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This is Canon
Born digital

My focus in both my research and art-making was queer youth and online communities. I wanted to explore how the internet can provide a space for queer youth to express themselves and feel both seen and accepted. For my art piece, I created an augmented reality model in Adobe Aero to visually represent how digital worlds interact with and impact our real-life experiences. I incorporated interactive elements to draw the viewer into the dichotomy of real/fake and physical/digital. By blurring the lines between the two, I could show how some queer youth only have the freedom to be their "real" selves in the digital world. In my essay, I discussed how queer people who struggle to find representations of themselves in media often form communities or fandoms that reinterpret and "queerify" content from tv shows and books. In my art, I wanted to look at how the internet is also a tool to seek out existing queer representation. I included examples of queer shows, books, and music, all of which I found out about online. Is it possible to find queer representation without the internet? It is for most people, but for those who live in unaccepting households or unsafe environments, it can be less straightforward. That's why there are online lists of queer books that don't give away their contents on the cover or the inside flap, so that kids with unnaccepting parents don't have to worry about getting caught. I wanted my model to work similarly, which is why it is a resource in addition to an art piece. Like the experiences of queer youth online, it is digital and real, and it is definitely canon.

"am i gay quiz":

Queer Youth and Online Communities

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OS46

This paper discusses queer spaces online and their importance to queer youth. It describes how online communities develop and function, as well as the ways that they are flawed. It aims to show a new perspective on the internet and social media as spaces that queer youth find community and acceptance.

The birth of social media has created a digital space for communication and connection separate from people's physical lives. For queer people, especially queer youth, this meant access to resources and information that were not previously available to them. Many queer individuals grow up without seeing their identities or struggles reflected in mainstream media or their physical surroundings, as they may be geographically isolated from other members of the queer community. This lack of representation can make navigating their sexualities and gender identities even more confusing. Oftentimes, finding resources and information about queerness and queer health means turning to the internet. The internet can provide room for queer youth to explore and navigate their identities, especially when they live in households where it is unsafe for them to express or explore their sexuality or gender in alternative ways. It also gives them the tools to build online communities where they can exist as their authentic selves.

The link between queerness and internet usage was not studied on a large scale until the 2013 report "Out Online: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth on the Internet" by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN). GLSEN conducted an online survey of 5,630 U.S. teens ages 13 to 18 in an attempt to understand the experiences of queer youth on the internet and how they compared to the experiences of their cisgender and heterosexual peers. Commonly accepted truths and shared experiences of the queer community were finally studied, analyzed, and put into text. GLSEN found that queer youth were five times

more likely to have searched for information about sexual orientation online, and more of them also searched for health information online compared to their non-queer peers (81% vs 46%). While sex-ed in most U.S. schools is known to be lacking in many areas, the curriculum is especially lacking in LGBTQ+ inclusive material. Queer students rarely get taught about their identities in sex-ed, so they often turn to the internet to fill in these gaps in their education. GLSEN also reported that half of queer youth had at least one online friend compared to 19% of other teens ("Out Online…"). While this could simply be a product of more time spent online, it also reflects how queer youth find opportunities to make authentic connections in digital spaces that they might not be able make in their school and home environments.

Queer kids' first introduction to the wealth of information and support on the internet can come in many forms. A classic is the "am i gay?" google search, which leads to articles and Buzzfeed quizzes that may or may not be vastly unhelpful. A well-worn joke within the queer community is that typing that phrase into your search bar is as much of an indication as you need to know that you are in fact gay, or at least part of the LGBTQ+ commmunity. Many kids also become acquainted with queer identities through media such as film or books. These are typically the same titles that get put into memes saying, "If you watched/read _____ as a kid, you're gay now." Even if the original content barely featured queer characters, oftentimes the online fandom community will be majority queer. This means they are hyper aware of where queer representation is absent or mishandled. The same also applies to the lack of racially and ethnically diverse representation in media: "Many Tumblr users are very critical of the way minority groups, especially people of color, are largely voiceless and often function as window dressing in media texts" (McCracken 158). In response to this, fandoms shape and mold the original content, which they refer to as canon, to better reflect their communities, thus creating the representation that the

original authors or writers failed to provide. These reinterpretations often start out as a headcanon, or a fan-made idea that diverges from or alters the original content, and if these ideas gain popularity and recognition, they can become fanon, or widely accepted headcanons. People make headcanons about race, sexual and romantic orientation, gender identity, neurodiversity, and more. To show better examples of different headcanons, I reached out to some of my favorite artists on instagram to ask permission to include their posts that show more diverse interpretations of popular characters.
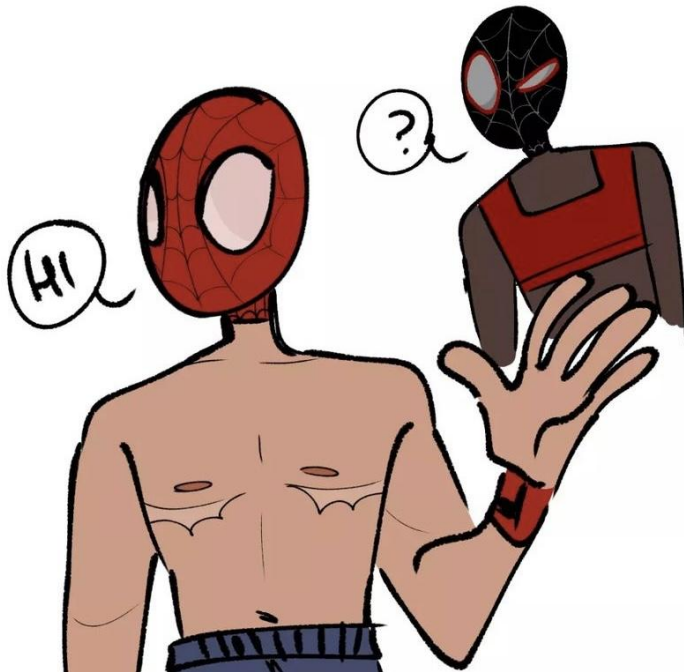
A post by Instagram user @yelloww.clouds depicting Peter Parker with top surgery scars and Miles Morales wearing a binder. The post was accompanied by a Spiderman meme coined "Binderman."

Comic by @zoep_illustration on Instagram that reinterprets Todoroki Shoto from the popular TV show My Hero Academia as aromatic.

An instagram story from @gabriellarragan showing his version of the Robins and their ethnicities, some of which are canon, while others are headcanon or fanon.

Another common way that queer and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) internet users insert representation into the context of pre-existing media is through the creation of fanfiction. Fanfiction is any work of writing that includes characters and settings which originate from another source, such as a show or a book. These works are shared to other fans for free, despite the fact that it is common for them to reach novel-length. (Side note: fanfiction is a very mixed bag, and there is some really awful, disturbing stuff out there, you have been warned).

Fanfiction authors are often compelled to create meaningful representation within the context of media that might have previously lacked much diversity. To capture this phenomenon, I included screenshots of "tags" from the popular fanfiction site Archive of Our Own that I believe showcase the variety and quantity of diverse representation on the site. Tags are similar to hashtags in that authors add them to their work to help others find or exclude types of content from their feed.

1 - 20 of 2782 Works in Black Character(s)

1 - 20 of 92067 Works in Trans Character

1 - 20 of 36646 Works in Nonbinary Character

1 - 20 of 871 Works in Latino Character

1 - 20 of 109 Works in Arab Character

1 - 20 of 8095 Works in Queer Themes

("1-20" indicates the number of search results on the first page, "____ Works" is how many written works on the site include this tag.)

A clear and important observation to note from looking at these tags is that in comparison to queer characters and themes, BIPOC characters are significantly underrepresented. While it is rare for authors to tag BIPOC characters in their works, it is even rarer for them to write stories with BIPOC main characters, with the notable exception of East Asian characters, which is an entirely different matter with its own issues. Archive of Our Own is by far not the only queer dominated online space with racism issues. Just because a site or community is dominated by queer

youth, that does not always mean it is as welcoming and safe for people of different races and ethnicities. This creates a toxic and disorienting space, especially for queer BIPOC youth, who can feel pulled between two identities and struggle to find spaces they can belong, both in physical and digital worlds.

Despite these realities, it is also true that social media platforms that appeal to queer youth often also appeal to other minority groups. For example, Tumblr, the self-proclaimed "queerest place on the internet," also has large numbers of BIPOC and lower income users: "Tumblr users are… demographically poorer, proportionally less white, and more urban than users of other major platforms such as Facebook and Pinterest" (McCracken 154). This can in part be attributed to the higher level of anonymity offered on Tumblr, which can make users feel safer. As stated by Dr. Allison McCracken in her 2017 paper on Tumblr youth subcultures, "Although their posts are publicly visible, Tumblr's users are pseudonymous, which makes it much harder for families, employers, friends, and other institutional authorities to police them; as a result, many youth feel a greater sense of security and privacy on Tumblr than on other platforms" (McCracken 154-155). This ability to create separation between online and offline personas can be critical to allowing queer youth space to express themselves authentically. This is important to BIPOC youth as well, since they face increased levels of online scrutiny and harassment. A 2018 study into Black millennial women's experiences online conducted by Dr. Erin L. Berry McCrea noticed a similar preference for platforms that offer greater anonymity: "Sites like Tumblr and Snapchat were viewed as 'safer' because these sites offer users and viewers the opportunity to create and participate more anonymously, thus offering them the opportunity to be 'human'" (Berry-McCrea 369).

However, the same anonymity offered by many social media platforms can also work against the safety and security of online communities, as some nefarious individuals use it as an opportunity to be bigoted and cruel. Queer BIPOC internet users especially face great amounts of discrimination and harrassment online. As found in the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, "25% of LGBTQ youth, 33% of LGBTQ youth of color and 34% of transgender youth are bullied online or electronically" ("Online Communities…"). GLSEN reported an even higher rate of online harassment for queer youth at 42% compared to 15% for other teens. Even more disheartening, survey participants were just as likely to feel unsafe online as they were to feel unsafe at school ("Out Online…"). Nevertheless, supportive and uplifting communities continue to thrive in the face of these realities: "Despite experiences of bullying and harassment online, LGBT youth indicated the Internet is also a space that offers safer opportunities to express who they are, find peer support and gain access to resources not necessarily available in person" ("Out Online…"). In order to protect the sanctity of these spaces and communities, it is necessary for social media platforms to increase protections against bullying and harassment.

A queer kid's first introduction to the vast LGBTQ+ community through the internet and their first bitter taste of online homophobia and/or transphobia are often not far apart. It's hard to scroll through the page of a popular queer influencer or the blog of a gay rights activist without seeing anti-queer comments and rhetoric. This also depends on how regulated the site is and how the content creators self-regulate their page. For a young, curious kid on the internet, it's easy to accidentally stumble upon traumatizing and hateful content. I have been lucky and privileged enough to avoid any abnormally disturbing online encounters, but my first experiences looking for resources on asexuality went poorly, to say the least. My google search of "asexual representation"

led me to an article about an episode of the TV show "House" in which a woman fakes being asexual to be with an asexual man. But, (surprise!) the husband is not actually asexual and only thought he was because of a tumor in his brain. This was supposed to be a "happy ending." Most of what I found on google was negative, sparse, or tentatively optimistic. The next place I checked was Pinterest, where I found cute, uplifting posts about asexuality and queerplatonic relationships. Then I made the mistake of checking comments, which revealed no shortage of acephobia and invalidation. After finding myself in this same situation over and over again, I gave up on looking for asexual content and support. I figured that it just wasn't out there, or that I was never going to find it. However, over the next few years, aroace (aromatic asexual) content started to filter itself into my feed over various platforms. I discovered artists, comics, and stories that were simultaneously validating and educational. It helped restore my faith in a community that I had begun to feel excluded from. Feeling a sense of belonging online in spite of negative experiences seems to be true for many queer youth, "Despite experiences of bullying and harassment online, LGBT youth indicated the Internet is also a space that offers safer opportunities to express who they are, find peer support and gain access to resources not necessarily available in person" ("Out Online…").

Most of the coverage social media and online communities get in news media and in academic papers is negative. When online communities, specifically marginalized communities on social media, do get positive coverage, it is usually related to activism. This is not necessarily inaccurate, as queer kids do engage in online activism at a higher rate than other groups, but it can create misconceptions ("Out Online…"). It suggests that the primary reason for building online communities and creating diversified content is to fight against the mainstream culture or to make some sort of political statement. While this may be accurate for some users, it contributes to the

narrative that queer people creating queer content always has to be a commentary on modern society or politics. Oftentimes the act of uncensored self-expression for queer people is seen as aggressive or dissident from the perspective of the mainstream media. Simply existing as their authentic selves can be interpreted as an act of defiance. This has been true long before the birth of the internet. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, the FBI kept a list of known queer people and places they frequented. Local governments regularly performed raids and forcibly shut down establishments on this list. The famous Stonewall riots that helped kickstart the gay liberation movement happened during a routine police raid where officers where stripsearching trans women and patting down lesbians to identify their assigned sex at birth. Queer people expressing themselves, be it their gender identity or their sexuality, has long since been labeled as a violent and aggressive act.

This is not to say that all criticism of social media is wrong or somehow anti-queer. In fact most of it is correct, and it has a valuable role in assessing the damage these platforms can cause and how to remediate it. The point of this essay was never to prove the critics wrong, because they're not wrong, but simply to show that they don't have the full picture. The internet revolutionized the way queer people exist. The spaces that queer people inhabit have always been hidden for fear of being caught out, but the internet added a whole new world of possibilities. It gave them increased anonymity, something that Stonewall patrons, who signed false names in the bar's book, knew the importance of. Social media gave queer people a way to connect without leaving their homes or their towns, allowing them safer access to the queer community earlier in life. It allowed them to share their unfiltered, uncensored stories. To a young queer person, the internet can mean salvation. To me, it was a space for self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-love.

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