

## Lesbian Community: Confusion or Connection?

When I was 16 years old, my best friend told me something that changed the trajectory of my life: “I think you’re a lesbian”. It revealed a facet of my identity that would become central to every other personal discovery I made. Though I feel uncertain about any number of things regarding myself and my identity, I will always know that what my friend said to me that night is undeniably true. In realizing my truth as a lesbian, I was able to build for myself a gender and social presentation upon the standards of chivalry set as a lesbian, particularly, as a butch lesbian. That has spurred my love for and interest in lesbian issues, including lesbian identity formation. Here, I consider how lesbian identity formation has changed due to the advent of social media.

Until I was 16, I knew that I was queer, but I had conflicting feelings and interests shaping how I understood that queerness. My conservative, religious, and homophobic family pressured me to continue considering men as an option. They were an unfortunate source of compulsory heterosexuality (comphet). Comphet is the social conditioning through movies, books, family members, and society that portray straight relationships as the only option. This can often be a large barrier to lesbian identity formation as it can be challenging to accept an identity that isolates oneself from men, a central figure in almost all media children are exposed to. That is why research surrounding lesbian identity formation, the fundamental *how* regarding lesbians identity formation, is so important. Further, I do not just investigate the process of coming into a lesbian identity, but the process of being socialized as a lesbian.

A complication of this topic is that the definition of identity formation has evolved over the years. In the period before social networking sites (SNS), a period which I define as pre-2005, the predominant schools of thought regarding the definition of identity was poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism “concentrates on the moment when we impose meaning in a space that is no longer characterized by shared social agreement over the structure of meaning” (Harcourt). In the context of identity, poststructuralism functions to add nuance and, sometimes, conflict. In particular, the rise of poststructuralism posits that essentialism is no longer a relevant means of meaning making.

Essentialism argues that a trait is fixed at birth. The poststructural movement allows academics to “examine more carefully the historical and social contexts in which any human behavior occurs” (Eliason), which contributes to the first significant shift surrounding the study of identity formation. Instead of approaching identity as a trait unaltered by social, political, and environmental factors, researchers, scholars, and theorists consider them within the framework of the times.

More currently, the definition of identity within SNS relies widely on the idea of homosexual labels as boundary terms. As Professor Herrera considers in her section regarding the definition of the word

“lesbian”, “the hashtag #lesbian is a boundary object that paradoxically enables young non-heterosexual women to form an affirming community while also compelling them to claim an uncomfortable sexual identity”. In an online culture, the labels of identity function as a tagging mechanism to foster community via algorithmic similarity. The societal definition of homosexual

identity has again shifted to accommodate community building on online platforms. In doing so, the very term “identity” has become slippery in its definition. For the sake of this analysis, I pose the definition of identity to align with Jill Johnston’s: “what you can say you are according to what they

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say you can be” (Johnston). This definition encompasses the social factors that influence identity as well as the process of self identification and thus encapsulates identity-seeking pre- and during SNS.

### **Lesbian Identity Formation Pre Social Media**

Pre-social media, lesbian identity formation relied on having a physical community in which to immerse oneself. Lesbians relied on gay bars as a community space. The world of the 1900s made it very difficult for queer people to exist in a way that felt authentic. Many lesbians were sex workers or factory workers because that was the only work they could come by that would not immediately reject them due to their sex or gender presentation. For lesbians growing up in this time period, finding a community was the key to navigating queer life. The lesbians within a bar circle became a family for those who were often thrown out by their biological parents and larger society. Gay bars would constantly close down, change location, or get busted by the cops. Even through the turbulence of an ever-changing bar scene, lesbians would “remain friends until separated by relocation or death” (Beemyn).

The congregation of lesbians in gay bars allowed for the exchange of information and queer socialization. Let us concentrate, for example, on the typical butch experience in bar culture. Identity

formation occurred within the halls of these bars. Butch lesbians would work in factories. They would exchange insight about what factories were hiring, unionized, treated butch employees well, etc. An information web was thus sustained through each of their lived experiences and reported back on at these bars. Butches would also learn how to dress and act in queer spaces. “How to Engage in Courting Rituals 1950s Butch Style in the Bar” by Merrill Mushroom outlines how to approach a femme in a bar

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in a way that was appropriate for 1950s gay bar culture, illustrating that a significant part of gay culture was the diffusion of queer social norms. Lesbians functioned within a particular social framework that was almost familial, with older lesbians coveted for their understanding and experience in a straight world. The younger generation learned the ins and outs of lesbian life while bringing their personalities and connections into the scene.

The biggest indicator of lesbian identity was dress and personality. Butch-femme identity was the backbone of lesbian expression. “The salience and tenacity of butch-fem roles in the pre-1970s public lesbian community derives from their functioning as both a powerful personal code of behavior and as an organizing principle for community life” (Davis & Kennedy). These behaviors shaped how the outside world saw and understood lesbian identities. Lesbians, particularly butch lesbians, were visible because they dressed and acted masculinely, far from the cishet norm and expectation. They became the face of relations with the outside world. They were also the most readily recognizable as queer, which was invaluable in creating a community. The butches that built bar culture in the ‘30s and ‘40s did so by being visible to other queer people, but also to straight society. Their appearance,

and further, socialization, played a priceless role in creating community.

Even if a lesbian did not feel particularly inclined towards a butch or femme identity, they often adopted one anyway. The sacrifice of personal preference and social comfort came with the reward of a proper lesbian community. This community took care of its members. The bars were a place for lesbians to find lovers, friends, and found family. “Going to the bars also made a difference in lesbian consciousness. Butches who regularly frequented the bars understood the value of proclaiming themselves and had definite opinions about those who did not” (Beemyn). There were degrees of

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butch presentation. Butches that adopted an almost exaggerated masculine style every day, regardless of who was around or what they were doing, often considered themselves to be a “better” form of butch. Lesbians that dressed/acted butch while in the bars but not in their daily life were known as Saturday-night butches, among other things, were not as readily accepted into the community or supported. This reveals the complex social and behavioral structure young lesbians would learn from.

Having a real community was the key to survival and living a happy life for lesbians who came into their identities before social media. The bars, factories, and homes in which lesbians conducted their every day life would have been lost if not for the oral histories passed down through the community. The intergenerational nature of the lesbian community allowed for knowledge and support to be passed through a network of people.

### **Lesbian Identity Formation During Social Media**

As a lesbian that did most of my identity formation via social media, I found more confusion than community online. The Internet was a treasure trove of information that I likely would not have been able to access until I was much older. In that way, I could not have learned of my own identity, nor the intricacies of my identity, without social media. However, the mode of social media means that the most accessible information is often the most problematic.

Though I personally never used Tumblr, I was well aware of the discourse on there based on the observations and stories of friends and reposted snippets of conversation. I remember my friends and I discussing Tumblr discourse over the years. There was the bisexual-pansexual discourse, which investigated the differences in bisexual and pansexual identities; bisexual-lesbian discourse, surrounding

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whether bisexual people could call themselves lesbian; gay male flag discourse, where certain people argued that the gay male flag was “copying” the lesbian flag, etc. Each topic seemed more frivolous and unnecessary than the last. I was consistently shocked by how nasty the Tumblr “community” could be to one another, invalidating whole swaths of queer people at once.

Unsurprisingly, I was not alone in that analysis of Tumblr culture. An Australian study, “Hey, I’m Having These Experiences”: Tumblr Use and Young People’s Queer (Dis)connections, investigates the use of Tumblr for queer identity formation. They found that “Tumblr use intensities reflect many young people’s (dis)connections to queer life” (Byron). Within the scope of their research, “intensities” is used much like I use “discourse”—corrosive arguments about identity nuances that crop up around the Internet. They found that the population surveyed had the same experience I had. The site played

an important role in their identity formation because it exposed them to different ways of being and a network of people with similar experiences to validate their seemingly unique feelings. However, at a certain point, the information became convoluted and the so-called community became “toxic”.

When a young lesbian steps into the virtual scheme of queer identity politics, they’re instantly bombarded with conflict. There are multiple destabilizing queer voices arguing about what it means to be lesbian enough, to be trans enough, to be queer enough. How does one figure out how to carry themselves through the world when the lens they’re taught to see the world through is fraught with conflict? I posit that they don’t. It wasn’t until I started actively searching for queer literature and the guiding hand of older generations that I was able to begin forming an identity and presentation.

For people that are fortunate enough to live in areas with other young queer people, they can perhaps learn from one another. However, they only learn from one another what was once learned

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online. This can become a cycle of misinformation and confusion. Without the guidance of older generations, lesbians and queer kids will surely suffer a more unstable identity. Further, not having an example of what life can look like as an older lesbian can increase feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. It can be difficult to conceptualize a life beyond one’s oppressive situation without knowing people with lives that seem aspirational. The fact that very few, if any, queer elders exist within a young queer person’s sphere of influence means queer kids are not getting the support they need from people with more experience.

**Young Lesbians Then and Now: Comparing Lesbians Pre- and During SNS** The lack of true community is the first thing robbed from lesbians coming into their identity in the modern day. The fact that there is no concrete community means that there is no tribunal of elders from which to learn how to navigate the world. There is no guiding hand that teaches a young lesbian right from wrong. In the lesbian community, the elders served as parental figures, teaching the youth everything from how to flirt to how to change a tire. Removing this found family and generational variation makes it more difficult to organize as a community. The change that queer people were able to invoke during Stonewall relies on the community they had. The largest implication of younger generations' loss of a queer community is that queer people cannot organize to promote change. Consider the anti-LGBTQ+ bills being considered and passed in states like Texas, Oklahoma, and many other states with conservative majorities. Change is difficult to extract on a large scale without a solid community base to support it. The presence of social media in youth identity formation has destabilized the sociopolitical ability of queer people to fight for their rights.

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It can feel hopeless for a young queer person to search for change when they cannot even conceptualize themselves as an adult with a fulfilling life. When lesbians of generations past lost family, friends, and jobs due to their sexualities, they had a community to fall back on who would support them. Lesbians today may have a community, but it's not necessarily one that will rally to support them. There is a marked difference between having a friend who will let you sleep on their couch for multiple months because you lost your job and having friends on social media who will repost your



Go-Fund-Me link. The support queer kids find online pales in comparison to the community older lesbians had grown up in.

### **What Now?**

I am a proponent of the re-establishment of physical queer spaces, especially ones that are easily accessible to anyone of any age. Bars are difficult to go to for a young queer kid, but things like cafes and bookstores can be readily queer. In Santa Cruz, some resources exist for queer kids, which seem to be doing the work of generations past. Other areas are not so fortunate. Digital media is an easy substitute for community when one is not present, but it comes at the expense of true connection. What is touted as a community is just a network of experience. I encourage any questioning lesbians to do the work of finding texts written by lesbians past to gain a greater understanding of themselves in lieu of community. I know that as I continue my identity journey, I will be seeking out more lesbian intergenerational support. The few queer elders I know are so valuable to my understanding of the world, and I sincerely hope that with more focus on community and the stories of older lesbians we can begin to bring back queer spaces and all the benefits that come with having a group of people who understand the struggles and joys of being a lesbian.

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