

Media, Political Movement, and Ideology: Queer Theory in The United States

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ABSTRACT

Amidst the long-existing oppression against queer community, LGBTQ+ movement has gained substantial social awareness and legislative rights since the late 20th century. The inspiration for this research comes from the underlying contrast between the rising reception of queer community and opposition of them from various aspects of society. Intending to look for an approach that LGBTQ+ people can rely on outside of politics and sociology, this paper will identify problems and address how these conflicts and challenges of LGBT movement can be resolved by queer theory from the field of literature. The purpose and goal of this paper is to explore and examine the extent that queer theory can be adapted in order to foster social changes.

Keywords: *Queer Theory, Media, Political Movement, LGBT, Ideology, United States*

1. INTRODUCTION

On June 28, 1969, the Stonewall rebellion in New York City marked the beginning of a civil rights movement led by and for the queer community. Since then, the gay liberation movement has evolved into an LGBT social movement in the United States. The overall LGBT movement comprehends advocacy of rights of not only gays and lesbians, but also people with non-binary sexual orientations or gender non-conforming identities.

Reviewing the relatively brief history of queer movement, LGBT communities grew larger and gained social support rather quickly. In 2015, the Supreme Court's ruling of *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalized same-sex marriage on a federal level, meaning that gay and lesbian marriages are under the protection of the due process clause in the Fourteenth Amendment. However, as queer communities gain considerable recognition and eventually rights in society, controversies, oppositions, and misunderstandings continue to exist. Rationales to oppose gay and lesbian rights in the U.S. come mainly from religion and the medical field in history. The terminology of homosexuality was also initially a creation of the homophobic discourse. "Homosexual" was first utilized as a medical-legal term in 1869, eleven years before the invention of "heterosexual." Ironically, heterosexuality only came to being and known by the public as a consequence of the crystallization of

homosexuality. Additionally, gender non-conforming identities such as transgender have been defined as "gender identity disorder" and "gender dysphoria[11,12]," implying that transgender is a disease or that individuals are vastly stressed and anxious about being transgender.

The purpose and goal of this paper are to explore and examine the extent that queer theory can be adapted as guidance of current and future LGBT political movements, though queer theory is abstract and post-structuralist in nature. To be specific, this research paper will address the following objectives.

- Theoretical foundations and function of lesbian and gay theory
- Growing awareness, support, and problems that LGBT movement face in the twenty-first century
- Possible socio-political insights and perspectives that queer theory is able to provide
- Limitations of queer theory as a guiding ideology of social movements

2. ANALYSIS ON QUEER THEORY

Qualitative approach is among the most suitable methods for this particular paper, because both research objectives 2.1 and 2.2 depend on theological and factual knowledge. In order to gain a better insight into the possibilities to convert conceptual abstract ideas in queer

theory into a practical ideology, this research gathers and investigate information from various secondary data in academic archives and descriptive data based on social and statistical facts. To ensure the credibility of findings, argumentations, and conclusions presented by this study, in addition, quantitative approaches are also presented in identifying contemporary issues, analyzing the obstacles that LGBT movement in the U.S. currently face. This research will cite existing statistical data such as surveys to increase the validity and credibility of analysis.

2.1. Theoretical Foundations and Function of Lesbian and Gay Theory

2.1.1. Theory Overview

Academia has already acknowledged and embraced queer communities to certain extents in recent decades. It is significant to note here that even though in history the word “queer” initially had an exceedingly negative connotation, in this particular essay, it is a neutral word to refer to the LGBTQ+ community today. Disciplines of queer theory apply this word as an umbrella, indicating a broad spectrum of non-normative sexual and gender identities [15].

As a critical theory, queer theory emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer studies and women's studies. When scholars refer to the term queer theory, they usually indicate either a literary analysis methodology or an extensive practice. In the former term, theorists incorporate close textual analysis of literatures and works from a queer perspective. In the latter, they propose ideas that relate to how queerness can be understood in various disciplinary contexts.

“Lesbian and gay criticism” includes two main theories: lesbian feminism and queer theory. Lesbian feminism originated within feminism, while queer theory was based on post-structuralist works in the 1980s, seeking to break the binary, heterosexism world. By desexualizing lesbianism and gayness, theorists were often able to make it political and “sanitized.” The notion of “women-identified women” and “lesbian continuum” introduced an insight to choice and allegiance into sexuality and gender, so that sexual orientation is not natural or unchanging, but a construction. In the field of queer theory, scholars dedicate to create distinctions that binaries or the paired opposites are constructed. They are defined in terms of the other, similar to Saussure’s principle that “words are relational.” It is even possible to practice to privilege the term “homosexual” by mentioning it before “heterosexual.”

2.1.2. Challenge of Heterosexism

Through the context of heterosexuality being the origin and foundation of society's heteronormative stability, queerness focuses on mismatches between sex,

gender, romantic attraction, and sexual desire on individuals[1]. Queer theory targets and criticizes heterosexism and heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is the social-cultural setting that promotes heterosexuality as the normal and/or preferred sexual orientation in the society, being constantly reinforced through social institutions, expectations, and daily performance of individuals. Hence, heterosexism is internalized in people’s minds. One’s heterosexuality is constructed and accepted by the social environment. Heteronormativity is a form of social power, internal control, and political discourse that applies pressure to both straight and gay individuals in the form of accepted social norms.

Queerness has been associated most prominently with gay, lesbian, and bisexual subjects, with a broader analytic framework including other topics such as cross-dressing, intersex bodies and identities, gender ambiguity. Queer theory holds that individual sexuality is a fluid, fragmented, and dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities and it may change and vary at different points during one's life[2].

Heavily influenced by the works of scholars like Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, and Judith Butler, queer theory challenges that sexuality, instead of gender, is the foundational identity and characteristic of human beings. The purpose of lesbian and gay criticism is to make sexual orientation “a fundamental category of analysis and understanding,” and it served as “an oppositional design informed by resistance to homophobia and heterosexism.”

Queer theory’s criticism of a fixed system of sexes, genders, and sexualities, claiming that identity is a constructed constellation of multiple and unstable positions. Post-structuralists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida introduced a considerable amount of insights into the emergence of lesbian and gay criticism. Moreover, queer theory also examines the discourses of homosexuality developed in the last century in order to place queerness into a larger historical context, deconstructing contemporary arguments both for and against the non-binary groups of people.

In literacy criticism, lesbian/gay critics usually identify and establish a canon of “classic” lesbian and/or gay writers, identify lesbian/gay episodes in mainstream work and discuss them, rather than read same-sex pairings in non-specific ways, set up an extended, metaphorical sense of “lesbian/gay,” connoting a moment of crossing a boundary, and such “liminal moments” mirror the moment of self-identification as lesbian or gay, expose the homophobia of mainstream literature as well as criticisms, foreground homosexual aspects of mainstream literature, and attract attention to literacy genres that were previously neglected, which significantly influenced ideals of masculinity and femininity [3].

2.2. Growing Awareness, Support, and Problems that LGBT Movement Face in the Twenty-First Century

2.2.1. Growing Support

As the United States enters a digital age, people expose themselves and spend time in online environments more frequently than ever. The predominant, and possibly primary way for the public to grow awareness about queer communities is through social media. Nowadays, lots of celebrities either have LGBT+ identities or support those groups, and these celebrities and/or public figures substantially enhance the recognition of queer communities in the United States. To name a few, Ellen DeGeneres, the host of the popular *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* identifies herself as lesbian; Troye Sivan, a singer and actor, came out as gay when he was a teenager. Till today, his come out video has been viewed more than 8 million times on Youtube; Jari Jones, a transgender model and actress, was recently featured on Calvin Klein's billboard in New York City. The more visible the images of these celebrities and influencers are, the more likely that the general public get to know about LGBT identities. Previous research on how online experiences influence people's view on gay identities shows that "early milestones about the realization of homosexuality came largely from online experiences," and "online experiences helped affirm homosexual identity[8]."

In addition, from an economic perspective, the commercial success of people identified or affiliated with the LGBT community proves that queer community is accepted, even affirmed, by the capitalist system in the United States. In this way, more queer people are willing to buy and endorse brands that feature LGBT-related stars.

Another major way originates within the US government. The issue of LGBT rights, which can be said as part of minority rights, is usually concerned by liberals. Thus, when the US had a liberal majority on one or more of the three government branches, it became more feasible to grant awareness and rights to the LGBT community through governmental effort. This means that when the president is liberal, or the Congress, or the Supreme Court has a majority of liberal people, there is a greater opportunity to bring up and solve queer identity-related issues. For instance, a very recent Supreme Court case, *Bostock v. Clayton County*(2020), ruled that "an employer who fires an individual employee merely for being gay or transgender violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964[9]." In other words, a gay or transgender person is officially and legally protected under the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

2.2.2. Rising Issues

One trend detected in people supporting the LGBT community is worth noticing. Previous studies (mainly conducted in the US) have found that heterosexuals with positive attitudes towards homosexuality are characterized more as non-religious, politically liberal or moderate, young, female, and have close personal contact with openly gay men and lesbians. Worth noticing, people with these characteristics are very likely to be liberal and/or democratic. A vast amount of young people heavily support LGBT rights. Historically, these young people advocated and promoted civil rights expansively, but usually had a much lower voter turnout compared to other age groups. Consequently, their low turnout and political efficacy prevented them from deciding the most prominent political agenda of the country.

However, as mentioned in the introduction of this research, queer rights movement is facing oppositions and backlashes from the American society. Relativism is the view that knowledge, practice, and truth exist in relation differing domains of conventions, cultures, and societal contexts. To be more precise, it covers an abstract view that every opinion can be, and should be justified to a given framework of assessment. The truth of reasoning attributing these properties is solidified once the relevant framework of assessment is specified or supplied as context[5]. Impacted by relativism thinking, people who in the LGBT community assert that their identities are justified, their discourse matter, and they have authority to speak out and receive respect from others. This controversial philosophical idea of relativism has helped a considerable number of LGBT community members to share their opinions and raise awareness for their identity.

Meanwhile, it has played an important role in undermining dogmatic attachments to certain positions[6]. Many researches and influential magazines exposed a generational trend that the younger generations today, including the millennials and new millennials, are more self-absorbed than ever, as a result of popular relativism. Time even published a cover story, *Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation*, in May, 2013 to address this problem of self-narcissism, claiming that technology and social media pushed for intensive self-involvement by millennials in many issues [7]. Actions and expressions from people within the LGBT community umbrella sometimes also contribute to opposition by the general public. As many people get prompted by political correctness, the phenomenon of language, actions, and policies that are carefully designed to avoid offense or disadvantage to members of particular groups in society. Such action of political correctness along with relativism thinking, creates a complex yet intensified conflict between the LGBT community and conservative public. This is partially due to the fact that if one from the LGBT community keeps expressing his/her rationale without a goal to seek for understanding

and sympathy from others outside of the community, consensus is hardly to reach.

2.3. Socio-Political Insights and Perspectives that Queer Theory Is Able to Provide

After giving some fundamental information regarding queer theory and LGBT movement, which is how, and to what extent, can queer theory provide socio-political insights and/or alternative perspective to the current LGBT movement. Insights can be found externally and internally.

Firstly, queer theory opens up another way to guide the public to understand the LGBT+ community indirectly. Currently, the majority of people in the United States get exposure to queer people through social networking or media, especially blogs and posts in the media. On the other hand, queer theory focuses on the close textual analysis to texts with explicit or implicit homoerotic and homosexual characteristics. As people apply it to criticize mainstream literature, more opportunities are provided for “queer” literatures as classics of a new standard. If queer theory can be promoted outside of its current existence as an academic disciplinary, it may offer a more post-structuralist perspective to the notion of gender and sexuality. One such possible effort can be to promote queer literatures to the public, and through public reading and understanding of these literatures, their opinions regarding LGBT+ people may become less radical. In other words, even though one blind and abridged oneself from queer people on social media or in real life, through the literature he/she can still try to understand gay or lesbian identities.

Secondly, accepting queer theory into the LGBT+ community may help people within the community to reflect and deconstruct their own identities, prompting self-examination. Because queer theory has its post-structuralist concepts and foundations, getting to know about it brings a new approach to thinking. When people who fight for civil rights acquire a deeper realization of how and why their identities form in this society, in this larger structure, they may develop new insights and make their words and action more powerful. For instance, when advocates say the slogan “Love is love,” they mean it. Nevertheless, queer theory encourages them to dive into their family, the society, and the structure they are positioned at. To trace why “love” occurs, why do people have different sexualities, and why they should not be discriminated against, LGBT-identity people may present a much more thorough explanation of themselves and in what way they should continue fostering social changes.

2.4. Limitations of Queer Theory as a Guiding Ideology of Social Movements

Previous researches suggested that a queer liberation movement departs from mainstream equality movements

because its target constituents, goals, strategies, and structures differ sharply from the mainstream equality organizations. This new movement prioritizes queer people in multiple subordinated identity categories. It is concerned with rebuilding institutions and structures, rather than with achieving access to them, and is grounded more in “liberation” or “justice” frameworks than “equality.” [14] Queer theory has three major limitations in its utilization of advocating for a social movement.

- The queer theory itself is proposed initially only to supplement a gay perspective in analyzing literature.
- Queer theory has been criticized for its failures in the past to adequately address the phenomenon of transgender-identifying people.
- The fluidity of identity weakens any practical political effort.

As a literature criticism, queer theory’s function was to provide more perspectives and possibilities of reading classics. It was intended to deconstruct the existing monolithic social norms and explore how and why identities form, manifesting themselves in this world. One such prominent project within the queer theory is “refusing heterosexuality as the benchmark for sexual formations[10].” In general, queer theory remains very theoretical and it is “restrained” within academia since it was proposed, detaching itself from the general public.

Moreover, one major critique of queer theory is that it fails to address enough about transgender people. Queer theory focuses on sexuality, but not gender. It is also considered a product of patriarchal, cisgender society, with an emphasis on gayness in homoerotic, homosexual experience and relationships. In today’s context of LGBTQ+ community, people ought to come in solidarity and take collective action, no matter what sub categories of identity they fall into. Therefore, if queer theory is to be applied pervasively, it is not sufficient to solely address gay people but not transgender people.

In addition, based on the notion that identities are fluid, heterosexual and homosexual do not designate fixed essences. Just like Saussurean signifiers, identities are merely part of a construction of concepts and differences. Theorists, therefore, construct an anti-essentialist, postmodernist concept of roles and potentialities, claiming that gayness becomes a shifting, floating and ever-changing signifier, not a fixed identity. If queer theory is designated to become guidance of practical social-political movement, henceforth, queer communities’ power to speak out and to have a discourse in society is in fact weakened. From this point of view, it becomes difficult for LGBT people to form an effective political campaign, because their identity is fundamentally ever-changing.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper aims to explore and examine whether and to what extent the LGBT community can adapt queer theory to help increase social awareness and political changes. This paper finds that queer theory provides analytical insight to the ongoing LGBTQ+ rights movement in the United States by widening another channel to let the public understand the LGBT community indirectly, through literature, and by prompting self-examination of people within the community to reflect and deconstruct their own identities. However, the queer theory also has limitations that it is proposed initially only to provide a gay perspective in analyzing literature, and it cannot adequately address the phenomenon of transgender-identifying people. The fluidity of identity weakens queer political movement. Since queer theory is detached and outdated to some extent in today's context, the LGBT community must revise and develop queer theory further to enhance corresponding benefit and feasibility.

The question of whether queer theory can be practically adapted to guide a social-political movement is a very large yet under-researched topic. Through this paper, the purpose and importance is not only to preliminarily explore this topic but also to inspire further efforts in this particular subject. In conclusion, it is possible and beneficial to implement queer theory into practice, but there is much more for theorists and advocates to accomplish.

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