Chapter 6

Alternative Sexualities and Virtual Communities:
Aspects of LGBT Participation on Social Networking Sites in Spain

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze online participation on LGBT websites in Spain in order to contribute to the field of social networking site usage and the users’ mode of participation with the aim of identifying their expectations and reasons to do it. The main concern is to focus on specific social network sites which are meant to ideologically and politically construct alternative sexual identities, such as lesbians, gays, transsexuals and bisexuals, which could have a difficult access to social recognition and which could be silenced on some heteronormative social networks. Uses and Gratifications Theory has been used as the basic model for the display of constructs, variables and hypotheses, to confirm the identity politics inherent in these practices, which are rather connected with social recognition than with some other needs as companionship or finding sexual partners.

INTRODUCTION

The codification of identity is related to the categories of sex, gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, social class, nationality, race, and ethnic group. These topics have been the object of analysis for most theories about culture in contemporary times. From the deconstructive project, originating in the second half of the past century, this issue has provoked a huge amount of literature belonging to disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and literary studies. In order to understand how this chapter approaches the concept of alternative sexualities, which are increasingly present in connection with social

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activities, media productions, and legal documents, it is necessary to go back to the history of LGBT construction through a historic-cultural explanation. This academic approach highlights basic tenets, which acknowledges that identity categories are mostly constructed in the process of adapting oneself to the world.

The investigation of emerging adults’ access to alternative sexualities needs to be addressed, within an explanatory frame of how LGBT identity was formed and developed over time. Two hypotheses are considered: a) that social activities of LGBT emerging adults can be safer in online communities than in offline life, and b) that LGBT virtual communities may be structuring experiences without age limits, establishing an online space for sharing, asking, consuming, dating, and constructing alternative sexuality. The analysis of online experience in this chapter makes the claim that virtual communities which gather LGBT people are a source of increasing debate concerning these people’s needs and anxieties in the contemporary world. To approach this phenomenon properly, the concept of alternative sexualities in the last years of the past century and as developed within the academic framework provided by cultural studies is necessary to consider.

Once stated, the point of departure lies in situating the chapter in this precise manner of understanding LGBT as an alternative sexuality, constructed in a specific time of Western history. The chapter locates this specific identity in its connection with online activities and its use of virtual communities on the Internet with the idea of showing the benefits of social networking sites created with this sense of belonging. The Uses and Gratifications Theory is the analytical tool selected for the evaluation of an online questionnaire, distributed within some LGBT communities in Spain, with 75 respondents with a specific deadline and a focus on contemporaneity as regards the responses. This makes the study a cross-sectional analytical survey of what is happening in LGBT virtual communities in Spain just at the moment of the questionnaire distribution. The fact of limiting this distribution to a Spanish context is justified by the opportunity for appreciating the relevance of LGBT political claims and achievements in recent years, which have seen the approval of certain modifications of the Spanish Civil code which promulgated same-sex marriage as official and legal in 2005.

From the beginning of this century, but more specifically since 2005, Spanish networking sites have been taken over by groups of LGBT users, creating a voice and a political agenda for the development of this alternative identity. The social networks devoted to this agenda are, in a sense, creating a new idea about the particular characteristics and the specific problems LGBT people have in contemporary Spain. This is the reason for the selection of some of these groups for the questionnaire distribution, which was finally sent to the following websites of five well-known LGBT associations in Spain: a) An online magazine dealing with LGBT cultural production and social journalism, b) two feminist associations situated in the South of Spain, and c) two transgender activist groups, whose use of the virtual community is mostly focused on political action.

The application of the Use and Gratification Theory upon the questionnaire results provides the chapter with some important insights about why and how LGBT people in Spain are accessing the Internet for reasons of identity construction and development, and also proves that emergent adults participating in these virtual communities are benefiting from the particular achievements of this online experience when in virtual contact with elders. The Spanish scenario produces another critical point since, in this national context, the main areas of identity formation, focusing on relevant decisions in life (Arnett, 2000), are put at stake because of the particular circumstances conditioning emergent adults’ life in Spain. With around a 40% unemployment rate amongst Spanish emerging adults, the main tenets of the concept of