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DIGITAL BISEXUALITY: THE SEMIOTICS OF ONLINE SEXUAL IDENTITY

Nora Madison
Chestnut Hill College

Introduction

This paper analyzes the practices of signifying 'bisexuality' across multiple online spaces. Central to this paper is a discussion of the significance of the efforts to represent bisexuality within existing socio-political systems of representation for sexual orientation. Cultural norms ideologically shape the intelligibility of representation; bisexuality is often misinterpreted when read within the dominant binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality in Western European culture. As Stuart Hall (1996) clearly articulates, "all identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being" (p. 4). This work addresses how users adapt visual, textual, and hyperlinked information in online spaces to signify bisexuality. I suggest these practices be understood as 'technologies of visibility.'

Technologies of Visibility

Technologies of visibility are the practices of adapting the sociotechnical affordances of digital technologies to signify one's bisexuality online. These practices include using symbols, images, text and hyperlinks to construct the message "bisexual." This process is examined within a Western European cultural framework where the visual cues of orientation are limited by the cultural norms of heterosexuality and monosexuality. While the presence of homosexuality may pose a threat to the cultural dominance of heterosexuality, it is notable that homosexual (or same-sex/same-gender) attraction does not threaten the hegemonic power of monosexuality, which continues to sustain the conventional binary in representing sexual orientation. Marjo Laukkanen (2007) comments "the most remarkable limitation of self-representation seems to be the binary understanding of sex, which is based on a user's material body even online. Even though a queer space like #closet enables a fluid understanding of gender and sexual orientation, binary sex is reproduced intensively" (p. 96).

The cultural dominance of the binary has far reaching impacts on representations of bisexuality. Online, the common practice of displaying photographs of oneself or with one's partner(s) often fails to signify bisexuality to a viewer. Bisexuals are often "read" as either straight or gay when alone or when posing with a romantic partner. Interestingly, when non-bisexuals attempt to signify bisexuality the most frequently employed form of representation is the use of triads (three people in an image together)

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to signify non-monosexuality. However, when bisexual-identified users attempt to signify bisexuality they employ a combination of signs specific to the bisexual socio-political history. These include using graphics of the bisexual pride flag or any variety of bisexual symbols such as the intertwined male/female symbols, using the bisexual pride colors (pink, purple, blue) as background colors for their personal or organizational site, using photographic images of bisexual characters in mass media or of ordinary people in clothing with bisexual slogans, and/or linking to bisexual specific content such as other websites, blogs, books, or music.

Methods

This research project examined online social spaces created by and for bisexuals between November 2011 and December 2013. These social spaces included national and regional websites for bisexual organizations, blogs dedicated to bisexual issues and topics, bisexual groups on Facebook, and bisexual list-serves. Participant observation and semiotic analysis was employed to analyze how bisexual representation was discussed and performed. This project did not study individual identity or a singular 'community' but rather examined a series of practices in which bisexuality is negotiated and enacted through digital mediation.

Digital Bisexuality

Digital mediation, a process of enacting forms of identity- like race, gender, and sexual orientation- underscores both the non-essentialism of identity as well as its hybridity and fluidity (Nakumara, 2008). Digital technologies certainly contribute to the complex and multidimensional processes that shape subjectivities. They can create or deny opportunities for the articulation of different types of subjects and subject positions.

However, online participants struggle to imagine what bisexual visibility "looks like" and what would successfully signify bisexual to others. As one participant posted, "their [sic] is no style for bi, there is no voice tone, unless I'm wearing my shirt, how is anyone to know?" Another participant post explicated, "I wish there was a look. I wish I could get up every day and put on the clothes and jewelry that identified me to the world when I stepped out of my apartment. I wish I was as visible on the street as I am on facebook." This longing for a signified bisexual identity is often articulated as a desire for a market commodification of "bisexual" linked to notions of the neo-liberal subject; however, the participant also notes that while they do not feel visible on the street, they do feel notably more visible on Facebook.

The issue of (in)visibility is polymorphous as participants discuss the complexities of an identity that 'appears' more visible in online environments than it does elsewhere. As another participant posted:

I feel I'm more out online that offline. That's because, in the offline world there's the whole "social assumptions" issue. My co-workers, friends, etc, know I have a boyfriend, wich [sic] equals "straight" for most ppl out there. So, I'll out myself when the occasion comes (talking abt smn I used to date, the LGBT youth group I used to belong to, or usually just abt some girl I find attractive) and usually ppl are not surprised. Whereas online, my pic at Facebook (and Orkut) is a Bisexual

Pride icon. I follow Bi groups on Twitter. I'm a member of bi groups. So, online it's spelled out, while offline ppl usually think me having a bf means I'm straight.

Conclusion

These practices serve to signify bisexuality to the viewer as well as increase the recognition of bisexual representation within mainstream culture. The full paper and presentation will further elucidate these practices and their significance, drawing connections between this research and the work of new media scholars in digital representations (Nakumara), performance of the self (Papacharissi), and queer identities online (O'Riordan & Pullen).

The Internet, which was touted early on as a space of great potential for anonymity and exploration where visibility could be masked, here becomes the place where users try to make the perceived invisible 'visible' through digital mediation. Participants discuss the complexities of an identity that appears more visible in online environments than it does offline. Digital spaces provide particularly useful environments for participants to negotiate issues of (in)visibility through digital mediation as they employ technologies of visibility through daily posts, pics, videos, and discourse in which bisexuality as a subject position is discursively (re)produced, articulated, defended, and desired.

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