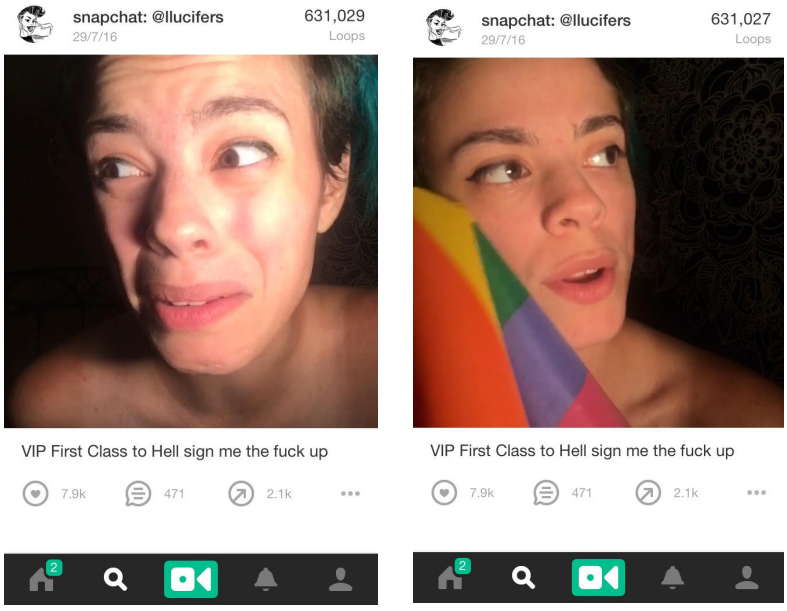
Selected Papers of #AoIR2017:
The 18th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Tartu, Estonia / 18-21 October 2017

THIRST TRAPS AND #RELATABLE VINES: INVESTIGATING A NETWORKED COUNTERPUBLIC OF QUEER WOMEN

Stefanie Duguay
Queensland University of Technology

Introduction

Jaxx, an undergraduate student, focuses her smartphone camera on herself in a dim bedroom. She contemplates an exchange from earlier, contorts her facial features, presses record and mimics a critical voice, “You’re going to hell” (Figure 1). Creating the next scene, she changes her demeanour and, while wiping make-believe tears with a rainbow flag, sarcastically exclaims, “Oh no, whatever will I do? I will be going to a place surrounded by other lesbians who are horny and willing” (Figure 2). She posts the video and it immediately begins to accrue likes, comments, and shares.



Suggested Citation (APA): Duguay, S. (2017, October 18-21). *Thirst traps and #relatable Vines: Investigating a networked counterpublic of queer women*. Paper presented at AoIR 2017: The 18th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Tartu, Estonia: AoIR. Retrieved from http://spir.aoir.org.

Figures 1 and 2. Stills from Jaxx's Vine (displayed with permission).

This is just one of many 6.5-second, looping videos created by queer women on Vine, Twitter's now defunct video social network. Launched in 2013, the app paired this short video format with social networking features for following others, sharing videos ("Vines"), and hashtagging. Vine's popularity spiked and plummeted across three years. During this time, a vibrant community of queer women gathered through LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) hashtags, such as #RainbowGang and #AllQueerHere. This paper examines platform features, content, and user experiences to better understand queer women's digital participation and representation. Using mixed methods, findings demonstrate that queer women comprised a networked counterpublic, drawn together through intimate Vines and intersectional identity statements. However, Vine's shift toward passive viewing of micro-celebrities contributed to users' eventual disengagement.

Background and Methods

This paper is part of a larger study examining queer women's identity performances on digital platforms. Focusing on queer women counterbalances the volume of literature about men who have sex with men and LGBT people in aggregate. Sparse research has examined queer women's use of older technologies (e.g. Correll, 1995) but few studies investigate queer women's use of contemporary digital media. This study attends to platforms' influence on identity performances, building on literature drawing attention to how commercial platforms foster profitable forms of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013) and intervene in everyday use (Gillespie, 2015). Vine is an apt case study as it presents particular affordances and queer female Viners were active throughout 2014 and 2015.

This research applied mixed methods, starting with a form of platform analysis – the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2016) – to examine Vine's sociocultural context and technological architecture. Then 77 Vines posted by queer women to LGBT hashtags were coded according to topic, technical conventions, and user characteristics. In-depth interviews were conducted with two Viners: Jaxx, featured in the introduction, who identifies as bisexual, Hispanic, and neurodivergent; and Chrissy, a teaching assistant who identifies as lesbian and Black. Interviews further elucidated findings from the content and platform analyses.

Departing from Habermas' notion of a unitary public sphere, Fraser (1990) identified the existence of multiple publics and described 'subaltern counterpublics' as those "where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67). Warner (2002) further conceptualised counterpublics as gathering of people in tension with a more dominant public. When paired with boyd's (2014) notion of networked publics, as publics structured through networked technology, gatherings of platform users around counter discourses can form networked counterpublics. This study's data show that queer women on Vine produced a networked counterpublic while also

contributing across identity-related publics until the platform ethos and redesign disrupted these publics.

Findings and Discussion

Queer women's Vine content included affinity-building clips, narrative performances, and remixes of popular media content. Clips from everyday life resembled the spontaneous and informal videos that Lange (2009) has identified on YouTube as "videos of affinity," containing in-jokes and references resonating with a target audience. Queer women's Vines were often video selfies, taken with the phone's front-facing camera held in close proximity, recorded in the intimate spaces of bedrooms, bathrooms, and cars. They checked in with an imagined audience of other queer women, shared stories and rants, and spliced scenes from their favourite television or YouTube episodes. Many Vines included sexual dancing and gestures in the genre of 'thirst trap,' overlaid with trap or hip-hop music, participating in platform trends and fostering sociability. These informal and intimate clips drew on the affordances of Vine's looping video format for producing intensely affective, detailed videos with a narrative arc. These Vines gave rise to and sustained publics and counterpublics among queer female Viners.

As Jaxx's skit demonstrates, queer women's Vines also included challenges to normative identity discourses, often as narratives. These videos were frequently comedic, aiming to resonate with others through shared experiences. Chrissy described this as being "relatable," noting: "If you are not relatable…people are not going to really care because it has nothing to do with them." Aligning with Calhoun's (2016) findings that racial comedy on Vine can serve as sociopolitical discourse, Chrissy's videos often spoke to queer and Black audiences, frequently remixing Black Viners' content. Jaxx posted her videos "to bounce back at people who are ignorant" about sexuality, race, and mental health.

Sociocultural and technical changes on the platform affected this queer women's counterpublic. Chrissy noticed users becoming preoccupied with being "Vine famous" and gaining profitable brand partnerships. Viners disengaged from LGBT hashtags, as they perceived that users were no longer authentic. This coincided with platform updates, including "TV Mode," which invited users to watch videos as a continuous stream without easily accessible "share" or comment buttons. Interface navigation increasingly skewed toward "featured" Viners who were showcased on Channels, the homepage, and in algorithmically personalised playlists. A Vine representative eventually contacted Jaxx saying, "If you look at the top 40 Viners, they're all white dudes and I want to see that changed," alluding to possible partnerships. However, this step was too late – Jaxx was intimidated by the dominance of white, male Viners with misogynist undertones, creating a hostile space where she constantly received harassing and negative messages. She instead focused on cross-posting Vines to a friendlier audience on Tumblr.

Vine's affordances contributed to the formation a networked counterpublic of queer women through intimate videos and critiques of normative identity discourses. However, shifts in the platform and users' intentions toward cultivating micro-celebrity led

individuals to disengage. These findings provide an understanding of queer women's identity performances on a visual, mobile platform. Further, they illuminate conditions that can foster and stifle networked counterpublics.

References

boyd, d. (2011). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Calhoun, K. N. (2016, 5-8 October). Six seconds to talk back: The emergence of racial comedy as a sociopolitical discourse genre on Vine. Paper presented at AoIR 2016, *Berlin*, *Germany.*

Correll, S. (1995). The ethnography of an electronic bar: The Lesbian Cafe. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *24*(3), 270–298. doi.10.1177/089124195024003002

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, *25/26*, 56–80.

Gillespie, T. (2015). Platforms intervene. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(1), 1–2. doi.10.1177/2056305115580479

Lange, P. (2009). Videos of affinity. In P. Snickas & P. Vonderau (Eds.), *The YouTube Reader* (pp. 70–88). Stockholm: National Library of Sweden.

Light, B., Burgess, J., Duguay, S. (2016). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media & Society.* Published online before print: 11 November 2016. doi: 10.1177/1461444816675438

van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Warner, M. (2002). *Publics and counterpublics*. Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books.