feminist audience and fandom studies discussed earlier. Building on queer theory and extending seminal works on gay and lesbian audiences (Dyer 1986; Russo 1987), queer media scholars stress that select media are themselves queer, or they are open to a range of queer readings, positions, or uses. In turn, media texts, audiences, or users can queer sexual and gender binaries as well as the expectations, demands, and constraints of heterosexuality and gender. Researchers have extended these ideas to a range of media, from earlier forms like television (Doty 1993; Muñoz 1999; Reed 2009) and film (Doty 1993; Schoonover and Galt 2016) to newer media forms like web-based platforms (Pullen 2010a) and video games (Consalvo 2003; Thompson 2014).

A catalyst for queer media research is Doty's (1993) *Making Things Perfectly Queer*. He explores how queerness in mass culture develops across the production of texts; the readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and queers; and the adoption of queer readings regardless of sexual and gender identification. Through textual and historical analyses of television shows like *I Love Shirley* and *The Golden Girls*, star characters like Pee-wee Herman, and genres like horror films and musicals, Doty seeks to "refuse, confuse, and redefine" how mass culture is interpreted in the public and the academy. Audiences of all sexual and gender identities develop queer positions, readings, and pleasures, Doty argues, which pushes beyond the traditional distinction between homo- and heterosexuality. Queerness, then, has always been a part of mass culture texts and the audiences who

receive and use them. That is, despite that mass culture has defaulted to explicitly heterosexual and gender normative representations, viewers have still managed to find transgressive meanings in them with regard to gender and sexuality.

Though queer media literature traditionally focuses on print, television, and film, scholars have explored queerness in cyberspace and online communities, resulting in a body of scholarship that Wakeford (1997) calls "cyberqueer studies" (see also Pullen 2010a; Thompson 2014). With the popularization of the Internet in the 1990s, scholars stressed that sexuality and gender are especially fluid online (in addition to emphasizing new outlets for community building, as discussed earlier). Because the physical body is invisible on the Internet, cyberspace would free Internet users from identities tied to the body—sexuality and gender, among others—such that you can become whoever you want. In turn, people could create new, virtual versions of themselves that did not align with their physical selves and identities. In 21st-century cyberqueer research, scholars explore how LGBTQ Internet users challenge heteronormativity by carving out spaces for sexual exploration and pleasures (Pullen 2010a; Thompson 2014). However, in contrast to earlier cyberqueer accounts and with influence from online discrimination scholarship, these recent studies acknowledge that Internet users' gender and sexual identities directly inform their Internet use and experience.

The Assimilationist

Following a long history of community-based advocacy, LGBTQ images have thrived across the media landscape in the 1990s and beyond, bolstering the

assimilationist narrative. “Lesbian chic” advertisements (Clark 1991), mass-market gay and lesbian films (Fejes and Petrich 1993; Gross 2001; Streitmatter 2008), and televisual star Ellen DeGeneres (Chasin 2000; Dow 2001; Gross 2001; Skerski 2007; Streitmatter 2008) signaled a new era of visibility. As I elaborate on below, scholars contend that these media texts and figures reflect the capitalist process of appealing to, and integrating, new markets of gay and lesbian consumers. Simultaneously, media industries incorporate and commercialize gay and lesbian subcultural styles, and gay and lesbian press has distanced itself from less “respectable” topics like sex and queer politics. In this manner, media scholars have approached this recognition with deep suspicion, suggesting it is linked to the joint forces of capitalism and heteronormativity. Some scholars explicitly adopt Duggan’s use of “homonormativity” discussed in the introduction (Lovelock 2017; Martin 2021; Ng 2013). Relatedly, the earlier discussed concept of “transnormativity” is seeing growing interest in media scholarship, given the dramatic rise of trans representation in the past decade (Glover 2016), yet most researchers have maintained a limited focus on gay and lesbian recognition. Their skepticism is forcefully summarized in Chasin’s (2000) words as the gay and lesbian movement “selling out” and adopting an "assimilationist” position. Chasin makes use of several media forms in her analysis, especially advertisements, and other researchers similarly range in their research objects, including film (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001; Schoonover and Galt 2016), television (Dow 2001; Skerski 2007), print (Chasin 2000; Clark 1991; Peñaloza 1996), websites and social networking platforms (Campbell 2005, 2007),

and media more generally (Chasin 2000; Fejes and Petrich 1993; Glover 2016; Gross 2001; Sender 2004; Streitmatter 2008; Walters 2001).

Regardless of scholars' research materials, a frequent point is that gay and lesbian media representations are the work of capitalist marketing and corporate interests (Campbell 2005, 2007; Chasin 2000; Clark 1991; Gluckman and Reed 1997; Gross 2001; Martin 2021; Sender 2004; Streitmatter 2008; Walters 2001). Especially during the early 1990s, market research underlined that gays and lesbians are disproportionately wealthy, well-educated "dream" consumers with trendsetting, fashionable tastes; despite sampling predominantly white, urban, white-collar gays and lesbians, market researchers took the findings as representative of all gays and lesbians, eliding differences in class, gender, and race and altogether omitting trans consumers. In turn, businesses and corporations began advertising in mass media with "gay vague" images: visuals with gay, lesbian, or bisexual subtext meant to appeal to sexual minorities while not alerting heterosexuals (Clark 1991; Gross 2001; Peñaloza 1996; Sender 2004). In a related vein, corporate industries began commercializing gay and lesbian subcultural styles through mass media (Clark 1991; Gross 2001; Peñaloza 1996). More broadly, the recognition of the gay and lesbian market has contributed to the dramatic rise of gay and lesbian content in news and entertainment media; recent market concerns have played a similar role in media industries' inclusion of bisexual and transgender representations (Gross 2001; Streitmatter 2008; Walters 2001).

Equally important is the troubled relationship between media and gay and lesbian politics (Chasin 2000; Gross 2001; Peñaloza 1996; Sender 2004; Streitmatter 2008; Walters 2001). Indeed, some scholars suggest that gay and lesbian politics has lost its critical edge and has ignored bisexual, transgender, and queer-identified people and problems. Simultaneous with gay and lesbian market research, gay and lesbian press needed money to survive and expand. Attempting to attract mass-market advertisers, they began "hermetically sealing and physically distancing the controversial aspects of gay/lesbian culture," including gender nonconformity, explicit sex, and poverty (Peñaloza 1996:34). These outlets likewise made a switch to glossy "lifestyle" content focused on fashion, celebrities, and travel instead of the overtly activist topics popular in previous decades (Campbell 2005, 2007; Chasin 2000; Ng 2013; Peñaloza 1996; Streitmatter 1995). In addition, mass media became a key site for gays and lesbians to advocate for military and marriage rights, yet some have noted that these goals have benefitted overwhelmingly white, middle-class, seemingly respectable gays and lesbians at the expense of the needs of more vulnerable segments of LGBTQ populations (Chasin 2000; Gross 2001; Streitmatter 2008). At the same time, the increased visibility of the trans community has similarly excluded trans people whose stories do not align with goals of respectability and acceptance (Glover 2016).

Project Directions

In part, my project is meant to extend and update the assimilationist narrative, which has come become the most dominant strain of scholarship in LGBTQ media

studies. Like marketing and branding scholarship and algorithm studies, the assimilationist scholarship has helpfully illuminated the intimate relationship between corporate business and the production of representations of social difference. In other words, this set of studies has a clear strength that this dissertation continues: an attention to the organizational and corporate practices that shape what LGBTQ media content is produced and promoted. Yet the assimilationist scholarship has not adequately accounted for the new media landscape, especially when considering branding, user-generated content, and algorithmic content moderation. With exceptions (Campbell 2005, 2007; Lovelock 2017), these studies have overwhelmingly examined corporate practices as well as corporate-produced, offline media. As detailed above, media reception and production scholars have called for greater recognition of media production and personal branding enabled by new media technologies. My project, then, examines in part how LGBTQ-identifying people engage with branding imperatives in their own new media production.

Still, I also aim to critique and complicate the assimilationist narrative. I sense that the impact of market and media assimilation, while significant, is overemphasized. I specifically am uneasy about the supposed effects of this assimilation on LGBTQ people who create and use this media. In some accounts, media outlets and representations work to altogether "contain," "tame," "integrate," and "incorporate" LGBTQ people as well as sexual and gender difference (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001; Clark 1991; Martin 2021; Raymond 2003). To be sure, I find some of this language useful, and I echo it in later chapters on corporate

YouTube's selective recognition and moderation of LGBTQ creators and content. Yet some scholars suggest that marketized media recognition is "very seductive" (Peñaloza 1996:34) or can feel "affirmative" or "empowering for those… who have lived most of their lives with no validation" (Hennessy 1995:31). In few of these accounts do scholars examine at length whether LGBTQ people find this recognition empowering, affirming, seductive, or incorporative. This dissertation, then, moves beyond these speculative notions and underlines that LGBTQ-identifying media users and creators (and their audiences) are not always already swept into broader patterns of commercialization and assimilation. Drawing inspiration from feminist audience and fandom studies, this dissertation details how LGBTQ creators and their viewers actively and critically negotiate new media capitalism and branding imperatives.

Concurrently, I elaborate on the alternative narrative of community, and I expand my focus to consider a more diverse range of LGBTQ media users and creators. I acknowledge that LGBTQ media representations and images are in many cases meaningful, personally resonant, and lifesaving for LGBTQ-identifying people, especially youth. However, unlike scholars working in the assimilationist vein, I underline in later chapters that corporations and businesses cannot entirely predict or control LGBTQ people's sincere storytelling and subsequent community building. Although LGBTQ media studies recognizes the exclusion of LGBTQ people along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and particularly class, the experiences of racial-ethnic minorities are rarely discussed at length (some exceptions include Christian 2018; Glover 2016; Gray 2011; Martin 2021; Muñoz 1999; Schoonover and Galt 2016).

Bisexual and transpeople are similarly acknowledged infrequently, if at all (some exceptions include Brookey and Cannon 2009; Craig et al. 2015; Glover 2016; McInroy and Craig 2015). As I also note in my methods chapter, the feminist audience scholarship—which elaborates on the influence of multiple identities—pushes me to sample and detail the perspectives of LGBTQ creators who vary by race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, ability, and mental health status.

Beyond these immediate concerns, *LGBTQ YouTube* is an attempt to highlight the increasingly complex and fraught nature of LGBTQ media practice. In addition to the assimilation narrative, the victim and community narratives appear throughout the various chapters. Community is the basis of its own chapter, pulling from LGBTQ media scholarship, feminist reception studies, and fandom community research. The victim narrative appears in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, which reference anti-gay advertising and anti-trans content policing; this narrative reappears in Chapter Six, which discusses the antifandom against gay YouTuber James Charles. At a glance, these four narratives are incompatible, and scholarly discussions have historically focused on one at a time. Even so, some critical scholarship has explicitly detailed the uneasy relations and tensions among them (for example, Campbell 2005; Schoonover and Galt 2016). As a brief example, Schoonover and Galt (2016), citing Doty (1993) and other queer media scholars, underline that film studies literature often paints popular cinema as deeply ideological. Through textual analysis of global cinema—including films from Thailand, Serbia, and Nigeria—they seek to offer popular cinema more nuance, underlining that it is a site where "the relationship of queerness

to the world is negotiated and renegotiated" (210). Although aligning with the assimilationist vein by detailing how films maintain a homonormative perspective given concerns about a mass-market audience, they suggest that the popular still leaves room for queer critique. Like Schoonover and Galt, this dissertation underlines the simultaneity of, and tensions among, these narratives on one platform specifically and therefore across the media landscape more generally. This project, then, is less interested in throwing out established scholarly accounts than it is in bridging them and updating them for the diverse new media environment.

Chapter Three: Digital Ethnographic Methodologies

Researching social media is a difficult enterprise. Simultaneously examining creators, viewers, fans, and YouTube, LLC, made this research an even more fraught undertaking. Any given social media platform offers incalculable amounts of materials and possible data points, including user profiles, user comments, total numbers of users and viewers, platform policies and terms, advertisements, images and video stills, image and video descriptions, search outcomes, and view counts—to name only a fraction. Given the vast social media landscape, this chapter outlines my research process and methodologies. I draw here from sociology, anthropology, media studies, cultural studies, and Internet studies to situate my process. My earlier contention was that LGBTQ media scholars need interdisciplinary work because LGBTQ media narratives travel within and across disciplines. My goal in this chapter is thus two-fold: first, to model interdisciplinary methods and, second, to demonstrate the challenges associated with social media research.

I describe my method as ethnographic. Ethnography has become an established method in the areas of media sociology (Brienza and Revers 2016), audience research (A. Gray 2003; Radway 1984), and fandom studies (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992). However, this project is especially indebted to the work of Radway (1984). As gestured toward in the previous chapter, Radway takes seriously the role of popular texts in social life, investigating interpretations of romance novels among communities of women, and she underlines the limits of purely textual analysis-based approaches to media study. Unlike some audience and fandom

researchers, Radway situates these interpretations and texts in their sites of production, investigating the romance industry itself by exploring marketing strategies and production processes. What I find compelling about Radway's ethnography is her simultaneous attention given to audiences, popular texts, and media industries. I take a similar approach but diverge slightly by also focusing on media creators, which is especially important in the new media landscape of increased individual- and community-based content creation.

Ethnographic work focused on online communities, sites, and technologies—variably termed "netnography," "virtual ethnography," "cyberethnography," or "digital ethnography"—has a fraught history. In particular, sociology initially displayed a disinterest and disavowal of digital ethnographic practices (Murthy 2008). "Ethnography" is a loaded term, with scholars differing sharply over its meaning and application, and in part, the initial disavowal reflects concerns about observational techniques, which are considered the foundation of ethnographic practice. Digital ethnography relies on observations of real-time, online interactions and sometimes real-time, offline interactions, yet it could also be based on a review of online interactions and materials from earlier times (Hampton 2017). In the latter case, this can resemble other methods like content, textual, or archival analysis—not observation in the strictest sense. The boundaries between observation and other methods are thus blurred in digital ethnographic work, which has remained a topic of contention among ethnographers (Hampton 2017).

Even so, *LGBTQ YouTube* is indebted to digital ethnographic scholarship that began to emerge in the early 1990s. Pioneering works largely focused on the liberatory potential of the Internet, using online games, virtual "worlds," and text-based discussion systems as sites of study (Hampton 2017; Robinson and Schulz 2009). By the late 1990s, scholars shifted focus by elaborating on virtual communities as legitimate, though not necessarily liberating, fieldsites (Robinson and Schulz 2009). And by the early 2000s, there was a growing and established recognition of digital ethnography as a valid research method, with attempts to understand online communities and spaces on their own terms through email and chat-based interviews, digital videos, and blogs (Boellstorff 2008; Hampton 2017; Murthy 2008; Robinson and Schulz 2009). Hence, I adopt the label of digital ethnography for my own project. (My adoption of "digital ethnography" over, for instance, "netnography" or "cyberethnography" is purely a stylistic choice.) While I maintain that ethnographic observation necessarily involves the analysis of text, especially field notes, I attempt below to parse the observational, text, and interview elements of this project.

Observational Approach and Offline Methods

New media scholars continue to debate the relationship between offline and online communications (as reviewed in Boellstorff 2008; Hampton 2017). The arrival of the Internet promised revolutionary social change, and its most dedicated supporters, or "techno-utopians," included a group of web users, investors, marketers and academics who envisioned the online world as a space of endless possibility (Nakamura 2002; Turner 2006). Following this thinking, the Internet would allow

users to communicate purely as thinkers and transmitters of ideas, freed from physical limitations, thus leading to democratic interactions (Nakamura 2002; Turner 2006). In turn, techno-utopians characterized online spaces as distinctly different and divided from those offline despite the idea that the Internet would have far-reaching effects.

Other scholars—especially those who detail the racial, gendered, and sexual implications of the Internet—have challenged and complicated this techno-utopian lens. Much of this scholarship has underlined that online environments reflect offline social hierarchies, evidenced by web users' racist, misogynist, and heterosexist behaviors (Armentor-Cota 2011; Nakamura 2002; Wakeford 1997). While acknowledging the influence of offline social systems, a handful of digital ethnographers also have shown the distinct characteristics of Internet-based communications (Boellstorff 2008; Nakamura 2002). Nakamura (2002), for example, coins the term 'cybertype'; she says that Internet users, rather than merely importing racist stereotypes online, spread images of race in distinctive ways.

Given this, my methodology builds on new media scholarship that acknowledges the importance of offline interactions and relationships to online life. In addition to the approach mentioned directly above, *LGBTQ YouTube* owes especially to the work of Baym (2006) and Baym, Zhang, and Lin (2004). Baym, arguing for rigor in qualitative Internet research, suggests that the "best work recognizes that the internet is woven into the fabric of the rest of life" and "does not really believe in cyberspace in the sense of a distinct place that stands in contrast to the earth-bound world" (86). In a similar context, Baym, Zhang, and Lim examine

how online interactions are woven into offline communications and daily relationships of college students, concluding that Internet users are supplementing, not replacing, face-to-face communication with computer-mediated communication. In tandem, the various works discussed above have offered an approach that I continue in this project: a commitment to understanding virtual environments on their own terms while still acknowledging the connections between offline and online fieldsites. I diverge from techno-utopian works that proposed a dichotomy between the offline and online.

My formal data collection thus began with offline fieldwork. From June 20 to 23, 2018, I attended VidCon in Los Angeles, the YouTube-sponsored and Viacom-owned annual convention focused on online video. The event organizers state:

> VidCon is the world's largest event for fans, creators, executives, and brands who are passionate about online video and building diverse communities. This unprecedented group of experts provides unparalleled access to strategies, secrets, tips, and insights about adapting and thriving during this digital transformation. (VidCon 2019a)

VidCon US, the flagship convention that I attended, has welcomed over 75,000 attendees in total since 2010 and has expanded to include sister conventions in Asia, Australia, and Europe. The convention has three tracks: First, the least expensive community track is intended for fans of online video content, creators, and culture, with the possibility of winning a lottery for a meet-and-greet with popular video creators. Second, the more expensive creator track is aimed at "anyone looking to learn more about the ins-and-outs of online video production and business development including how to grow social channels, monetize content more

efficiently, and build a brand"; activities include, for instance, another lottery to chat in a close setting with fellow creators about video production and social media management (VidCon 2019c). Finally, the most expensive industry track includes the "world's top creators, growth hackers, online video experts, and leaders from the top video platforms come together to chart the future of the media industry." Attendees in this track include brand strategists, social media managers, software developers, and market researchers, to name only some (VidCon 2019d).

When I attended the convention, the project was in an early stage, and my topic and questions were not yet fully formed. This in turn prompted me to cast a wide net for my offline observation. I chose to take the industry track, which also gave me access to both the community and creator tracks. Panel discussions and presentations in all three tracks were a major focus of the convention, and I accordingly chose to spend most—but not all—of my time at these scheduled activities. Given that the times overlapped considerably, I prioritized panels that included LGBTQ-identifying content creators, particularly those discussing business and branding. I identified these creators through the panel descriptions and through the creators' biographies listed on the VidCon webpage.

Although this project began with an interest in LGBTQ-centered marketing and business, I discovered quickly that most of the LGBTQ panelists were discussing and presenting on issues related to community, identity, and mental health. Panel titles included, for instance, "We're Here–Talking About Marginalized Identities" and "Not Straight, Not White, Not Serious." This pushed me to consider the topic of

community, which later developed into a key theme of this dissertation. Besides the community-based presentations, I attended industry track panels focused on diversity, marketing, monetization, and the general state of online video. Most industry panelists were from businesses unaffiliated with YouTube, and because this dissertation shifted to concentrate on YouTube itself, I did not include much of their content in this dissertation. (See Table 1 for a complete list of the VidCon panels and presentations that remained relevant during this research.)

Table 1. VidCon Event Attendance

Title	Track	LGBTQ-identifying Video Creators
Pero Like	Community	Ashley Perez, Curly Velasquez
Body Image, Gender, Presentation, and Online Video	Community	Annie Segarra, Chandler Wilson, Chase Ross, Kat Blaque, Stef Sanjati
We're Here–Talking About Marginalized Identities	Community	Ahsante Bean, Ashley Wylde, Chandler Wilson, Taylor Behnke, Stevie Boebi
YouTube Black	Community	Amber's Closet, Arrows, Miles Jai
Not Straight, Not White, Not Serious	Community	Ashley Perez, Amber's Closet, Courtney Revolution, Curly Velasquez, Jay Versace, Kingsley
The Creator Business Model Grows Up: New Revenue Streams, New Platforms, New Reality	Industry	Hannah Hart
LGBTQ Activism	Community	Amber's Closet, Ash Hardell, Dylan Marron, Hannah Hart, Jen Ruggirello, Nikita Dragun
Honesty Hour	Community	Kingsley
Branching Out	Community	Giselle "Gigi Gorgeous" Getty[12]

[12] Getty was not the only LGBTQ creator present, but my recorded audio of other creators was inaudible.

Disability and Accessibility Offline and Online	Community	Annie Segarra
Not Suitable for Advertisers	Community	Ash Hardell, Chase Ross, Hartbeat, Stevie Boebi

Throughout VidCon, I recorded written fieldnotes while traveling from panel to panel and during the panels themselves. I noted the general demographic composition, discussion topics, and physical responses from attendees both inside and outside presentation rooms. During the talks, I also quickly noted relevant quotes that I could more closely examine during data analysis. When I did not have a scheduled activity to attend, I walked and recorded notes around the convention, which included a sponsor exhibition hall, mini carnival, and check-in area, though I later opted not to use these notes as I found them too distant from my research topic. Following the event, I converted my written field notes into digital format. VidCon's Code of Conduct allowed attendees to "record, transcribe, modify, reproduce, perform, display, transmit and distribute in any and all media, in any form, and for any purpose any such recordings" (VidCon 2019b), so in addition to my fieldnotes, I audio recorded the talks and chats I attended. In the months after the event, I transcribed the recorded audio, which totaled approximately 20 hours, and assembled the transcripts with my fieldnotes.

To analyze the transcripts and fieldnotes, I used qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Kondracki, Wellman, and Amundson 2002). Content analysis is a flexible technique used for analyzing text and visual data obtained

through interviews, focus groups, open-ended survey questions, print media, or (most relevant for my purposes here) ethnographic observations (Kondracki et al. 2002). Though content analysis has always straddled the line between qualitative and quantitative methods, I took the approach of conventional content analysis, which reflects a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define it as qualitative content analysis in which "researchers avoid using preconceived categories" and in which "researchers immerse themselves in the data to allow new insights to emerge" (1279). This type of content analysis, I found, aligned well with my initial goal of placing myself squarely in my fieldsites to determine which themes, materials, and ideas might appear and solidify in my later data collection.

Online Texts and Case Selection

Cultural life is saturated with media texts, so there is an ever-present "challenge of too many texts" for media scholars (Couldry 2000:69). Early cultural studies intensified this challenge by rejecting barriers between "high" culture worth studying and "low" culture unworthy of study (Couldry 2000). To be sure, other fields and subfields, such as media sociology, have also embraced "low" culture popular texts as legitimate objects of study (Brienza and Revers 2016). Difficulties in selecting texts for study are thus not new; they existed prior to the advent of Internet-based communications and social media. Even so, these new technologies have deepened this research challenge by intensifying the distribution and amount of media materials available for selection and analysis, as I noted in the opening of this chapter.

What Gray (2010) refers to as paratexts—the variety of corporate created, community produced, and individually generated materials that surround and supplement any given media text—further complicate this picture. However, I agree with Gray when he maintains that texts cannot exist without paratexts, and studying texts also requires studying paratexts.

Accordingly, I made the early decision to focus on texts as well as paratexts, beginning with my investigation of YouTube, LLC, and I used my offline fieldwork to direct my selection of online materials. At VidCon, I discovered that both novice and veteran video creators remained confused about how YouTube determined what LGBTQ creators' content was acceptable. (I elaborate on this confusion in Chapter Five.) Despite YouTube inviting some creators to private events focused on diversity and video production, most had to rely on YouTube's online public materials to make decisions about their content creation. This pushed me to focus primarily on YouTube's public presence, starting with what VidCon panelists repeatedly mentioned: Community Guidelines and Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines. These guidelines led me to related materials distributed across YouTube's public blog, about and FAQ pages, help site, official Twitter and Instagram profiles, product forums, and "partner" pages. The specific materials included nondiscrimination policies; diversity statements; inclusion and outreach program information; monetization and money-making guidelines; algorithm explanations; and resources for video creators, brands, press, and software developers. Altogether, this amounted to 146 webpages. In addition, I was interested in news coverage paratexts focused on

YouTube's disputes and controversies; in doing so, I aimed to uncover instances that would shed further light on YouTube's stated public practices as well potentially unstated, non-public practices. This resulted in approximately 25 webpages and articles from news and entertainment organizations, including, *Buzzfeed News*, *Forbes*, *Polygon*, *The Guardian*, *The Verge*, *The Washington Post*, *Tubefilter News*, and *Variety*. I analyzed these online texts through the grounded theory approach of conventional content analysis discussed earlier.

The next part of my data collection and analysis involved identifying relevant video creators, videos, viewers, and fans. Prior to VidCon, I had compiled a list of the top-50 LGBTQ YouTubers, defined by the number of their followers. [13] I had completed this task through Google searches and Wikipedia listings with key term searches that included "LGBT YouTuber," "gay YouTuber," "trans YouTubers," and similar phrases. The original focus of this project was marketing, particularly among the most-visible and successful LGBTQ creators, and my belief was that these most-followed YouTubers would provide the richest content. However, my project began to take on a different shape after VidCon, and I began to recognize the need to expand this creator catalog. After revisiting my original top-50 list, I noticed quickly that the video producers were overwhelmingly white non-disabled gay cisgender men and to a lesser extent white non-disabled lesbian cisgender women. Following the feminist audience scholarship discussed in earlier chapters, I recognized the need for a more

[13] When a viewer "subscribes to" a YouTube content creator, the creator's videos will appear in the viewer's personalized feed on the YouTube website or app. I use the phrase "follower" or "subscriber" interchangeably throughout this work.

diverse sample of creators and content. I began to add to my list, purposely sampling non-white, bisexual, and trans YouTubers as well as YouTubers living with disabilities and mental illnesses. Many of them had channels with small- and mid-sized audiences. Among them were creators from VidCon as well as other creators absent from the convention that I had heard about during my time there.

Shortly after, I subscribed to these various creators' YouTube channels and began following their social media profiles on Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Twitch. I began watching their videos and reviewing their messages, often catching in real-time when the creators posted new materials. At the same, I worked alongside the YouTube algorithm (discussed further in Chapter Four and Chapter Five), clicking the customized video suggestions to identify new video creators and find new video content to include in the study. This mobile approach to online data collection organically led me to sites of audience and fan activity, particularly on the news-sharing and discussion website Reddit as well as in the comment sections of YouTube videos. Through this method, I was able to locate paratextual instances of antifan and fan-based community building based on specific videos that comforted, affirmed, angered, and frustrated viewers. Although my data collection was predominantly based on interactions from 2018 to 2020, I searched for supplemental materials about my illustrative case studies (discussed below) during the writing of this dissertation.

The abundance of textual material presented challenges for the analysis of data and presentation of findings. It was common for me to refresh a webpage or

social media application every few minutes and discover a new video, creator message, or viewer comment. Much of this online observation, then, was based on real-time communications among creators and viewers. At the same time, I was able to observe and review trends over periods of weeks and months. To facilitate my analysis, I took online fieldnotes of the videos I watched, comments and messages I was reading, patterns and themes I was noticing, and questions I had moving forward. These fieldnotes focused on topics of branding, advertising, identity, representation, and community. In turn, these fieldnotes helped me identify the video creators, videos, fans, and events most relevant to the study.

Throughout *LGBTQ YouTube*, I present illustrative case studies. I shift between explaining broader trends and elaborating on these more specific cases. As Davey (1991:1) explains in the context of evaluative research, illustrative cases are descriptive, "utilize one or two instances to show what a situation is like… serve to make the unfamiliar familiar, and give readers a common language about the topic." What I find useful about illustrative case studies are their highlighting of important variations while still capturing the details of specific figures and events. Given the overabundance of textual material, I acknowledge here the impossibility of capturing the diversity of all content creators, video content, and fan and viewer activities. Even so, I make efforts—again following feminist audience research—to illustrate the diverse experiences and voices of people engaged in media practice. I thus include cases of creators who vary by race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, ability, and mental health.

Interviewing and Rapport Barriers

With challenges, this research project included online interviews. As mentioned in the previous section, this research was interested in video producers who have publicly self-identified as LGBTQ, including creators who had already gained a prominent audience and producers who had not gained a larger audience. I originally planned to select interviewees from the list of the most-subscribed LGBTQ YouTubers as well as the LGBTQ YouTubers who fell outside that category. Following the completion of my VidCon transcription and analysis in late September 2018, I compiled contact information (public email addresses and social media profiles) for the listed creators. Around this same time in early October 2018, I discovered a video from the popular lifestyle and beauty vlogger Safiya Nygaard (who, while she does not identify as LGBTQ, has collaborated with LGBTQ YouTubers and has 8.5 million subscribers as of this writing). The video, titled "Trying Products That Asked To Sponsor Me (Not Sponsored)," provided footage of her business emails, including what appeared to be hundreds of emails from brands, Internet startups, and social media marketers as well as one email from a doctoral student with the headline "PhD research enquiry" (Nygaard 2018). Nygaard had not appeared to respond to any of the messages. After viewing the video, I gleaned that I may have trouble accessing the more popular creators, especially considering that most of them had personal business managers. Even if I could momentarily cut through the noise of business sponsorships and other research requests, I would have

less opportunity to build a rapport that would help in scheduling and carrying out an interview.

I chose to focus most of my efforts on completing interviews with the video producers of small- and mid-sized YouTube channels, expecting (incorrectly) that I would receive more responses. Though LGBTQ-identifying YouTubers were my focus, I spent time in early October 2018 contacting a YouTube representative and an affiliated representative: the diversity marketing lead for YouTube and the content coordinator for VidCon. The latter responded and answered a few brief interview questions over email about the process for selecting LGBTQ creators for the event and the metrics (such as subscriber numbers, demographics, and content type) used for selecting them. In late October 2018, I contacted and followed up with 20 video producers, explaining the project and asking for an interview over Skype or email (Appendix A: Recruitment Message). Four creators and one personal manager of a creator responded. One creator pulled out of the project after seeing the consent document (distributed electronically through Google Forms), two creators declined to participate given time constraints, and the manager did not respond to follow-up emails. One video producer answered my interview questions over email in the summer of 2019, several months after my initial request, due to his busy schedule (Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Video Creators). In total, this research included two interviews.

While interviews were only a small part of my data collection, my approach drew from and reflects the work of Nelhs, Smith, and Schneider (2015). Citing the

commonplace nature of computer-mediated communication, Nelhs, Smith, and Schneider in part discuss the advantages and techniques for online interviews, specifically those through video-conferencing software like Skype. As the authors explain and as I found, the advantages include convenience, low cost, and participants being freer to participate online at a time and location (home or an office, for example) of their choosing. Nelhs, Smith, and Schneider maintain that online interviews reflect similar levels of rapport to in-person interviews, but researchers must still spend time developing this interviewer-interviewee relationship. As the authors illuminate and as I similarly suggest, online interviews have their own benefits and challenges and are not simply sub-optimal versions of in-person interviews. Even so, I attribute my low number of responses to a few factors: gatekeeping among personal managers given creators' opportunities for monetary gain and self-branding via business sponsorships (discussed further in Chapter Five); a lack of rapport worsened by my formal recruitment message and consent form, with little opportunity to simplify and explain key parts of the documents in person; and time constraints among potential interviewees due to offline and online responsibilities. Nonetheless, given the richness of my other textual materials, I did not aim to schedule and complete any additional interviews.

To analyze the emailed interview text, I used yet another type of qualitative content analysis: directed content analysis. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), the method uses existing theory or prior research to guide and narrow coding, making it more structured than the more open-ended conventional content analysis. A key

strategy in directed content analysis "is to begin coding immediately with the predetermined codes. Data that cannot be coded are identified and analyzed later to determine if they represent a new category or a subcategory of an existing code" (1282). In my case, the "prior research" was my own; because my interview analysis came so late in my data collection and review process, I already had preestablished codes and themes to examine interview data. However, I also noted any emergent themes, as with my other research materials. Two themes that remained consistent across my observations, interviews, and content analyses was YouTube's branding efforts and inconsistent policy enforcement.

Chapter Four: Branding YouTube and Regulating LGBTQ Stories

In April 2018, the owner of Transthetics, a business that provides providing penile prosthetics for transgender men, found that YouTube deleted his account without warning. After appealing the decision, he received a brief response within 24 hours (Transthetics 2018):

> Hello,
>
> Thank you for contacting us. We have carefully reviewed your account appeal.
> Your account has been terminated due to repeated or severe violations of our Community Guidelines on Nudity and Sexual content. YouTube is not the place for nudity, pornography or other sexually provocative content. For more information, please visit our Help Center.
>
> Sincerely,
> The YouTube Team

YouTube outlines exceptions to its policies against nudity and sexual content. Most notably, it allows content that is informational and educational (discussed further in later sections). Even so, the platform deemed Transthetics' material offensive despite it providing product background and educational information. Just two months after the denied appeal, YouTube publicly declared to LGBTQ video creators, "We are so proud of the contributions you have made to the platform; you've helped make YouTube what it is today" (Ariel, Devon, and Victor 2018).

In this chapter, I focus on YouTube, LLC. As with YouTube's public declaration of LGBTQ appreciation, I detail YouTube's branding, diversity, visual, and discursive practices that selectively incorporate LGBTQ stories and creators on the platform. Additionally, I argue that YouTube relies on a "Janus-faced design"

(Campbell 2005) that publicly presents itself as a place of possibility while privately containing an unmarketable and controversial LGBTQ presence on the platform (as the Transthetics channel deletion illustrates). My central argument is that YouTube assimilates creators into its brand and profits from marketable LGBTQ content creators' stories—while also punishing controversial YouTubers' attempts to educate and entertain viewers. I intend in this chapter is to extend the narrative of LGBTQ media assimilation, updating it to consider the context of new media. In the remaining chapters, I turn my attention to creators, audiences, and fans to complicate this assimilationist narrative.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, I join critical sociologists and media scholars who argue that heteronormative expectations and profit imperatives in print, television, and film industries are intimately linked to the cultural recognition of gender and sexual minorities (Campbell 2005; Chasin 2000; Clark 1991; Gross 2001; Peñaloza 1996; Sender 2004; Streitmatter 2008; Walters 2001). As with YouTube, these industries have contributed to the cultural in/exclusion of certain LGBTQ stories based on marketability and various axes of identity, especially gender, race, ethnicity, and class (Chasin 2000; Gross 2001; Martin 2021; Peñaloza 1996; Sender 2004).

Also, this chapter echoes and extends the work of a new media researchers who stress the political and economic underpinnings of social media companies like YouTube (Bishop 2018; Kim 2012; Roberts 2016; Snickars and Vonderau 2009; Vaidhyanathan 2011; Wasko and Erickson 2009). I draw especially from Tarleton

Gillespie and Safiya Umoja Noble. In his multiple works focusing on social media platforms, Gillespie (2010, 2015, 2018) details how platforms moderate and intervene in the user-generated content circulated on them. That is, they facilitate, promote, hide, and in some cases remove content. To illustrate, Gillespie (2018) points to Facebook removing images of breastfeeding mothers for violating policies against nudity. (The Transthetics incident provides another example of moderation.) These practices of intervention, Gillespie underlines, are steeped in contradiction—based on guidelines and rules that are often open-ended and enforced inconsistently—and are central, not peripheral, to how social media organizations run (see also Roberts 2016). In a similar context, Noble (2018) details how Google's search engine perpetuates misrepresentations of women of color as hypersexualized, pornified, and unprofessional. Using the term "algorithmic oppression," Noble maintains that search algorithms are always based on human decision making and therefore reflect and reproduce human bias, especially racial bias. In turn, she suggests that algorithmic oppression is not merely a "glitch" in the system but is inherent to Google's services. In tandem, Gillespie and Noble provide insights on which this work is premised: that new media technologies and platforms are neither neutral nor objective, that platforms regulate the content and minority presence on them, and that the workings of platforms in this respect are often rendered invisible.

In this chapter, I first provide an overview of YouTube's business and advertising history, showing that its post-Google profit model is increasingly fragile and requires complex relationships with its "partners." I contend that this precarious

model has set the stage for its strategic branding, including deliberate discursive, visual, and diversity efforts. Next, I detail YouTube's selective representation and incorporation of diverse LGBTQ voices as well its use of social change as a discourse. In other words, I suggest that YouTube carefully maintains the appearance of diversity. Next, I highlight the advertising and community guidelines that facilitate moderator policing and algorithmic discrimination against creators who work on the periphery of YouTube's profit model. I maintain that these guidelines are not merely discursive suggestions for creators. Rather, they directly and selectively impact LGBTQ creators and allow YouTube to trumpet its values and policies, signaling brand progress to its partners, especially businesses that advertise on that platform. Finally, I provide cases of two queer creators: Chase Ross, a trans video blogger whose content YouTube age restricted and demonetized, and Hart, a lesbian producer and sketch comedian whose video series *SimLivNColor* YouTube altogether terminated.

YouTube's Precarious Partnerships

In December 2005, three former PayPal employees officially launched YouTube, choosing to exclude advertising to buttress the community-driven nature of the platform (Wasko and Erickson 2009). As a 2006 *Time* article featuring the founders explained,

> Early on, Chad and Steve made a crucial good decision: despite pressure from advertisers, they would not force users to sit through ads before videos played. Pre-roll ads would have helped their bottom line in the struggling months, but. . . It would have seemed simply like another Big Media site. (Cloud 2006)

Instead, Chad and Steve sought funds elsewhere, receiving 10 million dollars from Sequoia Capital, which had previously helped finance other Silicon Valley companies like Apple and Google.

The social media company received substantial publicity following Google's buyout of the platform for $1.65 billion in 2006. Google's expansion into all areas of cultural, political, and economic life is well documented, and the purchase is an extension of this process (Noble 2018; Vaidhyanathan 2011). From the onset, Google intended to develop YouTube's potential for advertising profit, with Google stating in a press release that the buyout combined a growing video entertainment community with established expertise in creating new forms of advertising on the Web (Wasko and Erickson 2009). According to Kim (2012:56), pre-Google YouTube was "characterized by amateur-produced videos in an ad-free environment, [while] the post-Google purchase stage is characterized by professionally generated videos in an ad-friendly environment." After the buyout, YouTube signed deals with major networks like Disney, MGM and Lions Gate, which planned to use the platform as a promotional tool; they began uploading television episodes, movie clips, and full-length movies, with advertisements running on the videos (Kim 2012). YouTube's revenue model has also relied heavily on selling advertising space and user clicks to other brands.[14] In 2015, the platform began supplementing this revenue with a subscription-based service called YouTube Premium (formerly YouTube Red) where

[14] The appearance of advertisements and major media networks across the platform contributed to LGBTQ YouTubers' impression that pre-Google YouTube was "so different" and more "organic" (Field notes, June 23, 2018).

viewers could watch original YouTube series, forgo advertisements on videos, and access the platform's music streaming service. Nonetheless, I found in my fieldwork that most users did not have a subscription and sometimes used alternative methods (outside applications, web plugins) to avoid advertisements.

Revenue and business remain precarious for YouTube. In 2015, *The Wall Street Journal* estimated that the platform had not become a profitable business (Winkler 2015), yet Google stated that YouTube generated $15 billion in 2019, in large part because of advertising revenue (Statt 2020). YouTube's business model is closely tied to relationships with its partners who have competing interests, as I detail in later sections. I suggest that YouTube must carefully manage its relationships with its partners or risk losing its brand growth. I agree with Gillespie (2010), who proposes that cultural intermediaries like YouTube must use strategic discourses to present themselves to several constituencies and "carve out a role and a set of expectations that is acceptable to each and also serves their own financial interests" (353). Gillespie notes that YouTube has relied on "platform" as a discourse, using the term to suggest a "progressive and egalitarian arrangement to support those who stand upon it" (350). My intention in this section is to make visible another broad discourse—that of partnership—which provides context for LGBTQ YouTube practice and ultimately serves to sustain and grow YouTube's digital presence and brand. Indeed, YouTube leverages the word "partners" on public webpages directed at various constituencies. These pages include success stories, testimonials, and

resources in support of four main partners: press, developers, advertisers, and creators.

Although YouTube representatives often respond to press inquiries, the social media company presents itself only briefly to press partners on its own website. On its "YouTube for Press" page, this includes numbers highlighting the growth and benefits of the platform: that users watch over one billion hours of video daily, that over one billion people use the platform, and that the platform is localized in 91 countries and accessed in 80 languages (YouTube 2019h). In addition, a "YouTube Essentials" section lists the first video uploaded to the platform, a video from the founders explaining the Google acquisition, and a link to YouTube's official video channel. Finally, a "Non-commercial use" section is intended to facilitate relationships between press and video creators, including steps to sending messages to creators and details about creator's copyright ownership of their own material.

YouTube provides more detailed appeals to software and application developers. On the "YouTube for Developers" website, the platform provides resources—documentation, sample codes, and tutorials— to bring "the YouTube experience to your webpage, application, or device" (YouTube 2019g). In addition to offering ways to "integrate with YouTube," the company showcases a diverse range of applications and partnered developers, including short videos of developer stories. To quote a few descriptions of those showcased:

> Next Big Sound provides analytics and insights for the music industry. Next Big Sound tracks billions of social signals to help record labels, artists, and band managers make better decisions.

> Interesante.com is an interest discovery engine for Latinos. Using the YouTube Data API, Interesante suggests and organizes relevant videos.
>
> Kamcord helps mobile gamers capture their favorite moments and share them with the world via YouTube.
>
> A great video is nothing without an audience. Tubular helps YouTube creators and marketers to grow their audience and take them to the next level.

These cases—as with YouTube's press statistics—feature YouTube's cultural reach as well the company's ability to facilitate relationships among distinct groups.

YouTube aims some of its most meticulous efforts at advertisers. Immediately after visiting the "YouTube Advertising" page, I received a pop-up box with instructions to call the platform's toll-free number for help in signing up for an advertiser account (YouTube 2019e). Text prominently urges advertisers to "[b]e seen where everyone is watching," creating a new outlet to reach potential customers and creating results for small-, medium- and large-sized businesses alike. Like the developer website, the YouTube Advertising materials provide tips and resources. These include guides to lighting, filming, and editing advertisements; measuring and refining ad impacts; and reaching marketing goals, including building awareness and ad recall, growing consideration and interest, and driving action. Besides confirming that advertisers can reach the exact YouTube users they wish, YouTube provides case studies and success stories to inspire other businesses of every size. To again quote a few brief descriptions:

> Culinary Artistas teaches cooking in a fun, creative, safe way to your littlest chef.
>
> StudioPros connects artists with the best session musicians.

Mammoth Bar brings customers a healthy snack with its raw protein bar.

Tulane's Closet: Giving people a better way to protect healing pets.

From fashion, education, food, and media to real estate, retail, transportation, and consulting, the case studies span all industry types. Additionally, YouTube publicizes its Google Preferred Lineups, a program that allows advertisers to place ads on the top five percent of YouTube creators' video channels, as determined by its algorithm (which I discuss in detail in later sections) (YouTube 2019c).

Video creators, sometimes described as YouTubers, are the final partner. The opening lines of the "YouTube Creators" website encourage YouTubers to "explore everything you need to get inspired, engage, and thrive" (YouTube 2019f). Featuring some of the most successful YouTubers from diverse backgrounds and content categories, an accompanying introductory video encourages creators "from all walks of life, from all corners of the world" to create one's self, one's communities, and our culture more broadly. "Push us, dare us, and surprise us by being creative," the video states. At the same time, the website provides a bevy of practical resources: The Creator Academy provides extensive steps to getting discovered, growing a YouTube channel, targeting audiences, building community, accessing video analytics, and making revenue. The YouTube Partner program gives access to additional resources and features—significantly, the ability to share in advertising revenue (also referred to as becoming monetized) (YouTube 2019i). The NextUp five-day creator camp similarly teaches creators how to create better content and get more channel subscribers while providing vouchers for new production equipment. The YouTube

Space program offers physical spaces across the world for creators to attend workshops, produce video content, and collaborate with fellow video producers.

Yet YouTube's creator rewards are publicly tiered. In many cases, creators must already have grown a specific audience to get the most use out of the resources. The platform describes "benefit levels" tailored to a channel's subscriber count: graphite level for one to one thousand subscribers, opal for one thousand to ten thousand, bronze for ten thousand to one-hundred thousand, silver for one-hundred thousand to one million, gold for one million to ten million, and diamond for ten million. Graphite channels only have access to the Creator Academy. Opal channels and up can apply for the YouTube Partner Program if they follow YouTube's guidelines and policies. Bronze creators and up can apply for NextUp and access YouTube Space if they have no copyright claims or Community Guideline violations (which are controversial in themselves, as I will show). Silver creators and above can apply for a "partner manager" to discuss creative strategies, business questions, and channel development; moreover, silver and up creators who "have played by the rules" get access to personalized trophies with YouTube logo branding.

Altogether, I read the web materials as attempts to brand YouTube as a productive site of cultural and economic activity while facilitating opportunities and relationships among press, developers, advertisers, and creators (especially creators with proven viewership metrics). In this respect, these branding exercises aim to further solicit members of these constituencies while maintaining the support of those already recruited. Although these constituencies have distinct interests, their success

ultimately ensures YouTube's continued growth. Moreover, hierarchical and tiered creator arrangements enable the regulation of certain LGBTQ stories. As I expand on in the next sections, YouTube chooses what materials and users thrive—offering the most support to those who reach certain levels of visibility, who attract advertisers, and who bolster YouTube's brand presence. Conversely, YouTube censors creators who are working on potentially controversial content that is unattractive to advertisers—for example, information about trans prosthetics—because these YouTubers do not help the platform develop its brand. In this manner, YouTube selectively incorporates the stories and creators useful for its business purposes.

Branding LGBTQ Diversity and Social Change

Indeed, YouTube has engaged in other branding practices. Here, I highlight another of YouTube's discourses—social change—alongside the platform's incorporation of LGBTQ creators and stories in its public materials and diversity efforts. This includes visual representations of LGBTQ creators whose stories YouTube deems brandable and who range across axes of race, nationality, sexuality, gender, and mental health.

For example, through its subscription-based service YouTube Premium, the platform has promoted a range of LGBTQ stories. Most notably, YouTube distributed *This Is Everything*, a documentary film that documents the gender transition and rise to celebrity status of trans creator Giselle Getty, better known as Gigi Gorgeous. The film received recognition from the Critics' Choice Documentary Awards, MTV Movie and TV Awards, and GLAAD Media Awards. While I take a closer look at the

documentary in Chapter Five, it is important to note here. In addition, YouTube supported the development of *Escape the Night*, a web series written by Joey Graceffa, gay vlogger and one of the most popular LGBTQ-identifying creators on the platform. The series, released in 2016 and inspired by Graceffa's love of the 1985 film *Clue*, centers around a murder mystery in which fellow YouTubers find themselves transported to different periods and contexts, such as a 1920s dinner party (Longwell 2016). LGBTQ YouTubers from diverse racial-ethnic backgrounds and with significant viewer and subscriber counts have received roles on the show: Asian/Latina and trans beauty influencer Nikita Dragun; Latino, gay makeup artist Manny Gutierrez; multiracial, bisexual fashion vlogger Eva Gutowski; and white, bisexual vlogger Shane Dawson.

Beside supporting LGBTQ creators' work and stories, YouTube released a related depiction as part of its premium *Weird City* anthology, intended as a free teaser for its subscription service. Written by Academy Award-winner Jordan Peele, episode one of the series, "The One," features Dylan O'Brien of 2011's *Teen Wolf* fame and Ed O'Neill of *Married... with Children* and *Modern Family* recognition. In the half-hour episode, O'Brien's and O'Neill's wealthy characters live in a futuristic world and use a dating service to find their perfect romantic partner. Despite their age difference and heterosexual identifications, they eventually get married to each other before being forcibly separated by the dating service owner. They eventually run away to remain with each other in a less-than-luxurious home. The teaser episode has amassed over 22 million views, many of them from fans of Peele, O'Brien, and

O'Neill. Like Getty's documentary and Graceffa's show, the episode signaled to viewers, creatives, and brands alike that the platform not only supported but encouraged LGBTQ programming.

Since 2013, it has become a Pride Month custom for YouTube to share textual and audiovisual materials about the LGBTQ community. On the company's public blog, we can find statements about YouTube being "inspired and amazed by the ways that [LGBT] people have used YouTube to broadcast their message, empower their community, and even catalyze social change" (Braun 2013). The platform, according to these messages, has become "a place where anyone can belong no matter who they are or who they love" (YouTube Team 2016), with "videos from this [LGBT] community… as varied and exceptional as the group of people making them" (Ellis 2017) and with LGBT YouTube users developing "an extraordinary legacy of turning adversity into creativity and self expression" (Ariel et al. 2018). Video montages have accompanied each of these blog posts, with the video descriptions, titles, thumbnails, and content emphasizing the pride and community themes. Trendy hashtags—#ProudToPlay, #ProudToCreate, #ProudToLove, #ProudToBe, #YouTubePride2021—accompany the statements and montages to bring attention to YouTube's efforts.

To take an example, the 2018 #ProudToCreate video includes a thumbnail of proud LGBTQ marchers and describes how YouTube is celebrating voices that shape our past, present, and feature (Figure 2). The montage leverages stories and images from LGBTQ people working through YouTube as well as creatives outside

YouTube. Among those featured, for example, are black, trans Broadway actress Peppermint; Asian singer-songwriter and lesbian Hayley Kiyoko; black musician and bisexual Janelle Monae; white Olympian and gay YouTuber Adam Rippon; white, gay vloggers Tyler Oakley and Connor Franta; black, gay beauty influencer Patrick Starr; and black, gay satirist and comedic vlogger MacDoesIt. Clips flash of LGBTQ people dancing, skateboarding, figure skating, marching, playing instruments, singing, applying makeup, sewing, and recording personal vlogs. Featuring music from gay bounce artist Big Freedia, the montage includes soundbites such as, "There is nobody in the media that is exactly like me, yet there are hundreds of people that relate a lot to me," and "We sort of encourage each other to create the kind of future we want to see." In this manner, the blog posts, hashtags, and montages function as displays of social difference and LGBTQ diversity.



Figure 2. "#ProudToCreate: Pride 2018" Video Thumbnail

YouTube's Creators for Change initiative similarly borrows and promotes LGBTQ creators' voices. The program is, in YouTube's words, an "ongoing global initiative that supports Inspirational Creators who use YouTube to foster productive

conservations" (YouTube 2019b). As part of the initiative, YouTube mentors and promotes partner "role models" to create films that tackle a range of social issues in the aims of bridging communities and increasing tolerance and understanding. The global and diverse role models are prominently and visually represented on the Creators for Change website, tackling topics like race- and class-based incarceration, women's beauty standards, Islamophobia, and hearing disabilities (Figure 3). To add, LGBTQ creators like Riyadh K, a gay, Iraqi journalist and author, offers a documentary on Swaziland's first Pride March; Murilo Araújo, a black, queer, Brazilian journalist and content creator, presents a video on the stigmatization and criminalization of black men; Victoria Volkóva, a Mexican, trans vlogger and self-love advocate, shares an interview about trans women's experiences and the impact of the LGBTQ community on Mexico.

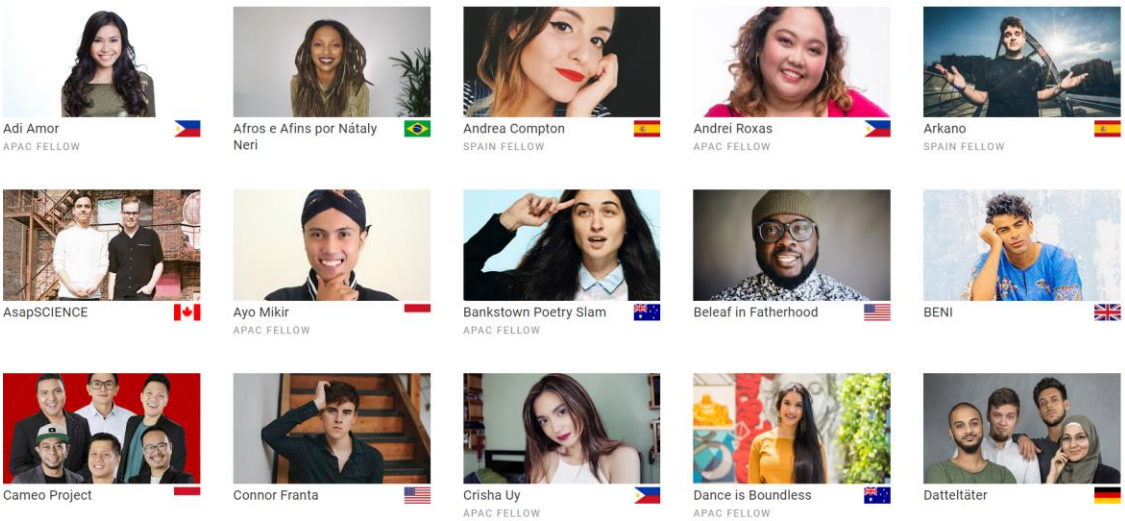


Figure 3. YouTube's Creators for Change Role Models

YouTube, in partnership with fellow media company Upworthy, released a report outlining steps for social change videos, again drawing from stories by and

about LGBTQ people (Upworthy n.d.). “Your strength is your voice. Use it,” the report urges, and “find the story” because “striking visuals and personal stories that make important ideas come alive” are just as relevant raw information. In addition, spread your own courage, the companies state, because “going there”—despite feeling vulnerable—can help build community and help others identify with you. Finally, communities are complicated, so learn from them, and provide a call to action. Nestled in the lists of steps is an eight-minute video from Dan Savage sharing his experiences as a gay Catholic, which ultimately launched the highly publicized It Gets Better Project aimed at reducing suicide among LGBT youth. In a similar vein, a six-minute video from bisexual sex educator Laci Green provides the details of her depression diagnosis at the age of fifteen, her profound struggles to find joy in living, and her suicidal episodes throughout her life.

Altogether, I argue the selective LGBTQ incorporation reinforces the company’s brand presence as a diverse, socially progressive media platform. My intention here is not to diminish the work of the LGBTQ creators YouTube has represented and promoted. To be sure, their efforts have offered outlets for the development of community and mental resilience, and creators are critically aware of the limits YouTube places on them, as I detail in later chapters. At the same time, the stories that YouTube allows to thrive signal to press, developers, advertisers, and creators about what kind of media space YouTube imagines itself to be, in turn safeguarding its existence. In contrast, YouTube has removed, algorithmically hidden, and restricted controversial content that threatens its relationship with

advertisers. This content has included trans prosthetics (as mentioned earlier), trans surgeries, lesbian sex education, and lesbian nudity, among other content (as I detail in later sections).

Even so, I contend that YouTube's LGBTQ recognition diverges from earlier media representations. As mentioned briefly earlier, print, film, and television scholars have underlined that gay and lesbian media images are the work of capitalist marketing and corporate interests. Primarily during the early 1990s, advertisers began identifying gays and lesbians as a viable niche market. This recognition had the side effect of rendering invisible segments of the LGBTQ community that were not valuable to marketers, advertisers, and media owners. To illustrate, Chasin (2000:237) details how, along lines race and class, market practice has led to the "skewed visual and political representation of the diversity of people who identify in any way as gay and/or lesbian" (237). Similarly, Peñaloza (1996:34) has suggested that marketing and advertising have led to "pervasive images of white, upper-middle class, 'straight looking' people at the expense of. . . the poor, ethnic/racial/sexual minorities, drag queens, and butch lesbians." Conversely, YouTube—at least on its public face—has moved past these histories by acknowledging and including diverse depictions and voices of LGBTQ people.

Content Regulation: Ad-Friendliness and Community Guidelines

As Gillespie (2015) succinctly states, "platforms intervene"; they pick and choose by facilitating, deleting, promoting, suspending, and hiding materials. Indeed, given the flood of user-generated content, Google governs and regulates YouTube

more heavily than it governs the rest of the Web (Vaidhyanathan 2011), likely because potentially offensive audiovisual content creates more immediate threats to Google's and YouTube's brand reputations. In contrast to early techno-utopian sentiments that the Internet would allow all users to communicate openly and democratically (Barlow 1996; Turner 2006), web platforms, including social media platforms, must impose and enforce rules to curb content that is hateful, discriminatory, or illegal (Gillespie 2015, 2018; Roberts 2016). At the same time, a growing group of scholars and critical commentators have described how social media companies have begun to promote and facilitate content that is most consistent with their commercial and branding goals (Kim 2012)–even if some of that content is, for example, misleading, racist, misogynistic, or otherwise discriminatory (Nicas 2018; Noble 2018; Roberts 2016). In some cases, controversial material attracts user engagement (embodied through clicks and views) that creates revenue for advertisers and social media brands. YouTube, for example, has algorithmically facilitated channels with misleading videos featuring flat-earth and anti-vaccination conspiracies (Nicas 2018). In other instances, social media firm allows controversial images (like blackface) to remain online to avoid appearing too restrictive to users, which would lower user numbers and discourage advertisers (Roberts 2016). In either case, web platforms like YouTube intervene in the circulation of content by relying on human content moderation (Gillespie 2018; Roberts 2016) and algorithmic management (Bishop 2018; Gillespie 2010, 2015; Noble 2018).

YouTube provides and enforces an extensive list of guidelines for users to maintain their accounts and content on the platform. Like Gillespie (2018), I maintain that these guidelines are yet another type of discursive gesture "to users, that the platform will honor and protect online speech and at the same time shield them from offense and abuse; [and] to advertisers, that the platform is an environment friendly to their commercial appeals" (47). YouTube crystallizes its rules in two sets of discourses: (1) Community Guidelines and (2) Advertising-Friendly ("Ad-Friendly") Content Guidelines. These are not the only discourses and guidelines that YouTube has regarding users and user-generated content. The more formal and legalistic Terms of Service, for example, addresses issues not only of content but also of liability and copyright.

Nevertheless, throughout this study, I found that the community and ad-friendly guidelines were most salient for LGBTQ users on YouTube; creators discussed these the most, and YouTube limited LGBTQ stories on the platform based on them specifically. Indeed, although YouTube describes these expectations as "guidelines," they are not gentle suggestions for creators and viewers. Rather, they are rules for what content and user accounts are eligible for advertising revenue, labeled as age-restricted, or removed from the platform entirely. YouTube enforces these rules unevenly: While it has removed lesbian sex education videos, for example, it has allowed materials that show bodies of suicide victims as well as ads that suggest homosexuality is a harmful sin (as I expand on in the following sections). The two sets of discourses overlap considerably such that material that violates

community guidelines is ineligible for advertisements, and material that is not ad-friendly generally violates community guidelines. Gory material or non-educational nudity, for instance, are disallowed under both guidelines.

Even if users often do not read guidelines in detail, they hold tremendous influence on the cultural ecology of platforms (Gillespie 2018). Accordingly, I want to detail the two sets of discourses, and I aim to trace controversies and irregularities in YouTube's enforcement of them. I show that YouTube has corrected some of these irregularities, and I argue that these corrections have allowed YouTube to trumpet its values and policies, signaling brand progress and strengthening relationships with certain "partners," especially advertisers and other brands. However, as I explain throughout the remainder of this chapter, the guidelines and inconsistencies are a constant source of confusion and frustration for LGBTQ creators. Before detailing these rules and irregularities, I must first explain the types of content and account regulation—some that are algorithmically moderated and others that involve human moderation. At the end of this chapter, I turn to cases of two creators whose content YouTube regulated under the rules.

Types of Restriction and Regulation

YouTube, like other platforms, engages in *algorithmic demotion*, hiding videos from view and making them less likely for users to discover (Bishop 2018; Gillespie 2010, 2015). The algorithm is especially difficult to understand given that

the platform rarely provides insight into how it operates.[15] According to business commentators and scholars, metadata—including video descriptions, tags/keywords, automated captions, titles, and thumbnails—contributes to algorithmic video discovery (Bishop 2018; Gielen and Rosen 2016). YouTube and Google employees have explained that the algorithm is based heavily on audience engagement, including what they watch, what they don't watch, how much time they spend watching, likes and dislikes, and negative feedback (Covington, Adams, and Sargin 2016; YouTube 2019d). Based on this algorithm, videos become visible in multiple locations on the platform: search results (video collections based on keyword queries), suggested videos (personalized video lists that a user may be interested in watching next, based on current video viewing), the homepage (what videos viewers see when they first open the app or website), and the trending page (a list of videos that are new and popular) (YouTube 2019d).

Across a range of official statements and webpages, YouTube has stated emphatically that it does not favor specific creators or content, but this stands in contrasts to its less discussed posts as well as creators' public commentary. In 2008 blog message titled "A YouTube for All of Us," the platform noted that videos that are sexually suggestive or contain profanity would be "algorithmically demoted"

[15] Why YouTube does not provide more algorithm information is unclear both to me and LGBTQ content creators. I speculate that YouTube releasing a detailed algorithm model would allow competing companies to adopt and improve upon it, thereby threatening YouTube's business.

across various locations (YouTube Team 2008). In a more recent blog post, the YouTube team states,

> We'll continue… [by] taking a closer look at how we can reduce the spread of content that comes close to—but doesn't quite cross the line of—violating our Community Guidelines. To that end, we'll begin reducing recommendations of borderline content and content that could misinform users in harmful ways… (YouTube 2019a)

Similarly, Google Preferred Lineups—the top five percent of creators on whose videos advertisers can advertise—uses a "proprietary algorithm" that filters out mature and sensitive content (YouTube 2019c). What is important to note, particularly given the Community Guidelines and cases that I detail in the next sections, is that LGBTQ creators who are working on controversial topics—especially sexual and trans education, health, and comedy—fall under these categories. At the same time, YouTube can reaffirm through its algorithmic recommendations that it's improving the platform for viewers while ensuring the continued support from outside businesses and advertisers who do not wish to associate with potentially offensive or controversial content.

Another form of regulation is *demonetization*—rendering videos ineligible for revenue, specifically advertising revenue. If creators are part of the YouTube Partner Program and follow the Ad-Friendly Content Guidelines, their content is eligible for monetization. Within the first hours of a creator uploading a video, YouTube uses its algorithmic machine learning to look at the video's metadata and determine if the video can remain monetized or becomes demonetized (Marissa 2017). If YouTubers feel like the automated system made a mistake, they can issue an appeal; after a

creator initiates an appeal, an "expert reviewer" compares the content and metadata against the ad policies to decide. However, reviewers have "parameters around which appealed videos get reviewed first to make sure we review those videos that are getting substantial traffic" (Marissa 2017). In this manner, content that has not already reached a visibility threshold may stay demonetized without review for longer periods—sometimes for months.

Age restriction is a step before *video removal* and *account strikes.* Like with monetization, YouTube relies on a combination of technology and human intervention to flag a video for age restriction, removal, or strikes based on Community Guidelines. The majority of flags comes from automated machine learning, which reviews video metadata, but a flag can also come from the platform's Trusted Flagger program composed of NGOs, government agencies, and individuals (Google 2019). In addition, YouTube relies on community flagging where video viewers can alert the platform to content in potential violation of community parameters (Figure 4). Following the flagging process, a reviewer will take one of three actions: keeping the video live, without further action; age restricting, or rendering it invisible to users who are logged out or under the age of 18; or altogether deleting a video in violation of policies. If the reviewer removed the video from the platform, the video creator will receive a Community Guideline strike, with increasing penalties. From January 2019 to March 2019, YouTube removed a total of 8,294,349 videos, with 60 percent of these breaking scams, spam, and metadata

(meaning video descriptions, tags/keywords, automated captions, and titles) policies and another 20 percent violating nudity and sexual content guidelines (Google 2019).

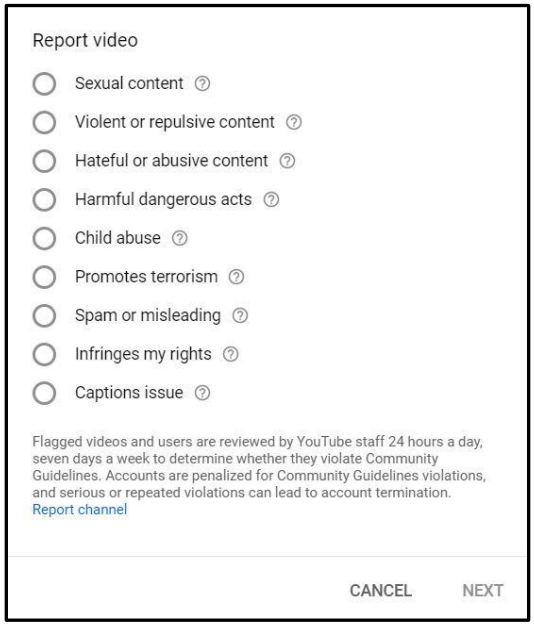


Figure 4. YouTube's Flagging Menu for Community Guideline Violations

The harshest form of consequence is *account/channel termination*. When YouTube terminates an account, all its videos are removed, and the account owner may be unable to access or create other YouTube channels. A YouTube channel will face account termination if it accrues either Community Guideline violations or copyright violations. Under the community violation category, YouTube can terminate a channel for having three-strike violations in a 90-day period, a single case of severe abuse, or an entire channel dedicated to policy violations. Under the copyright category, YouTube can terminate the account for having three copyright violations in a 90-day period. The platform states that it removed over 2,82,828,221 accounts from the periods of January 2019 to March 2019, which amounted to

74,014,284 video removed as a result; scams, spam, and misleading metadata caused over 85 percent of these removals (Google 2019).

What the Rules Say—And Their Inconsistent Enforcement Histories

Any individual who interacts with YouTube must follow the Community Guidelines whereas the Ad-Friendly Content Guidelines show whether advertisers want to have their brands seen with users' content. With the Community Guidelines, YouTube suggests that the guidelines keep YouTube intact as a place to share and listen:

> When you use YouTube, you join a community of people from all over the world. Every cool, new community feature on YouTube involves a certain level of trust. Millions of users respect that trust and we trust you to be responsible too. Following the guidelines below helps to keep YouTube fun and enjoyable for everyone. (YouTube 2018b)

Beyond this, YouTube characterizes the community rules—which are many and which all contain intricacies—as "common sense" (YouTube 2018b). With the advertising policies, creators must self-rate their content and choose to turn ads on or off their video materials based on whether they align with brand interests, yet violations of the policies may lead to ads being permanently disabled on YouTuber's channels.

Perhaps the most ambiguous and widely contested guideline with regards to LGBTQ-identifying video creators is the policy against *nudity and sexually suggestive content*. As Gillespie (2018) notes, platforms' rules against sexual content are incredibly broad, meant to cover a tremendous amount of material—accidental nudity, visually titillating acts, representations of sex toys, sexual language and

entendre, and extreme pornography, to name only some materials. YouTube offers a deceptively direct explanation, stating that content that is meant to be sexually gratifying is disallowed and ineligible for advertising. This includes depictions of genitals, breasts, or buttocks for sexual purposes; or pornography depicting acts, genitals, fetishes, or objects for sexual purposes. Additionally, content that blurs these lines—provocative dancing or kissing, pantsing or voyeurism, graphic or lewd language, and blurred or incidental nudity, among other content—is also subject to regulation.

YouTube has ambiguous exceptions for nudity and sexual content. More specifically, YouTube allows in its community rules "nudity when the primary purpose is educational, documentary, scientific, or artistic, and it isn't gratuitous" (YouTube 2018a). As with the other guidelines, context is of central importance so that, as YouTube illustrates, a documentary about breast cancer is acceptable, but out-of-context clips of the documentary are unacceptable. Moreover, in its advertising policies, YouTube states that general discussions of relationships and sexuality as well as "moderately" suggestive content are eligible for ads. Despite the (imprecise) explanations and examples provided, educational sex-based content continues to circulate on the platform while LGBTQ-focused educational and mild content is deemed offensive by community and advertising standards. As Hartbeat has remarked:

> YouTube got how-to-put-on-condoms videos. Just pure dick all over the YouTube screen, and it's very educational. I learned about penises that day. And that's there, but if we're looking on information about proper lesbian

> sexual education, that's not acceptable. You know what I mean? Why? (Field notes, June 22, 2018)

As of this writing, condom how-to videos are easily searchable on the platform, presumably because they have clinical, practical approach. In contrast, Hartbeat and other lesbian creators like Stevie Boebi have suggested that even the mere mention of lesbian sex results in YouTube restricting the content. The unpredictable guideline enforcement remains a hot-button issue for creators who produce educational content focused on LGBTQ sexual health, bodies, and identities. At the same time, these LGBTQ creators have become targets of harassment for viewers who repeatedly flag their videos, presumably finding them inappropriate for young audiences. Given these diverse views of nudity and sexuality, no matter where platforms draw lines on content, users will criticize guidelines as being too lenient or too prudish (Gillespie 2018).

Additionally, policies that held resonance for LGBTQ creators were the bans against *hate speech* and *hurtful content,* which are separate categories but noticeably overlap. In the Community Guidelines, hate speech refers to materials meant to incite violence or hatred on the bases of various identities and social locations, including race, ethnicity, religion, disability, gender, age, nationality, veteran status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Even so, YouTube admits that identifying and labeling this material as hateful is a "delicate balancing act" though the platform's goal is to continue protecting various "protected groups." In the Ad-Friendly Content Guidelines, hurtful content refers to material that is likely to offend marginalized

groups, with comedic and non-hurtful references to these groups deemed ad-worthy and with biased, demeaning, and hateful material labeled altogether unworthy of ads.

These guidelines came to the forefront during two contentious advertising-related events in the late 2010s, the outcomes of which continue to reverberate for gender and sexual minorities on the platform. In early 2017, *The Times* reported YouTube was allowing advertisements on videos, promoting Combat 18 (a neo-Nazi terrorist organization), ISIS, and al-Qaeda-aligned hate speech (Mostrous 2017). In the following months, major brands—including AT&T, Verizon, and Pepsi—threatened to altogether remove their ads and money from the platform (Alexander 2018). In response, YouTube started what has come to be known as the "Adpocalypse," allowing brands greater control on what videos they could place ads and introducing new, tougher guidelines for creators. In turn, creators—minority and non-minority—found their videos more easily demonetized and saw revenue plummet. Although Adpocalypse allowed YouTube to correct partially its irregular enforcement of its guidelines, especially surrounding hate speech, the restructuring contributed to greater policing of LGBTQ stories and creators. In particular, any videos with LGBTQ titles and any videos referencing same-sex relationships or attractions were age restricted; this included, for instance, a video entitled, "8 Black LGBTQ+ Trailblazers Who Inspire Me," uploaded by gay activist and pop culture enthusiast Tyler Oakley (Hunt 2017). LGBTQ YouTubers are still feeling the lingering effects.

In the early days of June 2018, news broke that YouTube was allowing anti-LGBTQ ads alongside LGBTQ creators' videos (as well as some unrelated content) (Hills 2018). YouTubers like Chase Ross, gay rapper and satirist Elijah Daniel, bisexual singer-songwriter Dodie Clark, and lesbian sex educator Stevie Boebi moved to Twitter to circulate screenshots of the advertisements, offering harsh criticism of the platform. The Alliance Defending Freedom, a legal firm that has fought against LGBTQ rights legislation, was responsible for one of the advertisements: a nearly five-minute-long video of a florist describing her refusal to create an arrangement for a man and his partner, stating that she would not allow the government to force her to create art for ideas in which she does not believe. Another ad from conservative commentator Dr. Brown asked whether a person can be both gay and a Christian, ultimately deeming homosexuality a harmful sin. Although this material likely fell under YouTube's categories of hateful and hurtful content, it was originally allowed on the platform. By June 30, 2018, YouTube shared a series of Tweets, using the opportunity to declare their LGBTQ-positive values on the last day of Pride Month: "[W]e let the LGBTQ community down–[with] inappropriate ads and concerns about how we're enforcing our monetization policy. . . We've taken action on the ads that violate our policies, and we are tightening our enforcement."[16] YouTube has since corrected the inconsistency, with the advertisements disappearing from videos altogether.

[16] YouTube's Twitter page, accessed June 30, 2018, https://twitter.com/YouTube/status/1013104842301157377?s=20.

Other rules include prohibitions against *harmful or dangerous content* and against *violent or graphic content*. According to community and ad rules, materials that encourage dangerous or illegal activities that risk physical or mental harm are disallowed; this includes, for example, content that promotes or glorifies suicide, eating disorders, theft, hacking, violent tragedies, hard drug use, or adolescent smoking. Nonetheless, YouTube states that uploads that are educational, documentary, scientific or artistic in nature may only result in the material being age restricted, not leading to an account strike that may result in account termination. Very similarly, the community and ad-friendly standards forbid content that shows violent or gory content meant to shock viewers or encourage others to commit acts of violent harm, which includes showing severe real injuries, real death, harm to minors, animal abuse, and sexual assault.

Yet again, a controversial incident brought up irregular moderation of violent, graphic, and harmful content. In December 2017, Logan Paul, one of YouTube's most popular vloggers, made a trip to Japan's Aokigahara (known as "Suicide Forest") and uploaded a vlog titled "WE FOUND A DEADY BODY," depicting the corpse of a man who had recently committed suicide by hanging (Alexander 2018). The title of Paul's video did not result in immediate algorithmic demonetization, unlike titles with LGBTQ-related words. According to the creators referenced in this writing, these specific words include "gay," "lesbian," "trans," "transgender," "queer," "drag queen," "LGBT," "pride," and other similar words (see also Hunt 2017). However, amid public outcry from LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ figures across

various Internet platforms, YouTube responded over a week later by discontinuing Paul's status in Google Preferred Lineups and halting the production of his YouTube Premium series. YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki remarked that Paul had not done enough to face account termination given that he had not violated the three-strike policy: "We need to have consistent laws, so that in our policies, so we can apply it consistently to millions of videos, millions of creators" (Newton 2018). Nonetheless, many LGBTQ producers have suffered account termination for far less graphic and potentially harmful material.

YouTube has other community and ad-friendly parameters that receive less frequent mention yet still shape content moderation. *Harassment and cyberbullying* (defined as malicious attacks and abusive videos or comments) and *threats* (described as predatory behavior, stalking, harassment, intimidation, or invasions of privacy) violate community policies. Nonetheless, as I have discussed, anti-LGBTQ violations are not uncommon. *Vulgar language* (such as profanity or sexually explicit language) may lead to age restriction, via community guidelines, and relatedly is unsuitable for most advertisers. Community guidelines prohibit practices that violate *copyright* or that amount to *spam or deception* (which include misleading video descriptions, tags, titles, or thumbnails). *Impersonation* (content intended to look like someone else is posting it, or a channel copying another channel's profile, background, or overall look) is also not allowed under community rules. Finally, the ad-friendly guidelines include perhaps the most sweeping parameter; any content that does not violate any of the above policies may still violate the guideline against *controversial issues and*

sensitive events (explained broadly as material that discusses recent acts of terrors, events resulting in catastrophic loss of human life, or "controversial social issues"). Given that LGBTQ issues remain a sensitive topic, videos and creators who discuss LGBTQ identities or experiences may still be ineligible for monetization even if they are otherwise advertiser friendly.

Altogether, I understand YouTube's rules and monitoring systems as perpetuating legacy media histories. In particular, Hollywood operated under the Motion Picture Production Code, which banned explicit references to homosexuality from the 1930s to early 1960s (Gross 2001; Russo 1987). As mentioned in the introduction, explicit representations of queerness are likely to receive a more restrictive rating under the film industry's "alphabet soup" rating system, which replaced the production code in 1968 (Gross 2001). At the same time, YouTube's content regulation parallels the recent trend of homonormative and transnormative images that present respectable forms of gender and sexual difference (Glover 2016; Martin 2021; Ng 2013)—a topic that I discuss further in a later section. Where YouTube differs, however, is its use of algorithms and user-based policing, rather than relying solely on decision-making of a few industry executives. In the pages that follow, I detail YouTube's policing of Chase Ross, a creator whose content centers transgender bodies and identities, and Hartbeat, a producer whose videos include sexual comedy and nudity. I argue that YouTube protects its brand presence by regulating content that pushes against the company's boundaries of sexuality, nudity, and sensitive topics.

Chase Ross: Trans Education, Age Restriction, and Demonetization

Chase Ross is a white trans activist and educator who has created videos since the age of fifteen and has uploaded to videos to YouTube since 2006 (Ross 2018a, 2019). One of the first trans vloggers on the platform, Ross started with documenting his transition from female to male and discussing his experiences with testosterone and top surgery. He has since moved to creating content that relates directly and indirectly to the health and wellbeing of the trans community. Among this content are informational videos about genital, sexual, and mental health. His 31-video "Trans 101" series, for instance, introduces the basics of transness to trans people and their families and addresses issues of gender dysphoria, pronouns, therapy, passing, transitioning, hormone blockers and hormone replacement therapy, fertility, and top and bottom surgeries. Many of Ross' materials, especially his recent videos, involve reviews of sex toys and prosthetics focused on trans men and include giveaways for his viewers. In total, Ross has amassed over 150,000 subscribers and 19 million video views.

Despite Ross' community focus, YouTube has flagged and age restricted many of his videos. Among those restricted are his Trans 101 series videos despite that he envisioned the videos as a vital resource for trans people under the age of 18. In a video titled "my channel is going to be deleted...." uploaded May 28, 2018, Ross reveals the details of YouTube's content regulation (Ross 2018b). As mentioned previously, YouTube uses an algorithmic system to check video metadata and flag a video for a potential community guidelines violation, which can lead to video age

restriction or removal. However, users and viewers can also use a flagging system to alert YouTube to potential guideline infringements. Ross notes in the opening lines of his video,

> I think that there are a—not one person—a group of people who targeting my channel and flagging every single video. If you recall last year, I did have a problem with this where a bunch of my videos started to get age restricted, and I was like, 'Why is this happening?' . . . We're on 144 [of over 750] videos right now, and I'm not even joking with that number.

Indeed, Ross explains that a friend had shown him screenshots of an online trans-exclusionary radical feminist group that would direct members to flag a video immediately after Ross uploaded one. In this sense, this anti-trans target parallels other instances of online discrimination against LGBTQ people (Brookey and Cannon 2009; Gray 2011; Pullen 2010a; Pulos 2013; Wakeford 1997). Even though a YouTube moderator must decide the outcome of a video flag, the targeting appears successful despite skirting against YouTube's anti-harassment policy. Even more, the platform issued community strikes to Ross' channel:

> It just sucks that LGBT creators are literally getting strikes on your account. After three strikes, your account gets deleted. Like, I literally got a strike on my account for a video that's five years old of me just talking about a packer, […] And it's a joke video, too, like whatever I was trying to make didn't work out, so I was like, "Ah, it's a joke." There was a strike for violence. […] Like, violence! I'm not even showing anything! (Field notes, June 22, 2018)

In response to these strikes, Ross expressed worry that he would suffer channel termination like other LGBTQ creators.

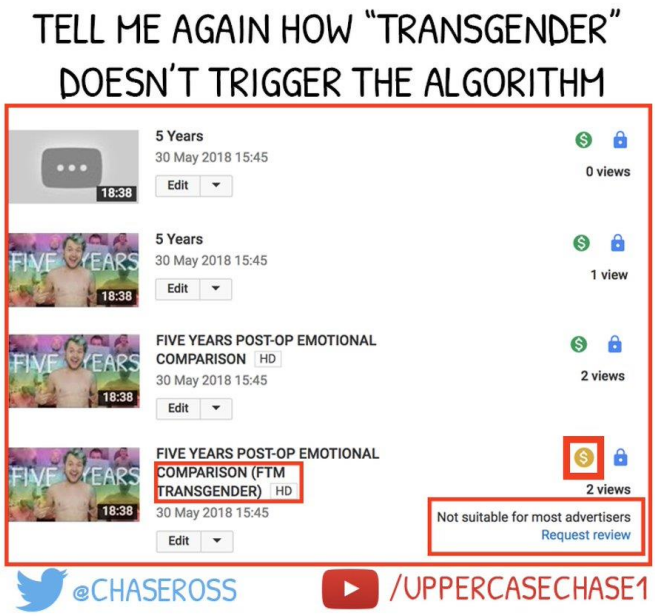


Figure 5. Chase Ross' Tweet on Anti-Trans Algorithm [17]

Ross received moderate media coverage by calling attention to his demonetization and to YouTube's unreliable algorithm. On his Twitter profile, he shared a screenshot of YouTube instantly demonetizing his videos when he directly referenced transness in his video titles (Figure 5). Ross explained,

> I don't like that automatically things get demonetized because they have special words in them, like "trans" or "gay" or "lesbian." And, um, I just think it's people that aren't paying attention to how the machines are learning. Um, for example, I had a video that. . . In the beginning, I put 'trans' in the title. It was demonetized instantly. Then I deleted, reuploaded it without the title, and it was monetized. I deleted [and] re-reuploaded it with the trans title, and it was demonetized again. And that's happened with three videos. I've done this test three times, and it's just like no one's paying attention to that. (Field notes, June 22, 2018)

[17] Chase Ross' Twitter page, accessed June 30, 2018, https://twitter.com/ChaseRoss/status/1001922360600137728.

Even this process was inconsistent, with trans titles sometimes not triggering the demonetization at all (Ross 2018b). In addition, Ross collaborated with another trans YouTuber on an educational video about anal sex, which was monetized as of June 2018—pointing again to irregularities in monetization. Beyond this, he changed the name of his video files and video tags to "family friendly" to finagle the algorithm, but YouTube similarly demonetized the videos, likely from reading other video metadata (Field notes, June 22, 2018).

Ross' experiences are instructive. YouTube's regulation of his materials would have remained invisible had Ross not spoken about it publicly. Ross' efforts call attention to the inconsistency of YouTube's algorithm, yet YouTube and its parent company Google claim that the algorithm simply follows with what users search, watch, and desire (Noble 2018). To be sure, the algorithm takes into account viewer and user engagement when recommending and hiding user-generated material (Bishop 2018). Yet Ross' case illustrates that YouTube engages in algorithmic discrimination based on trans identity. The demonetization of transness bolsters Noble's (2018) assertion that algorithms are never value-neutral; they reflect the biases and blind spots of their designers. However, social media companies intend for human moderation and policing (flagging, review) to become invisible (Gillespie 2018; Roberts 2016). YouTube is unlikely to correct the anti-trans targeting because it integrated into the platform's community flagging system; nonetheless, the anti-

trans flagging underscores that moderation becomes invisible for some creators more than others.[18]

Ross' experiences stand in stark contrast to the platform's statements and representations of diversity and equality. Ross often receives reminders from trans viewers and their families that his materials have helped them come to terms with trans identity, health, and bodies (Ross 2018b), but this significance escapes YouTube's content regulation. Ross is working on the fringes of what YouTube and their advertising "partners" deem potentially controversial and offensive. Despite YouTube's public support for select trans creators and some limited backing for Ross himself (including a creator trophy), the platform accordingly continues to demonetize and age restrict his videos.

Hartbeat: Black Lesbian Sexuality and Account Termination

Lesbian YouTuber Hart, better known as Hartbeat, has received the harshest of consequences on YouTube: account/channel termination. LBGTQ channel removals are not uncommon (Ross 2018b; Transthetics 2018), and Hart's case is especially striking because her account and video deletions remain shrouded in mystery. She began uploading videos to her main channel in October 2013. She rose to prominence in 2013 because of a minute-and-a-half video of her comedically dancing in a homemade watermelon bikini. Hart's other uploads include comedic

[18] In a similar context, surveillance scholars illustrate how online media companies ignore users who are not productive in terms of revenue, and users and community members accept and engage in self-surveillance as part of their participation in these platforms (Campbell 2005; Campbell and Carlson 2002).

skits, music videos, and personal vlogs on the topics of gender presentation and queer identity from a proudly black perspective. Her content focus is similar across her various accounts, and her primary channel is currently active with over 400,000 subscribers and nearly 35 million views.



Figure 6. Hartbeat's SimLivNColor Lesbian Nudity[19]

However, on May 5, 2018, YouTube terminated one of her secondary channels: the web series *SimLivNColor*—titled after *In Living Color,* the sketch comedy show with a largely black cast. Hart describes the show as a "mystery/drama/comedy" and creates voiceovers for digital avatar models from the video game *The Sims 4*; many of the characters are queers of color and feature a range of skin tones and gender presentations (SimLivNColor 2019). In Hart's terms, the show starts in the middle of the lives of a normal family before the family learns of one member's undiscussed past. The show gained some viewer recognition for its portrayal of avatar nudity (Figure 6). (Presumably, these portrayals violated

[19] Hartbeat's Instagram page, accessed November 15, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/ihartbeat/.

YouTube's policies on nudity and sexuality, but as mentioned previously, instances of human nudity are live on the platform.) Beyond the nudity, the series explores a range of sensitive issues: queer gender presentation, sex work and sexual intimacy, infidelity, partner abuse, gun violence, drug use, and incarceration, to name only some topics.

Hart, like Ross, provided details across her social media profiles of YouTube's content moderation, expressing confusion over the platform's irregular guideline enforcement. Shortly after uploading the third video of the web show's second season (which YouTube neither demonetized nor age restricted), Hart awoke to find her channel deleted. In the past, the channel had received community guideline strikes, presumably for violating the sexual content and nudity policy, yet she received little reason for the account termination itself. In her own words, "The channel still got terminated. I don't even have the answer to how it happened, but at least I had fun while I was doing it. That is so nuttery buttery to say. . . Nah, bitch, I should still be doing it. Shoot" (Field notes, June 22, 2018). Hart expressed frustration over the rule enforcement across YouTubers' channels, including across her own. In a half-hour live video stream on the Twitch.tv platform, Hart vented to her supporters and viewers:

> If you're a white guy who promotes dead bodies on YouTube, you're basically safe, um, because of the team of people around you to keep money pumping through the website. This is just strongly—it confirms on how they're attacking smaller creators in general. My other channels haven't been touched, and there's way worse things on there. I'm fucking dancing naked in a watermelon bikini. (SimLivNColor 2018)

At the same, she admitted and understood that her series may seem controversial to some: “You know, my series is really inappropriate, so if you go search *SimLivNColor*, just expect a lot of *Sims* titty—like, a lot of it” (Field notes, June 22, 2018). Hart has since successfully reuploaded some of the *SimLivNColor* series to an alternate channel by blurring the avatar nudity, and she also started her own website to share the episodes.

Nonetheless, her experiences highlight how YouTube irregularly polices minority representations and how smaller creators who are less focused on advertising acceptability have difficulty escaping YouTube’s moderation and policy systems. In a broader context, YouTube’s discrimination against Hart illustrates the homonormative cultural practices that regulate Black gayness. As Martin (2021) argues, black-cast sitcoms rely on a three-act structure of (1) detecting, (2) discovering/declaring, and (3) discarding black gayness. Act one raises the question of a character’s homosexuality by providing narrative clues. Act two involves a public declaration of a character’s homosexuality, and act three discards black gay figures so that a heterosexual plotline can continue. In this way, Martin maintains that the black gay other is positioned “as a narrative problem that must be solved” (17). While Martin focuses on focuses on black gay maleness in sitcoms, his larger point about the management of black gayness is applicable here to YouTube’s regulation and discarding of *SimLivNColor.*

Conclusion

In total, YouTube sets parameters for, but not does determine, the video production or reception of LGBTQ creators. The nature of social media—with its increased opportunity for user commentary and criticism—pushes YouTube to take accountability for its decisions; YouTube must carefully manage the distinct interests of various groups, including users, which puts the company in a precarious business position that could easily become unprofitable. This precarity contributes to deliberate branding efforts in the form of discourses and visual representations of partnership, diversity, and social progress. Corporate YouTube algorithmically commodifies and selectively assimilates diverse LGBTQ-identifying video creators who create advertising revenue for the platform and who serve the platform's branding interests. On its public face, YouTube seemingly moves beyond exclusionary histories of LGBTQ media representation by visually displaying content and producers that acknowledge LGBTQ social difference. In this manner, this brand recognition complicates what Peñaloza (1996:34) refers to as "pervasive images of white, upper-middle class, 'straight looking' people" of the LGBTQ community.

However, on a private, less visible level, YouTube restricts and regulates controversial content that threatens the company's brand name and digital presence. Often, that content represents diverse experiences—transness or black lesbianism, for instance—that the company claims to support. In this respect, YouTube's practices echo legacy media regulations (such as Hollywood's Motion Picture Code and "alphabet soup" ratings), demonstrating the persistent policing of LGBTQ images and

stories (Gross 2001; Russo 1987). In the case of Hart, YouTube perpetuated homonormative expectations of black gayness (Martin 2021).

Even so, Ross and Hart, as well as millions of LGBTQ-identifying YouTubers, continue to share intimate stories with their viewers. These YouTubers strategically balance their public service with their monetization goals, and some creators ultimately choose to prioritize one over the other. In the remaining chapters, I show how creators are negotiating and, in some cases, resisting YouTube to not only build their own brands but to develop networks of support and understanding.

Chapter Five: Production Strategizing and Personal Branding

YouTube's uneven restrictions and interventions have led to harsh criticism and resistance from creators. Since revealing YouTube's anti-trans demonetization in 2018, Chase Ross has continued to voice his concerns at public events, in interviews, and on his social media accounts. At VidCon, for instance, YouTube invited Ross to an event for LGBT content creators, and after attending, he disclosed,

> They gave us these shirts, and I was gonna wear it, but I didn't […] 'cause it looks like I'm "proud to create." I just want to show you now because it's like—my kink is YouTube trying to be like, "Oh, we love LGBT creators," and then giving us these shirts that say #ProudtoCreate. I wrote "demonetized videos" underneath because that's my life. (Field notes, June 23, 2018)

After VidCon, YouTube higher-ups invited Ross to meet, asking him to sign a non-disclosure agreement and assuring him that the platform would change with time. In August 2019, Ross shared in an interview that he did not believe change was coming: "I don't want YouTube's attention on Twitter anymore, because it does nothing. It's going nowhere" (Stokel-Walker 2019). By then, several LGBTQ YouTubers had contacted Ross after seeing his public criticism, culminating in *LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube*. This group lawsuit contends that Google/YouTube engages in activities that "stigmatize, restrict, block, demonetize, and financially harm" LGBTQ content creators (discussed later) (Courthouse News Service 2019).

As these incidents indicate, LGBTQ video producers are critically negotiating and even resisting YouTube's parameters when creating online material and interacting on the platform. I show how these creators, in varying degrees, work both with and against YouTube's algorithm, guidelines, and regulations. I start from the

premise that YouTubers differ in their creation and consumption of media, engaging with the platform in unexpected and sometimes critical ways. In this respect, I extend studies of feminist media reception (Bobo 1988; Hooks 1992; Martin 2021; Radway 1984), production (Christian 2018; Martin 2021), and fandom (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992, 2006). While the theoretical foundations and empirical findings of these studies differ, I build on two central points: first, the polysemic nature of media and, second, the idea that media consumers and producers are not cultural "dupes" who altogether accept industry practices and corporate-produced stories.

Creators' relationship with YouTube's algorithm is a significant factor in their content production and interactions on the platform. In part, my previous chapter showed how YouTube's algorithm works inconsistently and unequally. As Bishop (2018:73) explains, algorithm scholarship either focuses on "what algorithms *are* doing" or "what content creators *think* an algorithm is doing" (original emphasis). Here, I build on recent social media scholarship in the latter line of inquiry (Bishop 2019; Bucher 2017; Cotter 2018). Most notably, I extend Bucher's (2017) work, which develops the term "algorithmic imaginary" to discuss how social media users imagine, perceive, and experience algorithms. Bucher argues that algorithms are becoming a central part of contemporary life, so it is crucial to understand algorithms and the moods and affects they generate. She finds that Facebook users edit their behavior to work with the platform's structure; these behaviors include, for instance, waiting until a certain day or time to post and carefully choosing image descriptions. Moreover, Bucher details how users expect algorithms to act in certain ways; their

"expectations were not made intelligible until the algorithm did something to upset them"—that is, in moments of "perceived algorithmic breakdowns" (36). I adopt the phrase "algorithmic imaginary" to similarly demonstrate how LGBTQ YouTubers understand the platform's algorithm, including perceived breakdowns.

At the same time, I join scholars who detail self-branding, or personal branding, enabled by new media technologies (Banet-Weiser 2012; Lovelock 2017; Marwick 2013; Whitmer 2019). Like Marwick (2013) and Lovelock (2017), I argue that new media users develop personal brands by revealing personal information and engaging in promotional activities across multiple media channels. Not all LGBTQ YouTubers produce self-promotional content, and creators' branding efforts do not necessarily culminate in increased visibility on YouTube or outside YouTube. Indeed, there remain no guarantees that self-promotional behaviors through new media will result in professional success (Whitmer 2019). Even so, this chapter highlights video creators' techniques for cultivating their personal brands, which often includes moving outside the platform to build their professional careers (especially given how often YouTube intervenes in LGBTQ creators' content production on the platform).

In what follows, I first describe creators' varied algorithmic imaginaries and navigation of YouTube's regulations and restrictions. I elaborate on how these producers modifying their algorithmic behaviors while publicly calling on YouTube to change. Next, I show the techniques that LGBTQ creators use to promote their channels and develop their personal brands in- and outside YouTube. These techniques range from managing video metadata and generating video thumbnails to

developing merchandise and working with larger brands. Finally, I offer two illustrative cases of YouTubers who focus on beauty content and created profitable careers through their personal branding: gay creator James Charles and trans creator Giselle "Gigi Gorgeous" Getty. To extend LGBTQ media scholars' assimilation narrative, I argue that their practices demonstrate *homonormative branding* and *transnormative branding*, respectively.

Altogether, I explain that some LGBTQ video producers are skeptical of the company's branding practices and find ways to contest them. Concurrently, I show how some creators professionally benefit from the LGBTQ platform, allowing them to brand themselves and subsequently continuing a history of commercialized LGBTQ media representation. The cases of Chase Ross and Hartbeat, discussed earlier in this work, began to demonstrate creators' critical understandings of YouTube. This chapter provides further examples and context. Overall, these findings both build on and complicate the assimilation narrative with regards to LGBTQ media.

Algorithmic Imaginaries and Production Strategies

As discussed in the previous chapter, the algorithm decides which videos are suggested and promoted to viewers based on video metadata (video descriptions, tags/keywords, automated captions, titles) as well as previous viewer engagement (what viewers watch, how much time they spend watching, likes and dislikes, negative feedback). In addition, the algorithm (along with human moderators) reads video metadata to determine if a video is removed, age restricted, or demonetized

(ineligible for advertising revenue) or if the video will lead to community guideline strikes for a creator. In short, the algorithm's influence is pervasive.

This sections details LGBTQ creators' algorithmic imaginaries—how they make sense of, and feel, about the algorithm. This section also looks at LGBTQ YouTubers' negotiation of the algorithm and their strategies for producing content in the context of YouTube's inconsistently applied community and ad-friendly guidelines. On the one hand, I demonstrate how some content creators are pushing back against YouTube by publicly calling for changes to the algorithm and YouTube's guideline enforcement. On the other hand, I demonstrate how other creators are transitioning off the YouTube platform altogether or attempting to "reteach" and "trick" the algorithm in order to maintain a stable livelihood and community presence.

Before moving to this discussion, I would like to return to the assimilationist narrative in LGBTQ media studies. My aim in this chapter is to highlight the limitations in this academic line of inquiry. In particular, I sense that scholars overemphasize the impact of assimilation on LGBTQ media consumers and producers. In many cases, scholars do not discuss the meaning-making or subjectivities of those media consumers and producers at length (if at all), leading to speculative accounts. To illustrate, Peñaloza (1996) discusses the recognition of gays and lesbians in marketing campaigns and commercial appeals. She suggests that for "gays/lesbians, being targeted by marketers can be *very seductive*, particularly the portrayals of gays/lesbians as gorgeous, well-built, professionally successful, loved

and accepted, especially in contrast to the legacy of negative treatment" (Peñaloza 1996:13, emphasis added). Peñaloza is careful to point out to the contrast between these marketing campaigns and the more politically critical segments of the gay/lesbian community, ultimately stating that the marketplace is another site of struggle rather than something to be avoided or prevented (37). Similarly, Hennessy (1995) thoughtfully illustrates the commodification of gay/lesbian identity and asserts that queer theory, lesbian and gay studies, and activist circles have suppressed class analysis. Yet I am most interested in the opening pages of her work here, which state,

> […] *affirmative* images of lesbians and gays in the mainstream media, like the growing legitimation of lesbian and gay studies in the academy, can be *empowering* for those of us who have lived most of our lives with no validation at all from the dominant culture" (P. 31, emphasis added)

I am uneasy with the idea that media representation and commercial inclusion is necessarily "very seductive," "affirmative," or "empowering" for LGBTQ individuals. Even so, some studies within the assimilationist vein closely examine and consider the LGBTQ individuals involved in the production and circulation of media. I understand these studies as exceptions, which tend toward ethnographic and interview-based methods (Martin 2021; Sender 2004). I join these latter scholars to move beyond speculative notions and better understand how LGBTQ people think about and consider commercialized media recognition.

In this section, then, I illustrate how creators critically and thoughtfully navigate YouTube's parameters in their content production. I refer to several LGBTQ YouTubers: Stevie Boebi, a lesbian educator on queer sex and identities; Amber's Closet, a lesbian video creator who describes her YouTube channel as a "personality

channel" with content ranging from comedy skits to motivational videos; Ash Hardell, a nonbinary sex educator and author of *The ABCs of LGBT+*; Hannah Hart, a lesbian video producer and cookbook author who rose to popularity with her comedic cooking series *My Drunk Kitchen*; Hartbeat; Kingsley, a gay skit-based comedian and popular culture commentator; Chase Ross; and Jen Rugirello, lesbian co-creator of *The Kitchen & Jorn Show* and former member of Buzzfeed's *Ladylike*. I also elaborate on Lindz Amer and Carlos Maza's experiences and online presence at the relevant points. Unless otherwise noted or cited, quoted material originates from the "LGBTQ Activism," "Honesty Hour," and "Not Suitable for Advertisers" panels at VidCon.

Algorithmic Confusion and Public Criticisms

At the beginning of my data collection, I quickly noticed that creators had uncertainties and confusion about how the algorithm functions, worsened by YouTube's lack of transparency. For instance, Kingsley stated,

> My problem is with the algorithm, and I have talked to them directly. I just feel like I never get a straight answer. […] Um, so that for me is unacceptable, and they try to explain it as far as like they track your patterns and just all these things that don't make sense to me, and I don't understand it. And I know there's like a business side to it, but I think that's tacky and rude and needs to change.

When a VidCon panel moderator asked why LGBTQ titles and keywords lead to video demonetization, Hartbeat simply stated, "We don't know! That's why we here." She added, "We trying to figure it out just like the rest of people." Similarly, when I later asked an interviewee, who hosts a media review channel, if YouTube has demonetized any of his videos, he replied,

> YouTube's new strictness with flagging videos as "not suitable for all advertisers" […] seems to be inconsistently applied, and often gets triggered by keywords or spoken phrases around "gay" "Drag queen" etc. Though it also seems to be related to cursing… we're not really sure, so it's been a bit of a spaghetti on the wall approach. […] YouTube has demonetized about 75% of our last 15 videos […] but they refuse to say why or give any other detail or ability to appeal.

In these cases, what is telling is that creators, even when reaching out to YouTube representatives, received no clear answers.

Even when some established creators manage to get details from the platform, this insider knowledge is not widely distributed and can further puzzle video producers. Most notably, the phrase "ElMo score" was beginning to circulate among a handful of creators in 2018. Throughout my data collection and this dissertation writing, I heard the phrase "ElMo score" at only one point: during the one-hour panel focused on online content unsuitable for advertisers. During this hour, Stevie Boebi stated, "I think that it's [demonetization] always been happening. There's always been like, uh, I *think* it's called ElMo" (emphasis added). In response, Ash Hardell shared the following:

> Yeah, ElMo is an algorithm that decides whether a video or an entire channel is eligible for monetization. That's what it stands for, and every channel out there has an ElMo score. I don't know if you want your ElMo score to be high or if you want your ElMo score to be bad. I also talked to a few people at YouTube, and they don't seem to know the answer to that either, so it's all kind of a mess. Um, but the algorithm picks up certain words, and a lot of the words have to do with queerness and transness. Um, and if you—it can just trigger the algorithm in a way that can choose to demonetize a video.

Chase Ross also speculated about how ElMo was affecting him: "I *guess* my ELMO score is like really, really bad, because a lot of my videos are demonetized. Like, most of them are" (emphasis added). Later, Boebi responded: "We're sitting here

talking about, like, ElMo and algorithms, and none of that is like easy to understand. Like, I am still like, what is this?" Indeed, I could not locate any clarifying information about ElMo. To my knowledge, this information has never appeared in trade texts, news articles, YouTube's public materials, or even LGBTQ creators' social media posts. YouTube forces these creators to guess how the algorithm functions and how YouTube deems what is acceptable for the platform and advertisers.

In addition, content creators have expressed that the platform perpetuates anti-trans and anti-gay abuse. Key YouTubers have emerged here, including Lindz Amer, Carlos Maza, and Ash Hardell. Nonbinary creator Amer developed *Queer Kid Stuff*, a show aimed at explaining LGBTQ and social justice issues to families (Paul 2019; Strapagiel 2019). Since beginning the series in 2015, Amer has received hate from conservative commentators, and this harassment seemingly has not stopped. As Amer has explained, "If you search 'Queer Kid Stuff,' you get my videos, but you also get videos of people bullying me and warping my videos to make fun of me […] It's been a really big problem for my channel and what I'm trying to do" (Strapagiel 2019). A term search on YouTube (itself tied to YouTube's video suggestion algorithm) reveals videos with titles such as "Queer Kid Stuff Channel Rant," "Christian Conservative dad responds to SJW show Queer Kids Stuff," "Queer Kids Stuff Sucks!" and "StraightKids Stuff" (a derisive parody celebrating straight masculine "pride"). In June 2016, neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer* published an article entitled, "Sick Dyke Creates Educational Program to Brainwash Children Into the

Homosexual Lifestyle," which facilitated an avalanche of homophobic and anti-Semitic harassment against Amer. Yet YouTube did not intervene (Courthouse News Service 2019). Based on Amer's understanding, YouTube has a monopoly on video hosting, so "they have that advantage and they can steer the conversation and do nothing" (Paul 2019) despite the distribution of content that violates YouTube's anti-harassment and cyberbullying policies (Chapter Four).

Carlos Maza, a former video producer for the *Strikethrough* series on the U.S. news website *Vox*, has likewise experienced discrimination and harassment. YouTube has minimally intervened in these circumstances. The left-leaning *Strikethrough* video series explored news media in the age of Trump, eliciting years-long harassment from Steven Crowder. Crowder is a former Fox News Contributor who now hosts what he describes as the "The NUMBER ONE conservative late night comedy show" on YouTube (Ghosh 2020; Hern and Paul 2019). Maza, a gay Latino, flagged many of Crowder's videos for violating YouTube's policies; he also posted a video compilation of Crowder's attacks, which included phrases like "gay Mexican," "lispy queer," and "token Vox gay atheist sprite." Following moderators' review of Crowder's flagged videos in June 2019, YouTube commented: "[W]hile we found language that was clearly hurtful, the videos as posted don't violate our policies" (Ghosh 2020). The next day, YouTube reversed its decision, remarking that Crowder's channel "has harmed the broader community and is against our YouTube Partner Program policies," leading to the demonetization of Crowder's content. Crowder later removed the videos in question and his linked merchandise website,

which included tees with the slogan "Socialism Is For Fags." After Crowder reapplied to YouTube's Partner Program, the platform reinstated him in August 2020. As with his earlier criticism, Maza was vocal about YouTube's decision:

> Not a single thing has changed at YouTube. The company knows hate speech is wildly engaging, and is now running ads even on videos that don't belong to the Partner Program. It's [sic] business model is built in bigoted content, and everyone who works there is complicit. […] They don't take action against Crowder saying "faggots" because he makes them money.[20]

Thus, while Maza did not explicitly mention YouTube's algorithm, his emphasis on "wildly engaging" hate speech indicates his perception that YouTube—whether by machine-based or moderator-based decision-making—prioritizes hateful content over other content.

Ash Hardell by contrast has spoken directly about the algorithm promoting abusive content. In "Someone Leaked my Job...and it Sucked," a video essay uploaded July 21, 2019, Hardell shared the fear they felt when another YouTuber doxxed (non-consensually shared private information about) Hardell's five-year day job as a flight attendant (Hardell 2019). Hardell contextualized this video leak by discussing the transphobic, misgendering, sexually suggestive, and crude harassment they receive: images with breasts and bras superimposed over Hardell's body, scripted videos mocking Hardell's partner, hate art displayed in another YouTuber's channel image banner, and frequent transphobic comments. In light of their job becoming public, Hardell feared that anti-trans or other hateful viewers could

[20] Carlos Maza's Twitter page, accessed December 27, 2020, https://twitter.com/gaywonk/status/1332312615780044800?lang=en.

similarly fabricate stories and images to get them fired. After contacting an entertainment lawyer, Hardell shared the following in their video essay:

> Attempts to contact the doxxer, get a video taken down, or even respond publicly almost always results in more controversy and traffic to the original post or issue. It gives the original post a huge uptick or boost in YouTube's algorithm, and that video will start showing up in the recommended section of your videos. So basically the more you try to address or handle a problem, the harder it becomes to escape it. What a broken system! […] It's a vicious cycle, and the machine is primed to encourage breaches in privacy.

YouTube's tolerance of abusive and discriminatory content has not surprised Hardell, who has received years of harassment with little intervention from YouTube. They have described the platform's inaction as a "slap in the face" after it exploitatively used queer content in its public promotional materials (Paul 2019).

In a related vein, LGBTQ YouTubers reacted negatively and strongly when YouTube allowed anti-gay advertisements to precede LGBTQ creators' videos (as well as the videos of non-LGBTQ creators). (Like YouTube's video suggestions, advertisements also appear before videos based on YouTube's algorithm.) If algorithms influence how people feel (Bucher 2017), then the algorithm in this context led to one specific emotion: anger. When asked about the ads, Hartbeat gasped, cleared her throat, stood out of her chair, and shouted: "Ooh, let me tell you! Ya'll—are—trash—for—that!" Ash Hardell added,

> I love the exploitation that happens when Pride rolls around. Like, we're gonna get all these queer creators, like, together in a video 'cause we love them. […] so it's gonna be this one video that gets a ton of views and makes a ton of money. So, again, they're like really interested in celebrating Pride when it's about making money. It's like, at the same time, you're also putting anti-LGBT ads in front those creators' videos, so it really seems like only when it is convenient for you that you care about queer creators.

Chase Ross relatedly remarked, “[I]t’s Pride Month, and this is when everything happened. Like, someone tweeted me a screenshot of that guy that’s like, ‘Homosexuality is not in the Bible, so it’s bad.’ What? […] It’s just a really big slap in the face. Angry.” Yet Amber’s Closet was perhaps the most forceful with her words:

> I gotta calm down. I made a video talking about the anti-gay video that was floating around. It’s so disgusting. It’s so disrespectful, and I was so mad to go to one of my friend’s channels. I went to Hartbeat’s channel, and that ad was running on her video, and I wanted to fight somebody. I was so mad. Literally, I’m like shaking right now because it’s disrespectful. Like, this is my place of business. That is writing anti-gay, anti-Semitic, racist bigotry. You’re writing that on my place of business. That’s what that is because you’re filtering us as LGBT creators, but you’re not filtering your commercials, and you’re allowing them to target LGBT creators on Pride Month?! Oh, you’re disrespectful. […] You need to apologize to a whole community and stop reacting two, three weeks later or months later. This is right now. This is Pride Month. This is disrespectful.

As evidenced by this excerpt, creators are keenly aware of, and angry about, the discrepancy between YouTube’s private restriction of LGBTQ creators alongside its public promotion of anti-LGBTQ advertisements.

Echoing one of the central assertions in Noble's (2018) work on Google’s algorithmic discrimination, some creators pointed to the human bias involved in algorithm creation and machine learning. Chase Ross stated, “Algorithms are a thing, and we can blame humans for making those algorithms. I do, oh my god. […] I just think it’s people that aren’t paying attention to how the machines are learning.” Stevie Boebi remarked the following: “A robot is never just homophobic or transphobic. Someone taught it to be. […] Like, somebody literally had to teach a robot that these things are bad. So I think that it’s their responsibility to unteach it. […] The machine

needs a time out. What is happening?" A solution, creators proposed, is to hire a more diverse group of coders. "Hire some coders that aren't white dudes," Boebi stated succinctly. She continued,

> When I tell […] business people [to hire queer people], they're like, "You can't ask if they're queer." And it's like—yeah, you can. You can straight up publicly say, "We are looking to diversify and hire more queer people," and then the application comes in. And you can see sometimes, based on someone's previous work, if they're interested in that.

Thus, while Boebi recognized the difficulties in fixing the algorithm and hiring queer coders specifically, she pointed to YouTube itself for solutions.

Indeed, Boebi and her peers have identified the inconsistent regulations and biased algorithms as YouTube's responsibility alone. Hardell stated about the algorithm,

> There is no real way to get around it, which again is why it just comes back to fix the broken system. Stop making us try to find ways where we can still survive.[21] Like, fix it! […] I think that YouTube needs to make a clear commitment to LGBT creators. One that makes sense. There's no gray area, and there's no area for misinterpretation. Like, we care about you folks, and to show you folks this, these kinds of videos are not going to be demonetized: coming out videos, um, educational videos, things like that**.**

Discussing YouTube's demonetization and age restriction of LGBTQ creators' videos, Boebi comparably remarked, "I think it is YouTube responsibility as a company that has wildly said they're very inclusive to their LGBT creators, to not

[21] This project relied primarily on public texts and observation. Although some speakers spoke generally about their income success and struggle, they did not discuss their precise profits or incomes. Some video producers make their living through social media content production while social media is a secondary job or hobby for other producers. Incomes broadly range from zero to tens of millions. When publicly available, I list incomes and profit amounts.

allow that to happen, and they just haven't. […] And I feel like we caught them with restricted mode, and then all of the fallout is still happening." In a related line of thought, Jen Rugirello criticized YouTube for allowing its algorithm to flag LGBTQ titles and keywords for demonetization:

> I'm so pissed off right now, and the thing is like […] honestly, I know YouTube is working, and they're doing their things, and it's hard, right? But I just keep thinking, like, YouTube, you have so much money. Figure it out. Just honestly figure it out. […] I'm not gonna stop tweeting, not gonna stop yelling, not gonna stop wanting to fight somebody because it is total bullshit. Like, be better. Honestly.

To Hardell, Boebi, Rugirello, the solution is clear: YouTube has a responsibility to fix its algorithmic issues, and it has more than enough resources to achieve this.

If the promise of recognition in media industries and commercial campaigns is "very seductive" (Peñaloza 1996) and can feel "affirmative" or "empowering" (Hennessy 1995), then these creators provide a different picture. The creators discussed in this subsection understood the prevalence of anti-LGBTQ discrimination, the appearance of anti-gay ads, and the age restriction and demonetization of LGBTQ videos as "algorithmic breakdowns" (Bucher 2017): moments where YouTube's machine-based decision-making behaved counter to expectations, especially given YouTube's public inclusion of LGBTQ stories and individuals. In turn, these perceptions contributed to creators' prompts for immediate changes and responses from YouTube: the hiring of diverse coders, providing clear explanations of the algorithm, ending algorithmically promoted abuse and abusive content, apologizing, and merely being better overall. The YouTube platform directly affects LGBTQ creators' experiences and video production. One method for

navigating YouTube's confusing algorithm and inconsistent interventions, then, is to call on YouTube to change. Thus, some LGBTQ creators are critical about the kind of recognition that YouTube provides: the public, surface-level representation of LGBTQ creators combined with the private restriction of these same people and the public promotion of anti-LGBTQ material that harms them.

Algorithmic Strategies and Other Production Approaches

Creators publicly denouncing YouTube's actions (and inaction) was one important strategy creators used to remove the barriers to their content production and distribution, yet another group of YouTubers has taken the more direct approach of legal action. As discussed in the opening pages of this chapter, Chase Ross' public criticism preceded the *LGBTQ+ v. Google-YouTube* lawsuit, filed in August 2019 with several LGBTQ YouTubers (Alexander 2020; Courthouse News Service 2019). The 84-page legal document traces multiple instances in which YouTube failed its creators and contextualizes these instances as violations of free speech rights (Courthouse News Service 2019). The document notes, with regards to Ross, that the platform has indiscriminately aged restricted his videos; it has facilitated and even monetized disparaging and hate speech-filled video reactions featuring Ross. Moreover, the lawsuit notes that YouTube has demonetized "many UppercaseCHASE1's videos under the discriminatory, fraudulent, and unlawful pretext that the content violates YouTube's Community Guidelines or other vague, overly broad, subjective, or meaningless content-based regulations" (54). (See Chapter Four for a description of Community Guidelines.) Among those joining Ross

in the lawsuit is Lindz Amer, *Queer Kid Stuff* host. The document notes that YouTube's monetization policies and content regulation have stymied *Queer Kid Stuff*'s growth. In addition, by allowing the earlier mentioned neo-Nazi hate video to remain on the platform for nearly a year, YouTube promoted and profited from "homophobic hatemongers" (Courthouse News Service 2019:66). As the legal document explains, the video directed *The Daily Storm*'s followers to the *Queer Kid Stuff* Twitter account and Amer's profiles, leading to an inundation of anti-Semitic, misogynist, and homophobic hate as well as a death threat. Even though this video clearly and objectively violated YouTube's community guidelines, the lawsuit maintains that YouTube allowed the material to remain on the platform. Nonetheless, a YouTube spokesperson asserted that the platform neither restricts nor demonetizes videos based on terms like "gay" or "transgender," and, further, YouTube swiftly removes content and channels that violates its policies (as quoted in Lang 2021). By January 2021, a judge had dismissed the case, stating that YouTube is not a state actor that must adhere to the U.S. First Amendment. Still, the judge allowed the plaintiffs to amend the lawsuit under claims of YouTube engaging in false advertising (Lang 2021).

While waiting for the results of their public appeals and legal battles, LGBTQ creators are still forced to navigate YouTube's regulations and algorithmic breakdowns, pushing some to simply adjust for, or "trick," the algorithm. Even while the creators discussed here thought that the algorithm was YouTube's job to fix, they still had to adjust their production practices. Some creators modified their metadata

before or during uploading their videos because video metadata can lead to age restriction or demonetization. Tags—the descriptive keywords creators add to increase video discoverability—are an important type of metadata. Creating them is one of the final steps in creators' video production process. According to the advice of Amber's Closet, "Maybe try to stay away from the hashtags […] and just have friends tell you about each other's content and find people, because we can't use those hashtags anymore. Maybe stay away from those, and that will help you not get demonetized" (Field notes, June 22, 2018). Similarly, in the words of Ash Hardell,

> Little tip: I will upload a video with no tags or with really vanilla tags or basically no title or really vanilla title, and I also make [sure] the […] actual like source file doesn't have anything queer in it either. And then I'll let it upload, and then I'll let it process, and then when I see it's green [monetized] because the algorithm hasn't picked up what it's about yet because I lied to it, then I fill it with some like queer tags. (Field notes, June 23, 2018)

Yet, in response to Hardell, some creators have shared the inconsistency of this tactic. According to Chase Ross, "Mine get demonetized anyways. Literally I changed the name of the file to 'family friendly.' I changed the name of the video to 'family friendly.' I changed the tag to 'family friendly,' and it was still [demonetized]." Stevie Boebi resigned herself to removing tags off of her videos altogether while Hardell lamented the effects of this tactic, especially because they were sharing the process of their transition: "I won't have 'surgery' in my tags or 'double incision' in my tags, and then the video will stay monetized, which stinks though because anyone looking for top surgery or double incision probably won't find my video." In this manner, some creators can choose to stay monetized potentially, or they can choose to lose visibility among viewers searching for LGBTQ-related content. (I discuss in

the next section on branding that creators can still build an audience by using other methods.)

Another strategy is "reteaching" the algorithm. Hannah Hart was the major proponent of this practice, yet other creators were skeptical. Hart, arguably the most professionally successful YouTubers discussed here (which I elaborate on later), was one of the only creators to get concrete answers from YouTube itself. Based on her dialogue with the company, Hart explained:

> I think the best approach is that the algorithm has mistakenly learned, um, due to the inundation of hate on YouTube, open hate. It's not about the word "queer" being demonetized because it's the word "queer." It's about it being more commonly affiliated with hate speech, so the best way to counterbalance the algorithm not knowing what is or is not hate speech is to fill it up with more queer content creators saying positive things and to reteach it. It needs to learn and can only learn with more data, and we'll only have more data if people continue to make content.

While Ash Hardell said that they "loved" this approach, they also noted that it was difficult for smaller content producers who rely on advertising revenue:

> The only way for Chase [Ross] to make money is to avoid certain tags, and it stinks because it's almost not a choice […] he can bravely make to *resist* […] it's this hard place where a lot of us are put in where it's like, can I afford to resist? Can I afford advocacy? Or do I have to eat groceries? (spoken emphasis)

While Ross has voiced his criticism and taken legal action, Hardell's point stands: creators with smaller audiences are more likely to struggle with this approach. Still, Hart was firm in trying to rally her fellow creators to fix the algorithm themselves: "It's learned in the wrong direction, right? And they're not gonna change direction unless we participate in changing the direction, you know? And it's more than a conversation. It's content creation."

The final approaches that LGBTQ Youtubers took were transitioning off the platform altogether and, relatedly, diversifying income. Because YouTube affects the content that creators can openly produce and circulate, creators began exploring their "options" or were in "talks" with other websites and social media applications, such as Instagram TV and Snapchat. Others were already sharing content on different media channels and platforms. According to an interviewee, "We've recently started posting our demonetized videos on YouTube to IGTV [Instagram TV] (since they're not monetized either we figure better to try and gain new audience with it at least)." With an adjacent approach, Hannah Hart proposed using other platforms and taking on outside jobs to stay afloat in terms of income:

> YouTube is not the only platform to have a livelihood, and AdSense[22] was never enough to sustain. I made 200 dollars a month maybe like when I was doing great in my first year. Um, so the idea of YouTube being a sole source of income is a philosophy I don't subscribe to […] Diversify your income.

Indeed, this diversification seemed to be a common approach among both smaller and larger content creators. According to Hartbeat, who was describing the experience of her friends who suffered financially because of demonetization, "[D]on't put your trust into any platform that you're not in control of. […] Get a website. You having a website and having a YouTube channel, drive that traffic to your website, and be your own game instead of playing somebody else's game."

Patreon—a subscription-service website for video viewers to financially support YouTubers and other artists—was ever-present in my data collection. I often

[22] Google AdSense is the program that provides creators a share of the advertising revenue for monetized videos.

heard about it in both my offline and online fieldwork, especially among creators who did not have large enough subscriber counts or video views to gain the attention of brands (discussed in the next section). As of this writing, my interviewee still supports his channel with Patreon, where he offers tiered rewards depending on the level of monetary support a viewer offers. Hartbeat also noted, "Patreon saved my life, dude. Patreon saved my life. […] You know, if I wouldn't have opened up my Patreon, I wouldn't have like 200 people willing to see the vision of this LGBT content wanting to come about." Chase Ross added, "Yeah, no, legit Patreon also saved my life. I've never sat there and […] expected all my money to come from AdSense because I know that's not gonna happen because all my videos are demonetized. So you have to go elsewhere." In this respect, some creators chose to produce and share content they could not benefit from on YouTube. They perceived and accepted that YouTube was not enough to sustain their livelihoods.

Altogether, the algorithmic and production strategies discussed here further complicate the assimilationist picture of LGBTQ media producers and consumers. Far from being "seduced" or "empowered" by YouTube's recognition, these YouTubers recognize the limits that the site places on them and adjust accordingly. Given the platform's inconsistent policies and interventions, the creators' strategies and understandings are conflicting. The results are similarly uneven. Even so, I aimed in this section to shows how creators are critically engaging with the YouTube platform, even as it places limits on them and their content production. In the next

section, I turn to LGBTQ producers' branding practices, illustrating yet another way creators interact with YouTube.

Personal Branding on YouTube and Beyond

I build here on scholarship that illustrates the branding of the self, known as personal branding or self-branding, through new media (Banet-Weiser 2012; Lovelock 2017; Marwick 2013; Whitmer 2019). I understand personal branding as the strategic promotion of oneself as a product to be packaged, marketed, and sold (Marwick 2013; Whitmer 2019). Credited with popularizing the idea of personal branding, Tom Peters asserted that everyone is "every bit as much a brand as Nike, Coke, Pepsi, or the Body Shop," so we must become the "CEO of Me Inc" (Peters 1997). Given the extension of branding into all areas of cultural life, scholars suggest that there is a "branding imperative" (Whitmer 2019) or a "duty" to cultivate a self-brand (Banet-Weiser 2012). Indeed, I discovered that nearly all LGBTQ YouTubers had to cultivate their channels and public personas to find commercial success on the platform and in other media and entertainment industries.

A closely related study in this area is Lovelock's (2017) work on YouTube stars Connor Franta and Ingrid Nilsen. Their success, Lovelock contends, has offered them the ability to travel beyond YouTube through self-branding as "authentic" people who are open about their lives, culminating in their coming out video blogs that further extended their celebrity brands. In turn, their coming out signaled to gay and lesbian youth that they must "transform an anguished and unhappy past" into a productive, healthy adulthood and "future, through processes of emotional work, self-

acceptance, and self-love" (97). Lovelock refers to this as a "proto-homonormativity," a narrow framework for gay youth subjectivity.

I agree with Lovelock's assessment, yet I am reluctant to adopt the language of "proto-homonormativity" or "homonormativity" in this section, which details LGBTQ YouTubers' branding techniques. To be sure, I extend the language of homonormativity and transnormativity in the illustrative cases of beauty YouTubers James Charles and Giselle "Gigi Gorgeous" Getty, which appear at the end of this chapter. When I originally formulated *LGBTQ YouTube*, I understood that only YouTube's most-viewed, most-followed content creators engaged in personal branding. As this project grew, I came to recognize that creators demonstrated these practices notwithstanding their viewer metrics on YouTube or their success outside the platform. The reasons for personal branding also varied dramatically. While some creators were attempting to support their lavish lifestyles and product purchases, others explored various entertainment industries for their personal or artistic growth, and still others had the more modest goal of maintaining successful enough channels to afford groceries and rent. I am sure that some creators do not consider the practices discussed below as personal branding, yet others certainly would.[23]

I still understand these practices as falling under the branding umbrella. For Lovelock (2017), proto-homonormativity results from the celebrity status and personal branding of Nilsen and Franta. As I discovered and as Whitmer (2019)

[23] In the words of Hannah Hart, "I'm a personality brand, right? […] I don't have a separate brand. It is Hannah Hart" (Field notes, June 22, 2018).

suggests, branding attempts do not necessarily guarantee professional or commercial recognition. Further, Duggan (2002:179) originally conceptualized homonormativity as a "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions." I also found that, regardless of political leanings, creators were engaging in branding. In the discussion below, I reference creators (Stevie Boebi, Ash Hardell, Chase Ross) who have contested heteronormative treatment on YouTube and in other settings.[24] My point is that personal branding practices occur unrelated to creators' economic success, business goals, or politics. I for now distance these creators and branding efforts from heteronormativity and homonormativity (as well as transnormativity), in contrast to scholars who link them.

All the LGBTQ creators discussed in *LGBTQ YouTube* represented themselves in their visual or audio material such that they became effectively synonymous with their YouTube channels. If creators' channels succeeded in viewer metrics and engagement, then the creator themselves generally achieved some level or form of commercial success. Some YouTubers adopt alternate personas or do not share their faces or voices on their channels, but I understand these individuals as exceptions. While LGBTQ creators must still navigate YouTube's regulations and algorithm, creators who developed a consistent audience could use this visibility to procure brand deals, merchandising opportunities, professional management, and

[24] For example, Chase Ross critiqued YouTube and schooling systems for oversexualizing trans people, treating them only as objects for individuals' sexual fetishes (Field notes, June 22, 2018).

outside media appearances.[25] YouTube's video search and suggestion algorithm limits LGBTQ creators' channel growth and viewership numbers. However, these individuals can still gain visibility by word of mouth among viewers or by ad-friendly video uploads unrelated to LGBTQ identity. The algorithm can then incorporate those videos into its video suggestions to users. With these details in mind, I now turn to branding techniques, drawing examples from several video producers.

Personal Branding Practices

Among the most ubiquitous of branding techniques are *calls for viewer engagement*. According to YouTube, the algorithm will read viewer engagement measures to loop videos into the platform's video suggestions for users. More specifically, creators would ask audiences to "like, comment, and subscribe." Variations of this phrase are so common that I came to expect them each time I watched a new video during my data collection. When a viewer "likes" a video by clicking on the thumbs up icon, they increase the number of likes on the video and automatically place the video in a personalized "Liked videos" playlist. Similarly, someone watching can "dislike" a video, but LGBTQ creators rarely acknowledged this metric. When a viewer comments on a video, their message will appear listed below the video; creators can then "pin" specific comments, which will place them at the top of the list. When a viewer "subscribes to" a content creator on the YouTube

[25] As Chase Ross noted while discussing his income diversification, "Other things like brand deals and stuff like that are the other ways that I've been able to stay, like—I can still make videos and eat" (Field notes, June 23, 2018).

platform, the creator's videos will appear in the viewer's personalized feed on the YouTube website or app.

To take an example, Jaymes Mansfield, gay wig stylist and former contestant on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, asked viewers to "like, comment, and subscribe" in nearly all the 68 videos she uploaded in the year 2020. In the final moments of an episode of Wig Warz, where Mansfield's friends compete in a timed wig styling competition, Mansfield jokingly remarks, "Don't forget to like, comment, and subscribe, and I do mean like, and I do mean comment, and I do mean subscribe. I am so close to 100k [subscribers], folks. I can taste it, and if I don't get 100k soon, I may kill somebody, alright?" (Mansfield 2020). Even if YouTubers like Mansfield do not think of viewer engagement in terms of the algorithm, these calls to viewers aim to increase the recognition of the channel and creator.

The next strategy refers to creators' *tagline and slogan creation.* Within their videos, YouTubers will develop specific introductory or closing statements or repeat a catchy phrase across their videos. These statements often form the basis of creators' merchandise and products (discussed later). They also become associated with the creator and their channel. For instance, Jaymes Mansfield opens her videos by exclaiming, "Hi, everyone! Jaymes Mansfield here bringing you yet another video." Bisexual documentarian and makeup creator Shane Dawson jokingly refers to himself as "trash' and opens all his video by saying, "Hey, what's up, you guys? Yes!" Chase Ross begins his videos by greeting his audience and stating, "It's me, Chasie Poo." While Hannah Hart only infrequently uploads videos as part of her *My Drunk Kitchen*

series, she begins every video with the words “Boop boop,” timed with the accompanying musical notes. Altogether, I understand these catchy taglines as slogans as attempts to solidify the expectations of their audiences, thereby sustaining and potentially growing viewership.



Figure 7. “The ‘Boyfriend’ Tag (ft. Troye Sivan) | Tyler Oakley” Video Thumbnail

Beyond managing the content within videos, YouTubers engage in *metadata management*. Metadata includes video descriptions, tags/keywords, titles, and thumbnails. Users can search for and discover videos based on this metadata. Notably, every video includes a title and an image—the thumbnail—that accompany a video link on the platform. While browsing YouTube, users see the title and thumbnail first, so they are key metadata that can entice users to click and watch. As mentioned earlier, YouTube often demonetizes and age restricts videos with text metadata that includes LGBTQ-related words. Thus, the thumbnail becomes particularly important. Presumably, the algorithm cannot read images as easily as text, so video thumbnails are a place to mention LGBTQ themes, or creators can choose to remove LGBTQ words from the text. For instance, the “Boyfriend Tag” became popular in 2014, featuring videos of creators asking boyfriends and close friends personal questions. Gay musician Troye Sivan and gay author and popular

culture enthusiast Tyler Oakley collaborated on a video using this tag, amassing over 11.5 million views (Figure 7Figure 7). As this example shows, even as metadata remains a significant contention point among LGBTQ creators given YouTube's restrictions, it is also a site to build engaged and interested audiences.

Cross-channel collaborations are another form of personal branding and channel development. With these collaborations (also known as "collabs"), YouTubers create video content with fellow YouTubers. This usually results in a mutual exchange; each creator receives videos to upload to their respective YouTube channels. For instance, Joey Graceffa, gay vlogger and producer for YouTube Premium's *Escape the Night*, currently includes a video playlist on his channel entitled "COLLABS WITH FRIENDS!" As of this writing, the playlist contains 108 video collaborations with LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ content creators alike. One example includes his video collaboration entitled "PANCAKE ART CHALLENGE! w/Rosanna Pansino," uploaded on December 16, 2017 (Graceffa 2017). As the title suggests, the video shows Graceffa and Pansino, baker and cookbook author, competing in a race to make holiday-themed pancakes. In the final minute of the video, Graceffa calls on viewers to engage with the content: "Alright, well, I hope you guys enjoyed today's video. If you did, please give it a big old thumbs up […] We actually just filmed a video on her channel where we made ugly sweater […] so go check that out and subscribe to her." In the corresponding video on Pansino's channel, she states that she has listed Graceffa's social media profile links in the video description box. She then asks her viewers to subscribe to Graceffa (Pansino

2017). In this manner, video producers can tap into their peers' audiences, building and developing the visibility of their channels and themselves.

Another practice is *product and event development*. After gaining a steady stream of viewers by using the methods above or by receiving recognition from mainstream media outlets, YouTubers can begin to sell products and merchandise (more frequently referred to as "merch"), or they can plan events for their fans. This merchandise sometimes references content or slogans from creators' videos. Hannah Hart, for instance, explained how she began selling t-shirts after starting her channel in 2011:

> I would take one-liners from *My Drunk Kitchen* and turn it into a t-shirt like, "Taco is the most versatile fruit," [or] "Parkour for you." […] Whatever the top comment was, I was like, yeah! That was the funniest part! At the time, I was like, OK, great, so maybe I'll post a video and then sell a t-shirt that is coordinated with every video I post. (Field notes, June 22, 2018)

By 2013, Hart embarked on the international "Hello Harto" world tour after fundraising $220,000 from her followers (Tenbarge 2019). In 2014, Hart released a "self-help parody-meets-drunk cooking" book that debuted on *The New York Times* bestsellers list. She followed up with a memoir in 2016 that similarly debuted on the bestsellers list. She later developed a show "I Hart Food" for *The Food Network* and "A Decent Proposal" for Ellen DeGeneres' online video platform (Tenbarge 2019). As Hannah Hart's efforts show, creators can signal their core interests and traits (such as comedic cooking and content creation in Hart's case) and distill them into specific products and events.

Creators who develop strong viewer metrics and engaged audiences can seek out *brand sponsorships and affiliations*. These are mutual exchanges: Creators will acknowledge and advertise products from larger corporate brands on their channels, or creators appear on these brands' websites or social media accounts. Affiliate programs are commissioned based, with creators sharing a link or code to purchase a specific product or service. The creators then receive a percentage of sales from viewers using the link or code to make a purchase, and the viewer usually gets a discount. In contrast, sponsors provide creators flat rates to discuss and share a brand's products or services. For example, Amazon's audiobook and podcast service Audible sponsors Ash Hardell; in fact, Hardell's earlier mentioned video essay on their leaked flight attendant job ends with them sharing the benefits of the Audible service (Hardell 2019). One of the creators most open about her sponsorships and affiliations is trans beauty vlogger Nikkie de Jager, better known as NikkieTutorials (Dall'Asen 2019). For instance, Nikkie shared an anime-inspired makeup transformation inspired by her sponsor, the mobile game *Love Nikki*. The video's description box includes affiliate links for makeup brands Juvia's Place (one of Nikkie's favorite brands) and Morphe Brushes (NikkieTutorials 2018). In this manner, corporate brands benefit from the extra viewer traffic, and the recognition from these brands increases the visibility of creators.

YouTubers also engage in *cross-platform profile curation*. Because YouTube users seldom consume only one form of media, creators promote themselves on their various social media profiles and personal websites. Visibility and viewership in these

other online settings can increase viewership on YouTube, and vice versa. Stevie Boebi, for example, has developed public media profiles on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The image banners and descriptions on these various profiles include links to Boebi's YouTube channel and contextualize Boebi's online presence. Her Instagram profile reads, "LGBT & Lifestyle."[26] The about section of her Facebook page simply states, "SassiBoB (Stevie Boebi) makes videos on youtube,"[27] and includes links to her most recent video uploads. These public profiles and websites also become settings for YouTubers to promote their various products and events. The Facebook page of dancer and music artist Jojo Siwa, who came out in January 2021, states, "Come see me on tour!!! Get your tickets ASAP because a lot of cities are sold out!!! www.jojodreamtour.com."[28] Cross-platform curation often entails interactions and relationships with fans and audiences, a method that Cotter (2018) refers to as the relational approach to increasing social media visibility. According to an interviewee, "We try and do a good job of responding on all our forums. We mostly just heart comments on youtube [sic], but will respond from time to time. We try and reply to all the messages we get on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. We typically read all the comments on our videos." While this interviewee did not think

[26] Stevie Boebi's Twitter page, accessed January 15, 2021, https://twitter.com/stevieboebi?lang=en.
[27] Stevie Boebi's Facebook page, accessed January 15, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/sassibobtv/.
[28] Jojo Siwa's Facebook page, accessed January 22, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/itsjojosiwa/?ref=page_internal.

of his actions in terms of branding, they were still cross-promoting and sustaining and growing viewership.

Finally, LGBTQ YouTubers engage in *entertainment and media diversification*. This overlaps with the approaches discussed above, but I intend here to highlight the ways that YouTubers travel outside the boundaries of their social media profiles and personal websites as well as the YouTube platform more generally. This practice entails transitioning into other entertainment and media industries, especially music, acting, modeling, and hosting. A striking example is Troye Sivan, who has transitioned almost entirely off the YouTube platform following the success of his music career. After uploading his first video in 2007 at the age of thirteen, Sivan began to develop a consistent following by uploading humorous and personal video confessionals, culminating in his widely circulated coming out video in 2013. He later released his critically acclaimed album *Blue Neighbourhood* in 2015, with Sivan commenting that coming out was the best decision for himself and his musical career (Portwood 2016). This success led to multiple appearances on talk shows with Jimmy Fallon, Ellen DeGeneres, and James Corden; coverage from music publications like *Rolling Stone* and *Billboard*; and performances for SNL and other musical festivals. He even took a supporting role in *Boy Erased*, a drama about a gay conversion therapy program starring Academy Award winner Nicole Kidman and Academy Award nominee Lucas Hedges. Now, Sivan only uses YouTube to upload his music videos, moving away from the video confessionals that helped him grow his audience. When asked about this for a *GQ*

video, he simply stated, “Honestly, I just got over it. […] This is not exciting to me anymore. Let me go do something that's actually exciting and like hopefully you guys will still be along for the ride, ya know?” (GQ 2020).

Although creators develop self-brands for various reasons, I want to suggest that they are continuing a long history of commodifying identities and experiences. Scholars in the assimilationist vein have underlined how gay and lesbian press shifted their news strategies to expand and attract advertisers. Specifically, the press began “hermetically sealing and physically distancing the controversial aspects of gay/lesbian culture,” such as gender nonconformity, explicit sex, and poverty (Peñaloza 1996:34). Some of the “controversial aspects” (like gender nonconformity) are brandable (as the upcoming case illustrates). However, I did not locate any instances of creators trying to brand, for example, their experiences with poverty. Moreover, scholars have detailed gay and lesbian outlets making a switch to “lifestyle” content focused on fashion, celebrities, and travel in place of overtly activist topics (Campbell 2005, 2007; Chasin 2000; Ng 2013; Peñaloza 1996; Streitmatter 1995). Likewise, the branding discussed above reflects lifestyle content and other creative ventures: makeup, music, acting, cooking, dancing, romance. Of course, some YouTubers engage in activism (as the next chapter demonstrates) and balance their business goals with their public service. With this in mind, I turn to a YouTube creator with one of the most developed personal brands.

James Charles: Homonormative Branding

James Charles, a white gay beauty influencer (a creator who post videos related to makeup, cosmetics, and fashion), has cultivated an audience of 25.4 million subscribers, with over 3.2 billion video views. He is currently the most-subscribed LGBTQ creator on the YouTube platform. In this section, I extend the assimilationist narrative that LGBTQ people align with corporate interests while contributing to a highly commercialized form of LGBTQ media representation based on respectability. LGBTQ media scholars have adopted and refined the concept of homonormativity (Lovelock 2017; Martin 2021; Ng 2013), which I consider the most recent extension of the assimilationist narrative. As discussed earlier, Duggan (2002:179) defines homonormativity as a "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions […] while promising the possibility of a […] privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption." As a beauty influencer, Charles' career and branding practices are entirely rooted in cosmetics consumption, and he has largely avoided political discussion for most of his career (Tenbarge 2020). Accordingly, I illustrate here how James Charles is engaged in homonormative personal branding.

Charles' brand growth is tied directly to his cross-platform profile development. Charles dabbled in YouTube content creation from 2010–12 as preteen, uploading singing videos and graphic design examples to a channel titled "JaysCoding." He later returned to social media by launching an Instagram account in 2015 to post pictures of client's makeup during prom season (Falletta 2016). His

presence as a young man in the makeup industry resulted in a quick rise to fame on Instagram, prompting him to launch his new YouTube channel on December 1, 2015, with a video showing a brown/blue serpent makeup look (Andrews 2016). His Instagram supporters led to rising subscriber counts on YouTube. However, most of his personal brand growth came when he uploaded a photo to Twitter in September 2016. The Tweet shows Charles' senior photos, with his glowing, highlighted cheeks and a caption that reads, "So I retook my senior photos & brought my ring light with me so my highlight would be poppin. I love being extra."[29] The image went viral, driving continuous traffic to his various social media accounts.



Figure 8. "Makeup en Español con Kimberly Loaiza!" Video Thumbnail

Charles regularly engages in video collaborations as part of his channel. The first of these video collaborations, uploaded August 2, 2016, was with queer-identifying YouTuber and singer-songwriter Ben J. Pierce. Some of his most-watched videos include collaborations with Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner, Doja Cota, and Iggy Azalea. He has also collaborated with Tiktok star Charli D'Amelio; reality

[29] James Charles' Twitter page, accessed January 15, 2021, https://twitter.com/jamescharles/status/772883439733338112.

television stars Farrah Moan, Willam Belli, and Maddie Ziegler; and YouTubers Joey Graceffa, RCLBeauty, Ricky Dillon, Tana Mongeau, Amanda Ensing, Colleen Ballinger, NikkieTutorials, Jojo Siwa, and Christine Zydelko, to name only some. One such collaboration is with Spanish-speaking YouTuber Kimberly Loaiza. The 15-minute video entitled "Makeup en Español con Kimberly Loaiza!," uploaded on September 22, 2020, is a departure from Charles' typical English content (Charles 2020). The video thumbnail prominently displays Spanish text, a similarly unusual and engaging thumbnail given Charles' previous content (Figure 8Figure 8). During the video, Charles shares how he took Spanish classes for ten years, and he applies makeup to Loaiza. In the closing minutes, he displays the usernames for his accounts on Instagram, Twitter, Tiktok, and Facebook, and he directs viewers to watch the accompanying video on Loaiza's channel. Loaiza's video features the two creators tasting Mexican candies, and it similarly ends with Loaiza directing viewers to watch Charles' content. The video has amassed over 15 million views, and he gained 600,000 subscribers during the week of the upload (Social Blade 2021). In this manner, video collaborations guide new audiences from various media sources to Charles' channel, increasing his overall recognition and providing further business opportunities.

Charles unabashedly develops merchandise and relationships with beauty and cosmetics brands. In a half-hour video collaboration with fellow beauty influencer Tati Westbrook, Charles explains,

> Influencer marketing, regardless of whatever your personal opinion on it may be, is a system that works, is a system that is very, very efficient, and it is a

> system that is very, very cost effective. And it's probably not gonna go away for a very, very long time, so I think it's up to the public to educate themselves on it. […] Advertising exists in every single industry, and the beauty industry is a billion-dollar industry. […] There's nothing wrong with doing sponsorships. (Charles 2018)

Indeed, Charles regularly takes on sponsorships and brand deals. In 2016, he notably became Covergirl's first male spokesperson at age 17, prompting Katy Perry to release a supportive Instagram post sharing the news (Andrews 2016). He is an affiliate of Lilly Lashes and Laura's Boutique, but he is more famously an affiliate of Morphe makeup brushes given his consistent use of the phrase "You can use code 'James' for 10% off" on the Morphe website. This affiliation also led to Charles developing a line of eyeshadow palettes and makeup brushes with Morphe: the James Charles Brush Set, the James Charles Eyeshadow Palette, and the Morphe X James Charles Mini Palette. Moreover, he launched his merchandise site Sisters Apparel, named after his videos' opening line: "Hey, sisters!" The site also lists hoodies, t-shirts, track jackets, jumpsuits, bathing suits, swim trunks, underwear, leggings, bras, belts, slippers, fabric fans, and handheld mirrors emblazoned with his other catchphrases: "Love that," "Good and fresh," "Not with that attitude," and "Use code James for 10% off" (Ultrabrand 2020). In sum, I understand these efforts and Charles' other branding practices as deeply intertwined with cosmetics consumption while, as noted earlier, Charles rarely engages in politics. In turn, his personal branding reflects the assimilative gay recognition, depoliticization, and consumption known as homonormativity.

Gigi Gorgeous: Transnormative Branding

White trans beauty influencer Giselle Getty, better known as Gigi Gorgeous[30], has amassed 2.84 million subscribers and 500 million video views, becoming one of the most followed trans creators on the platform and one of the most visible trans women in popular culture. In this section, I suggest that Getty's public presence and personal branding illustrate transnormativity: the belief that transgender people can assimilate to dominant society by shaping "their gender embodiment, grooming practices, physical appearance, sexual practices, and sexuality (heterosexual preferably) […] alongside heteronormative standards and acceptable behaviors" (Glover 2016:344). Getty has made most of her brand growth after her publicly coming out as trans and sharing her transition, crystallized in the documentary *This is Everything*, discussed in the following pages. Like my illustration of Charles' homonormative branding, I propose that Getty is engaged in transnormative personal branding.

Even so, Getty's media career had humble beginnings. In her own words, Getty "started from the bottom," creating videos out of "pure boredom" by modeling them after those of another beauty vlogger Michelle Phan (Hoyer 2017; Kiefer 2017). She uploaded her first video, titled "Gregory Gorgeous' Makeup Routine," on August 8, 2008. The mostly silent four-minute video, filmed in her parents' home in Toronto,

[30] Getty's original online persona was Gregory Gorgeous, which she has openly and comfortably discussed (Kiefer 2017). Accordingly, I use Getty's current pronouns throughout this section, even when referring to her earlier content, but I do not omit references to the name Gregory.

Canada, shows a teenaged Getty applying a full face of makeup and adjusting her hair (Figure 9). The video's grainy quality indicates the recording technology of the time but also Getty's initial DIY approach and limited access to professional equipment. In her first year on the platform, she posted a handful of videos and, in subsequent years, began uploading a few times a month (Kiefer 2017). She developed a dedicated group of viewers with her increased content, including makeup and hair tutorials, product reviews, comedic skits, and video confessionals promoting self-confidence and acceptance.



Figure 9. "Gregory Gorgeous' Makeup Routine" Video Still

By openly sharing her former identity as a gay man on her channel, Getty grew her online brand and attracted a manager's attention. (This growth occurred prior to YouTube's demonetization of LGBTQ content and algorithmic discrimination against LGBTQ creators.) In her own words, "Coming out as gay man made my presence online soar," leading to a milestone of 100,000 YouTube followers in 2012 (Gigi Gorgeous 2017). In turn, Getty gained the recognition of Scott Fisher, a managerial newcomer who was similarly trying to succeed in the industry. Working

as a Starbucks barista, Fisher took on Getty as his first client, noting the unique nature of the YouTube platform: "YouTube flipped everything on its head. […] This is the first time that talent has ever had control and has the lion share of the revenue. The millennial generation, these people that are entrepreneurs, never could have never had this life five years ago" (Gigi Gorgeous 2017). Getting a manager was a challenging but essential step in her professional growth. As Getty has stated, "I met my manager along the way. […] I wouldn't be able to do it without my team or just people in general. It is so intimidating to get a manager, but you gotta try something. […] It's just business" (Field notes, June 23, 2018). Fisher accelerated Getty's brand growth so much that Fisher was able to build his own company based on her success, and he is still one of Getty's current business managers.

While Getty's brand was already on the rise, most of Getty's growth on YouTube came after she uploaded a video on December 16, 2013, titled "I Am Transgender" (Gigi Gorgeous 2013). For most of 2013, Getty had avoided posting personal videos, following the loss of her mother and the process of recognizing her trans identity. "I have felt for a very long time now that I was a girl trapped in a boy's body. […] It's still my heart. It's still my body. It's still my mind," Getty states in the four-minute video, vowing to be more open with her viewers and subscribers. This new openness culminated in the documentary *This Is Everything: Gigi Gorgeous*, which charts her gender transition and rise to celebrity status (Gigi Gorgeous 2017). The documentary received support from YouTube itself. As Getty has remarked:

> I feel like I was on YouTube for so long, so it was like just a natural progression of me sharing more and more. […] I've always kind of held off

> on sharing everything, so that's how the documentary came, and I was just like, I'm gonna put it all out there and let them into my transition fully. When YouTube Red reached out, they were like, you can have your own director. You can have all the creative control you want. I was like, bitch, I love this! Like, this is everything. (Field notes, June 23, 2018)

The documentary, directed by two-time Academy Award winner Barbara Kopple, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival to critical acclaim. Getty has marked the premiere as one of her most rewarding accomplishments. YouTube now hosts the documentary as part of its Premium (formerly Red) subscription-based service, with the platform's logo featured in the opening scenes of the trailer and documentary. In this manner, Getty has successfully navigated the YouTube platform and is one of the creators who has benefitted most from YouTube's LGBTQ diversity campaigns.

Getty has also benefited from YouTube's monetization of her videos, with Getty able to generate a six-figure monthly income through Google advertising revenue alone (Kiefer 2017). This figure stands in contrast to YouTube's rampant demonetization of LGBTQ content and creators. I attribute this advertising revenue to her channel's focus on themes other than her trans identity. To be sure, she discusses it, and her identity is key to her brand success. A scan of her recent video reveals titles like "where i've been… my horrific surgery" and "Helping My Friend Transition (Female to Male)." Even so, her trans experiences are not the channel's primary focus. Gendered beauty and lifestyle content are still the center of Getty's channel, and her videos on these topics outnumber the videos that focus solely on her various identities and the life events related to these identities. This in turn reduces

but does not eliminate the possibility of demonetization based on the algorithm's analysis of video metadata.

In addition, Getty's YouTube channel and videos have noticeably shifted in terms of quality and product branding. While her channel has steadily centered on beauty and lifestyle content since the beginning of her YouTube career, Getty's videos are now more smoothly produced and likely to receive monetary support from outside brands. To take an example, Getty's video "HOLIDAY FAVES + My Biggest Giveaway EVER!" (uploaded Dec 3, 2020) features calls for viewer engagement, a brand sponsorship, and a bright pink thumbnail with bold text (Figure 10Figure 10). In the 16-minute video sponsored by fashion company Viktor&Rolf, Getty shares her love for the company's Flowerbomb perfume while noting the "warm and spicy" fragrance notes that would make for a great present for the holiday season. The whole video setup and her appearance, Getty explains, is based on the Flowerbomb Limited Edition 2020 perfume; she notes her "pink smoky eye with a little bit of silver glitter to balance" with the look of the bottle. She similarly describes her other holiday favorites, including photo frames, concealers, eyelashes, eyeliner, lip balms, bronzing mousse, and other products. By the end of the video, Getty announces that she is hosting a giveaway of some items from her personal collection; those interested, Getty instructs, should enter by leaving a comment on the video and also liking and commenting on Getty's accompanying photo on Instagram. In this manner, the video represents several of the branding practices discussed in earlier

pages: calls for viewer engagement, metadata management, brand sponsorships, and cross-platform profile curation.



Figure 10. "HOLIDAY FAVES + My Biggest Giveaway EVER!" Video Thumbnail

Getty has received tremendous name and brand recognition outside of YouTube through business deals, products, and events. While Getty still posts on YouTube, she has consciously moved to other realms of entertainment: "I just feel like I always wanted to do just everything. I could never stick to like one kind of media or craft, so I feel like it was just an opportunity of everybody watching my stuff. When opportunities come, I'm like, yes, I'll do it" (Field notes, June 23, 2018). In addition to the Viktor&Rolf sponsorship noted above, Pantene, Too Faced, Ubisoft, L'Oreal, and Maybelline have worked with Getty; she has walked in New York Fashion Week and made cameos on Oxygen's *Project Runway All Stars*, E!'s *Celebrity Style Story*, MTV's *The Hills Aftershow*, and Logo TV's *Trailblazers Awards* (E! 2016; Gigi Gorgeous 2017). Relatedly, Getty made several award show appearances after *This Is Everything* received critical accolades: a Critics' Choice Documentary Award, a Streamy Award, and nominations at the Stockholm Film Festival, GLAAD Media Awards, and MTV Movie and TV Awards (IMDB 2020).

Following the premiere of the documentary in 2017, *TIME* listed Getty as one of the most influential people on the internet, alongside Rihanna and Kim Kardashian (Kiefer 2017). Also in 2017, Revlon made Getty one of its brand ambassadors, another key moment in Getty's personal and professional development:

> I grew up with Revlon makeup […] so when they reached out and wanted me to be the first trans spokesperson for the brand, I was like floored because to think that there was never a trans spokesperson before Revlon or Maybelline—I've worked with them before—was shocking to me. […] I just felt really, really honored the whole time. Going into their headquarters and seeing like Gwen Stefani and all these gorgeous—Ciara was with them too—I had to pat myself on the back, and I was like, yeah, let's get it! (Field notes, June 23, 2018)

Finally, in 2019, Getty went on tour with her memoir *He Said, She Said: Lessons, Stories, and Mistakes from My Transgender Journey*, and she created a makeup line in collaboration with the beauty subscription service Ipsy (co-founded by Michelle Phan, the same beauty vlogger that inspired Getty's YouTube career).

It is telling that Getty has made most of her personal brand growth after her public transition. Like Glover (2016) discusses in their analysis of Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, Getty is a conventionally attractive woman, and she has strived to align her gender and femininity with heteronormative ideals. In *This Is Everything*, Getty's manager notes that, while Getty is the same person after coming out as Gigi, she now presents herself differently. "Gigi is more self-aware than Gregory. Her goal now is to blend in," her manager states (Gigi Gorgeous 2017). A telling example of Gigi's approach to transnormative branding is another documentary scene. As Getty sits and looks for a credible plastic surgeon online, she spots a Beverly Hills-based doctor. She jokingly asks, "Hollywood, Beverly Hills. Am I going to become famous when I

get my boobs done?" At the same time, Gigi has embraced the cosmetic and fashion industries (as noted in the previous paragraph) and has developed a career based on her product consumption and beauty. A related scene in her documentary sees her falling on a bed after a bra shopping trip with a fellow YouTuber: "Like, I'm staring at my bras like, yes, bitch, this my fucking size! Me and my bras. Love ya, bitch. Calvin Klein, Victoria Secret. I need to hit up Asian Provocateur, La Perla." To be sure, bra shopping was a crucial moment in her journey as a trans woman—but it was also a moment indicative of gendered consumerism and heteronormative personal goals.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a look at the complex and fraught practices of LGBTQ video creators. Alongside their confusion and public criticism of YouTube's algorithm, LGBTQ YouTubers carefully adjusted their content production processes to account for the platform's machine-based decision-making. Indeed, creators were critically and thoughtfully aware of the platform's algorithm, calling attention to the human bias involved in its creation. At the same time, creators participated in personal branding, continuing a long history of LGBTQ people participating in the commercialized media sphere. Overall, the findings presented here nuance LGBTQ media studies' assimilation narrative by underlining the wide range of ways LGBTQ people contest, negotiate, and engage with media industries—rather than altogether accepting the commercial and media recognition offered to them.

In the next chapter, I turn toward yet another narrative: the community narrative. I later underscore how creators develop networks of support and understanding by sharing their own identities and life experiences. At the same time, I continue elaborating on the online hate and abusive communities that develop around specific creators.

Chapter Six: Community Building and Storytelling

In October 2013, Gigi Getty's fans gathered for the opportunity to meet the creator in a Toronto mall. The meet-up, documented in *This is Everything*, drew lines of young people yelling Getty's name and waving to the accompanying camera. "I'm having a religious experience right now," one crying fan said to her moments after meeting. Another supporter, on the verge of tears, shared her gratitude for the video creator: "I just want to say thank you so much because last year was like really hard." A different fan, speechless and weeping, repeatedly hugged Getty. "Don't cry. You're beautiful. Don't cry. You're okay. You're okay. Don't worry. I love you," Getty responded while wiping away her supporter's tears.

Beyond providing entertaining material to watch, LGBTQ YouTubers like Getty share their intimate lives and identities, resonating with millions of viewers and fans, particularly those who identify as LGBTQ themselves. In this respect, Getty's creator-fan meetup echoes the community narrative in LGBTQ media scholarship. See, for instance, Dyer's (1990:286) assertion that subcultural cinema contributed to an "affirmation politics" that helped gay and lesbian people survive under oppressive conditions and fill their need to be seen and believed. Other LGBTQ media researchers share similar ideas about new media. To quote Gross (2001),

> In recent years new options have emerged that offer isolated members of a minority the opportunity to reach and communicate with like-minded fellows. […] New media create opportunities for the formation of new communities, and the Internet is no exception. In contrast to most other modern media, the Internet offers opportunities for individual engagement both as senders and receivers, permitting the coalescing of interest-based networks spanning vast distances. (P. 227)

More recently, psychology-inflected scholarship has emphasized the sense of belonging, comfort, and community that develop among LGBTQ media viewers and LGBTQ-identifying new media users (Cabiria 2008; Craig et al. 2015; Evans 2007; Fox and Ralston 2016; Gomillion and Giuliano 2011; McInroy and Craig 2015; McKee 2000). Building on this diverse group of studies, I elaborate on the community narrative here.

This chapter is also indebted to fandom scholars and feminist audience researchers, especially Jenkins (1992, 2006) and Bobo (1988). Building on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, Bobo examines how black women reinterpret the meaning of the film *The Color Purple* to empower themselves, indicating "a community of heightened consciousness" (31). In a different context, Jenkins explains how fans adopt and rework mass cultural forms and use them "as the basis of their own cultural creations and social interactions"—a process he calls textual poaching (Jenkins 1992:18). In turn, Jenkin notes, fans develop a "collective identity" based on shared interests, drawing courage from one another. Taken together, Bobo and Jenkins underline the communities that form around particular media objects and figures, and the sense of support and identity that these group members share. Likewise, I detail here how LGBTQ creators become the center of communities for historically underrepresented people.

If the previous chapter complicated the assimilation narrative, this chapter features the altogether different narrative of community. I define *community* as a social network based in shared identity, experience, and media engagement;

community leads to a sense of belonging and comfort for its members. I maintain that, despite setting parameters for creators, YouTube does not entirely determine the media products that LGBTQ people create nor how viewers respond to them. In other words, even in the face of unequal industry practices, YouTubers and viewers create space to share experiences and media interpretations to connect with others.[31] This process parallels subcultural press and cinema that facilitated gay and lesbian community development—even as mass media industries regulated or altogether ignored gay and lesbian existence (Alwood 1996; Dyer 1990; Fejes and Petrich 1993; Gross 2001; Streitmatter 1995). Although I do not dwell on YouTube's algorithmic discrimination and assimilative practices in this chapter, creators' efforts always occur in this technological and cultural context (a point I return to in *LGBTQ YouTube*'s conclusion).

First, I detail LGBTQ YouTubers' sentiments and stories about media representation. I demonstrate how these creators account for their viewers during their video production. Next, I turn to the case of Annie Segarra, a nonbinary video creator and intersectional disability activist who sparked the "Future is Accessible" campaign. I then illustrate the case of Shane Dawson, a bisexual video documentarian whose candidness about his mental illness helped change and "save" his fans.

[31] In this chapter, I center creators' stories and experiences tied to their identities. However, feminist scholar Joan Scott (1991:779) asserts that "making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity." She adds that experience should not be "not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain" (797). Given that creators did not interrogate or historicize their identity categories or experiences, I admittedly take their stories as self-evident here.

Although *LGBTQ YouTube* is not a psychological project, this chapter addresses mental health issues and coming out practices. Finally, I shift to discuss the antifandom that resulted from James Charles' business deceit and sexual predation allegations. This community form contrasts with the support networks I detail for most of this chapter; nonetheless, it is a common community type that develops in response to LGBTQ video producers.

Media Interpretations and Representation Matters

Online creators continue to struggle over representational practices, particularly given legacy media outlets' limited recognition of minority groups (Christian 2018) and the restrictions that new media platforms like YouTube place on creators. Even so, web producers often embrace and illustrate social differences, creating space to share identities and experiences (Christian 2018). This section describes how LGBTQ YouTubers understand LGBTQ media representation offline and online. I establish how their media interpretations relate to their sense of community and their decision to become YouTubers. I illustrate how, in turn, these video producers cultivate relationships with their fellow creators and audiences.

In this section, I refer to LGBTQ YouTubers mentioned in previous chapters: Amber's Closet, Ash Hardell, Chase Ross, Jen Ruggirello, Hannah Hart, Kingsley, and Stevie Boebi. I also reference the personal stories and experiences of other YouTubers: Ahsante Bean, queer, asexual multimedia artist; Ashly Perez, lesbian author and former Buzzfeed personality and producer; Arrows, transgender, nonbinary model and filmmaker; Chandler Wilson, nonbinary, asexual vlogger and

LGBTQ educator; Kat Blaque, transgender illustrator, animator, and public speaker; Miles Jai, nonbinary beauty enthusiast and wig reviewer; Nikita Dragun, transgender makeup artist and creator of the Dragun Beauty cosmetics line; Stef Sanjati, transgender video game livestreamer and former social justice educator; and Taylor Behnke, bisexual digital organizer. Quoted material originates from several panels at VidCon: "Body Image, Gender, Presentation, and Online Video," "LGBTQ Activism," "Not Straight, Not White, Not Serious," "Pero Like," "We're Here: Talking about Marginalized Identities," and "YouTube Black."

Video creators described the absence and flaws of LGBTQ legacy media, resonating with Evans' (2007) reception study of gay and lesbian television. In part, Evans illustrates how gays and lesbians recognize improvements in television representation, yet they still locate the "negative" aspects. I found similar perspectives among LGBTQ YouTubers, particularly those who identify with the trans umbrella. According to Chandler Wilson,

> There's actually a show called *Billions* which has a nonbinary character in it, and it's played by someone who's nonbinary, so that's cool. […] There's very little even trans representation, but even in instances where trans representation exists, there's like not even a mention of nonbinary people, which I feel is just almost like kick to the side or under the rug or something.

Wilson contrasted this current form of recognition with the potential for more nuanced representation:

> The character instances that I see, trans representation is always "I was born in the wrong body, and I hate myself, and now I'm gonna go on a journey to like fix myself." And I just don't relate to that narrative at all. So I feel like nonbinary representation for me would be showing someone being nonbinary, showing their journey to become comfortable with themselves but not

> emphasizing [body] dysphoria or emphasizing the fact that they're nonbinary in a way where it takes away from the rest of their person.

In response, lesbian educator Stevie Boebi elaborated, "Yeah, I just find it so interesting that the younger and younger demographic you talk to, the less and less we watch TV. I think that's a lot because we aren't seeing ourselves represented in anything. Um, would love a nonbinary character who isn't like crying all the time." In a similar line of thought, Chase Ross remarked on the dearth of trans stories and how this could contribute to a negative self-image: "I grew up in a world that did not have any trans representation at all. Like, we only had Jazz [Jennings][32], and she was four at the time. […] I thought that, oh, okay, I'm just trans, so I just have to live miserable [and] hate my body 'cause that's all the other trans narratives I have seen." According to a few creators, old media rarely depicts asexuality (which itself is often excluded from the LGBTQ umbrella). In the words of Ahsante Bean, "there's not a ton of asexual representation that I've seen. Um, I know that there's an asexual character in *Bojack Horseman*, but […] just wasn't my style." These reflections from Bean and other creators are telling. I understand the search for LGBTQ stories as attempts to connect with others through their LGBTQ identities—in short, to find community.

Mainstream media's representational practices led to creators' decisions to start their YouTube channels and share LGBTQ-focused materials. Ashley Perez, for

[32] Transgender activist Jazz Jennings rose to U.S. public perception in 2012 following a *20/20* interview with Barbara Walters. She later starred in the TLC show *I Am Jazz*, which premiered in 2015.

example, began to make queer content because she did not find mainstream lesbian media uplifting:

> The stuff I tried to make on [Buzzfeed] Violet was just queer people having crushes on people because you get sad lesbian movies, and they're so fucking sad, and everyone is dying and old and coming out, and it's the saddest thing. And every movie's like the Titanic but not good, you know? And I was like, I just want a rom-com where it's like two people are shy—two women are shy around each other, and that's it.

In this respect, Perez' words align with the popular and scholarly criticism of the "Bury Your Gays" trope in entertainment media where LGBTQ people die or are presumed dead (GLAAD Media Institute 2020; LGBT Fans Deserve Better 2019; Russo 1987). In a different line of thought, Chandler Wilson explained, "It's like a lot of trans people in the media are played by cis people, and so it's like, *I want to be the representation* because I'm an actual nonbinary person and not a cis person who's playing a character" (emphasis added). With regards to bisexual media, Taylor Behnke likewise stated, "I feel like it's been a good year for bisexuals on television […] but at the same time, the reason that I'm up here is because I didn't have that until this year, and so *I had to make it myself*" (emphasis added). Another striking example is Arrows, who appeared on MTV's *Real World: Ex-Plosion* in 2011: "I started on YouTube because I was on a reality show. […] I got really nervous about people like taking my own narrative from me and then crafting me and introducing me. So I was like, let me get on YouTube so I could tell my own story." Arrows' journey to YouTube is unusual, yet their words underscore their critical interpretation of mainstream popular media. In tandem, these LGBTQ creators illustrate how their

perspectives on media histories inform their desires to build networks of support for themselves.

Trans creators pointed to their limited representation on YouTube itself, which similarly contributed to the choice to create LGBTQ-focused videos. For instance, Chander Wilson, at the age of sixteen, searched for YouTube videos related to nonbinary, agender identity and found only two videos—neither of which reflected their experience. In turn, Wilson uploaded their video "What Is Agender?" and began developing more LGBTQ-themed content on their channel. Beyond these agender YouTubers, other creators who fall under the transgender umbrella have represented themselves on the platform, if only temporarily and in limited ways. According to Kat Blaque, "What happens on YouTube is people make these like, 'Oh, I took hormones yesterday. I'm already feeling changes' videos, and then they disappear after they get to like a certain place. […] Trans guy vloggers […] and the same's with trans women. There's not many of them who stay, and so it's important to stay." Very similarly, Chase Ross explained, "There was no one on YouTube, and like everyone left. When people get to a certain part of their transition, like, bye. But I stayed because there was no one when I started." Nikita Dragun also began charting her trans journey and identity after finding little information on the platform, particularly with regards to surgeries:

> I was just really fed up with the fact that people weren't talking about certain things. They weren't showing the surgeries. They weren't talking about the really hard things you have to go through when you are on hormones or, you know, when you're trying to cover all this stuff and pay expenses, and there is kind of like a darker side of being trans. Um, in LA you know some of the girls are working girls, and some of them have sugar daddies […] I felt like I

> always treated my YouTube sort of like a diary. I showed obviously every bump in the road, everything in between, every needle and screw being pulled out of my head, and it's been really wild, but I'm so glad that we found this little community.

Thus, even while YouTube has provided new opportunities for trans self-representation, creators have historically shared narrow stories of transness, prompting others to join in this video production.

Even so, video producers found LGBTQ figures on YouTube and other online outlets, helping these people feel seen and inspiring them to build their own online presence. Former Buzzfeed personality Jen Rugirrello, for example, became comfortable with her lesbian identity through YouTube and the online lesbian community AfterEllen, eventually leading to her work with her creative partner at the Buzzfeed company. In the same way, Stef Sanjati shared her use of online platforms like Instagram to develop a positive self-image:

> I perceive myself as very muscular, and that's something that you cannot change with a surgery, right? […] I had to force myself to cultivate that good body image, and seeing the presentation of my body shape or of those specific parts of my body even on my Instagram feed, that's enough to get my foot in the door of creating a good body image.[…] See yourself in other people, and if you don't see yourself in other people, look for them. Look for the people that you see yourself in.

Beyond this, early adopters of the YouTube platform served as models for creators who began to share their LGBTQ lives on YouTube in later years. To illustrate, Ash Hardell found a mentor in Hannah Hart, who took Hardell "under her wing" and who was one of the first people to tell Hardell, "Hey, you're kind of good at this!" In this way, Hart and the rest of the LGBTQ YouTube community pulled Hardell further onto the platform by pushing them to create more content. In turn, Hardell inspired

other creators. Ahsante Bean described how "it was really through watching first Ash Hardell's videos […] on the whole asexual spectrum and all these different terms" that she began exploring her asexual identity and "based on that, started going down a rabbit hole of watching people like AmeliaAce and QueerAsCat and Embly99." Annie Segarra (discussed in the next section) similarly detailed how Hardell's videos inspired her when trying to understand, and ultimately publicly share, her identity as a genderfluid woman.

Kingsley, one of the first gay and black creators on the platform to go viral, found inspiration in another flamboyant black creator who was "so monumental" for his personal development. In turn, Kingsley inspired a slew of black queer creators. Miles Jai referred to Kingsley as a YouTube "legend" and "one of the first" people to encourage him. Likewise, Amber's Closet stated to Kingsley directly, "You allowed me to see that I could like be a person on YouTube […] 'cause all I was seeing was the same people over and over, and you just bring your personality and not being scared to like just share your opinion. You're one of the reasons why I'm here, so thank you." In this manner, creators used online sites—AfterEllen, Instagram, and YouTube—to accept their various identities and bodies while nurturing a sense of community. Early adopters of YouTube helped encourage future generations of LGBTQ creatives, signaling the possibilities and importance of the platform.

Indeed, creators used their channels to share their stories with like-minded audiences and LGBTQ viewers who were still coming to terms with their identities. Fellow queer Jay Versace remarked, "Just having that constant reminder of people

like DMing me or telling me, you've really helped me be myself or something. That just makes me like, like I'm the one doing the right thing." In a different context, Arrows shared their commitment to continue with their social justice work despite criticism or harassment: "My work almost always is speaking for underrepresented groups, so I'm just like, you can hate me as much as you want to, but that's not gonna stop me from making sure that people feel seen and that the people I'm speaking to or the people who see themselves in me get an opportunity." Coming out was a frequent point of discussion and also served as inspiration for creators' audiences and fans. Ahsante Bean, for instance, came out asexual on her channel and shortly after "had a bunch of people kind of realizing that they too were asexual from listening" to her particular experience of relating to romantic and sexual relationships growing up. A different video producer, Amber's Closet, felt "unstoppable" after publicly sharing her identity as a lesbian. Thereafter, she decided to help others go through the process so that they too felt powerful and validated:

> I started getting into little by little talking about my coming out process that ended up being like therapy for me, and I guess others that could relate to that. [...] It took me a long time to come out, and I was mad that I let other people tell me who I should be, and so that's what I wanted to share with the world so that other people feel empowered to just be confident in who they are and love themselves, and that's it.

In the same manner, Ashley Perez noted that her coming out inspired others to find themselves:

> I think the biggest thing's that changed after coming out is just being part of—I can't tell you how many people have come out to me and been like, "You make me feel better about being who I am," and being part of the reason people feel normal about themselves now is so such a gift in a way that I never would have anticipated of like, hey, "I'm awkward and gay and Asian too." I'm like,

> "That's amazing! Let's do it together!" It's such a happy place. It truly—I'm glad that gay used to mean happy because that's what it is. Like, go fuck yourselves. We're so happy.

In this way, Perez and the aforementioned creators fostered connections based on narrative understanding, shared experience, and empathy—or in Pullen's (2010b:19) words, "copresence."

The practice of disclosing identities and experiences with viewers was familiar for trans YouTubers who had grown up with few trans figures and representatives, as mentioned earlier. To illustrate, Chandler Wilson's "What Is Agender?" video allowed them to develop the community they were lacking. In their own words, "I got so many comments that were like, 'Oh my gosh, I'm agender too, and I've never seen a video about this! No one's talked about this. It makes me feel so supported and welcomed.' […] When I couldn't find the community, I had the ability to almost be like *a beacon* so that the community could find me" (emphasis added). Likewise, Kat Blaque discussed the trans community's positive responses to a video on gender pronouns that she completed for Buzzfeed:

> At one of my recent talks in Michigan, um, a student came up to me, and they said to me, "You know, I saw the first Buzzfeed video that you did, and it was the video that helped me understand that I was transgender," and when I hear stuff like that, it reminds me why it's important for me to be out, why it's important for me to be open, because I remember growing up, and there was not anyone who even lived closed to what I'm living now.

Blaque lamented the popular media storylines of dying, HIV-infected trans people and murdered transwomen, so she recognized the importance of her own story. She added,

> I feel like it's so important for all of us to be visible and be on YouTube because they are people out there who just can't envision their futures. And so whenever I have as a parent come up to me and say, "You've helped me understand my trans child," or I have a person come up to me and say, "You've helped me understand that I was queer or trans," that just reminds me of just how important it is.

Chase Ross, whose Trans 101 video series has become a vital resource for trans youth and their families, likewise explained, "I wanted to be the person that I needed when I was younger, so I decided to do videos, and I never had the intention to stop." Like Blaque, Ross contrasted his online work with popular transgender tropes, pointing out why his story of academic success is critical:

> I feel like when I was younger if I had seen like a successful trans person, like grad school! A master's! What?! It would have been so much easier to go through. […] I had to be that person, and I'm glad that I'm now that person for other people so they get to. Oh my god, like I get messages, like, "Oh you go to school, I can't believe you finished your master's. It makes me feel like I can go to school and be trans," and seeing that, like, oh my god, that's how I felt when I was younger.

Along this same vein, Stef Sanjati remarked on the importance of becoming "the person you needed" and shared her gratitude for the trans stories circulating on YouTube, even if they were imperfect. "You can find it [representation] without too much effort, so that is wonderful, and I wish I had that, and I'm glad that we can provide for people now," Sanjati stated. To borrow Wilson's words, trans creators indeed acted as representational "beacons" for trans people, especially young people. These creators did not merely assume the effects of their work; rather, they created tangible social connections and affirming changes for their audiences.

Altogether, these YouTubers and their viewers exemplify Fejes and Petrich's (1993:396) claim that people "search both the interpersonal and media environment

for clues to understand their feelings and sense of difference" (see also Craig et al. 2015; Evans 2007; Gomillion and Giuliano 2011; Gross 2001; McKee 2000). LGBTQ YouTubers attempted to search the offline and online media landscapes to see their identities reflected. YouTubers' subsequent understandings of representational histories and contemporary media recognition guided them to becoming aspirational "beacons" for their viewers. For many LGBTQ producers, coming out was a "happy" and encouraging experience, pushing them to signal their identities to others. In turn, viewers reached out to express their gratitude for this shared aspect of their lives. This process was especially significant for the trans community. Like the transgender youth in McInroy and Craig's (2015) study, young viewers of the aforementioned trans YouTubers developed a sense of support and belonging after watching other transpeople's online videos.

However, I must mention caveats to these community practices. First, some scholars interpret YouTubers' coming out and openness about their identities as an indicators of celebrity self-branding that reinstates heteronormative power (Lovelock 2017). The cases of beauty influencers James Charles and Giselle Getty in the previous chapter align with this interpretation, but my analysis above shows the warm reception and psychological importance of creators coming out. Second, LGBTQ people's community building—in terms of shared storytelling and experiences—is not unique to new media. As Dyer (1990:286) underlines, subcultural cinema helped gay and lesbian people survive under oppressive conditions and fill their need to be seen and heard; very similarly, Gross (2001:216–18) demonstrates that the gay

plotline in the show *One Life to Live* helped gay viewers come to terms with their sexual identity (see also Dyer 1986; Fejes and Petrich 1993; Streitmatter 1995). Likewise, I want to underline here that creators' personal stories—of media representation, coming out, finding community—are a vital mental health resource for individuals struggling with accepting their identities and bodies. The examples I provide in the following pages further animate this point.

Annie Segarra: Intersectional Activism and the Future of Accessibility

Annie Segarra, also known as Annie Elainey, has fostered an audience of 24,100 subscribers and amassed over 1.5 million video views. Segarra began uploading to her current channel in 2011, with her content focusing on a range of issues related to body image, gender, race, queerness, disability, chronic illness, and mental health. She has described her YouTube channel as focusing on personal narrative and storytelling. Indeed, much of Segarra's educational and artistic content draws from her experiences as a nonbinary/genderfluid, disabled, and chronically ill Latinx woman.[33] Identifying as an intersectional activist, she advocates for diversity in media and accessibility in schools, mainstream feminism, and queer spaces. One of her most public efforts is the #TheFutureIsAccessible campaign, which she started in 2017. As I elaborate on below, Segarra's presence personifies one saying she enjoys: "You can't be what you can't see." I explain how she has challenges expectations and

[33] In her social media profile taglines, Segarra refers to herself as "disabled" rather than as a person "living with a disability." She also discusses the "disabled community," "disability community," and "disabled people." I adopt her phrasing here, but some members of this community use language that emphasizes the person first, not the disability.

norms related to disability, and I detail the meaningful connections she has developed with her viewers and fellow activists. Unless otherwise noted, I quote Segarra's words from two panels at VidCon: "Body Image, Gender, Presentation, and Online" and "Disability and Accessibility."

Like the creators mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, Segarra discussed the lack of queer media representation, especially representation that intersects with other identities and stories. In her words,

> For me, representation is caca. I basically have only one person that I can be like, look at that successful who's also Latinx and disabled and queer, and it's Frida Kahlo. I have to mention her like a million times cause she's the only thing I've got. She's the only Latina, queer, disabled person in history that has made, like, in my experience, a name for herself, and succeeded, and an artist and an actress and all these great things that she was.

Indeed, Segarra has uploaded videos, "Why You Should Love Frida Kahlo" and "Frida's Bed: A Self-Care Painting," that expand on Kahlo's importance as a queer, feminist, disabled artist. Like other nonbinary/genderfluid YouTubers, Segarra noted her failed search for media images that affirmed her gender as well as her race: "When I was dealing with questions about being genderfluid, I didn't really, you know, there was no rubric for this. There is no like, again, like representation. There's not very much. Any nonbinary representation I've seen for a long time is just skinny white people." Even so, she did locate one representative on YouTube—Ash Hardell—who supported her eventual acceptance of her genderfluid identity (as mentioned earlier). Thus, even though Segarra identified the limits of contemporary media representation, she leaned into YouTube to find support networks.

Through her channel and advocacy, Segarra aims to become a representative for her various communities. While she recognizes the value of in-person activism, she has also described the wide-reaching impact of online work: "There's also the people that […] really connect with our content […] thanks to the fact that we're using video to create this visibility and create this representation. […] That's something that happens on a much larger scale than when you just one-on-one interact with them in real life." She also conveyed,

> If you don't see people who look like you, who are like you doing a thing, it's very hard to envision yourself doing the same thing. Um, like, the easiest example is probably women in this country typically as girls envision themselves as the president of the United States because every president so far has been a man, so it's just harder to see these things for yourself if you haven't seen it done before. A lot of people don't really have the mindset to kind of pioneer themselves into a position in life, so representation is very important to me as someone who can be representation.

Even so, rather than producing affirming materials only for disabled, chronically ill, Latinx, and nonbinary people, Segarra hopes to educate people outside these various underrepresented groups. In particular, Segarra has honestly and emotionally voiced the need for more contact with disabled people:

> It is about exposure. It is about normalizing like the fact that they're—that, you know, we're around, and like, I talk about it on my channel a lot. Like, accessibility and lack thereof is kind of a social form of segregation. Like, we are kept separated so often. […] It's about helping people be connected, especially at young ages. In the school—it breaks my heart thinking about in the school, they separate the disabled from the abled students, that they're kept from difference, and that's only reinforcing the idea that they're different from you and that you can't look at them and that you can't touch them. [Segarra is on the verge of tears] And that goes all the way into our adulthood—that it's the same. It stays the same. Adults, they grow up thinking that. They grow up with this culture of like, they're less than me.

Like her efforts to reach her communities, Segarra asserts that Internet-based representation is one way to address social segregation and lack of exposure, particularly in locations where disabled people are not readily visible. In this manner, she envisions her work as having an impact outside the media landscape and into other areas like school systems.

I contend that Segarra's advocacy and storytelling are, in part, meant to challenge popular conceptions of disability. Notably, Segarra has candidly described the difficult process of receiving her diagnosis of Ehlers Danlos Syndrome (EDS), a connective tissue disorder that affects the collagen in the body (Menendez 2019). According to her, collagen is the "glue" that holds the body together (Menendez 2019), so the disorder affects virtually every aspects of her anatomy and manifests in chronic join and muscle pain. She has explained on Rare Disease Day that EDS, despite not being a "rare" disease in terms of people's experiences, is rarely diagnosed; therefore, Segarra hopes to share her story and others to build awareness and reconsider if "EDS still has a spot at the table on rare disease day."[34] In this manner, Segarra points toward an understanding that accounts for healthcare systems' formal diagnoses of disease alongside individuals' experiences with disease. I read this as an attempt to blur the category of rare/non-rare disease while encouraging others to share in her disease-related storytelling.

[34] Annie Elainey's Facebook page, accessed February 28, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=257041019327524&set=p.257041019327524.

In addition, Segarra has circulated stories related to wheelchair use and invisible disabilities. Because of her EDS, Segarra has the ability to walk, but she generally needs a wheelchair, meaning she is an ambulatory wheelchair user. Like her EDS, she has openly explained the challenges associated with this element of her life:

> One of my first experiences using a wheelchair, I took my wheelchair out of the trunk to do some shopping at a story, and a woman saw me get out of my car, stand up, get my wheelchair, and wheel myself into the store. And she just decided to approach me and say, 'You know, honey, if you just lost some weight, you probably wouldn't need to use that chair.' […] That person, that woman, didn't say, 'I've never seen somebody stand up and use a wheelchair to get into a space. Maybe I should ask a question. Maybe I should learn about it.'

To help people "learn about it," Segarra has circulated several YouTube videos that rank among her most-watched content. For instance, "How to Spot a Fake Disability," uploaded on February 4, 2016, stands as her third most-viewed video (Elainey 2016). The video's title led to a strong response from people who were using Google searches and YouTube to try to "play detective" with people's disabilities, yet Segarra intervened in this process by educating these individuals (Menendez 2019). Challenging the public perception that people are fabricating disabilities and illnesses to use parking spaces, Segarra states directly that no person can determines who needs a space by simply looking at them. Some wheelchair users (for instance, those with a feeding tubes, heart conditions, prosthesis, or fragile bones) can walk, Segarra explains, though not for long periods of time or without pain. In a similar video, uploaded February 15, 2019, Segarra confronts the "fake disability" trope in entertainment media where wheelchair users get out of a chair to reveal they were fabricating their disability (Elainey 2019). In contrast, Segarra notes the few times in

popular culture that a user leaves a wheelchair and other characters react casually. "As rare it is to see a disabled character in media, we see even less of diversity of the disability community," she emphasizes, again pointing to the spectrum of disabilities that people experience. Through this media practice and storytelling, Segarra shifts popular perceptions of wheelchair/non-wheelchair users and understandings of the communities and subgroups she inhabits.

Segarra's most public example of community building is the #TheFutureIsAccessible campaign. Responding to the lack of accessibility at the 2017 Women's March, Segarra started the campaign to increase disability visibility, promote intersectional activism, and prioritize accessibility (Menendez 2019). Simultaneously, she has rallied for LGBTQ Pride events to make tangible accommodations: elevators, sensory-friendly spaces, and sign language interpreters, among others.[35] Other social media users have participated in the campaign, using the hashtag across multiple platforms. Instagram, which lists over 9,000 posts with the hashtag, features hundreds of self-portraits and images of infants and adults living with disabilities.[36] Like Segarra's online work, these posts provide personal stories that illustrate the diversity of the disabilities, explain people's use of mobility aids, describe their struggles and success with embracing their bodies, and proclaim their existence as disabled people. Twitter and Facebook users similarly have joined the

[35] Annie Segarra's Instagram page, accessed February 28, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/ByK6KfsgqGC/?igshid=qqbzrr0c9u6g.
[36] #TheFutureIsAcessible Instagram page, accessed February 28, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/thefutureisaccessible/.

campaign. For instance, Amy Purdy (a double amputee, Paralympics medalist, and *Dancing with the Stars* finalist) adopted the campaign hashtag when sharing news about Adaptive Action Sports, her organization that brings sports to the disabled community.[37] To be sure, multiple social justice organizations and educational centers have used the campaign tag to share their accessibility events and accessible services, including Able ARTS Work, Albert Gore Research Center, American Association of People with Disabilities, MindWorks Collaborative, Project Hearing, and WESCO Industries, to name only some.

Altogether, Segarra's online work has embodied her goal of creating change in and through media representation. She contrasts with previously referenced creators insofar as her intersectional community building reflects the experience of living with a disability. As a result, she has become one of the most visible LGBTQ disability activists both in- and outside YouTube, resonating with disability advocates and groups through her campaign. She has cultivated copresent (Pullen 2010b) communities steeped in shared understanding and stories of disease, wheelchair use, and disability.

Shane Dawson: Mental Health and the TanaCon Failure

White bisexual YouTuber Shane Dawson began uploading comedic skits, video blogs, and musical parodies in 2008. His main channel, shane, currently has 4.5 billion video views and 20.6 million subscribers, making Dawson the second-most

[37] Amy Purdy's Facebook page, accessed February 30, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/AmyPurdyGurl/videos/569331083627067.

subscribed LGBTQ creator on YouTube. During his time on the platform, Dawson has transitioned to a variety of content, including personal confessionals, pop culture commentary, makeup applications, and food reviews. By 2018, his content solidified into short documentaries on fellow YouTubers and conspiracy theories. Yet, throughout his career, Dawson has disclosed his struggles with familial instability and mental illness, and he also has shared reflections on suicide and self-harm among young people. Dawson has deleted some of his older content and seemingly exited the YouTube platform, for reasons I explain at the end of this section. Even so, he temporarily developed a community of fans who looked to him for advice and strength.

Dawson has elaborated multiple aspects of mental health on his channel and other media outlets, as mentioned above. Notably, Dawson shared in his 2014 video "My Eating Disorder" his experience with body dysmorphia despite losing weight at eighteen. "I look in the mirror, and I see a huge person. I see me in a fat suit," he explains while encouraging his viewers to be gentler with themselves if they feel the same way (Dawson 2014). In a *Forbes* interview, Dawson recalls the "dark" period after losing the weight and being fired from his job at *Jenny Craig*: "I don't like to throw around the 'suicide' word around lightly. But yeah. It was that" (Ward 2017). He later shared the mental health issues associated with his body dysmorphia: "Body dysmorphia also makes you anxious, depressed, makes you stay inside all the time, makes you hide all the time, makes you pick your skin, which like I've always had my arms and my neck just like little open wounds because I pick because I'm always

anxious" (The Dish with Trish Podcast 2019). Concurrently, Dawson has encouraged his viewers and fans to seek help and practice understanding for themselves (as in his 2014 video). He practiced this most directly in a video entitled "DEAR SUICIDAL TEENS….," uploaded initially in 2013. In the video, he pushes his young viewers to "please find something that makes you happy […] because we need you," and he offers his own story of moving away from his own thoughts of his suicide.

Dawson's efforts have not gone unnoticed. In response, his fans have disclosed their own struggles and engaged in what Jenkins' (1992) calls textual poaching: the adoption and reinterpretation of mass cultural forms for fans' own social interactions. More specifically, one of his fans downloaded his "DEAR SUICIDAL TEENS" work before the deletion, re-uploading it to the YouTube platform in 2021. A small group of commenters has shared how the video resonated with them[38]:

> Thank you so much for reuploading this. When he took it down, I was absolutely devastated. Now I have it back again when I really needed it.
>
> This video helped me a lot. I watched it when I was a depressed 13-year-old. I was sad when he deleted it. You're an angel for uploading. Thank you.
>
> I was so sad when he deleted this video. I remember watching this when was I was extremely young, and I didn't have anyone to talk to. I'm in a bad spot now, and I'm so grateful that I could watch it again.

[38] Although the video is public as of this writing, the commenters suggest that they are still youth. I have slightly modified their wording and omitted a citation to further protect their identities.

In this manner, his viewer recontextualized the video with new metadata and descriptions. This material became the basis for shared storytelling among Dawson's fans.

Moreover, several individuals have created content expressing how Dawson has helped them. For instance, one person has circulated a compilation of Dawson's inspirational words, concluding with a description of personal growth and thankful sentiments about Dawson: "Since 2008, your videos have helped me with my depression, Shane. You have always made everything in life better."[39] In the same line of thought, one viewer/creator has uploaded a 29-second slideshow of Shane's portraits with accompanying text: "Shane Dawson saved me. I started to cut myself, but I found Shane's channel. He made everything better."[39] Another YouTuber has even noted that Dawson's candidness about his mental health struggles inspired her entire channel and her openness about her own mental illness (Nelson 2019). Indeed, Dawson has become an inspirational figure in these fans' media practices and social support systems.

The failed "TanaCon" convention is similarly illustrative. YouTube creator Tana Mongeau planned the convention to compete directly with VidCon 2018 (where I completed my offline fieldwork), citing VidCon's decision to deny her featured creator status (Malone Kircher 2018). Mongeau advertised free tickets, and she offered the option of purchasing VIP tickets for gift bags, pictures, and meet-and-

[39] I believe that a young person uploaded this video. I have slightly modified their wording and omitted a citation to further protect their identities.

greets with featured creators, which included Dawson. When the day arrived, attendees quickly overcrowded the hotel where the event was taking place. Subsequently, thousands of attendees stood in the parking lot, left in the California sun for hours without vendors for food and water. The police eventually shut down the event.

The following week, Dawson uploaded "The Truth About Tanacon," the first of a three-part documentary-style series on the convention (Dawson 2018). "Not only was TanaCon a failure, but it was a safety hazard," he explains in the video. To his surprise, many people attended the event to see him specifically: "I went into this thinking this was TanaCon. It's gonna be all Tana's fans. […] But when I saw all the footage, and I saw all the footage of the kids making videos that were there, so many of them said they went there specifically to see me." In the video, Dawson textually poaches and recontextualizes his fans' footage to explain his own story of the event. The video clip montage illustrates several viewers who flew from outside of the state to see him, sometimes costing them a few thousand dollars, prompting Dawson to describe his guilt and lost sleep for not being able to meet.

Despite the multiple issues associated with the event, it led to further community building and fan activities. A prominent example is the communication between Dawson and Grant Uchida, a YouTuber whose content focuses on comedy, music, and cosplay. In "Going to TANACON to Meet Shane Dawson," uploaded June 20, 2018, Uchida describes how he felt a deep pull to attend the convention to meet Dawson and play a song for him in person (Uchida 2018a). After getting out of

a depressive state because of Dawson's online presence, Uchida wrote the music to share his love for the creator. Uchida lost the opportunity to meet in person, but he discovered that Dawson included some of Uchida's video clips in the TanaCon video series discussed above. In "Thank You Shane Dawson," uploaded June 28, 2018, Uchida describes his deep gratitude for the inclusion (Uchida 2018b): "He uploaded another video […] about the TanaCon thing. I can't even talk right now, and I saw my clip—I saw my clip in his video. I'm in—I'm in a Shane Dawson video, and that means that he heard my song." Uchida weeps and continues:

> Shane Dawson—even if it's only that tiny snippet—he heard my song. […] If you watch my entire series, all I wanted to do was get him my song. I wanted to tell him that I was happy that he helped me out of my depression, that he was able to be a beacon of light for me. And even if I didn't get to say that to him in person, the fact that he just watched my video means that he heard my song, and he knows that I wanted to thank him.

In part because of Dawson's recognition, Uchida characterized TanaCon as a "success," rather than a failure as most media outlets and commentators characterized it.

Despite some of Uchida's viewers expressing concern for the creator spending $2,000 to fly to the TanaCon event, they filled the comment section of the video with compassionate sentiments and encouragement:

> Aw , you made my heart hurt. When I found out why you were reaching out to him I changed my mind of course. I'm so happy that he was the one to help you through your depression and thoughts. You really do seem like a wonderful person and this world needs you & your positivity. All the best to you Grant.
>
> When I was watching Shane's video I was thinking "I really hope he includes Grant's clip" and then he did! I am so happy for you!! <3 It doesn't matter what other people think as long as you are happy and got what you wanted. :)

> I saw your clips in his video and it made my heart happy! Things happen for a reason! Congrats and Hugs to you!!!!

Shane Dawson himself—Uchida's "beacon of light"—also responded, simply stating, "love u so much!!!!!!!!!" Thus, while TanaCon was a failure by many accounts, Dawson, Uchida, and their viewers recuperated the event to create supportive social networks.

In this way, Dawson has resonated with his audience, yet I discovered in the process of this writing that his media career has seemingly concluded. To be sure, Dawson was one of YouTube's most public mentally ill LGBTQ creators, with his online work remaining a mental health resource for his most dedicated viewers. Yet social media users have shared criticism of the creator for over a decade. The disapproval reached a critical point in 2020 when commentators widely publicized Dawson's earlier "comedic" content that involved sexualizing children, donning blackface, and using racial slurs (Dodgson 2020). It is unsurprising, then, that an *Insider* journalist described Dawson as having the "biggest fall from grace the platform has ever seen" (Dodgson 2020; see also Wallace 2020). While Dawson had already deleted many of his controversial videos from YouTube, Dawson ostensibly exited the platform altogether after removing more content.

Bye Sister: Antifandom and James Charles

Although victimization was not my primary interest when I began this project, I provided stories related to the victim narrative throughout the various chapters. Internet scholars and web users have consistently elaborated on discrimination against

LGBTQ people in online communities and platforms (Brookey and Cannon 2009; Gray 2011; Pullen 2010a; Pulos 2013; Wakeford 1997). Likewise, I found that discrimination, harassment, and abuse were omnipresent issues. Sometimes this unequal treatment came from YouTube itself, as its consistent video removals, demonetization decisions, and account deletions show (Chapter Four). Equally, this abuse originated from YouTube users: Anti-trans feminists targeted Chase Ross by flagging his videos for community guideline violations (Chapter Four). The neo-Nazi site *The Daily Stormer* used the platform to promote hate speech against *Queer Kid Stuff* host Lindz Amer (Chapter Five). The antifandom against James Charles, discussed below, is another example of victimization. However, it is important to remember that this community did not develop because of media users' anti-LGBTQ sentiments, and Charles is a multi-millionaire who has resources that other YouTubers do not. Even so, my intention with this illustrative case is to show the intersection between the victim and community narrative, pointing to new media's contradictory nature given the presence of users with competing concerns.

I also maintain that LGBTQ media studies has underresearched varied community forms, privileging communities that contribute to improved mental health and sense of belong among minoritized people (like my earlier cases of Segarra and Dawson illustrate). Addressing earlier studies on fandom, Jonathan Gray maintains that scholars have underresearched and undertheorized antifans (and nonfans). Gray (2003) points to the "need to focus particular attention and dedicated studies on antifans (and nonfans) as distinct matrices of viewing and textuality" (65). Gray

describes antifans as those who often develop their own social groups or "hatesites" and who are "variously bothered, insulted, or otherwise assaulted by a" media text, personality, or genre (J. Gray 2003:70–71). Gray (2005) extends this formulation in his analysis of the television recap website Television Without Pity, concluding that antifan behaviors and community building parallel those of fans. Echoing Gray's analysis, I detail here the antifan community development that followed allegations against gay beauty YouTuber James Charles (discussed in Chapter Five).

On May 10, 2019, beauty influencer Tati Westbrook uploaded "BYE SISTER…," a now-deleted 43-minute viral video detailing Charles' business dishonesty and sexual predation. (The title is a reference to Charles' signature catchphrase, "Hi sisters!") Throughout the video, Westbrook shares how she acted as a friend and mentor to Charles before his brand growth, advertising his products and helping him negotiate more lucrative business contracts. In April of the same year, Charles posted an Instagram ad for Sugar Bear Hair, a competitor to Westbrook's hair-vitamin brand. "You should have walked away. You should have held on to your integrity. You're a phony. I know that you're easily bought," Westbrook asserts. More concerning, she describes Charles' attempts to seduce straight-identifying men. Westbrook claims that Charles was leveraging his celebrity status to trick these men:

> It's really disgusting to manipulate someone's sexuality, especially when they are still emerging into their adulthood. […] You are using your fame, your power, your money to play with people's emotions. […] Cracking someone's sexuality is not an escape room. This is shit that will follow them for the rest of their lives.

Indeed, in previous months Charles had flirted with straight video collaborators on his YouTube channel and disclosed his love of "straight boys."

A deluge of antifan commentary on Charles followed, and one of the most vocal antifan communities that developed was on Beauty Guru Chatter (BGC), a Reddit subgroup dedicated to makeup content, brand owners, and beauty influencers.[40] From May 10 to May 23, 2019, BGC members created 26 sequential discussion threads, each with thousands of posts (peachmmi 2018). By the final thread, the posts totaled over 80,000. During the discussions, BGC participants shared news from brands and other social media influencers, and they expressed their own perspectives on the accuracy and implications of Westbrook's allegations. Members reveled in the "drama" of the situation, with some describing it as a "train wreck" that demanded their attention.

BGC members often took a moralist tone against Charles, demonstrating what Gray (2005) refers to as moral/ethical objections in antifandom. One person contended, "James is tanking as we speak. I'm glad that people are confirming what a garbage person he is." In a related thought, another person maintained, "[T]here is a line and James has crossed it by a mile. He's arrogant and selfish." Yet the most pointed objections related to Charles' predatory behaviors. In one BGC member's words,

> James harassing and pressuring men of any age of any sexual orientation to do what he wants is NOT ok. He should not be allowed to get away with such a horrible, disgusting thing. Straight men are not toys for him to play with. And

[40] Although people on BGC and elsewhere spoke openly against Charles' ethical violations, YouTube took no action.

> NOBODY should ever use their fame and power to pressure people into doing sexual acts. I support all the victims who would want to come out and tell their truth.

A different discussant shared in these sentiments, referring to Charles' actions as "gross":

> James seems to genuinely not have any remorse over doing this and not get how gross and predatory it is and how bad an example he's setting for his young fans by showing them it's totally cool to pursue people who say they're not attracted to you and to treat their boundaries as a barrier you can overcome rather than something you have to respect. He's fostering rape culture, point blank.

While online support for Westbrook shifted to Charles because of subsequent video uploads (addressed later), BGC members recognized the moral repercussions of Westbrook's allegations.

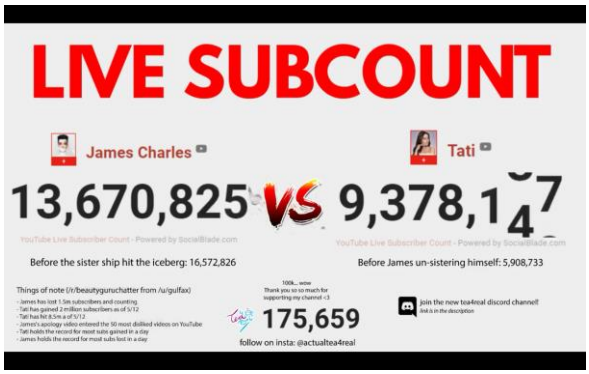


Figure 11. James Charles' Subscriber Count Livestream Still

A sense of community developed throughout the BGC threads, echoing Gray's (2005) analysis of Television Without Pity (TWoP) discussion boards. Gray notes how antifans of reality television star Omarosa enjoyed each other's company and were reluctant to leave the board when news stories dwindled. He explains the communal achievement that TWoP members felt after Clairol denied Omarosa an

advertisement. Similarly, BGC discussants disclosed that they had unsubscribed from Charles' YouTube channel, and they consistently celebrated and referenced Charles' diminishing subscriber count, especially in comparison to Westbrook's rising count. "Only 40K till Tati hits 10 mil!" one person acknowledged, with another responding, "I've been biting my nails and alternating between the live feed and this megathread waiting for her to hit 10 M." As this comment mentions, one BGC follower livestreamed the changing subscriber numbers and provided news about them (Figure 11. James Charles' Subscriber Count LivestreamFigure 11).

Charles' antifans documented how close they felt to one another after enduring what they began to call "Dramageddon 2.0" (following an earlier controversy with beauty YouTubers). In discussion thread 23 (titled "Closing Time"), a BGC moderator stated, " It's been over 5 days since we started this amazing journey together and we hope you all have had as wonderful of a time as we had over the course of the past few days." Another member likewise expressed, "Guys, the real Dramageddon was the friends we made along the way." "These megathreads have been an escape for me. Thank you all," another person stated. An unusual but illustrative example came from an individual who used the BGC discussion threads as a learning opportunity: "English is not my first language, and being here for these 5 days was so educational for me, I can't thank you guys enough for teaching me all the new puns, speech patterns and how-to-shade 101s." Finally, one person referenced explicit language that Westbrook used in her "Bye Sister" video and spoke on the video's significance for the BGC group: "Tati really united people of all

backgrounds, interests, ages, genders etc. She said sucking dick and cock and that was it. We all gathered in the name of drama. I like to think that is a beautiful thing." Although antifan commentary against Charles circulated across social media platforms, these discussions demonstrate how BGC housed a distinct antifan community.

To be sure, Charles is still a controversial YouTube figure and celebrity. He addressed the sexual predation allegations in a video entitled "No More Lies," uploaded May 18, 2019 (Charles 2019). In the video, he underlined that the intimate relationships he engaged in were consensual, and he explained that he stopped communicating with men who identified as straight or were otherwise uninterested in pursuing a relationship. Charles also claimed that the public's negative treatment was damaging to the gay community because it reinforced the stereotype of gay men as sexual predators. This attempt to reclaim his story was successful. In the following months, social media users largely turned against Westbrook, and Charles continued to build his personal brand (see Chapter Five). Yet in early 2021, several minors detailed sexual interactions they had with Charles through social media. In response, Charles uploaded a video claiming that the minors did not disclose their age, and he vowed to hold himself accountable moving forward (Charles 2021). As of this writing, Charles has disappeared from social media, and the long-term effects are unclear.

Conclusion

While previous chapters extended and complicated LGBTQ media scholars' assimilation narrative, this chapter foregrounded the community narrative. Despite YouTube policing and regulating LGBTQ creators and content (Chapter Four), these producers contributed to online community building through their personal storytelling. For many creators, LGBTQ media representation was a critical concern given their own youth experiences and coming out processes. Creators' perspectives on historical and contemporary representation contributed to their desire to become representational "beacons" for the viewers and fans. While most of the producers discussed here were concerned with the cultural recognition of LGBTQ identities, others had a different lens. In the case of Annie Segarra, an intersectional lens—recognizing identities tied to race, gender, sexuality, ability—was most apparent. On the other hand, the experience of mental health was most salient for Dawson. In nearly all cases, viewers and fans expressed gratitude for seeing their identities, experiences, and stories reflected, corroborating findings in psychology-informed media reception scholarship (Craig et al. 2015; Evans 2007; Fox and Ralston 2016; Gomillion and Giuliano 2011; McInroy and Craig 2015; McKee 2000). Some fans, such as Dawson's, textually poached (Jenkins 1992) creators' materials to produce their own media and share their love for producers. Conversely, some of Charles' viewers cultivated an antifan community (Gray 2005) that objected to Charles' presence, celebrated his downfall, and contributed to a felt bond.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

I conclude this dissertation by reviewing my findings in the context of my research questions, and I reiterate my contributions to previous scholarship. Next, I explain the limitations of this study by providing cases that trouble my arguments, and I offer suggestions for future research. Finally, I consider the overall implications of *LGBTQ YouTube* for understanding media recognition and activism.

Revisiting Questions and Contributions

Q1: How do branding imperatives and practices shape LGBTQ new media production?

Chapter Four detailed how YouTube, LLC, engaged in branding as a cultural intermediary that balanced the interests of its partners, chiefly advertisers. This branding included diversity campaigns, social change stories, ad-friendly guidelines, and community rules. YouTube enforced its rules (inconsistently) to protect its online presence as a progressive platform without controversy. In this way, YouTube shaped LGBTQ new media production by placing restrictions on creators who created content that YouTube's advertising "partners" deemed potentially controversial and offensive. In the case of Chase Ross, this content was educational material related to transgender bodies and identities; in the case of Hartbeat, the materials delved into nudity and sexual comedy.

The chapter contributed to LGBTQ media scholarship by extending and updating the assimilationist narrative, illustrating how YouTube selectively assimilated LGBTQ users and materials into its brand. Notably, scholars in this

assimilation vein have contended that gay and lesbian representations reflect the expansion of capitalism and the need to identify new markets of media consumers (Campbell 2005, 2007; Chasin 2000; Clark 1991; Gluckman and Reed 1997; Gross 2001; Martin 2021; Sender 2004; Streitmatter 2008; Walters 2001). As I argued in Chapter Three, this assimilationist scholarship has focused on corporate-produced, offline media and has not fully accounted for new media (some exceptions included Campbell 2005, 2007; Lovelock 2017). To add to this point, I contended that assimilation scholars had ignored important aspects of new media: branding, content moderation, and algorithms. Unlike this literature, I moved beyond the study of marketing to considering branding. I also provided an analysis of online media platforms, and I elaborated on algorithmic influences.

More specifically, I demonstrated how YouTube's representational practices diverged from legacy media patterns. Following (Campbell 2005), I suggested that YouTube had a "Janus-faced" approach: It publicly presented itself as a place of diversity and progressive change while privately policing and profiting from LGBTQ creators. In its public-facing role, YouTube visually represented and selectively assimilated LGBTQ creators who vary by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and mental health. This practice was evidenced, for example, by YouTube's yearly #ProudTo video montages and blogs that describe the platform's support for LGBTQ people. Thus, by including an array of bodies, people, and stories, YouTube seemingly moved past exclusionary representational histories in television, film, and advertising (Chasin 2000; Gross 2001; Martin 2021; Peñaloza 1996; Sender 2004).

YouTube also complicated representational histories in its private role. I underlined that YouTube policed LGBTQ creators by hiding, deleting, restricting, and demonetizing unmarketable content. This finding corroborates scholarship that highlights that new media technologies and platforms are not value-neutral; rather, they strategically manage the content and minority presence on them (Gillespie 2010, 2015, 2018; Roberts 2016). At the same time, YouTube continued a long history of media industries regulating the presence of sexual minorities. For example, Hollywood's Motion Picture Production Code banned references to homosexuality from the 1930s to 1960s, and the film industry later adopted its new rating system that provides more restrictive ratings to queer representations than non-queer ones (Gross 2001; Russo 1987). However, as a new media platform, YouTube differs in a meaningful way: Much of its regulations are algorithmically moderated. The algorithm reads video metadata to determine if a video is removed, age restricted, demonetized, or hidden; this illustrated by Chase Ross' videos with "trans" titles becoming demonetized instantly. Even so, human moderators still contribute to the regulations by confirming or reversing the algorithm's decisions.

Q2: How do LGBTQ new media producers negotiate and engage with branding imperatives?

Chapter Five showed how LGBTQ video producers negotiated YouTube's selective regulations and parameters (which were themselves tied to YouTube's branding efforts). I demonstrated how creators understood and navigated the algorithm. Relatedly, I illustrated how LGBTQ YouTubers called on YouTube to

make changes and discussed the human bias involved in algorithm creation. On the other hand, I underlined how content creators successfully navigated the platform to develop personal brands. Some of their practices included creating attractive video thumbnails, calling on viewers to engage with the video, or seeking out sponsorships from corporate brands.

Through Chapter Five, I complicated the assimilation narrative in LGBTQ media studies. I suggested that scholars presume the impact of assimilation on LGBTQ media consumers and producers, ignoring their meaning-making and subjectivities (exceptions include Martin 2021; Sender 2004). Extending this argument, I pointed to scholars who suggest that media industries and images work to "contain," "tame," "integrate," and "incorporate" LGBTQ people as well as sexual and gender difference (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001; Clark 1991; Martin 2021; Raymond 2003). However, far from being "tamed," these YouTubers thoughtfully recognized the limits and parameters that YouTube places on them. They adjusted their production practices accordingly and developed algorithmic strategies. For example, Chase Ross' lawsuit, filed along with several other creators, illustrated how creators attempted to remove restrictions on their video production. Other creators modified video metadata, such as removing LGBTQ hashtags and titles, to "trick" the algorithm. In contrast, others attempted to "reteach" the algorithm by flooding the YouTube platform with more LGBTQ content. In this manner, I showed how these people were not merely cultural "dupes" who accepted the selective recognition that YouTube offered them.

On the other hand, I demonstrated how creators developed personal brands, continuing a historical practice of LGBTQ identity commodification. In this manner, my argument resonates with assimilation-based scholarship that shows how gay and lesbian press shifted their strategies to expand and attract advertisers. These outlets also began distancing themselves from the controversial aspects of their culture, such as explicit sexuality (Peñaloza 1996). The press moved to "lifestyle" topics: fashion, celebrities, and travel (Campbell 2005, 2007; Chasin 2000; Ng 2013; Peñaloza 1996; Streitmatter 1995). Likewise, the branding strategies I detailed reflected activities like dancing, cooking, music, and makeup. To extend the most recent iteration of assimilation scholarship, I joined scholars who have elaborated on homonormativity (Lovelock 2017; Martin 2021; Ng 2013) and transnormativity (Glover 2016). On this point, I demonstrated how beauty influencer James Charles' branding was tied to cosmetics consumption and a gay depoliticization, thereby demonstrating *homonormative branding*. I also highlighted how trans lifestyle YouTuber Giselle "Gigi Gorgeous" Getty made most of her brand growth after publicly coming out as trans and adopting heteronormative goals, including feminine self-presentation and gendered fashion consumption. In turn, I suggested that Getty engaged in *transnormative branding*.

Q3: What forms of community develop through LGBTQ new media production and reception?

In Chapter Six, I foregrounded the community narrative by demonstrating two community forms. The first form offered social and psychological support through

shared stories. LGBTQ YouTubers shared how the historical misrepresentation and lack of LGBTQ images contributed to their decision to become content creators. In turn, they shared personal stories of identity development, pride, and belonging, inspiring their viewers to accept their own identities and, in some cases, become YouTubers themselves. I provided two cases that illustrate this first form of community: intersectional disability activist Annie Segarra and Shane Dawson. Segarra's challenged binaries of disability, calling attention to the diversity of disabled people and experiences; through her #TheFutureIsAccessible campaign, she developed a support network based on a shared understanding of disease, wheelchair use, and disabled experiences. Former documentarian Shane Dawson disclosed his experiences of depression, anxiety, and disordered eating. He also uploaded materials urging his young viewers to find happiness and move away from suicidal thoughts. His fans textually poached (Jenkins 1992, 2006) his video materials, disclosed their own stories of mental illness, and offered comfort and encouraging words to each other. This community form—based on shared story and experience—parallels community development in earlier eras of legacy media (Alwood 1996; Dyer 1990; Fejes and Petrich 1993; Gross 2001; Streitmatter 1995). At the same time, it resonates with LGBTQ media literature that highlights the social-psychological benefits of using new media and seeing LGBTQ figures offline and online (Cabiria 2008; Craig et al. 2015; Evans 2007; Fox and Ralston 2016; Gomillion and Giuliano 2011; McInroy and Craig 2015; McKee 2000).

In Chapter Six, I also detailed another form of community: antifandom tied to a dislike and aversion to a media figure (Gray 2005; J. Gray 2003). In response to allegations against James Charles for business dishonest and sexually predatory behavior, Reddit users developed community through antifan discussion threads. They morally objected to Charles' actions, and they celebrated his subsequent setbacks, including his falling subscriber count. They also expressed that the discussions brought them together and that they felt a kinship with fellow members.

Having addressed my research questions, I would like to detail another contribution of *LGBTQ YouTube*. Throughout the chapters, I included the diverse experiences and voices of trans YouTubers, especially nonbinary YouTubers. My earlier contention was that LGBTQ media scholars did not account for the trans community as thoroughly as gay, lesbian, and queer people (some exceptions include Brookey and Cannon 2009; Craig et al. 2015; Glover 2016; McInroy and Craig 2015). In contrast, I marked how these trans identities came to matter and how trans creators differ from other members of the LGBQ community. These efforts were perhaps most apparent with the illustrative cases of Chase Ross (Chapter Four) and Annie Segarra (Chapter Six) and my discussion of trans YouTubers' perspectives on representation (Chapter Six).

Future Research

Following feminist and feminist of color media scholars, *LGBTQ YouTube* includes perspectives and stories from creators who vary by race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, ability, and mental health. Although I provide a detailed analysis of media

recognition in terms of gender and sexuality, I leave some cultural identities and social forces underdeveloped in comparison.

While I mention race and ethnicity (particularly with the cases of Hartbeat and Annie Segarra), these topics are not as thoroughly addressed. With this in mind, I point to the words of two creators. First, gay Buzzfeed personality Curly Velasquez spoke about the intersection of his Salvadorian and gay identities:

> I'm Central American. I'm Salvadorian. It's interesting because when you make Salvadorian content, you get people like, "Yes, finally we're represented," and then they're like, "Oh, but he's gay. Never mind." One of the biggest comments that I've ever got was, […] "What a shame that this faggot's representing us." […] And it's interesting because, who better than this faggot, you know what I mean? […] I might not appeal to all of El Salvador, and that's okay, and all gay people might not like me either, and it's fine. You find your own little way, but it is hard, and it is something that you have to deal with as a POC—as a queer POC for sure. (Field notes, June 22, 2018)

The verbal discrimination Velasquez described overlaps with other examples of anti-LGBTQ harassment that I detailed earlier. Even so, Salvadorian history and Velasquez's ethnic identity contributed to the harassment in ways that are beyond the scope of this work, so analysis on intersectional online discrimination is warranted (see Gray 2011). Second, lesbian content creator Amber's Closet discussed brand opportunities and business deals for black lesbian creators:

> I will try to stay calm, but I might turn up. The biggest thing was, amongst a lot of our friends and other fellow creators, a lot of us lesbian creators, we were finding out that amongst us, hanging around each other and sharing experiences with brands particularly. […] Her [Hartbeat] and I had double of the other creators—these two other creators that happened to be Caucasian in this brand deal—and we were paid 25 percent with double of the amount of subscribers and views that they had. (Field notes, June 21, 2018)

While I provided a typology of personal branding practices (including sponsorships) in Chapter Six, Amber's Closet highlights that LGBTQ creators of color often have fewer branding opportunities—leaving open another potential area of inquiry into intersectional discrimination. Taking these two stories into consideration, I want to point to a chance for LGBTQ media scholars to address issues of race and ethnicity further, as some have done in national and global contexts (Christian 2018; Glover 2016; Gray 2011; Martin 2021; Muñoz 1999; Schoonover and Galt 2016).

I do not provide a thorough analysis of asexuality or asexual identities, which hold a tenuous relationship with the broader LGBTQ movement. In this study, I included two asexual YouTubers (Ahsante Bean and Chandler Wilson) and incorporated their stories (Chapter Six). Still, I did not delve into the implications of their asexual experiences. Although asexual people overlap with other LGBTQ people in community development and identity formation, they also diverge in meaningful ways (Scherrer 2008). In particular, cultural symbols of asexual identities and subcultures are not widely recognized, and asexuality has gone unnoticed in some social institutions, such as law (Scherrer 2008). Given these differences, asexual media production and consumption are open areas for investigation.

A final absence in *LGBTQ YouTube* is that of class. In my data collection, I relied on public texts and observation, and creators did not discuss class positions or subjectivities publicly in a sustained manner. (A few creators did mention how they did not gain enough money from YouTube to pay their bills or buy groceries.) By contrast, some critical LGBTQ media scholars center class. Hennessy (1995) does

this most forcefully by critiquing the commodification of gay and lesbian identities and suggesting that academic and activist circles have suppressed class analysis. She notes, "These commodified perspectives blot from view lesbians, gays, queers who are manual workers, sex workers, unemployed, and imprisoned" (Hennessy 1995:69). In these terms, my analysis is lacking, but Hennessy directs us to contextualize media politics and access by focusing on economic structures and positions (see also Gray 2009; Wakeford 1997).

Implications

In these final pages, I discuss the implications of *LGBTQ YouTube* for understanding and engaging with media. Beyond the suggestions discussed above, I maintain that the most fruitful research would examine the overlaps and tensions among LGBTQ media narratives. Earlier scholarship has demonstrated this research agenda (Campbell 2005; Schoonover and Galt 2016), and I modeled it by complicating and bridging narratives. In this manner, I have underlined the increasingly complex and contradictory nature of the media landscape. For instance, Chapter Five described beauty YouTuber Giselle Getty's transnormative branding practices, yet Chapter Six began with a discussion of Getty's emotional resonance with her fans, some of whom cried and expressed their profound gratitude for her videos helping them survive a challenging year. Ash Hardell, nonbinary creator and prominent critic of YouTube's algorithmic discrimination, has taken on brand sponsorships to sustain their livelihood. Their digital video essay on YouTube's algorithmic facilitation of privacy invasion concludes with them sharing the benefits

of Audible, an audiobook and podcast service (Hardell 2019). Similarly, #TheFutureIsAccessible organizer Annie Segarra is a paid partner for Dove, promoting the personal care brand's refillable deodorant and encouraging others to join #theBeautyRefillution.[41]

At the same time, creators are keenly aware of superficial diversity efforts in media industries and social media organizations. Speaking on the topic of tokenism (the practice of businesses and organizations representing underrepresented individuals to give the appearance of diversity), nonbinary model and filmmaker Arrows said the following: "The issue with tokenism is that when that one person enters that room, […] they also have the weight of their communities" (Field notes, June 21, 2018). Asexual, agender YouTuber Chandler Wilson similarly shared, "I love talking about being trans and being representation, but sometimes I'm almost nervous too because I'm worried I'm going to be tokenized. […] Are they really taking inclusivity seriously, or are they just doing this as like a footnote?" (Field notes, June 22, 2018). Still, LGBTQ creators like Arrows and Wilson continue to use media to speak to their communities and share their stories of identity development and coming out.

Through examples like those above, I demonstrated that LGBTQ media simultaneously commodifies, victimizes, affirms, and mobilizes marginalized people. Thinking about media in this way pushes us to reconsider the political and cultural

[41] Annie Segarra's Instagram page, accessed June 16, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CQJxlTED3ZZ/.

implications for underrepresented communities. A white trans celebrity with a highly developed personal brand can obscure the reality of racialized anti-trans violence while also helping diverse trans youth feel a sense of belonging. This research agenda could help us understand how an online site helps gay users develop intimate relationships with each other while enticing them to disclose personal information for corporate clients (Campbell 2005). We might also interrogate how a film about a suicidal lesbian artist contributes to the trope of gay and lesbian death (Gross 2001; Russo 1987) but inspires a mentally ill person to seek life-saving treatment.

I conclude with the topic of social transformation, having sidestepped it for much of this writing. To be clear, LGBTQ video producers have not yet brought about systemic or structural change. Instead, I suggest that the work of LGBTQ YouTubers reflects what Banet-Weiser (2012) calls a "politics of ambivalence." Banet-Weiser maintains the brand culture often reinscribes individuals into capitalism rather than facilitating its disruption. She acknowledges the attempts to brand WikiLeaks, a site that challenges "the history of 'official' information and the public's right to access this information" by releasing classified documents (Banet-Weiser 2012:220). Banet-Weiser argues that WikiLeaks is "an articulation of a politics of ambivalence, which enables the site to be potentially subversive even as it is branded as a consumer product" (Banet-Weiser 2012:220). Likewise, even as YouTube selectively incorporates LGBTQ people into its brand and creators cultivate personal brands, LGBTQ YouTubers are subversive. Their visibility—made possible through algorithmic negotiations and strategic production decisions—allows them to

speak to fellow community members on a scale and speed impossible before the advent of the internet and new media. In turn, LGBTQ creators serve as a psychological and emotional resource for individuals struggling with their identities, allowing them to feel deeply seen despite cultures and political systems that deny and stigmatize their existence. YouTubers' persistence highlights that these networks of belonging and community are worthwhile and valuable in themselves, even as they appear on platforms structured by algorithmic bias, capitalism, heteronormativity, and related systems of inequality. In short, I would like us to recognize that media is polysemic and is the site of ambivalent yet potentially subversive politics. Media matters, but my hope is that we more deeply consider how, when, and for whom it matters.

Appendix A: Recruitment Message

Hello, my name is Julian Rodriguez. I am a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

You are invited to participate in my research study, "LGBT Incorporated? Examining LGBT Media Production, Reception and Business through YouTube" (UCSC IRB Study #HS3159). Its purpose is to better understand how and why lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people produce videos, what role business has in their video production, and how viewers relate to and understand their video production and business.

To participate, you must be of at least 18 years of age and meet one of the following criteria:
• You identify as LGBT and currently produce videos on YouTube, or
• You identify as a viewer or fan of video producers who identify as LGBT (but do not need to identify as LGBT yourself).

If you are eligible and choose to participate, I will interview you for approximately 20-30 minutes at a time and location of your choosing. Interviews can be completed online through email or video-conferencing programs like Skype or Google Hangouts.

If you have any questions, you can contact me by email at jrodri73@ucsc.edu.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Video Creators

Demographics and Background.

1. Age?
2. Gender?
3. Sexual orientation?
4. Race and/or ethnicity?

Production Choices and Practices.

5. What steps are involved in your video editing process? What elements do you regularly edit out of videos?
6. How does monetization affect your videos? Has YouTube demonetized any of your videos? If so, why?
7. How do you use YouTube's search and suggestions algorithms, if at all?

Viewers and Fans.

8. How do you interact with viewers and fans?
9. How have their responses affected your video production, if at all?

Promotional and Self-Marketing Practices.

10. How do you promote your videos and channel, if at all? Do you use other platforms besides YouTube to do this?
11. How does this promotion affect your content and channel, if at all?

Funding and Business Influences.

12. Do you receive any other support from other businesses? If so, how and when did this support begin?

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