

Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labeling on Tumblr

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Abstract

In this article, I examine lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) Tumblr bloggers' bio boxes and "About Me" pages to show the ways gender and sexual orientation identities are constructed through community-regulated and community-generated labeling practices. Tumblr encourages counter-cultures (and labeling practices) to not only form but also to thrive due to its distinctive affordances including tagging and blog formatting. This article examines not only how these affordances shape usage and, subsequently, identity construction on Tumblr but also the ways in which Tumblr bloggers have embraced affordances to create community-accepted conventions of identity construction. Additionally, building upon online identity scholarship by Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons and Tiidenberg, this article discusses *true self* and nonbinary gender and sexual orientation labeling as forms of identity construction that allows LGBTQIA identifying individuals a method for nuanced descriptions of feelings and desires. However, far from perfect, these labeling practices are also grounded in hegemonic female/male, feminine/masculine binary discourse. In a Foucauldian sense, bloggers construct discourse within existing power structures that ignore or erase LGBTQIA as sexual "abnormalities." Although it is nearly impossible to fully break away from the dominant discourse, these labeling practices can be a useful starting point for conversations about genders and sexualities that lie outside of the hegemonic binary.

Keywords

identity, labeling, gender, sexuality, affordances

Sexuality does not follow from gender in the sense that what gender you "are" determines what kind of sexuality you will "have." We try to speak in ordinary ways about these matters, stating our gender, disclosing our sexuality, but we are, quite inadvertently, caught up in ontological thickets and epistemological quandaries. Am I a gender after all? And do I "have" a sexuality?

Judith Butler (2004, p. 16)

So, so confused about gender right now. Let's just use he/him or they/them pronouns for now. Cool? Cool.

Tumblr Blogger

Labeling gender has been a part of the online experience since people began speaking to strangers in chat rooms and asking them a/s/l (age/sex/location). Social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook require users to enter a gender and sometimes ask for their sexual orientation when creating a profile. On the Internet, there is an opportunity

for users to create more nuanced labels for themselves than simply "male" or "female" and "straight" or "gay," and the unlikely, somewhat quirky, environment of Tumblr has provided fertile ground for just this type of terminological evolution. LGBTQIA—lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual—Tumblr bloggers have, in the semi-publicity of their Tumblr blogs, had a hand in expanding public discourse of nonbinary genders and sexual orientations (NBG&SO). More specifically, public labeling of genders and sexualities and sharing of information concerning nonbinary genders and sexualities via Tumblr plays a role in disturbing hegemonic¹ notions of the female/male, feminine/masculine gender binary as well as

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hegemonic conceptions of heterosexual as the “default” sexuality.

This article examines the ways in which LGBTQIA Tumblr bloggers utilize the affordances of Tumblr to engage in NBG&SO labeling practices. Tumblr, as a space, is not just quirky due to the people who use it but also because of the distinctive features and affordances of Tumblr that shape the way Tumblr is used, the type of information shared there, and the kind of communities encouraged to gather there. Tumblr bloggers construct layered identities through personal bios, labels, and post tagging that contain a wealth of information. For LGBTQIA bloggers, that information sometimes includes indicators of NBG&SO, what are discussed here as labels. In order to construct my argument, I first discuss the ways in which platform affordances affect usage and subsequently identity construction. Following that, I create a framework for examining online identity work; more specifically, I highlight a concern for narratives of authenticity and *true self*, how that applies to the sexual self online and on Tumblr, and how public identity construction may encourage community building. Finally, I take a closer look at labeling, keeping in mind Foucauldian notions of discourse, to better understand how labeling practices as a discourse, function to disturb hegemonic understanding of NBG&SO.

Tumblr as a Distinct Discursive Space

Before delving into the data and discussion, I will briefly describe Tumblr’s functionality, focusing on the terminology and portions of Tumblr blogs examined here. Users who are familiar with more traditional blogging platforms such as Blogger or Wordpress may find Tumblr’s functionality and community practices confusing. The Tumblr dashboard, the home page, functions similarly to the “News Feed” in Facebook in that it is a stream of posts from blogs a user follows. So, Tumblr functions as an intersection of blogging and SNSs. The SNS-like functionality of Tumblr provides “an opportunity to build a community by following other users and monitoring who follows you” (Tiidenberg, 2013, p. 176). It should be noted, however, that Tumblr is unlike other SNSs in that the user profile is not the center of the platform (Renninger, 2015). While in SNSs such as Facebook, users construct a profile that includes information about themselves such as age, sex/gender, location, interests, and educational background, Tumblr does not offer these same affordances. Instead, identity construction on Tumblr occurs through a combination of bios, “About Me” pages, blog posts, and tags on those posts.

About Me pages and bio boxes are similar to profiles on other SNSs, although the information included there is entirely up to the users as there is no preset form to fill out. What I am calling a *bio box*, Tumblr calls a blog description and is meant to contain general information about the blog. In practice, Tumblr bloggers use the “blog description” to

share information about themselves. Occasionally, bloggers share more information on their About Me pages. About Me pages are not a standard inclusion in most Tumblelog (an individual Tumblr blog) themes (background color/image, font style/color/type, cursor style, etc.) and must be added as an additional page to the Tumblelog. Like a bio box, an About Me page is not formatted, and users are not prompted to include any particular information. Most often, though, users share their likes and dislikes (movies, music, television shows, etc.), and, in the case of some LGBTQIA bloggers, their gender and sexual orientation.

Methods and Data

Research Question

In my preliminary browsing of Tumblr, I noticed that there was a very active, open, and vocal LGBTQIA community that challenged even my own notions of gender and sexuality. So, when conceptualizing this study, I was most interested in the ways Tumblr bloggers openly construct their identities—often through labeling practices—and the implications of this open construction of their identities. Therefore, I sought to answer the following guiding question: “In what ways do LGBTQIA Tumblr bloggers construct and discuss their gender and sexual orientation identities?”

Sample Selection

In order to examine identity construction on Tumblr, I selected a sample of Tumblr bloggers by choosing 10 community-defined hashtags representative of the LGBTQIA spectrum: #gay, #girlswholikegirls, #bi, #ace, #queer, #lgbtq, #nonbinary, #gender fluid, #genderqueer, and #trans. These hashtags were chosen because they are commonly found when browsing LGBTQIA content on Tumblr. Although I chose tags based on the LGBTQIA acronym, there is no tag for “lesbian” but rather “girlswholikegirls.” When I first attempted to collect data under the #lesbian hashtag, I noted that, since Tumblr has an active Not Safe/Suitable for Work (NSFW) community (Tiidenberg, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b), this search returned primarily pornography rather than posts generated by users who identified as lesbian. Likely in response to this, posts written by individuals who identified as lesbian used #girlswholikegirls to tag posts rather than #lesbian. Additionally, I believe that it is vital to use community-defined hashtags and terminology because this knowledge regarding gender and sexuality, especially on SNSs, is socially constructed, defined, and evolved, and, often, these self-identified hashtags are another form of gender and sexual orientation labeling practiced by bloggers. It is also worth noting that search terms in English primarily found English-speaking United States bloggers, though there were some English-speaking bloggers based in other countries such as Japan, the Netherlands, and Ireland. As all

information gathered from these blogs is voluntary, it was often the case that the blogger's location was not disclosed.

Finally, since the object of this study is to examine individual identity construction, I created exclusionary criteria in order to garner a sample of personal LGBTQIA blogs: for example, blogs moderated by several people do not best represent an individual's NBG&SO identity construction. Exclusionary criteria are as follows:

1. The blogger is under the age of 18.
2. Tags on search results that contained #lovewins or #love wins. These posts were excluded because the American Supreme Court ruled that bans on same-sex marriage are unconstitutional during data collection (*Obergefell et al. v Hodges*, 2015), and bloggers from outside of the LGBTQIA community often used LGBTQIA tags in celebration of this ruling in conjunction with #lovewins or #love wins.
3. Duplicate blogs (the same blogs occasionally showed up under different search terms).
4. It was not a personal blog, for example, the blog was run by several moderators, the content of the blog was primarily submissions of photos and other LGBTQIA content, or was a promotional blog (e.g., for movies or clothing lines).
5. The blog content is primarily pornography or other sexually explicit material. Note: This did not exclude blogs with occasional sexually explicit content or nudity.

Under each term search, the first 20 blogs that did not meet the exclusionary criteria were collected. Since Tumblr does not include an official explanation, and some Tumblr themes do not include timestamps on posts, it is difficult to say if search results are displayed chronologically or if an algorithm affects the results. Either way, the blogs included in this study were active at the time the data was collected. These data were collected during the months of June and July in 2015. These methods resulted in an initial total of 200 blogs collected. Upon closer inspection, an additional 14 blogs met the exclusionary criteria for a total sample of 186 blogs.

Methods

Data were collected using the webclipping tool Zotero when possible, and saving pages manually when it was not. The text from the bio boxes and About Me pages was compiled and coded to assist an interpretation of recurring types of information using NVivo software. That is, the data from bio boxes and About Me pages were primarily coded to indicate what kinds of information bloggers share. In order to examine the communal aspects of NBG&SO identity construction—a phenomenon noted by Tiidenberg (2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b)—I tracked which bloggers included an ask box (think inbox) and noted if they tracked their responses

Table 1. Overview.

Totals		
Information	Users	Percentage of sample
Sample total	186	100.0%
Total bio box	173	93.0%
Active ask	166	89.3%
Selfie tags	67	36.0%
Total About Me	40	21.5%
Both bio box and About Me	39	21.0%
Personal tags	26	14.0%

to submitted asks via a link on their Tumblelog. Ask boxes and tracked tags are usually linked in the bio box on the main page of a blogger's Tumblr, though this depends on the Tumblelog's theme. Links to a blogger's selfies or personal posts—posts representative of the blogger, their feelings, or their thoughts—are also sometimes found in bio boxes, main pages, and About Me. I also noted whether or not bloggers linked selfie tags and personal tags (see Table 1).

I initially used descriptive coding as described by Johnny Saldaña (2014) to assess About Me pages and bio boxes, examining how bloggers referred to themselves and the types of personal information shared (such as favorite television shows, music, and books). However, during analysis, it became apparent that limiting the scope of this project to the types of information shared about NBG&SO would provide the most manageable and appropriate data to answer the guiding research question. Therefore, I instead created categories based on the labels shared by the Tumblr bloggers (see Tables 2 to 5 for examples of categories) and proceeded to use Saldaña's (2014) hypothesis coding in the second round. These categories of information shared were pulled from the data and grouped to show relationships among gender labels, sexual orientation labels, romantic interests, and preferred pronouns. After several rounds of examining relationships within the data such as frequency of gender labels versus frequency of sexual orientation labels within the whole group and individual categories, I employ rhetorical analysis to examine not only labeling practices but also the terminology used by the bloggers in order to examine their relationship with hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality.

Another note, I have followed Tiidenberg's (2014a) and Markham's (2012) notions of ethical fabrication to help protect the identity of the individuals included in this analysis. I only include a few snippets of quotations, and any quotations included in this article that may be entered into a search engine and traced back to the individual who wrote them were altered. I changed the wording of quotations included here to remain true to sentiment but eliminate the possibility of using snippets to search online for the individual who wrote it. As my rhetorical analysis of the data examines power structures and specific labels that are used, altering

Table 2. Information Given.

Information shared by bloggers related to gender and sexual orientation and its placement on their Tumblelogs

Information	Bio box		About Me		Both ^a	
	Users	Percentage of sample	Users	Percentage of sample	Users	Percentage of sample
Sexual orientation	60	32.3%	18	9.7%	5	2.7%
Preferred pronouns	58	31.2%	14	7.5%	10	5.4%
Gender	40	21.5%	19	10.2%	5	2.7%
Sexed at birth	6	3.2%	4	2.2%	0	0.0%
Romantic interest	5	2.7%	4	2.2%	2	1.1%

^aThis category shows the overlap of users who gave this information in both places rather than an additional category.

Table 3. Pronoun Labels.

Types of pronouns used, whole group versus users who identified

Labels	Users	Percentage of users who identified	Percentage of sample
They/them	23	36.5%	12.4%
He/him	9	14.3%	4.9%
They/he	9	14.3%	4.9%
She/her	8	12.7%	4.3%
They/she	7	11.1%	3.8%
All	6	9.5%	3.2%
They/alt	2	3.2%	1.2%

Table 4. Gender Labels.

Types of gender labels used, whole group versus users who identified

Labels	Users	Percentage of users who identified	Percentage of sample
Trans ^a	15	24.2%	8.1%
Genderfluid ^a	11	17.7%	5.9%
Genderqueer ^a	9	14.5%	4.8%
Agender	6	9.7%	3.2%
Woman or girl ^a	5	8.1%	2.7%
Nonbinary	4	6.5%	2.2%
Cis ^a	3	4.8%	1.6%
Queer	3	4.8%	1.6%
Male	2	3.2%	1.1%
Demigirl	1	1.6%	0.5%
Aerogender ^b	1	1.6%	0.5%

^aTerm was standardized or simplified (e.g., transman was shortened to “trans,” and “gender fluid” was changed to “genderfluid”).

^bAerogender is community-defined as a gender that changes based on one’s setting.

the wording of these quotations does not greatly impact my rhetorical analysis.

Limitations

This project focuses on NBG&SO construction on Tumblr. Given this focus, intersectionality regarding race and class are beyond the scope of this project. This is, however, essential work that should be done and would be better

supplemented by interview material than the type of data in this study. Another limitation of this study is its inability to comment on the impact of labeling practices on hegemonic discourse. It is not the goal of this study to measure impact of these labeling practices but instead to examine the ways they can make conversations about nonbinary genders and sexualities accessible to those familiar with hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality. Finally, I feel that it is important to acknowledge personal biases that I, as a

Table 5. Sexual Orientation Labels.

Types of sexual orientation labels used, whole group versus users who identified			
Labels	Users	Percentage of users who identified	Percentage of sample
Queer	15	18.5%	8.1%
Bisexual	13	16.1%	7.0%
Lesbian	11	13.6%	5.9%
Pansexual	11	13.6%	5.9%
Asexual	9	11.1%	4.8%
Gay	7	8.6%	3.8%
Demisexual ^a	3	3.7%	1.6%
Gray-asexual ^b	2	2.5%	1.1%

^aDemisexual is community-defined as someone who only experiences sexual attraction with deep emotional connection.

^bGray-asexual falls under asexuality to describe someone who may rarely experience sexual attraction.

researcher, have. I am a heterosexual cisfemale and therefore have predominantly viewed and experienced the world from within the binary. With this in mind, I actively work to achieve a fair understanding of the people and posts in this analysis.

Data

Out of the 186 blogs collected, 173 had a bio box, and 40 had an About Me page (see Table 1). Bloggers share everything from name and age to gender to their favorite movies, television shows, and bands, all typical information found in online profiles. Recurring pieces of information shared regarding NBG&SO are a blogger's preferred pronouns, their gender, and their sexual orientation.

Also related to NBG&SO are bloggers' designated sex at birth (e.g., sexed female at birth but identifies as male), and their romantic interest (which may differ from sexual interests). However, only a marginal number of bloggers identify their designated sex at birth and romantic interest (3.2% and 2.7%, respectively; see Table 2). Most commonly, bloggers disclose their preferred pronouns and sexual orientation (see Table 2). Largely, users either identified this information in the bio box *or* in the About Me page, so the overlap providing the same piece of information in both spaces is small (see Table 2). Users identified information in varying combinations (e.g., sexual orientation and preferred pronoun but not gender). For example, 35.4% of those who identified their gender also identified their sexual orientation and 42.4% of those who gave preferred pronouns also identified their gender. See Table 6 in the *Labeling* section for the breakdown of information shared in relation to identified sexual orientation.

Of the pronouns identified, they/them is the most common (see Table 3). Some bloggers choose multiple pronouns, usually they/them in combination with he/him or she/her (see Table 3). In only one instance was the normative she/her and he/him claimed by a cisgendered person; other cisgendered individuals do not specify pronouns. Only two

bloggers identify pronouns that are nontraditional (ey/em/eir and xir/xim/xyr).

The normative genders of male and female are not commonly used on their own (see Table 4), that is, they are more commonly combined with the prefix "trans." Gender labels are most commonly used by transgender, genderfluid, and genderqueer individuals (see Table 4). Cismale and cisfemale are not commonly labeled (see Table 4).

The most common designation for sexual orientation is queer, with nearly 19% of those who identified their sexual orientation claiming the label "queer" (see Table 5). The next most used labels are bisexual, lesbian, and pansexual (see Table 5).

Theoretical Context and Discussion

This section is organized by theme with the theoretical context and the discussion of data interlaced rather than put into separate sections in order to provide a cohesive argument and a fuller picture of the complexity of online NBG&SO construction. I also believe that this type of organization better reflects the iterative process of analyzing data, as researchers often move between existing literature and their data many times during the research process. Therefore, I organized this discussion to highlight three salient themes that I observed during my iterative review of both the data and existing literature:

1. The relevance and impact of platform affordances on usage and subsequently identity construction.
2. Consideration of *true self*, online identity construction, and how sharing one's *true self* may encourage community on Tumblr.
3. The discursive nature of labeling practices and their implications for the larger conversation about gender and sexual orientation.

The organization of these themes is also important as each analysis builds upon the previous. It is necessary to first

understand how platform affordances may shape the usage of that platform to then understand how affordances and usage influence layered identity construction. Finally, an understanding of layered identity construction on Tumblr allows for examination of NBG&SO labeling practices that also take place on Tumblr.

Networked Publics and Platform Playgrounds

Social media has made “widespread publicness” an unprecedentedly common phenomenon, and “social media introduce a conundrum of visibility..., as people’s mediated acts are both visible and invisible in networked publics” (Baym & boyd, 2012, pp. 321-322). boyd’s (2011) study on networked publics gives a framework for how to think about mediated communities and publics. Unsurprisingly, she explains that networked publics are similar to face-to-face (F2F) publics in function; however, technological affordances shape how people connect with one another (boyd, 2011, p. 39). Acknowledging effects of a platform on its users, boyd (2011) argues that “[n]etworked publics are not just publics networked together, but they are publics that have been transformed by networked media, its properties, and its potential” (p. 42). Bryce J. Renninger (2015) has already applied this framework created by boyd (2011) to Tumblr, showing it to be a networked public in compliance with both the “four types of features that play a salient role in constructing social network sites as networked publics” (boyd, 2011, p. 43), and with her four affordances of networked publics. Establishing Tumblr as a networked public then allows us to examine the ways the architecture of the platform itself influences the type of publics and counterpublics (referred to here as communities) that gather there.

Though the affordances of platforms often just function quietly in the background during use, ultimately they shape both how they are used and the types of communities that use them (Flanagin, Flanagin, & Flanagin, 2010). Social networking platforms themselves are not neutral entities but rather rhetorically and politically constructed (Flanagin et al., 2010; Gillespie, 2010). The intentional shaping of platform affordances affects not only its demographics, as Tarleton Gillespie (2010) notes, but also the content users share there. Therefore, different types of media and SNSs are used for different purposes, and, in turn, standards are set for what is appropriate discourse for different platforms. Ilana Gershon (2010) describes the collective decision of how to use different media and the “appropriate social uses of technology” as media ideologies (p. 6), and these media ideologies play a key factor in choosing which platform to share certain information (Renninger, 2015). Gershon (2010) focuses on the social aspect of media ideologies, as Renninger (2015) notes, and he goes on to explain the necessity of “acknowledg[ing] how the design and politics of technological platforms may play a role in impacting their use” (p. 6).

That is, the design of the platform affects usage in various ways, two of which are particularly relevant here. First, the way that designers intend a platform to be used may not be the way that users actually end up using the platform. For example, Tumblr states that it “effortlessly lets you share anything” (“About,” n.d.) and that “Tumblr celebrates creativity. [Tumblr] want[s] you to express yourself freely and use Tumblr to reflect who you are, and what you love, think, and stand for” (“Community Guidelines,” 2015). Although Tumblr encourages creativity in its users, it seems unlikely that the *intended* purpose of Tumblr was for the gathering of marginalized groups like the LGBTQIA community or sexually explicit NSFW communities like those Tiidenberg (2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) examines.

Second, the affordances of the platform shape actual usage, community, and identity formation. That is, what a platform is capable of doing heavily influences how it is used. While this may initially seem like a simple concept, its result is more complex. Consider that in this sample, less than 22% of users had an About Me page on their Tumblelogs (see Table 1). This seems like it should be a primary point of identity construction for users; it allows them unlimited space to share information about themselves. However, the About Me page is not usually included in a default blog layout and must be added as an extra page. This requires more than the fill-in-the-blank type of persona building that happens on other SNSs or even in the bio box section of a Tumblelog. This additional effort to include an About Me page may account for—or at least contribute to—the small number of users who choose to include one in the structure of their blog.

Tumblr’s unique tagging system is also an excellent example of affordances shaping usage. While metacommunicative discourse in hashtags is common across platforms (Daer, Hoffman, & Goodman, 2014), Tumblr allows both spaces and punctuation (except for the comma which separates the tags), which in turn allows for longer, more complex metacommentary about the content of a post that frequently just occurs in the tags rather than appearing in the actual text of a post or reblog.² Since tags are not carried along when users reblog content, it is rendered temporary commentary or categorization on blog posts when considering reblogging, though these tags remain on the post of the user that wrote them and are still searchable on Tumblr writ large. This ephemeral aspect of Tumblr’s tagging system creates another space, apart from bio boxes and About Me pages, that LGBTQIA bloggers can, and in some cases do, practice NBG&SO identity construction;³ this is part of what will be discussed in the next section as “layered identity.”

True Self, Identity, and the LGBTQIA Tumblr Community

Identity construction is a multifaceted practice that is complex both in real-world and online situations. In both cases,

there is an apprehension regarding “authenticity” that can be magnified in the ambiguous space of the Internet. Research overwhelmingly shows that, in most situations, people represent themselves truthfully in online spaces (Baym, 2010; Baym & boyd, 2012; de Laat, 2008; Yee, Bailenson, Urbanek, Chang, & Merget, 2007), and some studies suggest that there is even a more accurate representation of self in online spaces than in real-world situations (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Tiidenberg, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). A few influential Internet researchers comment on this phenomenon in varying ways: Bargh et al. (2002) suggest anonymity allows users to express themselves in ways unavailable in F2F social interactions (p. 35); Nancy Baym (2010) states that “reduced social cues make it easier to lie, but separation, time lags, and sparse cues also remove social pressures that make lying seem a good idea” (p. 116); Katrin Tiidenberg (2013) argues “that a sex blog allows people to type themselves into being in a more open and layered way than, perhaps, some other form of non-sexualised social media participation” (p. 179); and Yee et al. (2007) find that even when people are represented by digital avatars in an online game, they are still “governed by the same social norms as social interactions in the physical world” (p. 119).

Narratives of authenticity are often a concern for the Internet users, and, while authenticity certainly can be a concern for LGBTQIA Tumblr bloggers, there seems to be more worry about being allowed to show one’s *true self*. Though the distinction I make here between authenticity and *true self* might at first seem untenable, it is a distinction worth making. Generally, authenticity needs a source of external validation. In other words, in order for one’s authenticity to be verified, someone must concur that one is authentic—consider, for example, the blue check mark on Twitter that means users (usually a celebrity or public figure) are who they say they are. Mary L. Gray (2009) comments on authenticity in her study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rural youth, and instead of notions of authenticity, advocates for “queer realness.” Gray (2009) argues “[g]enres of queer realness simultaneously expand and consolidate the possibilities of identity,” and “identity, even the most intimate, personal senses of self, can be explored as deeply social and highly mediated” (p. 139). That is, sense of self and the identity work one must do to get to their *true self* is a mediated venture that requires effort to fold one’s queer identity into their own “realness,” rather than relying on an outside source for validation of authenticity.

I borrow the term *true self* from Bargh et al. (2002), to indicate notions of *inner self* rather than the performance of *actual self*. Bargh et al.’s (2002) use of *true self* is borrowed from Carl Rogers, and is similar to *inner self* as defined by Erving Goffman and Carl Jung (p. 34). As Bargh et al. (2002) use the terminology, *true self* refers to the participants’ inner self, and *actual self* is their public presentation of self. Bargh et al. (2002) find that in online interactions, users present

true self qualities more easily than in F2F interactions. Similarly, Tumblr users are often worried about being able to express their *true self*. For example, one of the primary concerns when Yahoo purchased Tumblr in 2013 was that Tumblr would no longer be a place where users could express their *true selves* (Renninger, 2015). Both Bargh et al. (2002) and Tiidenberg (2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) show that the Internet users provide a more complete sense of *true self* in an online environment. This inclination to express *true self* on Tumblr is compounded by the solace and sense of community LGBTQIA users find in online spaces (Gray, 2009). Although my use of *true self* in this essay represents one’s inner self, aligning with Bargh et al.’s (2002) definition, it also has similarities to the queer realness that Gray (2009) describes. So, considering Bargh et al.’s (2002) findings regarding the presentation of *true self* in online spaces and Gray’s (2009) conceptions of queer realness, rather than narratives of authenticity which must be confirmed by an outside source, it is possible then to examine Tumblr blogger identity formation as expression of their *true selves* in their own online space, continuing to use the term *true self* in representation of these notions.

The Internet users can, and often do, feel comfortable sharing glimpses of *true self* in online spaces. Tumblr is a site where users experience freedom specifically related to gender and sexuality, and bloggers experience “[c]ertain freedom from sexual and gender roles [they] have been socialized with” (Tiidenberg, 2012, p. 43). The ability to express one’s sexuality freely within a community of like-minded individuals is then a welcome and freeing experience for bloggers, and Tiidenberg (2013) notes that

NSFW blogging helps with valuing oneself positively, especially the aspects that may not have been valued thus offline. This happens via new elements being assembled into one’s identity, and previously existing ones being redefined as positive. It also happens via the sense of belonging with a specific group of online others . . . There was a desire to be seen as more like themselves, and simultaneously more than themselves, in the bloggers’ narratives. (p. 193)

Here, Tiidenberg (2013) indicates both the complex nature of online identity construction and Tumblr’s role in facilitating that identity construction. Just as humans are complicated beings—rightly so, or else many academics would have nothing to study—the process of building a *true self* identity is complicated and messy. On Tumblr, users wish to “be themselves” (Renninger, 2015, p. 8) but also to be liked, valued, and accepted. Tiidenberg (2012, 2013) remarks that NSFW blogs allow users to come into an acceptance of themselves for their sexual desires, which may have previously been seen as deviant or non-normative such as bondage, spanking, or same-sex erotic encounters.

In addition to NBG&SO identity construction, there are indications of the desire to build community, be liked, and be accepted within the identity building that happens outside of,

and sometimes in conjunction with, NBG&SO identity construction; as Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (2003) point out, “[e]veryone may have sexuality, but not everyone defines their identity around their sexuality” (p. 8). Similarly, Tiidenberg (2012) argues that

including non-sexual, personal details in . . . construction of the private sexual self online and being sincere about their sexuality, is a part of constructing their sense of self as distinct . . . and positively valued (by other community members) within that particular culture. (p. 43)

In accordance with Tiidenberg’s (2012, 2013) notions of community, these data indicate a trend of specific community building practices in which bloggers invite readers to send them asks or otherwise contact them via social media. One blogger even implores their readers: “Please don’t be scared to talk to me . . . I’m super nice . . . I just can’t hold a conversation.” This particular blogger is requesting submissions for their ask box, a feature on Tumblr that allows the audience to communicate with the blogger. This is a voluntary feature, and bloggers have the ability to control the presence of an ask box on their blog in addition to whether or not they allow anonymous submissions to their ask box. Once a blogger receives an ask, they may choose to answer it privately or post it publicly. Requesting asks and even having an active ask box encourages community building communication between a blogger and their audience, and, as Gray (2009) notes, the presence of other nonbinary persons online helps to add resonance to experience and helps individuals understand that they are not alone.

Almost 90% of the bloggers sampled had an active ask box with 15.7% of those bloggers specifically requesting readers to contact them through their ask box (see Table 1). Bloggers invite their readers to ask them questions. Some invitations are simple: “Ask me stuff!” or “send me some anons,” and others are more involved; in a few instances, bloggers invite their readers to inquire about nonbinary genders and sexualities: “Also please don’t be afraid to ask about me or anything you see on my blog like gender, sexuality, and kitties.” In combination with an active ask box, public labeling of NBG&SO signifies inclusion in the LGBTQIA community, indicating a sympathetic or at least non-hostile interaction is possible with a particular blogger. Likewise, Paul B. de Laat (2008) notes that when bloggers assume “others to be worthy of [their] intimacies, at least a number of them will indeed become [their] intimate correspondents” (p. 68); meaning that the act of public labeling in conjunction with an active ask box provides community building opportunities for LGBTQIA bloggers and their audiences.

Identity construction, not just in regard to gender and sexual identity, on Tumblr is a complicated activity. Since Tumblr does not have the typical profile-like structure (fill in pre-determined information about one’s self, such as on

Facebook), it is difficult to pinpoint where the majority of identity construction takes place. Tiidenberg (2012) writes about “layered” identity, to describe the complexity of identity construction in relation to the different aspects of self shared by the NSFW bloggers she interviewed (e.g., sexual and non-sexual pieces of information). But the types of information shared are not the only kinds of layers that appear during identity construction. Platform affordances, discussed previously, also factor heavily into this identity construction—at least they do on Tumblr. Yes, users engage in labeling practices on the bio boxes and About Me pages, but these labeling practices also happen within the posts on the blog and via tagging on those posts. Tagging then becomes an integral part of that identity construction in part because tags are searchable on a user’s blog. Occasionally, bloggers will link common tags that they use and especially tags related to blogger selfies or personal tags (see Table 1). The tagging and linking of selfies was even more prevalent than constructing an About Me page with 36% of bloggers tagging their selfies and just 21.5% taking the time to construct an About Me page (see Table 1). So, while only 39.3% of bloggers chose to identify their sexual orientation and 27.7% their gender (combined totals from bio box & About Me pages), all of the bloggers in this sample chose to either have LGBTQIA content on their blogs (evidenced by the methods used to gather data for this study) indicating that they are, on some level, identifying as nonbinary.

While the data in this study cannot examine the motives behind the labeling process, the fact that the labeling of genders and sexual orientations is present in the semi-publicity of Tumblr indicates that Tumblr is a space where NBG&SO are more widely accepted and even encouraged by the LGBTQIA community that exists there. This notion of disturbing hegemonic understandings of NBG&SO or at least defying those expectations by “mere presence” is supported more widely by research on queer communities (Gray, 2009, p. 26). So, what this discussion of *true self* and being one’s true self does for examining NBG&SO identity on Tumblr is allow researchers and audiences to take these identity building moves at face value. de Laat (2008) describes this as a type of trust shared between the blogger and their audience. So, the relative anonymity of the Internet does not encourage users to fabricate identities (Bargh et al., 2002; Baym, 2010) but rather allows identity construction that audiences may trust as a representation of *true self*. NBG&SO labels, created and shared between an ever-growing number of LGBTQIA bloggers on Tumblr, can then be seen as meaningful markers of an evolution of how gender and sexual orientation are viewed.

Labeling

The labeling practices discussed here are in relation to gender and sexual orientation identity. Consistently, LGBTQIA Tumblr bloggers self-identify with up to four pieces of

information: (1) gender, (2) preferred pronoun, (3) sexual attraction, and (4) romantic attraction. Distinguishing between romantic and sexual attraction means that the individual doing so recognizes their desires for romantic and sexual love differ, for example, an individual identifying as biromantic pansexual would have romantic feelings (usually meaning wanting to be in committed, loving relationships) for two genders, but be sexually attracted to all genders. That stated, it is worth noting the differences between gender, sex, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexuality. The word “sex” is most commonly used to describe “the biological phenomenon of dimorphism (the fact that humans come in two varieties for purposes of sexual reproduction)” (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 4), whereas gender is the societal construct of modes of behavior and appearance normally associated with sex. Cameron and Kulick (2003) are also careful to explain that there is a difference between sexual identity and sexuality. Sexual identity encompasses both sexual orientation and sexuality, which is broadly defined as “ways of being sexual” (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 8).

The labels that LGBTQIA Tumblr bloggers use more frequently describe their sexual orientation, unlike the groups of NSFW bloggers that Tiidenberg (2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) examines, which go through a process of constructing their sexuality—or ways of being sexual—on their NSFW blogs. Tiidenberg (2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) also describes NSFW blogs and sexual identity as a community-driven type of identity construction. The NSFW communities that Tiidenberg (2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) studies have a community-influenced aspect of each individual’s sexual identity construction comparable to the way that other SNSs facilitate community-driven identity construction. Similarly, the LGBTQIA community on Tumblr co-constructs NBG&SO labels, co-creating media ideologies as described by Gershon (2010). The result is the acknowledgement of Tumblr as a safe space where it is appropriate to display labels outside of the binary whereas the same users may not be comfortable sharing this information on sites like Facebook due to the availability of the information to real-world friends and family—something that has been shown as a deterrent to the presentation of *true self* (de Laat, 2008; Tiidenberg, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b).

Labeling as a form of identity construction is an important practice in that it gives LGBTQIA individuals a way to have an accurate, nuanced description of their feelings, gender, and desires. However, it is also a practice that is born within binary discourse. In a Foucauldian sense, LGBTQIA bloggers construct discourses within existing hegemonic norms of a power that is intent on pretending that, as a sexual abnormality, they do not exist (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 84). Terms of gender, romantic desire, and sexual desire are framed and described by the binary both subverting and hiding within binary norms. That is, terms such as “asexual” and “bisexual” are variations of terminology already existing to describe

sexuality: heterosexual and homosexual. Labeling, like Foucault’s (1978/1990) concepts of discourse,

transmits and produces power; it reinforces, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance. (p. 101)

Here, Foucault (1978/1990) notes the delicate balance between power and discourse; discourse that attempts to subvert power also reinforces it by first recognizing its power and second by giving it credence through acknowledgment that it needs to be challenged in the first place. Likewise, remaining silent allows that which is in power to remain in power, though silence should not be assumed to be passive acceptance of dominant powers (Carillo Rowe & Malhotra, 2013; Glenn, 2004). So, although the LGBTQIA community asserts and makes space for their own genders and sexualities, they use the framework of gender that has been constructed by the hegemonic binary.

Cameron and Kulick (2003) write about “default heteronormativity,” and this sort of default also seems to present itself within the LGBTQIA community on Tumblr. I mean this in two ways: First, the “default” of the LGBTQIA community is the LGB (or, arguably, the LG) portion of the community. That is, within the LGBTQIA community, lesbian, gay, and bisexual are the “default” sexualities, with labeling outside of those being the “deviant” labeling within the community. Additionally, there is the more traditional hegemonic default gender binary in that it is highly unlikely for LGBTQIA bloggers to identify themselves as cisfemale or cismale (see Table 4, which shows the prefix “cis” is used by only three bloggers to describe their gender). The LGB portion of the LGBTQIA community is the least likely to also include gender identity labels (see Table 6), showing the TQIA portion of the community to be the most deviant section of the LGBTQIA community in that they are more likely to identify *both* their gender and sexual orientation as outside of hegemonic binary norms. This information suggests that the sharply increased likelihood of queer, asexual, and pansexual individuals—rather than lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals—to divulge gender identity labels is significantly impacted by hegemonic binary norms that emphasize their status as deviant both writ large and within the LGBTQIA community.

Additionally, individuals who identify their gender outside of the binary continue to use variations of normative male/female terminology. That is, even if an individual identifies as genderqueer or genderfluid, the pervasive practice is to claim a pronoun such as “they” (see Table 3); only two individuals chose to use nontraditional pronouns (ey/em/eir and xir/xem/xyr). Although “they” is gender-neutral in that it does not indicate whether or not the individual being referred to is male or female, those who do this are still choosing to use existing language that was created with the male/female

Table 6. Labels Shared by Sexual Orientation.

Labels shared in relation to identified sexual orientation					
Sexual orientation	Total	Gender	Pronouns	Sexed at birth	Romantic
Queer	13	61.5%	61.5%	7.7%	0.0%
Lesbian	11	36.4%	36.4%	9.1%	0.0%
Asexual ^a	9	55.6%	66.7%	0.0%	33.3%
Pansexual	9	88.9%	66.7%	11.1%	11.1%
Bisexual	8	25.0%	50.0%	0.0%	12.5%
Gay	7	28.6%	28.6%	0.0%	0.0%

^aLabels of demisexual and gray-asexual were included in this total since they are subsets of asexuality and only three individuals identified within those two categories.

binary in mind. Language is ever-evolving, making the invention of new or usage of current, nontraditional gender-neutral pronouns not an entirely unmanageable task. In fact, the gender-neutral pronouns “zir” and “ze” have even been adopted in University infrastructure language to accommodate genderqueer students (Scelfo, 2015). In effect, the choice of traditional pronouns, rather than subverting the hegemonic, binary discourse, is, in some ways, reified by extensive labeling practices and pronoun usage.

Even the absence of gender (agender) is a label that allows individuals who claim the label to be recognizable by those who think in terms of the dominant discourse. Asexuality has only come to describe human desires in the 21st century (Renninger, 2015), formerly being used to describe the reproduction of plants (“Asexual,” n.d.). This is due in very large part to the online communities such as those on Tumblr and AVEN, a website which “is often said to be the birthplace of an asexual identity as it is understood today” (Renninger, 2015, p. 3). After claiming of the label “asexual,” several subcategories of asexual cropped up, including gray-asexual, demisexual, and aromantic, all of which fall under the “asexual umbrella” (Renninger, 2015, p. 3). But the point here is that the appropriation of the term “asexual,” which is traditionally used to describe reproduction that is abnormal—that is, without a male and female partner—is the appropriation of a term that exists because of a hegemonic male/female understanding of both gender and sexual orientation.

Additionally, the term “queer” is the most claimed sexual orientation label (see Table 5), which is another appropriation of hegemonic language. Where asexual is simply a term that fits the lack of sexual desire, “queer” has historically been used as a derogatory term toward gay and lesbian individuals (Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Gray, 2009). The reclamation of the term “queer” has, in the past, represented a cultural-political move that both repurposes a derogatory term and challenges heteronormativity and even some gay identity politics (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 28). In the labeling processes on Tumblr, “queer” serves as more of an umbrella term for nonbinary persons. There are those who use “queer” as a cultural-political statement (e.g., claiming to be “queer as hell”), but it also functions as an intentionally

vague NBG&SO label or else as a label for those who recognize themselves outside of hegemonic understanding of gender and sexual orientation, but are unsure of their fit on the LGBTQIA spectrum.

Labeling theory. There is a body of literature in psychology referred to as labeling theory and modified labeling theory (Norris, 2011). Predominantly, this literature focuses on the negative influences of labels such as “depressed” and “ex-convict” attached to individuals considered by society to be deviant (Norris, 2011). Given these focuses on labeling, drawing connections between labeling theory or modified labeling theory and gender labeling practices can be tricky—the implication that a nonbinary gender or sexual orientation label is indicative of either mental illness or criminal tendencies, especially when the validity of gender identity disorder has been called into question by scholars such as Judith Butler (2004), is not the aim of this study. Helpfully, Dawn R. Norris’ (2011) study examines *self*-labeling in nontraditional undergraduates (those aged 25 years and older), rather than focusing on more socially stigmatizing labels of ex-convict or mentally ill. One primary point of difference, though, is that Norris (2011) finds negative self-evaluation and subsequently disidentification to be closely tied with self-labeling (p. 191), whereas NBG&SO self-labeling practices as discussed in this article are, ultimately, a constructive process, for example, the process of public NBG&SO self-labeling helps to provide openings for communities to connect.

Norris (2011) also argues that self-labeling arises out of “discrepancies between how one ‘should’ be and how one is in reality” (p. 190). While this is likely the case in some instances of self-labeling (even some instances of NBG&SO self-labeling), I find that, generally, the practice of self-labeling NBG&SO on Tumblr serves as an attempt to bridge those discrepancies and create/use labels that more precisely describe one’s NBG&SO rather than nonbinary individuals attempting to fit into hegemonic understandings of gender and sexual orientation. This conclusion is similar to Adam D. Galinsky et al.’s (2013) findings that the reclamation of previously derogatory labels (such as “queer”) by marginalized groups help to “attenuate the stigma attached to the

derogatory group label” (p. 2028). It is then possible to understand the reclaimed label of “queer”—described by Cameron and Kulick (2003) and Gray (2009)—as initial grounding for the self-labeling of NBG&SO since “once a group begins self-labeling, group power is perceived as increasing” (Galinsky et al., 2013, p. 2028), and this perception of power may be a contributing factor to the expansion of NBG&SO self-labeling as seen on Tumblr.

Conclusion

Arguably, labeling processes through appropriation of hegemonic discourse are not radical enough to elicit true change in societal imaginings of gender and sexual orientation; in a Foucauldian sense, the LGBTQIA community is, perhaps, just recycling existing power structures. However, though born of hegemonic discourse, I argue that this framework also provides an opportunity to make LGBTQIA genders and sexualities recognizable. The term “asexual” is immediately recognized as the absence of the act of sex, and so is an easy logical step to the absence of sexual desire in an individual. This framework serves not only to make an easier path for new members of the LGBTQIA community to follow but also provides the opportunity for those outside of the community to gain a better understanding of nonbinary genders and sexualities—even if they may not necessarily accept them. In other words, since the audience already has some knowledge of the basic (hegemonic) gender and sexual orientation discourse, it is then easier for them (within the community or not) to learn the more nuanced methods of describing genders and sexualities outside of the hegemonic binary, therefore disturbing hegemonic notions of gender and sexual orientation.

In addition to the positive subversive powers of public gender and sexual orientation labeling, I have shown how platform affordances shape usage and consequently identity construction in addition to discursive labeling practices. Affordances as simple as not providing structured profiles enable users to figure out their own ways to showcase aspects of themselves they consider being central to their sense of *true self*. In this case, lack of structured profiles means that identity construction happens not online in bio boxes and About Me pages but also through ephemeral tagging and other community building practices such as requesting asks. LGBTQIA bloggers have taken advantage of the affordances (or lack thereof) on Tumblr to make About Me pages and bio boxes common places for NBG&SO identity construction and self-labeling to take place, making this a convention of the LGBTQIA community on Tumblr that extends the conversation on NBG&SO and perhaps invites audiences to contemplate their own gender and sexual orientation.

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Notes

1. This builds upon Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci’s (1971/1992) notions of hegemony wherein hegemony is described as an ideology that suppresses the ideologies of subordinated groups.
2. Reblogging content is a function like retweeting where the content appears on the user’s blog. A user may choose to add commentary and tags to a reblog post or choose to reblog as-is.
3. For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between Tumblr’s tagging system and gender identity, see Avery Dame’s (2016) article “Making a Name for Yourself: Tagging as Transgender Ontological Practice on Tumblr.”

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