

Rainbows Over the Digital World: The YouTube Case.

Abstract

This study analyzes YouTube users' comments posted in response to videos covering an Azerbaijani gay activist's suicide. Analysis of comments revealed a lack of users' understanding of LGBT concerns as well as hostility toward the deceased. Though YouTube may serve as a medium to promote the concerns and voice of minorities and other disadvantaged groups, it also has the potential to underscore the social divisions present in society, especially in non-Western countries. Our study notes that most comments lacked empathy and support for the deceased and the larger agenda of LGBT concerns in Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, the study revealed a small but vocal minority of YouTube users who are genuinely concerned about the welfare and social perception of LGBTs.

Keywords: sexual minorities; suicide; Azerbaijan; LGBT, social media, YouTube

Introduction

Recent studies suggest the increasing visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) in Western mass media (e.g., Barnhurst, 2007; Dhoest & Simons, 2012) as well as the widening acceptance of sexual diversity in contemporary Western societies (McDermott, 2011). For example, Ross (2012) argues that coming-out stories are almost a staple of popular culture, whereas Gross (2007) points out that "for... teenagers, the Internet is a godsend, and thousands are using computer networks to declare their homosexuality, meet, and seek support from other gay youth" (p. 267). Alexander and Losh (2010) suggest that coming out videos are intentionally broadcast statements that "attempts to negotiate the boundary between intensely personal desires and public identities" (p. 24). Boross and Reijnders's (2015) analysis of the *Uit de Kast* (Out of the Closet) Dutch television program suggests that media plays an essential role in transforming the socially unscripted act of coming out into culturally meaningful performance. Duguay (2014) suggests that because diverse sexualities are often stigmatized, LGBT's sexual identity disclosure decisions are shaped by social conditions of their online networks as well as the technological architecture of social network sites. Gray's (2009) ethnographic study of how rural young people engage digital resources into their process of discovering their identity, particularly as they navigate the politics of coming out, suggests that "digitally circulated representations of LGBT identity categories interpellate rural queer youth by laying down a basic narrative for the articulation of identity" (p. 1172). Gray posits that

genres of queer realness simultaneously expand and consolidate the possibilities of identity by prompting youth to rework the unmarked categories of heterosexual, male, and female; embrace their burgeoning non-normative desires; and then rearticulate LGBT identities as "real," "natural," "unmediated," and "authentic." (p. 1182).

But while the Internet can offer safe places for people of counter-normative sexualities otherwise subjugated in some offline spaces to construct their identities and forge connections (Taylor, Falconer & Snowdon, 2014), coming out as LGBT continues to be a highly emotional journey, interwoven with complex discourses of shame, pride, anger and

fear (Taylor & Snowdon, 2014b). Even though identifying as LGBT on the Internet may be considered normal (Gregg, 2008), research shows a clear link between LGBT youth and deliberate self-harm (McDermott & Roen, 2012). The issue has been brought to light by a spate of youth suicides in the USA, most notably of Billy Lucas, an Indiana high school student, and Tyler Clementi, a Rutgers University student, has resulted in a mass-mediated campaign against the perceived increase in queer youth suicide (Grzanka & Mann, 2014). Addressing the phenomenon as a global issue, this study analyzes the case of Isa Shahmarli, a LGBT activist in Azerbaijan, who committed suicide in January of 2014. While the subject of sexual minorities is taboo in conservative Azerbaijan (The Danish Institute of Human Rights, 2010), the activist's death was covered in local media (as well as international media) and sparked a social media debate on sexual minorities' rights. This study investigates how YouTubeⁱ users' comments are representative of Azerbaijan's largely homophobic society.

Background

The constitution of Azerbaijan guarantees equality of rights as well as freedoms for everyone regardless of country, race, nationality, religion, language, sex, origin, property holdings, official status, record of conviction, and affiliation with political parties, trade unions and other social organizations (Article 25). However, Azerbaijan legislation does not directly specify issues of non-discrimination on basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Although there are cases of verbal and physical violence on the basis of perceived sexual orientation and gender identity, the report of Danish Institute of Human Rights (2010) states that there have been no reported investigations regarding these cases (The Danish Institute of Human Rights, 2010) and that representatives of sexual minorities are usually cut off and rejected by their own families. Along these lines, the 2011 Caucasus Barometer annual household survey on social economic issues and political attitudes in Azerbaijan revealed that 85% of the respondents (n=1176) reported that they could never justify homosexualityⁱⁱ. However, the survey does not report significant differences in negative perception of homosexuality by ageⁱⁱⁱ or gender^{iv}.

In January of 2014, Isa Shahmarli, a 20-year-old chair of the Free LGBT non-governmental organization in Azerbaijan, took his life, leaving a note on his Facebook social networking site page. In his note, he blamed the "world" for his death:

"I am going. This country and this world are not for me.... I am leaving to become happy," he wrote. "You are all to blame for my death. This world is not colorful enough to accept all my colours. Goodbye." (Lomsadze & Tales, 2014; Musavi, 2014).

The days before committing suicide, Shahmarli gave an interview to Meydan TV^v, an independent online TV channel, advocating the rights of sexual minorities. In his interview Shahmarli argued that Azerbaijan LGBTs have to stand together, be open about their sexual identities, and demand their rights. However, he expressed his pessimism that Azerbaijan would ever ensure equal treatment for all members of society regardless of sexual orientation. Shahmarli's call to Azerbaijani LGBTs to be open about sexuality has important connotations because, as Sedgwick (2008) argues, acknowledgement is critical in the coming out process that queer individuals face during the lives. Due to connection between acknowledgement and sexuality, the latter becomes closely associated with the discourse. As Foucault (1990) points out the "confession was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex" (pp. 136-

137). For Foucault (1990):

The essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth (p. 122).

Given the risks as well as the gains associated with coming out as a homosexual, especially in a society that has been documented as homophobic, it is important for gay youth to assess the climate in which they might take this crucial step. This study, therefore, analyzes YouTube video comments associated with Isa Shahmarli's suicide. This present study investigates the following question: Do comments posted in response to YouTube videos covering an Azerbaijani gay activist's suicide demonstrate tolerance of the issues of sexual minorities?

Method

YouTube searches using keywords "isa shahmarly," "shahmarli," "isa shahmarli suicide" were conducted to find the most viewed and commented-on videos for analysis. YouTube suggested list of videos were also analyzed. In total, 349 comments posted in response to seven YouTube videos were sampled. These videos featured the activist's pre-suicidal interview, footage of an ambulance team trying to resuscitate the activist, and his funeral.

In order to assure that analysis of the collected data was not contaminated by a priori concepts and theories, Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory was employed to analyze emerging themes, revealing three major variables: gender of user, types of addressee, expressed attitude toward the deceased/ LGBT.

The following coding scheme was defined for the three thematic concepts:

A. Gender of user

Female (0), Male (1), NA (2)

YouTube users' profiles, such as profile name and picture, were analyzed to identify gender of the users commented on the sampled videos.

B. Types of addressee

Deceased/ LGBT community (0), Other User (Reply) (1), All Users/Public (2), Other (3)

Types of addressee were identified based on analysis of each comment.

C. Expressed attitude toward deceased/LGBTs

Hostile (0), Acceptance/Understanding (1), Sympathy (2), Other (3)

Each comment was analyzed to identify users' attitude toward deceased and/or LGBT community. For the purpose of this study harsh, unfriendly, rejecting and cursing comments addressed toward the deceased and/or LGBTs were coded as *hostile*. For example, following comments were coded as hostile:

"Hey... no respect to gays... He made the best choice: one like him better not to live."

Comments expressing acceptance and understanding of deceased and/or LGBTs were coded as *acceptance/understanding*. For example:

... hey people that is how he was created, what is fault - being a homosexual? I believe it's not his fault that is the way he was created ...

Comments, such as “rest in the peace” and “damn for making him to take his life! The whole world is responsible for his death!,” were coded as ones expressing *sympathy*. Comments that were not relevant to the topic of discussion were coded as *other*. For example, comment such as “What did you do as a man in your life?” was coded as *other*.

The study allowed more than one value to be assigned to each comment for some variables. Overall, coding was based on Bauer’s (2000) principle that “every text unit must fit a code, and none can be left over” (p. 139).

It worth noting that, even though adaptation and use of the Internet technologies are linked to proficiency in English language (Pearce & Rice, 2014), comments analyzed in this study were predominantly written in Azerbaijani language. Perhaps, it is due localized nature of the subject. All comments were coded by the first author, and 20% of the sample was coded by a second coder. Inter-rater agreement between the two coders was 86%, indicating a reasonable level of reliability.

Results

The findings are based on the analysis of 349 comments posted to the seven YouTube videos, one covering the gay activist’s pre-suicidal interview and six covering paramedics’ attempts to revive the deceased activist and his funeral (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of analyzed videos (N=7)

Videos	Views	Comments
#1	848	3
#2	15,241	30
#3	24,858	87
#4	19,823	71
#5	4,227	46
#6	2,083	30
#7	3,314	82
Total	70,394	349

The most viewed (24,858 views) and commented-on (87 comments) video covers the doctors’ attempts to revive the deceased and interviews with his friends who read the deceased’s Facebook note and rushed to the LGBT office to find him hanged. The second most viewed video (19,823 views) covers the deceased’s interview with the Meydan, independent online TV channel, in which he advocates the rights of sexual minorities. Although the most viewed videos cover different issues related to the deceased’s life, there were no significant differences in themes of the comments analyzed.

Analysis of the users’ profile names and profile photos revealed that most of the comments were posted by male users (60.5%), and female users accounted for only 10.9% of the analyzed comments (see Table 2). It was not possible to identify the gender of 28.7% of users who posted comments as neither their profile pictures nor their user names provided clues to identify gender.

Table 2. Gender of Users (N=349)

Gender	No.
Male	211 (60.5%)
NA	100 (28.7%)
Female	38 (10.9%)

These findings echo studies of gender differences in computer-mediated communication (CMC), suggesting distinctive gender patterns in online communications. For example, Selfe and Meyer (1991) observed gendered power dynamics in an academic discussion list, with men and high-profile members of the community dominating communications, even under conditions of anonymity. These findings seemed to be in line with the 2013 Caucasus Barometer annual household survey on social economic issues and political attitudes in Azerbaijan, suggesting that only 8% of respondents (n=1988) had commented on Internet publications during last six months^{vi}. Even frequent users of the Internet seemed to be reluctant to comment: only 39% of the every-day users of the Internet provided comments in response to Internet publications^{vii}. Looking at the types of addressees in the Shahmarli case revealed that most of the posts were addressed to the deceased and/or LGBT community (53%), followed by posts addressed to another user in reply to a previous posting (25.8%) (see Table 3). Only 5.3% of posts either did not specify any addressee or were addressed to the news outlet that posted the video or the government.

Table 3. Types of Addressee (N=430)

Addressee	No.
Deceased/LGBT	228 (53%)
Other User /Reply	111 (25.8%)
All Users/Public	68 (15.8%)
Other	23 (5.3%)

Analysis of users' attitudes expressed in the posted comments demonstrated that 70.1% of the comments were hostile toward the deceased and the LGBT community in general (see Table 4).

Table 4. Expressed attitude toward LGBT (N=375)

Attitude	No.
Support/Understanding	33 (8.8%)
Hostile	263 (70.1%)
Sympathy	21 (5.6%)
Other	58 (15.5%)

Hostile users overwhelmingly argued that being gay was against their religious beliefs. Some comments applauded the deceased's decision to end his life because his choice to be a gay and advocate LGBT rights embarrassed the country:

AZ: The only good thing he did is that he committed suicide, his friends should follow him (translated from Azerbaijani)

Hostile comments also suggested that the users believed that the appearance and coverage of issues of sexual minorities are the result of the influence of the western sexual revolution (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011) as well as Azerbaijan's governmental policies favoring westernization of the country:

IA: If government would stay away from Europe it wouldn't have happened... All European trash brought to the country... (translated from Azerbaijani)

The deceased's funeral and the use of a rainbow flag to cover his grave were other subjects of critique: The rainbow, a symbol of pride and freedom in the LGBT community, was interpreted as a humiliation of religious beliefs. A number of users also argued that it was a shame to cover Isa's death in the same way as those of the nation's martyrs who lost their lives for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan in the Karabakh war with the neighboring country of Armenia:

EK: What a shame to ask for peace for his soul. First ALLAH gives and takes life. Second instead of fighting for him get a gun and say I'm a fighter... Shame on you (translated from Azerbaijani)

Just 8.8% (see Table 4) of the total comments expressed understanding of and support for sexual diversity as well as respect for LGBT rights and equality. However, responses to those who expressed sympathy or understanding were overwhelmingly verbally abused:

TV: ... may his soul rest in the peace:

TA: ... rest his soul? Can you live freely in this society?! He could not stop. I hope he will find happiness in the heaven. Rest in peace Isa.

PB: F**k you

...

TA: PB watch your words!!!! I would have told you something but whatever. He is a human being and there is a mother behind who gave him life.

...

PB: Hey gay, f**k you what you can say... the one who supports gays deserves humiliation. I don't believe that those like this dude have mothers or fathers. If they had one they would have been raised as men. If I happened to have a son like him I would have killed him myself I swear! (translated from Azerbaijani)

Even though analyzed comments were predominantly posted by male users, analysis of differences in expressed attitude by gender of the users, revealed that women tended to express more understanding and sympathy (35.5%) than men (10.8%). Interestingly, this observation was supported in previous studies of asynchronous CMC (e.g., Guiller & Durnell, 2006; Thompson

& Murachver, 2001). For example, Herring's (1992, 1993, 1994) analysis of discourse style on academic discussion lists revealed that women tended to manifest a more supportive attitude towards their addressees in comparison with men. This finding also resemble previously reported findings of gender differences in spoken communication (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1994), suggesting that Internet users transfer their offline communication patterns into asynchronous computer-mediated messages.

Some users expressed overall dissatisfaction with the government and authorities. Thus, 5.5% of the analyzed videos expressed negative attitude to the government's decisions with regard to the political situation in the country and freedom of speech:

IA: I'm neither a gay nor have interest in such things, simply respect everyone's opinion ... I'd like to make to point -- what religion and Koran you are talking about? I appeal to everyone: instead of focusing on this go check out videos of unrest ... police kicking the Koran dropped by the woman in hijab who rallied, they dragged her to the police car... have you seen that violence? It's a shame. Instead of fighting for such a minor thing, go fight against the government's misconduct...put yourself into the shoes of those protesters - harassed, beaten ... You probably would say that they committed something wrong but what about laws? They could have been sentenced. Why beat them? ... (translated from Azerbaijani)

A few users also criticized the news outlets that covered the activist's death:

MI: Why is this f**ker covered on the internet, TV. The other day an Azerbaijani soldier died and no outlet covered it. Damn it ... AMIN (translated from Azerbaijani)

Discussion

This study attempted to shed light on the case of Isa Shahmarli, LGBT activist, through analysis of YouTube users' comments responding to the videos covering the activist's pre-suicidal interview and media coverage of his suicide. In line with previous studies suggesting conversationality (e.g., Honeycutt & Herring, 2009) of communication on social media, 25.8% of the analyzed comments were replies to previous comments. It is worth noting that users tended to switch addressees, for example reply to one YouTube user's comment as well as address the overall LGBT community or all users. In this regard, Bays (1998) argues that addressivity is similar to gaze in offline conversation, directing the next turn either to one addressee or to the whole group.

Even though Internet technologies provide an open space to discover and develop sexual identity (e.g., Braquet & Mehra, 2006; Gray, 2009), it is not easy to confront the challenges that LGBTs face in the real-life world, which sometimes force them to deliberate self-harm (e.g., McDermott & Roen, 2012). This study demonstrates that the overall negative perceptions of LGBTs in Azerbaijan are replicated in the YouTube open environment: Most of the users demonstrated not only a lack of compassion and sympathy toward the deceased LGBT activist, but also hostile and negative perceptions of LGBT community in general, rejecting even the possibility of co-existence of sexual minorities. Nonetheless, the study revealed a small but vocal minority of YouTube users who were genuinely concerned about the welfare and social perception of LGBTs. Even though users expressing support and understanding were overwhelmingly criticized and silenced, confirming Fox and Warber's (2015) argument that closeted individuals may be silenced in many heteronormative networks on mainstream social networking sites (p. 93), some courageous

individuals issued a clarion call to demonstrate tolerance toward sexual minorities.

Although studies suggest that use of the Internet technologies to network and search LGBT related information become less important after individuals have come out (e.g., Szulc & Dhoest, 2013), it is unclear how the process of coming out and LGBT activism in general affect and/or change the real-world life of LGBTs, particularly in homophobic societies. Baym (2006) argued the the Internet is woven into the fabric of the rest of life” and

online spaces are constructed and the activities that people do online are intimately interwoven with the construction of the offline world and the activities and structures in which we participate, whether we are using the Internet or not (p. 86)

Along these lines, this study did not observe significant difference between offline and online perception of the LGBTs. In this regard Gross (1993) argues that “for many oppressed groups the experience of commonality is largely the commonality of their difference from, and oppression by, the dominant culture” (p. 117).

Nevertheless, in the interest of continuing progress toward greater tolerance, more holistic approaches employing various research methods should be utilized to achieve a better understanding of LGBT communities as well as how they are perceived in homophobic societies.

Conclusions

Although a symbol of the LGBT community is a rainbow, which has traditionally symbolized hope, many of its members are forced to deny their sexual orientation and live under a cloud that obscures the rainbow. This study suggests that the consequences of living as an openly gay person can be profound – rejection, verbal abuse, and lack of protection, all of which can be exacerbated in the public domain of the Internet. As an open space to express one’s beliefs, identity and views, the Internet is a vital part of the rest of human life from which the GLBT community’s experience cannot be teased. Along these lines, online representation of sexual identity should be considered as a valid element of the larger mosaic of cultural, socio-technical and political construction of identity. This approach will provide a better understanding of the complexity of human identity but also nourish tolerance of its marginalized representations.

Limitations and future directions

One of the key limitations of this study is that only YouTube users’ comments were analyzed. However, due to widespread popularity of YouTube as well as its democratic and open platform for expression and communication, it provided a valid opportunity to analyze users’ perceptions of the suicide of an LGBT activist in Azerbaijan. Another limitation of this study is that it was based exclusively on content analysis of users’ comments and did not utilize other research methods to provide more a holistic understanding of public perception of LGBT activist’s suicide. Analyzing issues of LGBTs across various social platforms utilizing mixed research approaches, such as ethnography and interviews as well as content analysis, might prove to be an interesting avenue for the future research.

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ⁱ YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com>

ⁱⁱ Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan: Homosexuality Acceptance Caucasus Barometer 2011

Azerbaijan: Homosexuality: <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2011az/JUSHOMO/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan: Homosexuality Acceptance Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan: Homosexuality Acceptance by age
<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2011az/JUSHOMO-by-AGEGROUP/>

^{iv} Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan: Homosexuality Acceptance Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan: Homosexuality acceptance by gender
<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2011az/JUSHOMO-by-RESPSEX/>

^v Meydan TV <http://www.meydan.tv>

^{vi} Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan: Commenting on Internet
<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013az/ACTINTNT/>

^{vii} Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan: Commenting by Frequency of Internet Use
<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013az/ACTINTNT-by-FRQINTR/>