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Introduction

This presentation uses information poverty (Chatman, 1996) and information worlds (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010) to explore how insider/outsider dynamics shape information access and value among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals. Informed by individual, semi-structured interviews with 30 LGBTQ+ individuals, findings denote that insider/outsider dynamics create authenticity as a key marker of access and value of identity-related information. At the social group and cultural levels, participants only access and value information about authentic identities and disseminated by those with authentic identities. At the individual level, participants develop a different marker for information access and value – realness. Realness depends on personal experience and positions the participant as ultimate insider. Examining how authenticity and realness produce and maintain insider/outsider dynamics, as well as the tension between these concepts extends understanding of LGBTQ+ individuals' unique challenges and achievements when navigating identity-related information.

Literature Review

This research sits within the Library & Information Science (LIS) field in the Human Information Behavior (HIB) sub-area. Here, a paucity of empirical research on LGBTQ+ individuals exists. Extant research focuses almost exclusively on gay and lesbian sexualities, imposing a liminal, psychological model of identity development to examine their information behaviors (e.g., Creelman & Harris, 1990; Whitt, 1993; Joyce & Schrader, 2003; Stenback & Schrader, 1999; Garnar, 2000).

Recent research expands the scope of these findings by sampling outside of gay and lesbian individuals, incorporating sociocultural context, and examining online technology use (see Hamer, 2003; Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004; Mehra & Braquet, 2008; Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2014; Rothbauer, 2004). Findings demonstrate that insider/outsider dynamics shape how LGBTQ+ individuals value information. Specifically, LGBTQ+ individuals avoid information created by those not sharing their worldviews, preferring information provided by those with similar experiences. Online technologies facilitate access to social group insiders and relevant information.

Theoretical Framework

Findings from recent research inform the theoretical framework, which uses information poverty (Chatman, 1996) and information worlds (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). Information poverty (Chatman, 1996) represents a dominant theoretical perspective to describe, predict, and explain the information behaviors of marginalized individuals. Insider/outsider dynamics mediate conditions of information poverty. At the cultural level, insiders withhold information relevant to outsider worldviews. From a social group perspective, those who are information poor consider themselves insiders, contending that those outside their social realities cannot provide them with valuable information.

Information worlds theory (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010) addresses a fundamental critique of information poverty as totalizing, purporting that individuals belong to multiple social groups where their insider/outsider statuses are variable. Individuals also belong to the lifeworld (Habermas, 1964), representative of the totality of information within the larger culture. The concept of information value provides a framework to examine how information moves between

social group and cultural contexts, and how individuals in these different contexts perceive, understand, and interpret information.

Methodology

The researcher recruited 30 LGBTQ+ participants between the ages of 18 and 38 from across the US using convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling methods. This age range represents individuals likely to self-identify as LGBTQ+ (Groves, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsons, 2006; Savin-Williams, 2009) and having traits and values shaped by their interactions with online technologies (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 4; “Social Media Factsheet,” 2017).

The researcher followed a semi-structured protocol that employed the critical incident technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) to elicit memorable moments from participants when exploring, negotiating, and adopting LGBTQ+ identities. This technique, coupled with the semi-structured protocol, allowed participants to define concepts like insiders, outsiders, and information access and value, in their terms. To maintain participant confidentiality, the researcher audio-recorded and transcribed each interview and used pseudonyms to describe participants.

While many participants do not ascribe to a particular identity label, they use labels when describing themselves to others. The most common labels participants used were female (n=19, 64%), queer (n=18, 60%), and not cisgender (n=17, 57%).¹ These labels represent outsider identities within mainstream LGBTQ+ social groups, which attend to the worldviews of gay and (to a lesser extent) lesbian, cisgender individuals (Gamson, 1995; Jagose, 1996; Rust, 1993; Ward, 2001).

¹ Identifying as not cisgender signifies that an individual’s sense of identity does not correspond with their sex and gender assigned at birth (“Cisgender,” n.d.)

The researcher analyzed interview transcripts using qualitative data analysis. She developed high-level etic codes informed by information poverty and information worlds, then inductively generated emic codes from participant accounts describing each etic category (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 61). The researcher constantly compared both coding categories and refined them over time (Charmaz, 2014). A second coder analyzed 20% of the data using the researcher's coding scheme and calculated inter-coder reliability as 0.93 (Cohen's kappa), indicating excellent agreement.

Findings & Discussion

Research findings extend information poverty and information worlds theories by introducing authenticity and realness as two emic codes that emerged from the data. Authenticity and realness represent two markers of information access and value, which while inductively derived, matched categories previously established by outside literature (Goffman, 1963; Gray, 2009; Halberstam, 2005).

Unlike conditions of information poverty, where individuals experience a dearth of information (Chatman, 1996), participants report being able to access identity-related information. However, such access only applies for those with authentic identities. Authenticity represents "recipes for an appropriate attitude regarding the self" that render individuals as "real and worthy" (Goffman, 1963, p. 132). Cultural and social group insiders define and reproduce authenticity to maintain insider/outsider dynamics not only by defining who is authentic, but also what information conveys authenticity and thus is valuable.

One way cultural insiders regulate what identities are authentic is by using explicit enforcement mechanisms (e.g., rules, laws). For instance, in most states, individuals are not recognized as their desired gender without it listed on their birth certificate or diagnosed and

treated by a healthcare provider. Such explicit enforcement of authenticity could provide participants with access to valuable information that facilitates their identity adoption, negotiation, and expression. Per Mark: “I was seeing a therapist and a psychiatrist and it was very easy for me to ... get them to write a letter that I had gender identity disorder and I wanted to medically transition.”

Contrastingly, participants without authentic identities experience limited access to information. Sage notes this limitation when discussing their² transgender identity:

It’s easy ... to assume there are certain issues that are really important and apply equally ... everyone is interested in having gender confirmation surgery and what the legalities are. I am not interested in that sort of thing. There’s more to being trans than that.

As a result of this cultural limitation, participants seek social groups where they can access information that better matches their lived experience. Finding similar others within a social group allows participants to develop an authentic identity and subsequently redefine their worldviews based on this identity. Eva describes a thread discussing drag identities from the online message board reddit as: “Helping me get my gay chops. I was able to talk about [my identity] so freely on my reddit.” The phrase “gay chops” suggests the importance Eva places on shared practices with other social group insiders to create and sustain an authentic gay identity.

Participants view social group insiders as more valuable information sources than cultural insiders for information on authentic identity practices. Jamie exemplifies this finding when explaining his participation on an online forum for transgender men: “It wasn’t a doctor who knew nothing about [being transgender] giving you advice, it was people already living it.” Although doctors represent cultural insiders who recognize the authenticity of certain

² The researcher uses participants’ preferred pronouns.

transgender identity expressions, Jamie does not consider doctors as valued information sources for how to be authentically transgender, preferring social group insiders for this information.

Although social groups can provide more comprehensive and multifaceted information about LGBTQ+ identities than at the cultural level, they still necessarily limit what identities can be authentic. Here, authenticity represents a tactic used by insiders to maintain boundaries between themselves and larger culture. This tactic can be problematic from an information value perspective when one identifies a certain way, but insiders do not recognize their authenticity. As Casey explains: “I run an LGBT archive and research center ... I have to say I’m queer all the time so that people don’t think I’m a random straight ally who is fascinated by the queer community.” Since Casey does not practice their queerness in a way others judge as authentic, they experience difficulty being valued by social group members as an interpersonal information source.

Authenticity can also limit participants’ understandings of how to practice LGBTQ+ identities. Jamie details some of the practices perceived as emblematic of an authentic transgender identity:

After a while, I started trying to go about [exploring a transgender identity] by [asking], "How do I do this right?" I'm very different from a lot of trans guys that I know and have talked to. I'm not out there with it. I'm more laid back. A lot of people have issues getting jobs and stuff and I haven't. Even with coming out. Am I doing it right? I did try and figure out a right way to do [my transgender identity], a wrong way to do it. Eventually I realized my way was the right way for me, even if it wasn't the right way for somebody else.

Initially, Jamie conformed to practices authenticating his transgender identity, but, over time, concludes there exists no “right” way to be transgender. Instead, the knowledge Jamie derived from his own embodied practices informed a unique, right way to be transgender. Here, Jamie

practices realness – the process of individualizing an identity category that “embraces more hybrid possibilities for embodiment and identification” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 54) than the authenticity demanded by cultural and social group insiders.

When participants practice realness, it can be difficult for them to evaluate outside information since it does not fully match their lived experience. Merton (1972, p. 13-16) regards this phenomenon alternatively as “extreme insiderism,” “extreme insider doctrine,” and “total insider doctrine,” and contends that if one defines information value solely based on embodiment, it can shut off information sharing and exchange. However, findings suggest that participants recognize this tension and approximate information provided by others to their particular, individual context. Consider how Rihanna evaluates information related to queer identities:

What I look for is a depth of analysis and the ability to hold contradiction. An ability to see how queer experiences [are] intertwined with lots of things like historical contexts and class politics. [The] kind of stuff I look for is not just a description that seems very closed or self-contained about someone’s experience or way of being in the world, but is able to say something or do something or show something that acknowledges complexity and opens up other questions.

Rihanna does not close herself off to outside information but rather expects such information to embrace the messiness of individual, social group, and cultural contexts rather than condensing identities into a monolithic set of authentic practices.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ individuals are not helpless when achieving information-related goals, but rather engage in a variety of tactics at lifeworld, small world, and individual levels to access and evaluate information pertinent to their identity development. While authenticity and realness represent two markers of information access and value in tension with one another, participants

envision both as necessary. Paralleling issues related to labels within queer theory (Gamson, 1995), authenticity maintains boundaries between social groups and larger culture by reifying characteristics of valuable information and who can access it. However, authenticity necessarily excludes information not conforming to its mandates. Realness provides a reprieve from authenticity by allowing participants to embrace the messiness of context while legitimizing their embodiment and experiences. Future research should further explore authenticity and realness since these two concepts incorporate much-needed messiness inherent to individual and sociocultural contexts into HIB analysis.

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