Queer and Neurodivergent Identity Production within the Social Media Panopticon

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QUEER AND NEURODIVERGENT IDENTITY PRODUCTION WITHIN THE SOCIAL MEDIA PANOPTICON

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How are queer and neurodivergent identities explored within virtual enclaves on social media, and what do these spaces look like in the face of a general public that assumes cisheteronormativity and neurotypicality as the norm?
Neurodivergence – Traditionally defined around neurological differences, developmental/learning disabilities, and certain mental illness diagnoses like bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, but also colloquially used as an identity under the general mental illness umbrella, as opposed to being neurotypical

Social media as a panopticon – Using Foucault’s (1977) ideas of the Panopticon as a tool of social control where individuals will self-regulate, feel the “unseen” power of being watched, and feel the pressure to assimilate to norms
**Ableism** — Ideology/practices that discriminate against or marginalize people with physical, psychiatric, or intellectual disabilities; underlying theme of disabled people as in need of “fixing” (Center for Disability Rights)

**Cisheteronormativity** — Where being cisgender (identifying as the gender one is assigned at birth) and heterosexual is considered the norm

**Queer** — Anybody under the expansive umbrella of gender identities and sexualities; the term has historical pejorative connotations but has been used as a reclamation in recent history
The Pressures of Cisheteronormativity and Neurotypicality

“We are the queer groups, the people that don’t belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions. But the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit we are a threat” (Gloria Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 209).

Neurotypicality/able-bodiedness as the “natural order of things” (McRuer, 2006)

“U.S. empire has always been reified by enforced heterosexuality and binary gender systems” (Andrea Smith, 2005, p. 178).

Marginalized voices in need of a safe space and access to nonjudgmental community can seek online spaces to address this
**Panoptic Social Media**

- Panopticon enforcing the norms of the hegemony – cisgender, heterosexual, neurotypical expectations and standards
- Social media has the option of anonymity but spaces like Facebook that attempt to replicate non-virtual social circles (peers, coworkers, employers, family members, neighbors) impact how communities gather and how individuals present themselves on these public platforms
- The need to escape the more public virtual eye and therefore find more private, niche spaces to feel freer to explore one’s identity
What do these virtual spaces look like?

**Facebook**: private or closed groups that are actively moderated and members are screened through questions based on identity or politics.

**Twitter**: option for anonymity, alternative accounts, hashtags to foster discussion and identify users who belong to these communities.

**Reddit**: subreddits such as /r/BPDQueer, /r/NonBinary, /r/TransyTalk, /r/Neurodiversity – many subreddits have content overlap of queerness and non-neurotypicality; Reddit is more anonymous in nature.

**YouTube**: mental health YouTube communities, leftist spaces (called Breadtube or Lefttube) – spaces to discuss and educate viewers about neurodivergence, marginalized identities, how politics/systems play a role in oppression and marginalization.
What does identity production look like?

Individuals learning, being supported, being educated, able to vent and share frustrations and experiences of a cisheteronormative and ableist society, being continuously exposed to marginalized voices and identities which, in turn, subsequently normalize them.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943). While there is much to be discussed about this model and what it omits, it shows the general ways in which facets of identity production are integral to motivation and growth, such as security of body, community, esteem, and self-actualization.
Common Characteristics of Online Spaces for Identity Production

The option of anonymity

Moderated spaces

Equal opportunity for users to interact, share their experiences, and provide advice/knowledge/support to others

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<th>Familiarity</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Sense of Belonging</th>
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A 2012 study showed that three social capital factors (familiarity, perceived similarity, and trust) positively related to a sense of belonging in virtual communities, which helped individuals to share their knowledge and learn from others, and that smaller and focused communities may be more effective in this (Zhao, et al., 2012)
References

Anzaldúa, G. (1981). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color.*


