‘You have to coin new things’: sexual and gender identity discourses in asexual, queer, and/or trans young people’s networked counterpublics

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Abstract

Emergent gender and sexual identity discourses that circulate on social networking sites in spaces organised around non-normative genders and sexualities (i.e., networked counterpublics) challenge dominant conceptions of gender and sexuality. These emergent discourses increasingly represent sexual and gender identities as pluralistic, potentially infinite, and able to be tailored to the individual. Using interviews with asexual, queer, and trans young people (AQTYP; $n = 16$), we examined how AQTYP in networked counterpublics appropriate hegemonic norms of identity construction to creatively articulate new sexual and gendered subjectivities. We employ thematic discourse analysis to trace how AQTYP use these labels to navigate and complicate sexual and gender self-labeling imperatives in counterpublic contexts. We conclude that AQTYP engage with gender and sexual identity discourses in online counterpublics in ways that challenge many, but not all, parameters of hegemonic identity discourses. Ultimately, we argue that new understandings of sexuality and gender in AQTYP's networked counterpublics are a form of queer world-making in which the feelings and relationalities that constitute sexual and gendered subjectivities cannot be considered self-evident, stable, or universal.

Keywords: asexual, identity, queer, social media, transgender, youth

Introduction

The Internet currently plays an important role in sexual and gender identity development for many young people, perhaps especially asexual, queer, and/or trans young people (AQTYP[1]; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Hillier, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2012; Kuper & Mustanski, 2014; Pascoe, 2011). Queer and trans youth spend more time online than their heterosexual, cisgender peers, and many report using the Internet to access information about their sexualities and genders and to connect with other queer and trans young people (GLSEN, 2013). Asexual individuals, in particular, have created thriving online communities that discuss gender and sexual minority identities and issues, and these communities are active in shaping the boundaries and meanings of contemporary asexual identities ('About AVEN', n.d.; Carrigan, 2011; Renninger, 2015).

In this paper, we examine how participation in online spaces organised around discussion and community-building among AQT people affect AQTYP's sexual and gender identities and

[1] Individuals can be trans, asexual, and/or queer, such that these are neither mutually exclusive nor completely overlapping categories. We use them here to reference three distinct non-normative social positions: 'trans' to refer to gender/sexes that do not coincide with the gender/sex an individual is assigned at birth, 'asexual,' to refer to individuals who do not experience sexual attraction to and/or sexual interest in others or do so rarely or in specific relational contexts ('About Asexuality,' n.d.), and 'queer' to refer to sexualities based on the gender/sex of partners that are not heterosexual. Importantly, common definitions of queer also encompass asexual and sometimes trans, and some definitions inhere specific politics and relationalities. Here, we use 'queer' only to refer to a range of marginalised sexualities without re-centering heterosexuality (e.g., 'heterosexual').

self-understandings. We analyze how gender and sexual identity discourses circulate online, with a focus on rapidly expanding vocabularies for describing sexual and gender diversity (Cover, 2018). Our analysis builds on recent sociological and psychological research on new media and sexual and gender minority identities by exploring how AQTYP discuss, learn about, and develop their identities online.

AQTYP's Networked Counterpublics

One way that we can understand AQTYP's online communities is as *networked counterpublics* (i.e., a specific type of *public*). *Publics* are self-organised, ephemeral discursive spaces that emerge in relation to a circulating text (Warner, 2002). Texts that produce publics circulate in such a way that people can engage with them at different times and in different places (e.g., books, newspapers, and films, among others). *Networked publics* are a form of mediated public that is persistent rather than ephemeral, consists of replicable forms of speech (e.g., sharing, copy/paste options), has invisible (i.e., unknowably large) audiences, and is searchable (boyd, 2007).

Social networking sites (SNSs) are the prototypical online spaces that produce networked publics (boyd, 2007). Currently popular SNSs include Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, among others. SNS users maintain a profile that is often public and linked to their name and identity (boyd & Ellison, 2007) – although some SNSs afford anonymity more than others, which is especially relevant for AQTYP (Cho, 2018). SNS users communicate with other users in the networks in which they are located (boyd & Ellison, 2007). SNSs are highly searchable and contain large volumes of persistent, easily replicable content. Networked publics are able to come into being in response to user-generated public speech on SNSs because users see

themselves both as individuals through their personal profiles, and as one of any number of strangers also interacting with that public speech.

A *counterpublic* is a public that is simultaneously subordinate to a dominant public and self-conscious of its subordinate status (Warner, 2002). Like publics, counterpublics take on distinct forms online due to the distinctly mediated nature of online platforms (i.e., *networked counterpublics*). Networked publics organised around sexual and gender minority identities and experiences are counterpublics because sexual and gender minority individuals have both a subordinate social status and awareness of their subordination across a broad range of social and geographic contexts (Byron, Robards, Hanckel, Vivienne, & Churchill, 2019; Renninger, 2015). Therefore, we refer to AQTYP's publics on SNSs as networked counterpublics.

On which SNSs do AQTYP's networked counterpublics actually form? Popular micro-blogging platform Tumblr has been a particularly conducive SNS for AQTYP's networked counterpublics, and accordingly, it has received more scholarly attention than other SNSs (Byron et al., 2019; Cho, 2018; Cover, 2018; Dame, 2016; Oakley, 2016; Renninger, 2015). Tumblr has hosted thriving AQT networked counterpublics in which individuals share their personal experiences, theorise the boundaries and meanings of their own identities, and generate language, images, and resources for imagined AQT audiences (Byron et al., 2019; Cho, 2018; Fink & Miller, 2014; Oakley, 2016; Renninger, 2015). Tumblr is structured in a way that uniquely facilitates the formation of networked counterpublics, due to features such as accessible private and anonymous interactions, relative equivalence of content generated by new and experienced users, and the use of hashtags to consolidate content and make it easily searchable (Renninger, 2015).

Further, unlike other popular SNSs (e.g., Facebook), Tumblr users are not compelled to link their accounts to their name and identity, which helps AQTYP feel that they can behave authentically without fear of exposure to offline personal networks (family, friends, etc.; Byron et al., 2019; Cho, 2018). The relative anonymity afforded by Tumblr also helps AQTYP express themselves without having to account for the 'context collapse' (i.e., one's imagined and actual audiences are often simultaneously composed of family, close friends, acquaintances, and even strangers) that characterises SNSs like Facebook and Twitter (Cho, 2018; Duguay, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Therefore, AQTYP's networked counterpublics on Tumblr might be particularly active, generative sites of AQTYP's collective creation of language and theory about gender and sexuality.

Asexual/Queer/Trans Identity Work

Recently, researchers have begun to ask not only where and why AQTYP spend time online, but also *how* – including how AQTYP act in ways that help constitute their identities (i.e., how they do *identity work*; Gray, 2009). AQTYP interact in networked counterpublics in particular ways that facilitate forming connections with other AQTYP, learning and performing AQT identity work – all while simultaneously avoiding online harassment common in other networked publics (Dame, 2016; Kuper & Mustanski, 2014; Renninger, 2015). As a result, AQTYP's networked counterpublics often function as spaces for their authentic self-expression (Cho, 2018; Oakley, 2016; Renninger, 2015).

Scholars have noted the importance of authenticity in the creation and negotiation of non-normative gender and sexual identities offline as well. Gray (2009) described queer identity work as a collective process through which young, rural, queer people craft authentic queer identities, with the ultimate goal of enacting 'queer realness.' Queer identity work happens in a variety of

contexts, including fragile, ephemeral 'boundary publics' created within dominant public spaces. For Gray's (2009) interlocutors, boundary publics included a local Wal-Mart that queer young people would treat as a runway for their drag looks, or a young trans man's blog documenting his transition that allowed his family, local friends, and geographically distant trans peers to engage with his experiences.

Gray (2007, 2009) articulated the concept of identity work via consideration of the specificities of rural, queer young people's lives. And notably, the sites of identity work on which we focus (i.e., AQTYP's networked counterpublics) differ from Gray's boundary publics in that they are generally less ephemeral and less focused on local, public recognition. Still, a common thread runs through Gray's boundary publics and networked counterpublics: AQTYP utilise spaces that are not explicitly designed for them – but nonetheless facilitative of their goals – to accomplish identity work for authentic self-expression and recognition from others (Cho, 2018; Oakley, 2016; Renninger, 2015).

What might AQT identity work look like in networked counterpublics? Oakley (2016) suggested that AQT Tumblr bloggers find the site useful for identifying and articulating their 'true self,' as opposed to the 'actual self' they typically present in public. She noted that 'true self,' rather than being an internal essence, is actively constructed through identity work. One particularly salient process through which such construction occurs in AQTYP's networked counterpublics is through sharing gender and sexual identity labels. AQT Tumblr users commonly include their sexual and/or romantic orientation identities, gender identity, assigned sex at birth, and pronouns in their About Me sections or personal bios (Oakley, 2016). AQTYP also generate new language to facilitate more self-labeling options to describe themselves and others (e.g., asexual communities on Tumblr or AVEN; 'About AVEN,' n.d.; Cover, 2018;

Renninger, 2015). The collective construction of a new taxonomy of gender and sexual diversity and efforts to self-locate within this new taxonomy might be especially salient forms of AQT identity work in AQTYP's networked counterpublics.

Counterhegemonic Identity Discourse

Interactional norms and self-labeling practices in AQTYP's networked counterpublics are structured both through hegemonic and counterhegemonic identity discourses (Cho, 2018; Cover, 2018; Oakley, 2016; Warf & Grimes, 1997). Hegemonic identity discourse is essentialist (Gelman, 2003) whereby gender and sexual identities are positioned as inherent and fundamental to subjectivity (i.e., selfhood situated in social context). Examples include the ideas that gender and sexual minorities are 'born that way' and that every person can and must be categorised based on gender and sexuality (Diamond, 2008a; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001; Savin-Williams, 2009). Further, hegemonic identity discourse defines a person's sexuality through their desired partners' gender(s) – or implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) partners' bodily sex(es) – rather than any other feature or sexual interest (van Anders, 2015). We refer to hegemonic identity discourse as such because it is a pervasive, culturally dominant way of understanding gender and sexual identities that persists despite failing to account for many people's lived experiences of gender and sexuality (Abed, Schudson, Gunther, Beischel, & van Anders, 2019; Diamond, 2008b; Galupo, Ramirez, & Pulice-Farrow, 2017; Schudson, Manley, Diamond, & van Anders, 2018).

Counterhegemonic identity discourses, on the other hand, are typically nonessentialist ways of discussing and understanding sexual and gender identities that often account for change across an individual's life span and change in the types of sexual and gender identities that exist and their significance across time, place, and cultural context (Arseneau, Grzanka, Miles, &

Fassinger, 2013; Cover, 2018). Whereas hegemonic identity discourse delineates only a few static sexual orientations (i.e., heterosexual, homosexual, and in some cases, bisexual), counterhegemonic identity discourses might challenge the idea that sexual orientation is a fundamental component of subjectivity or delineate many possible sexual orientations that are defined by things other than or in addition to partners' sexes (Cover, 2018; Savin-Williams, 2009; van Anders, 2015). Counterhegemonic identity discourses better account for diversity in people's lived experiences by accommodating sociocultural, historical, and individual variation in gender and sexuality.

Although the proliferation of new sexual and gender identities emerging from networked counterpublics is deeply shaped by counterhegemonic identity discourses (e.g., through its emphasis on fluidity and heterogeneity of identities) some elements of hegemonic identity discourse are still prevalent. For instance, practices of guarding or policing the boundaries of novel gender and sexual identities sometimes occur (Cover, 2018). Some AQTYP have described participation in networked counterpublics as especially intense and marked by conflict over the 'correct' definitions of particular sexual and gender identities (e.g., debates over the relative scope of bisexuality and pansexuality; Byron et al., 2019). Rather than challenging the compulsory nature of sexual and gender self-labeling, the emergence of new gender and sexual identity labels can sometimes produce more ways for individuals to define sharp boundaries around sexualities and genders.

Regardless, identity discourses circulating in AQTYP's networked counterpublics might be a form of queer world-making due to their prominent counterhegemonic elements and their ability to help AQTYP articulate and live diverse sexualities and genders (Byron et al., 2019; Cover, 2018). Berlant and Warner (1998) described queer world-making as '[supporting] forms

of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity' (p. 558). The creation of new forms of sexual and gender self-labeling might be one means through which AQTYP multiply and expand the range of imaginable, livable relationalities and ways of being in the world. The public availability of AQTYP's identity theorising and co-creation online means that many young people can (and in practice, actually do) access these diverse frameworks as they develop their sense of who it is possible for them to be (White, Moeller, Ivcevic, & Brackett, 2018)

However, one significant barrier stands in the way of AQTYP's networked counterpublics being fully accessible and sustainable: these spaces generally rely on SNSs, which are owned and maintained by corporations. Corporate politics frequently threaten to destabilise networked counterpublics and put AQTYP at risk. For instance, AQT Tumblr users experienced anxiety about changes in the platform following Yahoo's acquisition of Tumblr, because Tumblr provided them an accepting community, in contrast to unaccepting families or offline communities (Renninger, 2015). More recently, Facebook and Tumblr have started banning explicit sexual content to avoid liability under new, restrictive, and ostensibly anti-sex trafficking U.S. legislation (Martineau, 2018). It remains to be seen how these new policies will impact AQTYP's networked counterpublics. Therefore, while SNSs afford the existence and flourishing of AQTYP's networked counterpublics, their corporate control often threatens to destabilise the accessibility and value of these discursive spaces.

The Current Study

We conducted secondary analysis of qualitative interviews with AQTYP originally done for research on a novel, inclusive measure of gender/sex and sexuality called sexual configurations theory (SCT; MASKED FOR REVIEW; van Anders, 2015). Our analysis

explored how participants engage with identity discourses in networked counterpublics. Notably, the interview protocol did not include questions about engagement with networked counterpublics or Internet use of any kind, but participants raised these issues. Indeed, these topics arose organically from questions about which sexual and gender identity labels that participants use, and how they came to use those labels. This allowed us to explore the ways that networked counterpublics are already deeply embedded within participants' meaning-making around sexual and gender identity. For this paper, then, we explore these questions: What are the identity discourses through which AQTYP engage with networked counterpublics? And, what sorts of identity work do these discourses enable and/or constrain?

Method

Participants

We recruited gender and sexual minority participants ($N = 25$) for one-on-one interviews for a study on gender and sexual diversity at a large Midwestern university in the United States. Interviews were conducted between August and November 2015. We recruited primarily through student organisations for trans-, asexual-, and bisexual-identified students and their allies, as well as through advertisements on craigslist.org. Participants were compensated $30 USD for their participation. One participant was recruited from the first author's personal network. For the present study, we used a subsample of participants ($n = 16$) between ages 18 and 25 ($M = 20.4$, $SD = 1.8$) who discussed the Internet, SNSs, and networked counterpublics when talking about their gender and sexual identity labels (see Procedure). Participants self-identified their racial/ethnic identities: Black ($n = 1$), Chinese American ($n = 1$), Mexican American ($n = 1$), Multiracial Latina ($n = 1$), and white ($n = 12$). They also self-identified their gender/sex identities: cisgender woman ($n = 7$), genderfluid ($n = 1$), genderqueer or gender non-conforming

female (*n* = 2), genderqueer (*n* = 1), male or nonbinary (*n* = 1), questioning/nonbinary/agender (*n* = 1), transgender woman or transfeminine (*n* = 2), and transgender man (*n* = 1). Participants' self-identified sexual orientations included: asexual (*n* = 5), bisexual (*n* = 2), bisexual/queer (*n* = 1), bisexual/pansexual (*n* = 1), lesbian (*n* = 1), pansexual/demisexual (*n* = 1), pansexual/panromantic (*n* = 1), polysexual (*n* = 1), and queer (*n* = 3).

Procedure

Each interview lasted between 58 and 158 minutes, averaging 90 minutes, and was structured in three sections: 1) interviewers asked participants to list words and labels they use to describe their partnered sexuality (i.e., sexuality related to other people) and gender/sex, and then asked them to describe why and how they use each term, when they first encountered it, and how they came to use it to describe themselves; 2) participants visually mapped their partnered sexualities and gender/sexes on sexual configurations theory (SCT) diagrams sourced from van Anders (2015) to allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of their sexual interests and gender/sexed identifications; 3) participants reflected on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two activities. We originally designed the interview to assess the utility of SCT diagrams and explore the insights about gender/sex and sexuality that were gained through this process (detailed in MASKED FOR REVIEW). We intended for the first section of the interview to serve as a point of comparison for participants, so they could describe what SCT diagrams allowed them to express that their identity labels do not, and vice versa. All interviews were recorded, and transcripts of the audio recordings were generated for analysis. (For an in-depth discussion of the interviews, including descriptions of the diagrams, see MASKED FOR REVIEW).

We searched each interview transcript for key terms related to the Internet: 'online,' 'Internet,' 'website,' 'site,' 'blog,' 'app,' and specific SNSs (and other websites with SNS features) mentioned by participants: 'Tumblr,' 'Facebook,' 'Reddit,' 'AVEN,' and 'Autostraddle.' Each section of the transcript that included these terms was excerpted, and we included all excerpts with at least one relevant key term. Nearly all excerpts came from the first part of the interview in which participants listed words and labels they use to describe their partnered sexualities and gender/sexes, particularly from one routinely asked follow-up question: 'Where did you first encounter this word/label?' While the number and length of excerpts varied across participants, the percentage of each individual transcript covered by included excerpts was typically small (M = 8.63%, SD = 4.39%). Seventeen of the 25 transcripts contained at least one relevant key term. Only one of these transcripts came from an interview with a participant over the age of 25, and this yielded only one excerpt that did not contribute to the analysis in this paper (i.e., it was clearly not about networked counterpublics). Therefore, all participants that we included in the present analysis were between 18-25 years old[2] (n = 16). This subsample represented a notably large proportion (i.e., 16 out of 20; 80%) of the total number of participants in the study who were in this age range, which demonstrates how common discussion of the Internet was in young participants' narratives of how they found their current identity labels.

Analysis

[2] Although individuals past early adulthood might engage with gender and sexual identity discourses in networked counterpublics, we focused on young people in our study because only young people discussed it in their interviews.

We used thematic discourse analysis to interpret our data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gavey, 1989; Willig, 2015). Thematic discourse analysis is a flexible method for analyzing discursive patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This can involve identifying which discourses participants use, and analyzing how and why they use those particular discourses. Therefore, the themes generated in a thematic discourse analysis can be specific discourses themselves. Our thematic discourse analysis attends less to the micro-level details of speech and conversation than traditional forms of discourse analysis (e.g., Wetherell, 1998). Rather, we focused on how participants referred to networked counterpublics in their narratives of identity discovery and development (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Hammack, 2008). We wanted to better understand how they described and interact with norms of hegemonic and counterhegemonic identity discourses circulating in networked counterpublics.

The first author carried out the thematic discourse analysis alone, and the second author helped verify the clarity and coherence of each theme to ensure quality (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The first author read interview transcripts to determine patterns in 1) why participants engage with AQT networked counterpublics and what identity work their participation in them accomplishes, 2) how they use counterhegemonic discourses that emerge from these networked counterpublics to construct their identities, and 3) how hegemonic discourses interact with those counterhegemonic discourses. The first author then collated these patterns into themes. Next, the first author verified that the identified themes fully represented the corpus of data and confirmed the thematic structure. Lastly, we chose quotations that were most illustrative of each theme to include and analyze in this paper. Quotations are attributed to specific participants and all participants are referred to via pseudonyms. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym or have one assigned to them by the research team.

Results and Discussion

Using thematic discourse analysis, we identified four identity discourses that participants used, which represent varying interactions of hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses: identity as a feeling of belonging, identity as a tool for representing salient experiences, identity as a process of self-discovery, and identity as a means of world-making. Taken together, these themes suggest that several identity-related discourses circulate in AQTYP's networked counterpublics and shape the kinds of identity work AQTYP perform.

Identity as a Feeling of Belonging

Some participants described how engaging with AQT networked counterpublics made them feel as if they belonged somewhere. For example, Erin (white, queer, gender non-conforming person) talked about coming to use the word 'queer' for themself after feeling like they 'fit in' on Autostraddle, an online community with SNS features (e.g., personal profiles) primarily for bisexual, lesbian, and queer women and non-binary people (Autostraddle, n.d.):

> I saw it and I was like, 'Oh my god, this is everything I identify as,' like in terms of like nerdiness, and also love of cats and rainbows and… affirmations and stuff. And… it felt very cultural, it's like, 'Oh, this is my people, like this is where I fit in, like regardless of what my sexuality is.'

Erin described their cultural identification with how queerness is articulated on Autostraddle as more about felt similarity to other members of this particular networked counterpublic, rather than the adoption of a specific identity label like 'queer' or 'lesbian.' Erin also noted that they did not seek out the word 'queer' on Autostraddle to describe their sexuality. Rather, they came to 'queer' through their sense of belonging amongst other queers. The content of Autostraddle (i.e., 'nerdiness,' its focus on queer women and non-binary people) combined

with the invisible, and therefore potentially large, scope of the counterpublic engaging with it (i.e., its audience is '[their] people') gave Erin a sense that Autostraddle is its own specific cultural space in which they belong (boyd, 2007). And, Erin defined this belonging in relation to humor and taste more so than the use of specific sexual and gender identity labels.

Another form of belonging participants described was belonging in a very broad sense – that is, belonging as knowing one's feelings or desires are shared by others. Before finding their current identity labels online, some participants reported they did not know that their identities were possible to have. Melissa (Multiracial Latina, bisexual/pansexual, cisgender woman) said of her bisexual identity, 'I had never considered that you could like both genders… and then online somewhere… I found it and I was like, 'Wow, this makes a lot of sense.'' She later indicated that she typically read about sexuality online through Tumblr. In what we gleaned from Melissa's account, her bisexual identity did not necessarily precede her attractions, but discovering an identity label online that '[made] sense' allowed her to articulate her desires as constitutive of an intelligible form of personhood. Another participant, Joanna (white, asexual, cisgender woman) described the feeling she had when she found a fitting identity label on Tumblr: 'It was another lightbulb like when I saw asexual. Like, 'Hey that's me! There you go – you just described my experience in a nice pithy sentence (laughs).''

Engagement with online resources, including networked counterpublics, might be particularly valuable for AQTYP with desires or self-understandings that do not fit hegemonic binaries (e.g., asexual and bisexual). Further, a term's circulation online can actively facilitate feelings of belonging. For example, if the term 'bisexual' is somewhere online, then there are other people who are bisexual. If other people are bisexual, a felt sexual desire for multiple genders that may have been difficult to categorise or understand *belongs* somewhere. Therefore,

engagement with networked counterpublics (and/or online resources more broadly) can be a useful strategy for combatting feelings of isolation or the impossibility of one's desires or experiences (Byron et al., 2019).

Participants described multiple ways of finding belonging within their own identities through engagement with networked counterpublics and online resources more broadly. This belonging might come through encountering language for one's gender and/or sexuality (e.g., Melissa) and feeling a cultural connection to others in AQT networked counterpublics (e.g., Erin).

Identity as Tool for Representing Salient Experiences

Identity discourses in networked counterpublics function to produce a broad range of desires and ways of being as constitutive of specific forms of personhood, beyond binaries of gay/straight or female/male. Traditionally, sexual orientation, defined as a stable interest in partners based on their sexed bodies (typically, genitals), has dominated scientific and lay understandings of sexual subjectivity (Sedgwick, 1990; van Anders, 2015). However, participants named other aspects of their sexualities that were salient in their self-definitions and used labels that they had encountered in AQT networked counterpublics that represented those desires as orientations.

One label reported by two participants, 'demiromantic' – which refers to someone who does not feel romantic attraction to others until there is a close, emotional bond between them ('Demiromantic,' n.d.) – was especially illustrative of how identity discourses in AQT networked counterpublics focus on representing salient experiences in ways that expand the boundaries of what sexual identities are and can be in hegemonic identity discourse. In a Foucauldian model of sexual subjectivity, it is not personally salient experiences that produce the

conditions of sexual subjectivity, but rather experiences that fit hegemonic discourses. Because medical and psychiatric discourses organised same-sex sexual behaviors into a singular, coherent, and pathological form of personhood, sexual interests based on partner gender/sex came to be the particular sexual experiences that constituted personhood (Foucault, 1978). However, this is not the case for 'demiromantic.' There is no medical terminology to refer to 'demiromanticism' in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Psychiatric Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). There is no clinical terminology that functions analogically for a demiromantic person like 'homosexuality' or 'transsexualism' have historically for lesbian/gay people and transgender people, respectively. 'Demiromantic' emerged out of counterhegemonic identity discourse in networked counterpublics, not in medical and academic journals.

Unlike 'homosexuality,' 'demiromanticism' – and the distinction between sexual and romantic attraction as it manifests in AQT networked counterpublics more broadly – represents counterhegemonic and hegemonic identity discourses colliding. Distinguishing between romantic and sexual attraction allows AQT people to take control of the hegemonic discourse of sexuality as a constituent of subjectivity and broaden it to fit their multiple and varied relationalities, or imagined relationalities of others. For instance, when asked why they use the term 'demiromantic,' one of the two participants, Taylor (white, pansexual, genderqueer/female) indicated that they found the term online and said, 'I've been thinking back through my past relationships and realising that the timing with which I feel in love with people and how close I had to feel with them before like actually feeling romantically towards them so I wanted something to define that.' Through self-reflection, Taylor realised there was a pattern not only in *whom* they fell in love with, but also with *how* or *when* they fell in love. They added that prior to

encountering the term ‘demiromantic,’ the particular way their romantic feelings do or do not develop was ‘just something that I hadn’t noticed about myself before.’

Another participant, Sascha (white, pansexual, trans man), encountered the term ‘demiromantic’ through posts on Tumblr delineating a range of romantic and sexual identities:

> On Tumblr… people have lists and everything like ‘don’t forget these forms of romanticism’ and ‘don’t forget these forms of sexuality; look at these little definitions’ and [‘demiromantic’] stood out to me because when I first read it I was like ‘how strange’ because I never would have considered that for myself until I realised that you can kind of separate like romantic feelings from sexual feelings. And I was like, ‘Woah!’ I do like having sex but I dunno how much I trust people (laughs)… not very much.

Sascha described a pattern in AQT networked counterpublics on Tumblr: lists of sexual and romantic identity labels that the authors of the lists identify as commonly excluded from hegemonic identity discourse. His particular engagement with this pattern (i.e., seeing ‘demiromantic’ on a list, thinking it was strange and new, and eventually coming to adopt it for himself) demonstrates how initially disorienting it can be to see a framework for identity that is incongruent with the hegemonic model. Because people are not normatively compelled to define their sexualities through the degree to which they are interested in romantic relationships, Sascha initially found the term ‘demiromantic’ to be ‘strange.’ However, he later came to see ‘demiromantic’ as usefully descriptive of how he relates to sexual and romantic partners and claimed it for himself. Something that he previously could not represent through an identity label framework (i.e., his lack of trust for potential romantic partners) became representable in a form that is socially intelligible as a meaningful part of who he is.

Although ‘demiromantic’ is in some ways a product of counterhegemonic identity discourse, it also mimics the grammar of the scientific classification of sexual identity. Sexual identity labels frequently end in ‘-sexual’ (e.g., bisexual, heterosexual) and ‘-romantic’ labels rely on the intelligibility of ‘-sexual’ labels as denoting orientations. Also, ‘demi-’ is a prefix, originating in French, which means ‘half,’ and reflects a sort of mathematical representation of sexualities, similar to scale measures of sexuality such as ‘Kinsey scales’ or the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 2003; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985). However, a term like ‘demiromantic’ borrows the grammar that affords particular labels scientific authority, while following a counterpublic-defined agenda, rather than an academic or scientific one. For instance, the earliest search result for ‘demiromantic’ on academic search engine Google Scholar is an analysis of a survey of asexual spectrum identifications that was conducted by members of an asexual awareness Facebook group (Miller, 2011).

It is not clear that ‘demiromantic’ or other terms that arise in networked counterpublics are intended to be subversive or liberatory; and in fact, an analytic frame that adjudicates whether ‘demiromantic’ is good or bad in some way might not be useful. Certainly, ‘demiromantic,’ like any other sexual (or in this case, specifically romantic) identity category, may have normative, regulatory effects. For instance, Sascha’s description of lists on Tumblr was echoed by another participant, George (white, panromantic asexual, genderfluid person), who described how they found their label ‘biromantic’: ‘I found this chart on Tumblr and it was like, if you do this and this but not this then this is like a word that describes it.’ The genre of the list or chart calls to mind strict, definable category boundaries and specific criteria for category membership. George described their encounter with this particular list as positive and helpful, but it is possible that other individuals’ encounters with identity lists might involve essentialist

identity policing practices (e.g., some people might not fit the list's crtieria for a label they use, or others might argue that some people are more 'properly' demiromantic than others).

Thus, we are not arguing that if more and more people began to identify as 'demiromantic' – or any particular label – that this would necessarily have liberatory effects like destabilising heteronormativity or compulsory sexuality. Rather, what we found compelling about our participants' use of this term, and other terms linked to the emergent taxonomy of gender and sexual identities (e.g., 'pangender,' 'demigirl,' 'lithromantic,' 'queerplatonic'; Cover, 2018; 'Lexicon,' n.d.) is that they instantiate a wide range of gendered, sexual, and romantic feelings, behaviors, and self-understandings as nameable, and thereby livable subjectivities. They decenter hegemonic, binary identifications (e.g., man or woman, straight or gay) and position them as just a few possible self-understandings among many.

Identity as a Process of Self-Discovery

A common feature of hegemonic identity discourse is the obligatory nature of sexual and gender self-labeling in order to achieve intelligible adult subjectivity (Cover, 2018). This understanding of self-labeling as a rite of passage of sorts affected the kinds of identity work some participants performed online. Alice expressed resistance to labeling her sexuality, but when asked whether she sought out the label 'pansexual,' rather than just having happened upon it online, she responded, 'I was looking for it…. I was like in the midst of discovering my sexuality and trying to figure out who I was, and to figure out a proper label to designate myself with if I have to use a label.' Alice's words suggested to us that she might see her resistance to identity labeling as somehow impractical or untenable. She called upon the popular narrative of 'discovering [one's] sexuality' in which an individual reflects on their sexual desires and practices, adopts a label to describe those desires and practices, and in doing so, discovers who

they are as a person. Despite her reticence, Alice sought out 'pansexual' to participate in this process of fulfilling the normative expectation to find a 'proper label.' Sexuality self-labeling identity work in networked counterpublics takes diverse forms, but it is nevertheless compulsory.

Sexual identity self-labeling in counterhegemonic discourse is a requirement for intelligible sexual subjectivity, yet there is flexibility in that process that hegemonic discourse does not allow. In a hegemonic model of sexual subjectivity, sexual identity self-labeling is a teleological process, the goal of which is to find the one correct identity label that describes one's essential nature. When describing how she first encountered 'pansexual,' Melissa described a moment of being limited by the singular nature of sexual self-labeling and the freedom that counterhegemonic identity discourse provided her:

> I never paid too much attention to it ['pansexual'] since I already had my label, ['bisexual']. And then a year or two ago I started reading more things about it online, probably on Tumblr. I just keep on reading about it and now I'll say, 'Well that connects a little too close to me,' because I do care about the gender. I do still consider the gender but it's not a deal-breaker.

In accordance with a hegemonic model of sexual identity self-labeling, Melissa found the term 'bisexual' and thought her self-labeling journey was over. However, because of the consolidation of information on sexuality and gender in AQT networked counterpublics, she found another label that described her well. Counterhegemonic discourse in AQT networked counterpublics presents choosing a label as creative identity work: You can mix and match labels, cast out ones that do not fit, and use as many as you please. Melissa used both 'bisexual' and 'pansexual' because they both captured important aspects of her desires: an attraction to 'both genders' as well as not considering gender to be 'a deal-breaker.'

Even as AQT identity discourses in networked counterpublics reify the compulsory nature of sexual self-labeling, they destabilise the teleological bent of hegemonic identity discourse by allowing for and encouraging fluidity and multiplicity in labeling. While finding the 'right' identity remains obligatory, that 'right' identity can actually be multiple, potentially shifting identities. Identity discourses in AQTYP's networked counterpublics do not represent self-labeling as a necessarily singular event but rather as ongoing identity work in service of self-discovery.

Identity as a Means of World-Making

Participants used identity labels both to describe themselves and also to describe their broader worldviews and call attention to the inequities that emerge out of hegemonic identity discourse. This use of identity self-labeling to advance particular social, political, and moral stances is a form of AQT world-making. Specifically, it facilitates relationally oriented ways of being that incorporate care and understanding for others into individuals' self-concepts. This relationally oriented re-imagining of the purpose and scope of gender and sexual self-labeling asserts the legitimacy, interrelatedness, and simultaneity of varied feelings and experiences (erotic, nurturant, gendered, non-gendered, etc.) And thereby, AQTYP sharing, creating, and adopting identity labels in networked counterpublics are performing many of the functions Berlant and Warner (1998) describe as central to queer world-making: through collective, creative, language-focused identity work, they make diverse genders and sexualities more accessible and available to memory.

One example of AQT world-making in networked counterpublics is the practice of compelling self-identification to index normative practices and embodiments (e.g., the use of 'cisgender' to mark gender identities that coincide with assigned sex at birth as constituting a

particular form of identity). This contrasts with how hegemonic identity discourse uses identity labels primarily to describe how non-normative practices and embodiments constitute distinct forms of personhood. Erin described how this discourse structures their relationship to asexuality as someone who is not asexual:

> I don't know what the exact term is to identify as like not-asexual and I think that there's a term for that and I think it's important that I should probably like start including that in my identity because otherwise it's just assuming that like the norm is to not be asexual.

Erin's use of 'should' to describe their desire to use an identity label to index the fact that they are not asexual (i.e., allosexual) reveals a morality discourse underpinning their words. Why *should* anyone describe themself in a way that is not deeply felt (e.g., asexuality did not come up again during the interview because Erin is not asexual), let alone using a word they do not yet know? Their 'should' is difficult to explain through attributions to hegemonic identity discourse, which does not compel allosexual identification among non-asexual people as a moral imperative to avoid reifying the non-normative status of asexuality. The moral imperative that Erin is responding to comes from a counterhegemonic identity discourse of social identities as multiple and simultaneous – both socially privileged and marginalised identities – that circulates in AQT networked counterpublics, and is linked to Black feminist theory (e.g., intersectionality; Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1991) and privilege discourse (e.g., McIntosh, 2004). This discourse compels a form of identity work in which individuals acknowledge and account for their experiences of privilege, which can involve adopting certain labels that marginalised groups use to refer to majority individuals. Many participants described their use of labels like 'cisgender' and 'monoamorous' to index the normative, privileged status of their gender/sexes or relational

orientations. They were not responding to a demand of hegemonic identity discourse, but rather a counterhegemonic moral imperative.

Another form of world-making evident in how participants described engaging with networked counterpublics was the creation of new language. Members of AQT networked counterpublics create and share identity labels and other identity-related language that challenges the hegemonic discursive foundations of sexual identity labeling (Cover, 2018; Oakley, 2016). Joanna (white, asexual, cisgender woman) used the label 'alterous' (i.e., an individual who defines their intimate relationships and attractions as falling somewhere between platonic and romantic), which was she said was created by a Tumblr user, and which she believed to be used by few other people. She described the necessity of creating new language for her and other individuals whose sexualities are not representable in hegemonic identity discourse:

> Yeah I mean, somebody just coined ['alterous'] online (laughs)… it's what we have to do I mean if you're somebody who doesn't feel like they can relate to the more dominant terminology… you have to coin new things, and all of this terminology was coined at some point so this is a new term and I kinda hope people start using it more 'cause I like it… Like it'd be nice to say, 'Yeah, I'm alterous' and have people know what you're talking about, ya know?

Joanna recognised that 'alterous' was not a self-evident identity label outside of the networked counterpublic in which she encountered it, yet she hoped that eventually it would be. She expressed that every sexual identity label had to be invented at some point and so a term emerging from a single Tumblr user could one day be widely known, which is indicative of a belief that sexual identity discourse is flexible, can change over time, and can be affected by individuals. And, she described the process of creating new language as 'what we have to do,'

which we understood as a recognition of the necessity of the collective, world-making labor of naming, understanding, and articulating AQT ways of being.

New language emerges in AQT networked counterpublics because its creators believe that it might come to be taken up by others and transform a broader societal understanding of sexuality. In the case of 'alterous,' the term itself carries a critique of distinctions between forms of relationality: the lines between sexual, romantic, and platonic are not obvious, easily definable, and one can adopt an identity label like 'alterous' to represent one's inability to be defined by a distinction between forms of relationality. 'Alterous' may seem to mimic a hegemonic discursive model in representing its critique by individualising it to specific 'alterous' people who function differently than unmarked, normative individuals who are able to distinguish platonic from romantic attraction. However, by locating its critique within individuals, it provides an intelligible means for 'alterous' individuals to articulate the harm of compulsory separation of friendships and romantic relationships as *personal*. If there are specific 'alterous' people who do not distinguish neatly between romantic and platonic attraction, then a sharp distinction between the two can be understood as not appropriately inclusive, or even discriminatory. Counterhegemonic identity discourse in networked counterpublics produces new identity labels to articulate subjectivities that are harmed by those systems and spark creative forms of political and relational thinking.

Limitations

There are some limitations of the present study that are important to note. First, our interview protocol did not explicitly ask participants about their involvement in networked counterpublics. For that reason, the high frequency of participants who discussed networked counterpublics is quite striking; but we might have heard more variation in participants' accounts

had we systematically asked about participants' experiences learning about their gender and sexual identities online and how they think about those online spaces. Participants were also primarily white and from the Midwestern United States. Although individuals in networked counterpublics are geographically diffuse, interactions between their offline and online experiences may vary greatly depending on geographic location (Hardy, 2019). Finally, rapid change occurs in sexual and gender identity discourses and the networked counterpublics in which they are discussed (Byron et al., 2019; Cover, 2018). Therefore, the content and significance of the identity discourses we have described and the platforms on which networked counterpublics form are likely to change significantly over time.

Conclusion

AQTYP engage with multiple identity-related discourses in networked counterpublics to better understand themselves, others, and gender and sexuality more broadly. Counterhegemonic and hegemonic discourses were interwoven in AQTYP participants' accounts of their use of identity labels and participation in networked counterpublics. AQT networked counterpublics facilitated AQTYP's feelings of belonging both in their own gender and sexual identities and in broader communities of AQT people in which they could observe and engage in diverse forms of AQT identity work. The identity language from the new taxonomy of gender and sexual identities that participants encountered in networked counterpublics frequently mimics the construction of labels defined by scientific classification (e.g., heterosexual or homosexual), but centralises desires, feelings, and interests that hegemonic constructions fail to represent (e.g., sexualities defined via conditions under which a person will have a romantic relationship). Participants felt pressure to choose the 'right' identity labels, consistent with hegemonic identity discourse, but also demonstrated how this process could occur in nonlinear ways without a single

endpoint in their own experiences. And, AQTYP used identity language to counteract erasures of hegemonic identity discourses through methods such as naming their societally privileged identities (e.g., allosexual or cisgender) or using language to challenge the normative boundaries between different types of interpersonal connection.

As identity discourses in AQTYP's networked counterpublics change rapidly in response to social change and the affordances of popular SNSs, it will be important for scholars to continue to attend to them. These identity discourses are compelling because they have expanded the possible selves and worlds that sexually and gender diverse individuals can imagine and live out. Analyzing how AQTYP discuss sexuality and gender in networked counterpublics is essential for understanding AQTYP, and will likely become increasingly important for understanding contemporary genders and sexualities more broadly.

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