Who cares?
Social media, epistemic oppression, and denial in the cisheteropatriarchy

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Abstract

Coming out as queer is nowadays often met with both support and negative responses. These negative responses often are not explicitly negative, but rather question the decision to come out at all or the reliability of the person coming out. This thesis deals with the question of what forms of denial are found as responses to coming out posts on social media. I discuss denial as a mechanism of epistemic oppression and silencing, and analyze the role of social media in these dynamics.

1. Introduction

“Why do some people feel the need to say ‘Who cares?’ when a gay athlete comes out?”: a 2017 Outsports article brought attention to the phenomenon of people responding to their stories about athletes announcing their queer identity (Zeigler, 2017). However, sports is not the only field this occurs in. Many who come out as queer nowadays seem to face similar responses across different public spheres. As Zeigler (2017) points out, people who respond in such ways try to *appear* supportive – showing that they and the rest of their society are accepting to the point that even coming out is a needless and regressive act – while simultaneously telling the person who is coming out to essentially not share the fact that they are LGBTQ at all.

The relevance of such responses has increased with the rise of social media platforms which have become highly relevant in daily social and political life. With such an impact on our social practices, it is unsurprising that people have also utilized social media to post about coming out and queer issues. In the same way, those who oppose them have posted content to resist or discourage the discussion of queer issues. Anti-queer content of this kind relies on denial that comes in various forms. When going back to the initial example of online users saying “who cares?”, they are openly stating or implying we live in a world where being queer is not a trait people may experience negative consequences over; they aredenying that being queer may come with difficult experiences and is not a trait one possesses neutrally.

Furthermore, the notion that we have made moral progress in regards to queerness is also related to these denial-based responses. The claim could be summarized along the lines of: we have progressed as a society because we have prohibited violence and discrimination against LGBTQ people, and judging people for their sexual orientation or gender is frowned upon. However, it is important to examine whether we can really say that we have made this progress morally. Additionally, as social media has allowed us to clearly observe a wide range of social interactions, we can consider what role platforms play in the evolution of denial and the dynamics of moral progress.

Another layer present in these responses of denial is the challenge to the queer person's authority and agency – they are sharing information supposedly no one is interested in, and is deemed irrelevant. When present frequently, this questioning becomes a form of silencing of a particular group. This leads to another consideration: Is denial used as a mechanism to uphold oppressive systems?

Considering the role of denial in responses to queer realities, the main question I will deal with is the following: What forms of denial are found as responses to coming out posts on social media?

This thesis explores how denial is utilized on social media as a response to coming out. It places denial as a mechanism of epistemic oppression and silencing, with the epistemic goal of the cisheteropatriarchy (CHP) being to maintain the gender binary. I utilized a mixed methods approach, first interpreting the content of 12.013 comments collected on Reddit and Twitter posted between 2008 and 2022, and then conducting a regression analysis in order to gain insight into the relationship between queerness, denial, and social media.

The sub-questions addressed are: What is the role of denial in a cisheteropatriarchal world in regards to epistemic agency and oppression? (Chapter 1 and 2); Does social media make a difference to whether and how denial is expressed in a cisheteropatriarchy? (Chapter 2–6); Does it change the CHP itself or is it merely extended to the realm of the internet? (Chapter 6); Is denial present in online discussions of queerness among a general non-queer audience? (Chapter 3–5); If so, what are the aims of expressing denial publicly in regards to queer issues? (Chapter 3, 4, and 5); Has social media facilitated or discouraged moral progress on queer issues? (Chapter 6); What is the role of queer epistemic agency in the dynamics of moral progress? (Chapter 6).

The relevance of this work is twofold. Academically, it contributes to queer science and technology studies from a new perspective, utilizing concepts of epistemic oppression and silencing on social media, as well as some of the mechanisms behind epistemic resistance (denial). Another contribution of this thesis is the expansion of the concept of epistemic oppression and silencing into the field of queer technology studies. To my knowledge, no

literature exists discussing queerness in such a context, and this analysis attempts to shed light on the dynamics of queer oppression and the role of denial in it. It also contributes to the analysis of denial in the particular context of queerness, something that has not been explored before in the literature. Lastly, as (Guyan, 2022) illustrates, there is a lack of documentation and data of queerphobic practices (p. 48). This research contributes to queer studies empirically, using the data collected in demonstrating evidence of queerphobia online and analyzing its meaning.

The practical relevance of this study may be insightful in the identification of queer-negative content online. According to the analysis presented in this thesis, very few reactions are explicitly negative. Rather, people find ways to express their disapproval or hate in ways which appear less hateful and aggressive, but nevertheless inform those reading that queer people or their insights are not welcome. Identifying such claims can help better moderate content on social media sites and create spaces available for more open expression and honest discussion of queer issues.

The rest of the first chapter introduces the concepts of the cisheteropatriarchy (CHP), denial, as well as the methods. Chapter 2 introduces epistemic oppression and silencing as ways of upholding the epistemic system of CHP, and discusses the role of trust in epistemic agency. In Chapter 3, the results of the first comment content analysis are considered. Particularly, I analyze the role group membership plays in the responses people get to coming out and what this means in the context of the CHP epistemic system. Then, Chapter 4 deals with the results of the second content analysis in which the differences between platforms are discussed, and the effects site structures influence outcomes. In Chapter 5, I discuss the results of the third analysis: differences between time periods in the kinds of responses to coming out. The potential mechanisms behind the changes in responses are considered as well as their meaning for the dynamics of oppressive speech. Lastly, in Chapter 6, the concepts of moral progress and epistemic agency are discussed in greater detail, discussing the observations throughout the study and evaluating whether it can be said that we have moved forward socially and morally, and providing a conclusion to what has been discussed in the previous chapters.

The cisheteropatriarchy

Before discussing the place denial has within a cisheteropatriarchy (CHP), I would like to discuss ideas of what characterizes such a system. While notoriously difficult to define, I will attempt to provide a characterization of the CHP using Robin Dembroff's (forthcoming) analysis of the patriarchy. Before doing so, I would like to point out that what Dembroff calls "the patriarchy," I will refer to as "the cisheteropatriarchy." This is to emphasize the different components of the patriarchal system itself and to narrow down the particular form of patriarchy being discussed here. For example, it is conceivable that there could be patriarhcal societies that do not incorporate heterosexual dominance, one example being ancient Greek societies, where (in today's terms) bisexuality was the norm and homosexual relations were not stigmatized, while a patriarchy was maintained (Rauh, n.d.). Hence, the form of patriarchy discussed in this thesis is one that is also part of a system involving homophobia and cisnormativity. By calling it a cisheteropatriarchy, I attempt to specify that the form I will be discussing is part of a system made up of common justifications underlying all three concepts.

Dembroff (forthcoming) criticizes existing, static models of the patriarchy. Many feminist writers and theories have discussed the notion of a patriarchy as, at its core, being simply a system that privileges men and disadvantages women. Developments of this view involve works by Dworkin, MacKinnon, Wittig, Frye, Walby, Haslanger, Lerner, Beechey, and others (Dembroff, forthcoming). As Dembroff points out, this definition is fundamentally flawed. It views patriarchy through a functionalist lens, through which a problem of distinguishing between the patriarchy and other forms of oppression arises.

Dembroff provides another view of patriarchy: for them, patriarchy is characterized not through a functionalist view, but through a process that produces a system in which "real men" dominate (pp. 2-3). "Real men" are those who perform in accordance with ideal norms of being a man. In addition to this, "real women" are those who perform according to the cultural ideals of what a woman is (p. 3). The view that patriarchy simply privileges men and subordinates women is too simplistic and does not take into account the overlap between race, class, or sexual orientation as being influential to how someone is seen as a man or as a woman. These distinctions make a

difference when it comes to how someone is treated. For example, a gay man may not be seen as a man because part of the requirement of being in the privileged positon as a man is to be a heterosexual one (p. 3). In other words, men who are not perceived as “real men” are also disadvantaged in the patriarchy. Hence, the patriarchy, as Dembroff points out, does not advantage men because they are men, it advantages “real men” because they are “real men.”

Demroff (forthcoming) continues to identify the ideas that create the meanings and values that are essential to the persistence of the patriarchy along three elements: sexism, teleology, and the natural attitude (p. 4). Sexism consists of valuing men over everyone else, and not just women. This distinction is important because it allows for a more nuanced view of the systems and reasons for the privileges afforded to different groups. Teleology is a notion used to support sexism. The valuing of people according to gender needs to be somehow supported if sexist hierarchies are to be sustained. It is through teleology that the notion that one is supposed to be a “real man” or “real woman” is formed. For this, there needs to be the view that one is either male and female, and based on this, that males are masculine, and females are feminine. This idea is then naturalized and presented in such a way that the teleology of “real men” and “real women” seems to simply be part of nature. Hence, it cannot be questioned or criticized as a system in which people have organized themselves – it is simply the way things are. Men simply *are* one way and ought to be “real men,” and women *are* another and ought to be “real women” (p. 4).

Figure 1. A meme shared by the Macedonian anti-queer group Prezemi Odgovornost. The person represented on the left states “They have brainwashed you!” The one on the right asks “Really?” (Prezemi Odgovornost, 2022).

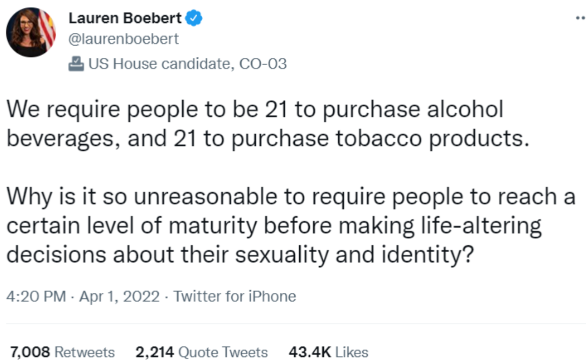

Figure 2. A tweet originally made by Lauren Boebert (2022) that became a meme in anti-queer online spaces, proposing that people ought not to have any queer identity before they are of an “appropriate” age.

Such naturalization can be seen expressed as a tactic to make queer people seem unnatural (with, in many cases, an implication that therefore it is wrong to be queer). The above image can be used to illustrate this (Figure 1): the person on the left, showing someone queer (or perhaps a queer ally), is presented as someone influenced by organizations, political parties, and ideologies, saying “they’ve brainwashed you!” The one on the right, saying “really?”, is not only free of “sponsors,” but is also free of having a flag that represents its sexuality. In other words, being a cisgender heterosexual is perceived as what it is to exist in a natural state. Being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender is the artificial identity that has to be created and promoted through the various creators, “sponsors” or influencers, rather than something that also exists naturally. A similar underlying sentiment is shown in Figure 2. According to this logic, being of a particular queer identity is something that is an intentional divergence from the neutral or the natural, while being cisgender and heterosexual is simply the unquestioned norm. Being queer is life-altering, while not being queer is seen as a default state that does not have to be decided on.

The “natural,” heterosexual men and women then have to behave in particular ways that are ideal for their gender to be successful. This is often expressed through very rigid norms of what it is to

be a “real man or woman.” For example, wearing make-up, while clearly a cultural norm, is one associated with being a woman. In the case of a man wearing make-up, he is punished socially for it. He is no longer fully considered a man, as the case in Figure 3 shows: he is not only made into a “non-real man” through this, but he also begins to be called a woman.

Furthermore, the example in Figure 4 shows how certain behaviors as a “real man” are worthy of award or success of some kind, in the eyes of the cisheteropatriarchy, namely a submissive woman (a “real woman”) who would play her role of a “real woman” with a “real man.” These elements of teleology and the natural attitude imply and build sexism as the final element of a patriarchy. If there are “real men” and “real women” and it is natural and expected that they behave in particular ways, then there are sexist norms, where “real men” are valued higher than everyone else.

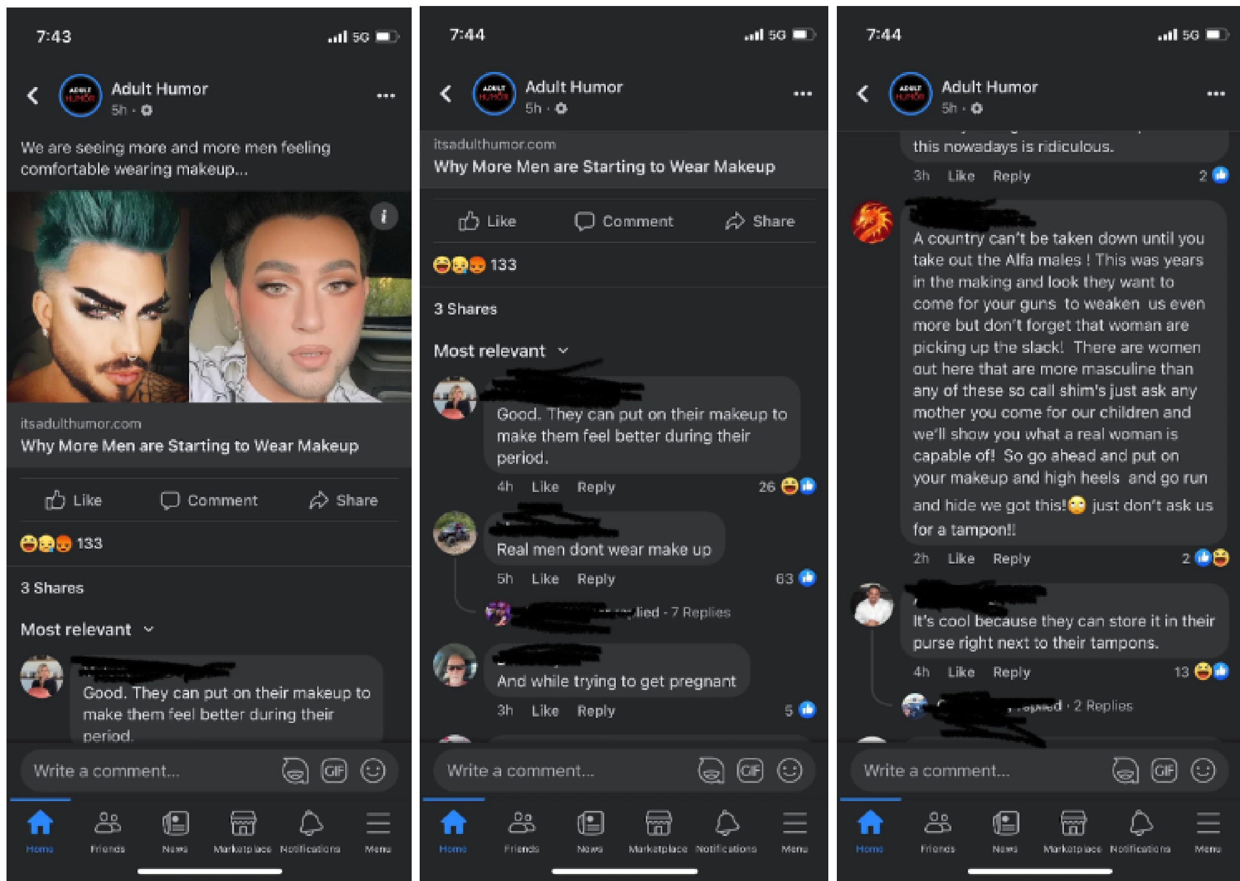

Figure 3. A Facebook post and comments in response to a trend of men wearing makeup (TasteofHoney88, 2022).

Figure 4. A Facebook post expressing an opinion on relationship dynamics between men and women (yesterdaysatan, 2022).

The CHP is not only a set of rules that guide behaviors, but also a system of knowledge (as Townley (2003) points out, there is a social nature to the creation and acceptance of information as knowledge. Hence, system of knowledge refers to social epistemic practices in regards to commonly shaping what is known about the world). People learn the appropriate terms and behaviors; they form knowledge about what it means to be a man or a woman, and are rewarded for showing correct understanding of how the CHP works and participating within it according to its logic and rules. Those who share the understanding of the world through this lens gain trust, as having seen the world correctly. Since being trusted is a key element in contributing to knowledge (Townley, 2003, p. 106), queer people might lose this trust by not demonstrating appropriate knowledge of this system of understanding the world by being LGBTQ and breaking away from its understanding of how people supposedly should be – cisgender and heterosexual. This can then put them in a position of seeming out of touch with reason or simply irrational, since the system does not allow for them to exist within the CHP framework.

A cisheteropatriarchal society engages in a denial of reality as a necessary component of maintaining its type of social order and system of knowledge. It has to invent the gender binary and uphold it by creating a certain reductive and default “reality” of human experience separate from some facts of the world (i.e. that people can be gay or transgender), and deny forms of queerness, and actively work to avoid, hide, and suppress it in a variety of ways on a personal and societal level. Viewing the CHP as a system of knowledge, the maintenance gender binary can be identified as its epistemic goal. Hence, the CHP can be analyzed through the lens of having this goal and functioning in accordance with it. As denial of queerness is an important element in creating such a system, and a key element of focus in this thesis, I will proceed with discussing it in greater detail.

Denial

I will argue that the use of denial is key in establishing and maintaining the cisheteropatriarchy. In order to create a prescriptive default lifestyle that is dominant in a society, it has to deny that other possibilities exist (either literally or as valid lifestyle choices). Exploring how denial is employed within the CHP can help gain greater insight into how the maintenance of such a system persists and shapes the dynamics between queer people and those defending the CHP. I will first explain the concept of denial, and then apply it to queerness.

Denial is a state where there is some form of repression, disavowal, reinterpretation, or dismissal of some information (Cohen, 2013, p. 1). This does not only apply to the “raw” information one receives from their environment, but also implications of this information. Sometimes, the consequences of a fact or event are neutralized, evaded, or rationalized (p. 1). As Cohen illustrates, there is not one fixed social or psychological process or mechanism that is covered by the term “denial” (p. 3). Rather, it is a response one could have to a variety of information or its consequences.

Denial-statements are assertions that “something did not happen, does not exist, is not true or is not known about” (p. 3). The denial may be a truthful one: something might have genuinely not happened, or it could have happened without the knowledge of the person or people expressing

the denial. Another possibility is that the denial is a form of lying. With lying, the truth is known, however it is intentionally hidden or reinterpreted. Lastly, people might try to engage in denial by shielding themselves from receiving certain information about the world in the first place (e.g. changing their route to avoid passing by places where they might see homeless people to avoid the reality that these people exist and perhaps that something needs to be done to change their situation) (p. 4).

The focus here will be on the content of the denial, rather than whether it can be considered lying, truth, or a state where one simply does not process the information given in a situation as fact (what is typically associated with denial). There are three kinds of denial in regards to the content of a statement according to Cohen's (2013) classification: literal, interpretive, and implicatory.

With literal denial, it is asserted that something did not happen or is not true. There is a refusal to acknowledge the facts. Cohen clarifies that this may be in good or bad faith, genuine ignorance, lies, or because of unconscious defense mechanisms (p. 7). An example in regards to queer people would be literally denying that gay and transgender people exist, such as claiming there are no trans women (among other things, for a more in-depth discussion of the variety of comment types and their analysis in terms of denial see 1.3 Denial and queerness).

Interpretive denial acknowledges that the raw facts in question do exist, however, they are supposedly being interpreted wrongly. As Cohen puts it: "the raw facts (something happened) are not being denied. Rather, they are given a different meaning from what seems apparent to others" (p. 7). Changing terms in regards to what has happened is a common form of interpretive denial. An example of such denial would be – as is common – that there are people who are indeed transitioning or identifying as – for example – transgender women, however they are not *really* trans women, rather they are just "men in dresses" or perhaps are "just confused."

Implicatory denial is the most complex form of the three. It happens when a person who is engaging in denial either has accepted or concedes that the initial "raw" information and the interpretation may not necessarily be wrong. Instead, "[w]hat are denied or minimized are the

psychological, political or moral implications that conventionally follow" from a statement (p. 8). Hence, it is not a denial of reality per se, but rather its significance or implications. Implicatory denial can take many forms. Two are especially important for this discussion. In the first form "detachment, unconcern and self-centeredness are casually invoked: 'I don't care a shit', 'It doesn't bother me', 'Not my problem', 'I've got better things to think about', 'What's the big fuss about?', 'So what?'" (p. 8). Many such responses – as will be discussed – are common responses to coming out. The other form of implicatory denial has to do with creating alternative narratives for a phenomenon in order to create rationalizations for why something is not important to care about or respond to in the commonly seen appropriate way. This can involve coming up with narratives such as the one of the "gay agenda" or "gender ideology," movements that supposedly consist of queer people aiming to teach others (especially children) to be part of the LGBTQ+ community. This form of denial aims at removing responsibility on the part of the denier, which will be elaborated on in greater detail as follows.

Denial and queerness

I have explained the theory of denial I will be using, and will now elaborate on the exact forms it takes in the case of queerness. This part deals with applying Cohen's (2013) theory of denial to the various common forms of responses to queerness that were encountered in the comments collected or expected based on theorizing about potential denial responses to queerness (more on this in Methods). This analysis will be used to both examine the content of the responses in terms of denial, and classify the comments collected in this study for further analysis.

Literal denial responses to coming out as queer

Literal denial is easiest to recognize. What the person who is engaging in denial does is deny a seemingly easily observable fact about the world. In the case of queer people, literal denial may be expressed in one of the following ways:

"You cannot transition/it is impossible to transition"

Cohen (2018) states:

> In literal, factual or blatant denial, the fact or knowledge of the fact is denied … These assertions refuse to acknowledge the facts – for whatever reason, in good or bad faith, and whether these claims are true (genuine ignorance), blatantly untrue (deliberate lies) or unconscious defence mechanisms. (p. 7)

The fact being denied in this case is that there is no such thing as a transition between genders or sexes, hence there are no transgender people or it is impossible that they are transitioning.

"They're not bisexual/gay/lesbian/transgender" or "there are no bisexual/gay/lesbian/transgender people"

This is literal denial because, as Cohen (2018) discusses it, the fact that someone is LGBTQ is denied in direct response to them sharing their identity.

"Two men/women cannot have sex"

This falls into the category literal denial as well, as it denies particular sexual acts engaged in by people of the same gender. It can also be argued that this is a form of interpretive denial – it reinterprets what is commonly seen as sex. However, at its base is a literal denial of queerness: only cisgender heterosexuals can engage in this activity. Through this, queer sex becomes something else that is unnamed and does not or is not supposed to exist. This response was not present in any of the comments as a response to coming out. While there were comments pertaining to the sexual life of the people in question, none denied the existence of queer sexual relations. This is likely because the topic of coming out is tied more to the question of a person's identity than a discussion of queer sex in and of itself.

Interpretive denial responses to coming out as queer

Interpretive denial can take many more forms compared to literal denial. It is only restricted by the amount of reinterpretations one can come up with. Three main forms were encountered among the content.

“They’re only coming out/LGBTQ because it’s advantageous or beneficial to be LGBTQ”

Cohen (2018) states:

> At other times, the raw facts (something happened) are not being denied. Rather, they are given a different meaning from what seems apparent to others…By changing words, by euphemism, by technical jargon, the observer disputes the cognitive meaning given to an event and re-allocates it to another class of event. (pp. 7-8)

This statement reframes the reasons for coming out as it somehow being (financially or socially) beneficial to be LGBTQ, rather than a genuine want or need to express one’s identity. Those stating this engage in literal denial of the oppression and difficulties LGBTQ people face. However, while there is an element of literal denial of the hardships that come with being queer, the statement itself is a reinterpretation of the coming out not as something potentially socially dangerous, but as somethig advantegous. Hence, in this context it is primarily seen as interpretive denial because there is an implicit flipping of the social script: being LGBTQ is interpreted as being at the top of the hierarchy.

“They’re just doing it for attention”

Similar to the claim that people are coming out because it benefits their careers or social position, this kind of comment is not denying the fact that someone has indeed come out or might be LGBTQ. Rather, these claims state that the only reason for sharing the information that one is LGBTQ is to gain attention instead of genuinely wanting or needing to express their identity or experiences.

“Why do they feel the need to tell everyone about their sex lives?”

While this comment seems similar to the insistence that LGBTQ people should keep their identities to themselves, it contains an assumption based on interpretive denial. It reinterprets the person's coming out as sharing details about their sex lives or preferences rather than sharing an identity that is more complex than just sexual acts. This reductive approach engages in a denial of the social contexts that surround queerness, erasing oppression, and the difficulties of the act of coming out and replaces it with a statement about publicly sharing one's sexual wants.

Implicatory denial responses to coming out as queer

As discussed above, implicatory denial mainly involves ways to avoid being seen as responsible. There are several ways one could try to express this detachment from the situation.

"Who cares?" or "No one cares"

These kinds of statements, straightforwardly fall into the category of implicatory denial. Cohen (2018) states:

> "implicatory denial" covers … vocabularies … that we use to deal with our awareness of so many images of unmitigated suffering … idioms of detachment, unconcern and self-centeredness are casually invoked: "I don't care a shit", "It doesn't bother me", "Not my problem", "I've got better things to think about", "What's the big fuss about?", "So what?" (p. 8)

The underlying goal of this form of denial is to return to literal denial: one does not want there to be open acknowledgement of non-CHP experiences or identities. It is an attempt to silence queer expression – if no one talks about it, it allows people to believe it is not there.

"Why is this news?"

Similar to the "Who cares?" response, questioning the relevance or downplaying the importance

of the event would be seen as implicatory denial according to Cohen (2018, p. 8).

"They should keep this to themselves"

While this comment does not deny the fact that someone is LGBTQ or reinterprets it, it does imply that the statements are insignificant, inappropriate, something that should not be shared, or that there is no need to do so. Hence, it is in line with Cohen's (2018) implicatory denial. Similarly to the "who cares?" comment, this statement is an attempt at erasure of queer experiences and a return to literal denial.

"This is part of a gay agenda/transgender ideology"

This comment and its similar but different forms can become quite complex to easily interpret. It can be argued that blaming a gay agenda is a form of interpretive denial – one is not *really* queer, but rather it is the agenda that somehow made them so. In this is also a trace of literal denial, as there is an attempt to negate the existence of a common and genuine queer experience without the presence of an agenda.

However, it can also be argued that this is a form of implicatory denial. It – at least at first glance – seems to accept the given facts about the people in question. However, the denial targets some form of implication of such coming outs. Implicatory denial involves refusing to accept the social context in which being queer has been and is still treated as either negative, strange, or somehow out of the ordinary. Instead, it replaces it with an imaginary agenda or ideology, or – in the case of a more grounded response – that being queer is simply accepted nowadays. Because of the assumption that being queer is completely accepted or even promoted, the responses can be either of the "who cares?" nature, or they might accuse queer people of promoting an agenda (or perhaps that they themselves were indoctrinated through one to be LGBTQ+). Because of this, they are engaging in denial that concerns the widespread oppression and discrimination taking place and the reason queer people must go through the process of coming out in the first place if they would like to share such information about themselves with others. Through this,

the one responding with implicatory denial refuses to face their – or their society's – responsibility for preventing or stopping discrimination or judgment towards queer people.

Furthermore, I would like to point out that there is a difference in what kind of denial one engages in between accusing the person coming out of promoting a gay agenda and using an agenda as the explanation for their queerness. In the first case, the denial tends more towards implicatory, while in the second it is a combination of both interpretive and implicatory. In the former case, the person coming out is acknowledged in some capacity as being queer, but accused of attempting to recruit more people to become like themselves. In the latter, there is both a claim that there is an agenda and that the person fell victim to it. As both ways of thinking involve statements that claim there is an agenda in the first place, they were both seen as interpretive denial in this study.

Interestingly, there were tendencies towards both in the data examined. While this was not a focus of the analysis, a tendency towards an accusation was observed more in the gay and lesbian groups, while more comments that explained a person's queerness appearing due to an agenda were in the trans group (though there was a mix of both in all groups). Note that the comments were not sorted based on the comment content itself, but according to denial categories. Hence, all such comments were simply placed in the same category and there was no analysis that differentiated between these two specific variations of the comment. However, this can be focused on in future research. It seems there might be a more nuanced difference that can indicate a difference valuable for the analysis of denial, queerness, and social media.

In the case that there are significant differences between the transgender group and the rest, it can inform us about the fact that there does seem to be more denial (more literal and interpretive denial compared to the distribution of denial per category of the other groups) focused on negating the legitimacy of transgender individuals with more frequency and a greater variety compared to sexuality-focused coming outs.

Methods

A mixed methods content analysis was conducted. This approach was chosen in order to compare the amounts of denial present across groups, time, and platforms. A qualitative analysis of the content of the comments had to be done in accordance with Cohen's (2013) theory of denial in order to categorize them. Once the comments were interpreted, they could be analyzed quantitatively with a logistic regression. Krippendorff (2004, pp. 97-98) highlights the utility of regression models in content analysis, such as testing which characteristics can predict an outcome of particular forms of content. Hence, a logistic regression was performed to test (i) the different likelihoods of each group's coming out resulting in comments of a particular kind of denial, (ii) the likelihood of encountering denial as a response to coming out per platform, and (iii) the likelihood of denial per period. 18 logistic regression models were run to test all hypotheses. The models and hypotheses are presented in each relevant section: Chapter 3 deals with the differences in likelihood of encountering denial between the four groups, Chapter 4 between platforms, and Chapter 5 between periods.

Lists of well-known people or celebrities who have come out were searched for in articles listing famous people who have come out (this search was done on www.google.com). A question of who is considered a celebrity or popular enough might come up. There were no explicit criteria for selection. A more pragmatic approach was chosen by selecting the people already included in lists of famous people who have come out as LGBTQ. Thus, if someone was considered famous enough to report on, they were considered well-known enough to potentially receive large amounts of responses. This also helps in reducing biases in selection of who is in the pool of potential subjects. The study was set up in this way for the purpose of collecting as many comments as possible. While collecting responses to the average person's coming out might have provided more accuracy in terms of reflecting the everyday experiences of queer people, collecting such responses would require more resources than were available. Future research needs to be carried out with this consideration in mind in order to better capture the average experiences of queer people on social media.

The search was divided in 3 periods: 2008-2012 (period 1), 2013-2017 (period 2), 2018-2022 (period 3). This was done so that the evolution of denial over time could be observed, if present in these times on the platforms studied. It also ensured that people from earlier periods would not

be excluded, as results tend to show more recent results. While both Reddit and Twitter (the platforms used to collect the comments) were present before 2008, this was set as a limit due to the scarcity of comments in the earlier days of social media – those who came out before 2010 (and they were much fewer than later periods) generally seemed to gain much less attention. This could be for several reasons, and perhaps worth further exploring in future research. It could also be the case that coming out was not something people cared about and simply ignored. However, this seems like an unlikely explanation considering interest in public figures coming out before and after this period. Another explanation is that social media simply was not very popular. However, there were active users who were engaging with other forms of content. Hence, there does not seem to be one straightforward reason for why this was the case. A possible explanation is that internet culture in its earlier social media days differed significantly from offline culture, and responding to coming out was simply not part of it. When social media became part of an average person's medium of expression and engagement with the world, the offline culture could have become dominant on the internet. It could also be interpreted as a form of literal denial: people might have been avoiding engaging with the content through the communities they had joined or formed.

Based on the search conducted, a list of names was compiled and divided into 4 groups: lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Due to limited resources, not all names collected were searched for in the analysis. One person from each group and period was arbitrarily selected from the list (for the list of selected names see Appendix). The person's name was looked up on https://redditsearch.io/ or through the Twitter advanced search, along with the search criterion of their coming out year and relevant search terms such as "coming/comes/came out", and "gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/pansexual". If there were no Reddit or Twitter posts related to the person, another was selected.

Posts in LGBTQ-related subreddits were excluded from the data collection. The same was not done on Twitter because the design of the platform is more open[1] and the Tweets can reach

[1] It might also be said that perhaps Twitter is less structured than Reddit. However, I would like to avoid such a characterization because defining what makes a platform more structured than another might be difficult or require more extensive discussion. The platforms have different structures which their users operate within; the structure of Reddit can be seen as more closed because the platform is structured around joining particular communities.

broader audiences regardless of who the original poster is. In addition to this, communities on Reddit have moderators controlling the content, while Twitter does not. The relevance of these differences will be examined in greater detail later on in Chapter 4.

All relevant posts were selected, adding up to a total N = 12387 comments. A total of 373 comments were removed due to moderation, leaving N = 12014 comments in the analysis. N = 469 of which were in the bisexual, N = 5389 in the gay, N = 4784 in the lesbian, and N = 1564 in the transgender group. Furthermore, N = 9977 of the comments were collected from Reddit, while N = 2037 on Twitter. N = 474 were from period 1, N = 5225 from period 2, and N = 6789 from period 3.

There were several common types of comments, the table below lists them and the specific category of denial they were placed in. Each comment was classified in one category, however, it is important to note that comments can be long and complex, sometimes containing multiple forms of denial. In cases where there were multiple kinds of denial within one comment, the kind that was asserted the strongest was taken to be the main form of denial presented.

Type of comment	**State of denial**
Who cares?/No one cares	Implicatory denial
You cannot transition/it is impossible to transition	Literal denial
They're not bisexual/gay/lesbian/transgender	Literal denial
This isn't news/Why is this news?	Implicatory denial

Information and discussion are more restricted in this way. Twitter, on the other hand, lets posts and engagement with these posts easily travel across the whole of the platform.

They’re only coming out/ they’re only LGBTQ because it’s advantageous or beneficial to be LGBTQ	Interpretive denial
They’re just doing it for attention	Interpretive denial
They should keep this to themselves	Implicatory denial
They are promoting a gay agenda	Implicatory
Why do they feel the need to tell everyone about their sex lives?	Interpretive denial

Table 1. The most common denial-based comments, categorized per type of denial.

In this chapter, I introduced the importance of studying denial as a response to coming out online in the cisheteropatriarchy. I then introduced the questions this thesis will deal with, the concepts of denial and cisheteropatriarchy that will be used in the rest of the discussion, as well as the methods used to study the phenomenon of denial. The next chapter will explain the role of denial within a broader context of epistemic oppression and silencing of queer people, helping to establish the dynamics of oppression within the system of knowledge that the CHP represents.

2. Epistemic oppression, silencing, and denial

Before analyzing group membership, platforms, and changes over time, it is important to introduce the concepts of epistemic oppression and silencing, as they help us view denial in a broader context and better understand the goals of the CHP as a system. Once the concepts have been introduced, I will discuss how the analysis of differences between different groups of the LGBTQ community help us understand epistemic oppression and silencing in the context of the CHP.

Note that the concepts are used as frameworks suitable for the analysis of denial and queerness within a particular system of understanding the world. The theories are not critiqued, but applied to this context. While important to engage with the literature from a critical standpoint as well, this is not the goal of this research.

Epistemic oppression

Kristie Dotson (2014) defines epistemic oppression as the "persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production" (p. 115), infringing on the epistemic agency of a knower (p. 123). Dotson discusses the phenomenon through three different categories: first-, second-, and third-order epistemic exclusion and epistemic changes.

First-order epistemic exclusion and changes

First-order epistemic exclusion combines two main characteristics: "the unwarranted infringement on the epistemic agency of a knower," and first-order changes (p. 123). First-order changes are changes that work in line with already established organizational goals. They are meant to correct for the inefficiencies encountered within the already present system. The first-order epistemic exclusion happens when there is an incompetence of the shared epistemic resources that align with a goal or particular value.

Some can have more credibility in this system, while others have less. For some, credibility lowers due to inaccurate negative prejudice, and this lowered credibility persists. They could share their experiences or insights, yet not be believed because of their position within their society (p. 124). The more widely-believed and accepted the assessments of lower credibility of a particular group are, the more difficult it is to address them (p. 125).

First-order epistemic exclusion is addressed through single-loop processes. These are changes that address problems without changing the underlying system or its goals (p. 125). Single-loop processes along with first-order changes make up the minimal changes necessary to address

epistemic exclusion, creating an efficient solution to an issue without making greater changes to the core values or concepts driving their behavior. In this case, the epistemic resources themselves are not what comes into question, but how they are applied (p. 125).

Second-order epistemic exclusion and changes

Second-order epistemic exclusion comes as a result of insufficient shared epistemic resources (p. 126). In comparison to first-order epistemic exclusion, it is no longer just the application of the resource that is in question, but rather the resource itself. A particular use of language and assumptions have to be used for the communication of knowledge or experiences. Through this, those who are disadvantaged cannot account for the full range of their experiences. Hence, knowledge production and the system itself do not work in their favor, and mostly perpetuate themselves in their existing forms, while compromising the one attempting to share insights (p. 127). Epistemological resilience becomes important in such cases. Those who are attempting to share knowledge from the margins have to challenge what the others consider reliable and functioning (p. 128). Because of this, it is difficult to give one's own insights to the majority without it seeming untrustworthy or irrelevant.

Second-order epistemic exclusion requires not only second-order changes but also double-loop processes as well. Second-order changes involve a recognition that the epistemic resources need to be revised significantly (p. 128), while double-loop processes involve individuals or groups being willing to "change their ways of thinking and their values to improve effectiveness" (p. 128). Unlike first-order epistemic exclusion, a consideration of the underlying values takes place, rather than a surface-level shift in how the epistemic resources are applied.

Third-order epistemic exclusion and changes

A third-order epistemic exclusion involves a "compromise to epistemic agency caused by *inadequate* dominant, shared epistemic resources" (p. 129). Bringing to light the inadequacy of such resources is not only a questioning of the resources themselves, but bringing into question the overall dominant resources of a community (p. 129). Unlike first- and second-order epistemic

exclusion, third-order exclusions come externally as a result of the goals of the system themselves. Because of this, the issue is in regards to upholding and preserving the resources, rather than the resources in and of themselves (p. 131). As the first- and second-order changes involve single- and double-loop processes, third-order changes involve triple-loop processes (p. 131). These include “recognizing one’s instituted social imaginaries and altering them” (p. 131), as it is important that those maintaining the third-order oppression become aware of the systems that underlie their own knowledge and behavior towards those with more marginalized places in their society, as well as recognizing that they could also provide valid and valuable inputs and be a part of knowledge production. However, this is difficult to achieve and involves tackling epistemological resilience itself (pp. 131-132).

Epistemic oppression, denial, and queerness

I argue that the different forms of denial work as mechanisms of epistemic oppression[2]. It is not difficult to see how the denial responses to discussions of queerness applies in this case: responses of denial act as both resistance to the claim that someone is queer, and as a way to assert the notion that the person coming out is not welcomed in the production of knowledge about the world. Their contribution is simply not valid because they do not share information that is aligned with the dominant system, the cisheteropatriarchy. The person is simply seen as out of touch with reality, or at least the social understanding among those reinforcing the CHP of the norms that are in place. In other words, this would refer, for example, to the belief that there might be a variety of sexual attractions to people of different genders and expressions, but one is meant to suppress such feelings and remain doing what is seen as morally correct behavior – the CHP lifestyle[3]. It is not merely a disbelief, but rather contains a moral statement that this is the lifestyle we are supposed to live, even if it is not in accordance with our wants and needs. In a sense, queer people are expected to suffer for some greater goal, such asbeing morally good, or

[2] It is difficult to assess whether oppression is achieved through denial directly. Perhaps the addition of silencing as a tactic that may utilize denial can help shed light on this. Furthermore, as the results in Chapters 3-5 will show, there is a complicated relationship between denial (as an attempt at epistemic oppression) and progress/support.

[3] By the CHP lifestyle I mean a life within a system that, through denial and moralization, has created a lifestyle for most where one does not need to extensively consider the complexity of their own gender or sexuality as long as they are capable of doing the expected tasks. One is expected to be cisgender, heterosexual, and monogamous. Not being aware of the other possibilities because the CHP does not enable the creation and sharing of knowledge helps create this lifestyle, as it is very difficult to learn that one might have the option to be things other than what the CHP provides.

pleasing one's family, in order to maintain the "reality" propagated by CHP as a system. The reality the person who is coming out has not seen (in the eyes of the CHP) is this. Queer and other non-conforming people have broken the unspoken rules which tell us not to express the complexity of human experiences of gender and sexuality because they were meant to follow a life of simple, monogamous heterosexuality. Not realizing the game being played among those adhering to the CHP system (again – in the eyes of the CHP), the person cannot be trusted as a source of knowledge about the world. Of course, people who come out typically are aware of the fact that they are breaking these unspoken rules and expectations. However, from the perspective of the CHP as a dominant epistemic system, the queer person acknowledging a reality beyond CHP (i.e. that not everyone is cisgender and heterosexual) does not result in the system of knowledge itself being wrong, but of the individual being wrong. Hence, the queer person must have somehow made a mistake, is lying or delusional, or is acting in bad faith to be provocative.

The simplified lifestyle of people within a CHP does not only simplify one's own life and moral beliefs, but it helps simplify social relations. There are men and there are women. There are normal, heterosexual, moral people, and there are those who are considered abnormal or/and immoral. In falling outside of the CHP, a person becomes marginalized both in a social, political, but also epistemic sense. Queer people find themselves expressing experiences that lie outside the CHP, against which various forms of denial are used.

An example of first-order epistemic exclusion and the kinds of changes that correspond to it is the acceptance of gays and lesbians as men and women. Dembroff (forthcoming) makes the argument that the CHP is a system which privileges "real men", "real families", and "real relationships." The title of being a "real man" or "real woman" comes from one aligning their behavior and expression with the cultural ideals of man- or womanhood. Being cisgender and non-heterosexual breaks the rules of the CHP – lesbians cannot be "real women," gay men cannot be "real men."

I argue that in the past it was indeed more commonly the case for gays and lesbians to be seen as another gender, one outside the binary. Monique Wittig's (1992) argumentation can be seen as an example of this perspective: Wittig (1992) makes the argument that lesbians are not women.

According to Wittig, women are a social category defined by their relation to men. Not being part of the systems of heterosexuality, lesbians are therefore not women (note, however, that her perspective differs from Demroff's, has a different aim and context, despite their conclusions seeming similar). Such discussions are also encountered in queer literature; for example, in Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982), where she brings up how some lesbians reject being called a "gay girl," and instead prefer the label of "dyke" (p. 206). Various such "dyke" communities have similarly rejected being women or using typically women-associated language to refer to themselves or their practices, as Jacob Hale (1997) describes (p. 230). While there have evidently been discussions about the gender of gay men and lesbian women, today it seems that it is more common to fully view them as men and women respectively. The concept of what it is to be a man or woman has expanded to include homosexuality. Gay men can be 'real men' as long as they live up to the rest of the ideal masculine traits. This can be seen in pressures reported by gay men to appear very masculine to others (Sánchez et al., 2009). This phenomenon indicates that there might be a component of self-identification to gendering as opposed to it being determined by our ideals alone. Hale (1996) also engages with this question, pointing out that some lesbians are women, and others are not (p. 115). As there is no single defining characteristic of a woman (even among lesbians, there are different opinions and identities, as well as varieties of both masculine and feminine presentations), it is most reliable to take an individual's identity as what determines their gender. Furthermore, the pressures of conforming to the gender ideals are applied to gay men and there seems to be a process of internalizing such standards based on the evidence that they do in fact seem to experience the same influences of masculinity on their behavior and expression that heterosexual men do, as Sánchez et al. (2009) discuss. Hence, the element of self-identification and perception by others point to them being largely perceived and treated as men by both themselves and others today.

Such a change from not seeing same-gender attracted people as belonging to a binary gender constitutes a first-order change. The standards of what it is to be a man or woman are now applied to a new group of people who were excluded before (to one of belonging to a particular corresponding sex). For this change to happen, a stage of literal denial has to be overcome. The dominant majority has to admit to the existence of homosexuality. From this point, an adjustment into the CHP system takes place: gay men become men and lesbians become women since they

are better integrated into the commonly used system of knowledge. As the CHP presents the gender binary as the only valid mode of designating individuals along the lines of gender, with first-order acceptance of homosexuality, they must be categorized as men or women. The gender binary itself as a core of the patriarchy remains, while a surface level change has occurred to take into account "new" experiences within it, namely that one can be gay and a binary gender.

After literal denial has been overcome to a significant extent, new ways to protect the goal of the system arise. The more complex forms of denial, interpretive and implicatory, are employed. Hence, the various ways of reinterpreting homosexuality can still happen, such as "they're doing it for attention," "they're not really gay, just confused," etc. Ways to resist conversations through implicatory denial also persist through responses such as "so what?," "no one cares about this," or "this is not what is really important," etc. Such statements aid the epistemological resilience of the CHP system, preventing discussion that goes beyond first-order changes, and attempting to revert to a previous state of literal denial, and hence, completely undisrupted functioning of the system in accordance with its epistemic goal, maintaining the gender binary.

The exclusion of sexuality from the criteria of what it is to be of a particular gender makes the body the main determining factor of one's gender. What might be present in this stage of epistemic exclusion is a perception of transgender experiences through the lens of sex as a reality they are attempting to mask, change, or avoid. Trans people might be acknowledged in this capacity, hence there being no literal denial, but other forms of denial become more dominant. This includes interpreting the experience by applying interpretive denial, such as by saying "they are not really women, they are just men in dresses," "they are just confused," or even "they are delusional." Like sexuality-related epistemic exclusion, implicatory denial can also be employed to resist greater changes to the CHP by altering the system of understanding and values itself.

Through the first-order changes, the epistemic agency of a knower who is gay or lesbian is expanded as they have now been accepted into the epistemic system and seem to be sufficiently aligned with the (epistemic) goal of the CHP. The reason why gay men and women are first to be integrated into the system is that their acceptance does not have direct impact on the concept of the gender binary itself. The ideals of what it is to be a man or woman (including the idea that

they are separate and opposite states of being) can still remain in place – gay men are simply men who are attracted to other men, and the same applies to lesbian women's gender-designation and experiences. Apart from one criterion as to what would (dis)qualify one from being a man or woman, the idea of the gender binary firmly remains in place.

Second-order epistemic exclusion and changes are such that norms or values are reevaluated, however, the underlying concepts remain unchallenged. This would allow for greater flexibility within the binary: one can change from one side to the other, or they might be somewhere between the two opposites. In other words, one can be allowed to transition between genders or exist as a combination of the two, and these expressions are then seen as valid. Importantly, the binary remains in place, but the values that one's gender is based on one's sex at birth (and their sexual expression) and is a fixed category are weakened.

In this case, literal denial has to be overcome: the existence of transitioning between genders or sexes has to be acknowledged in some capacity. However, other forms of denial can persist. Interpretive denial is present in the form of basic problems both being acknowledged and reinterpreted. Transgender people are seen as valid and are epistemically validated through their conformity to the gender binary. However, in this stage, the problem is transformed from "the gender binary is the system that creates the conditions to need to form these identities because of oppressive practices" to "transgender people are simply on the wrong side of the binary," i.e. "the problem is not what you think it is."[4]

Third-order epistemic exclusion and changes involve not the values operating within the system, but addressing the very fact that the CHP is an epistemic system with the gender binary as its core goal. In this stage, it is difficult to employ literal and interpretive denial against queer people's existence or experiences because they are not what is being individually reconsidered. In this stage, it becomes best to use implicatory denial to avoid challenging the core value of the CHP. Questioning the importance of the conversation, or the character of those who try to challenge the gender binary – through statements about how nobody cares, the topic being

[4] For example, forms of medicalization of sexual and gender identities fall into this way of thinking and producing narratives about experiences and realities.

uninteresting or unimportant, or queer people having elaborate bad faith agendas – helps avoid discussing queerness or the binary itself, and attempts to silence those who oppose it.

Silencing, trust, and epistemic violence

When examing this phenomenon question also arises: is using denial-based comments in response to the sharing of one's self-knowledge as queer is necessarily epistemic *oppression* or if could it be the case that it is some other form of epistemic resistance. Dotson (2011) who provides an account of epistemic violence and silencing would be helpful in assessing this. She highlights the importance of the speaker-audience relation as a fundamental feature of communication and a basis for epistemic violence. More specifically, the concept of reciprocity, as Hornsby (1994, p. 134, in Dotson, 2011) introduces it, provides a mechanism important to the analysis of the interaction between queer people sharing their identity or experiences. She points out that a reciprocal act of communication involves both understanding the words of the speaker and understanding them as they are meant to be understood.

As coming out is an act of sharing information to another, the dynamics between the speaker and their audience can be analyzed in terms of epistemic violence. As the study's results show (as presented in Chapter 2, 3, and 4), a queer person's coming out can frequently be met with denial. The refusal to acknowledge the information being shared, in this case, that one is queer, means the audience is not taking the information in a way that it was meant to be taken. The meaning of the words is known to the audience – they know what terms like "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual," or "transgender" mean. However, the sharing of this information is taken not as a person sharing a fact about themself or their own identity, but as something to be debated, challenged, or disproven. This creates a dynamic in which a person's ability to contribute to knowledge is restricted.

For example, attributing a queer person sharing their identity to an agenda meant to influence others to be queer (implicatory denial) misconstrues the statement of coming out as something it is not. Such engagement with the act of coming out is not only a problematic interpersonal interaction, but when it is consistently done in regards to particular kind of information or

groups, this creates an environment in which information about queerness is resisted, making the discussion of queer knowledge something that must pass epistemically violent challenges to its intent, purpose, and validity. A recent development with such dynamics is the accusation that LGBTQ people who share their identity, especially in settings of education[5], are "groomers" – a term used to describe priming children for sexual abuse (Romano, 2022; Natanson & Balingit, 2022). In this case, the information is interpreted in bad faith as having to do with influencing others sexually rather than simply a statement about one's life. This prevents sharing information about queer experiences and the needs people might have in relation to this element of their experience, effectively silencing them and preventing open communication between the speaker and audience, and making cooperation towards suitable solutions to a community's or an individual's issues. As Dotson (2011) points out, denying linguistic reciprocity (having an audience willing and capable of hearing what a speaker says) to entire groups institutes epistemic violence (p. 238). Dotson (2011) also discusses the role of ignorance in practices of silencing. She makes a distinction between ignorance that is pernicious and ignorance that is not:

> Pernicious ignorance should be understood to refer to any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another person (or set of persons). *Reliable ignorance* is ignorance that is *consistent* or follows from a predictable epistemic gap in cognitive resources. According to this definition, a reliable ignorance need not be harmful. (p. 238)

Epistemic violence is then a refusal of an audience to reciprocate in communication because of pernicious ignorance (p. 238). Importantly, this may be both intentional and unintentional. Hence, whether the audience of the person coming out genuinely believes the denial-based comments or not, it nevertheless defends the epistemic goal of the CHP and creates the dynamics of epistemic violence through denial, harming those disadvantaged by the ignorance.

Dotson (2011) expands on the concept of harm:

> Assessments of which kinds of harm result from epistemic violence are also context-dependent exercises. Insofar as the harms of epistemic violence are hardly ever

[5] While the setting of education is different from the one of famous people, it is important to consider the ways in which narratives evolve and can be applied in multiple settings. Queer people are often accused of taking part in an agenda to make others like themselves; the narratives of grooming are one form of this accusation.

> confined to epistemic matters, the harm resulting from pernicious ignorance that interferes with linguistic exchanges will require a case-by-case analysis. That is to say, ignorance that is perfectly benign in one epistemic agent, given a certain social location and power level, would be pernicious in another epistemic agent. A manifestation of ignorance that is reliable, but not necessarily harmful in one situation, could be reliable and harmful in another situation. Pernicious ignorance should not be determined solely according to types of ignorance possessed or even one's culpability in possessing that ignorance, but rather in the ways that ignorance causes or contributes to a harmful practice, in this case, a harmful practice of silencing. Epistemic violence, then, is enacted in a failed linguistic exchange where a speaker fails to communicatively reciprocate owing to pernicious ignorance … What I am offering here presupposes that all ignorance has the potential to be harmful, but ignorance becomes harmful only in certain circumstances and to the extent that it actually causes harm. It appears to be an unsustainable position to take all ignorance as harmful. (p. 239)

Hence, it may be difficult to assess all cases of denial or ignorance as harmful, however the specific case of using denial as a practice to devalue or discredit a community's epistemic agency is arguably harmful in most cases of its use.

Dotson's (2011) concept of *testimonial quieting*, a form of testimonial oppression, as part of the practices of silencing sheds further light on the dynamics of epistemic violence. It means that the audience does not recognize the speaker as a knower. Without this, the speaker is not in a position to offer testimony at all (p. 242). This is especially salient in the case of coming out and its relation to epistemic oppression more broadly.

The commonly expressed denial attempts to discredit those who share their queer life experiences as knowers, and aims silence them and others who may wish to express themselves similarly. The former is done through literal and interpretive denial, the latter through implicatory denial. Comments such as "she's just confused" or "you cannot transition" provide a way to discredit the speaker by implying that they are out of touch with reality, and their audience should not take their statements as fact. Additionally, comments such as "who cares?"

or “this isn’t news” indicate to others who might be queer that their contributions to knowledge are not welcome and that there is no point in expressing them. These mechanisms create a system that inhibits the spread of queer knowledge.

It might be argued that this dynamic is not necessarily episemically oppressive, as it has to do with self-knowledge of the queer person rather than the prevention of the epistemic agency of the knower or hindrance to one’s contribution to knowledge production. However, the availability of language to recognize, interpret, and share their queer experiences is limited through being consistently discouraged from being openly shared. For example, transgender people have commonly expressed how learning about what being transgender meant allowed them to recognize their experiences as ones corresponding to being trans, when they were not able to before having access to this knowledge. Hence, having language appropriate to one’s experiences helps shape and strengthen self-knowledge. Restricting access to such a resource for both forming and sharing knowledge would then be an act that prevents a knower from forming the appropriate knowledge and contributing to shared knowledge.

Dotson (2011) points out several harms that may develop through the exclusion of someone belonging to a particular group as a knower. One type is harm to intellectual courage (Fricker, 2007, in Dotson, 2011); another is harm to epistemic agency (Townley, 2003). Dotson emphasizes that in the context of testimonial quieting, there can be circumstances in which “one’s intellectual courage is undermined through routinely being taken as a ‘non-knower’ as a result of social perceptions of one’s identity” (p. 243). However, there can also be “circumstances in which one’s epistemic agency is undermined through testimonial quieting” (p. 243). Such dynamics may harm queer people’s ability to share knowledge. A result from this could also be the inability to form communities[6] in which queer people can share their insights with one another and create enviroments supportive of their perspectives and capable of understanding the information they might provide better than a general audience.

[6] This is the case due to having less access to information that might be relevant to their identity and experiences, as well as more barriers to expressing themselves and formulating reliable knowledge due to the resistance they encounter in expressing and sharing knowledge of (their) queerness.

Another form of testimonial oppression is *testimonial smothering* and it can also be seen in moments of coming out. Dotson (2011) describes testimonial smothering as occurring due to the speaker perceiving their immediate audience as unwilling (or unable, in some cases) to receive the testimony given (p. 244). It is “the truncating of one’s own testimony in order to insure that the testimony contains only content for which one’s audience demonstrates testimonial competence” (p. 244). In other words, those giving the testimony have to find ways to simplify or alter their language to explain their experiences to others, compromising on not only their own expression, but also their impact on others who might, in this case, be queer. This is also an element of the dynamics of second-order epistemic exclusion, as Dotson (2014) discusses in regards to epistemic oppression. Hence, knowledge production and the epistemic system of the CHP itself do not work in queer people’s favor. They perpetuate themselves in their existing forms, while compromising those attempting to share insights (Dotson, 2014, p. 127).

In the case of coming out specifically, testimonial smothering might take the form of having to place one’s queer experience into a category so that it may be understood along the established, acceptable bounds of defining queer experiences and narratives. For example, a woman who is attracted to both women and feminine presenting non-binary people might opt to identify herself as a lesbian. This term is a simplification of her actual self, but it grants her the convenience of an easy explanation of her attractions at the expense of accuracy and more precise understanding of the complexity of her sexuality. This tradeoff in coming out between safety (in terms of conforming to a more established and accepted narrative) and convenience, and nuance may not only impact the CHP audience’s concept of (her) queerness, but also her queer audience. Through the simplification of her experience, they also receive an impression of someone who neatly fits into a defined category, reducing the knowledge of having a more complex, queer sexual orientation.

Cynthia Townley (2003) discusses this social aspect of epistemic agency, adding special emphasis on its importance to marginalized communities. Having the ability to form an epistemic community requires that those sharing insights or information are trusted and can fully

express their experiences[7]. As Townley (2003) also points out, not being trusted as an epistemic agent, as queer people often are, is a form of punishment in and of itself (p. 106). People are social beings and their epistemic pursuits depend on this (p. 109); "we desire to be thought well of, i.e., seen as authoritative, responsible, trustworthy — because this is a necessary condition for full participation in the epistemic community" (p. 108). There may be, of course, different scenarios in which one might wish to exploit such trust. Townley (2003) notes that someone might indeed desire unmerited recognition. However, in the case of knowers, not getting recognition places the knower "in a bad position," as they have genuine contributions to make (p. 108).

While they are separate concepts, practices of silencing and epistemic oppression are not unrelated as there is an overlap between the two. Epistemic oppression analyzes dynamics more broadly, while practices of silencing analyze the dynamics between the speaker and their audience. Silencing can be considered a mechanism of epistemic oppression. Thus, denial can be seen as an attempt to silence, and hence oppress queer people.

This chapter has introduced Dotson's concepts of epistemic oppression (2014) and epistemic violence (2011), and applied them in the case of queerness. Denial was placed within a context of epistemic oppression as a mechanism to resist queer knowledge from being formed or shared in order to protect the epstemic goal of the CHP, the gender binary. The following chapter examines how denial indicates the stage of epistemic oppression and how the level of threat to the epistemic goal influences the amount and kind of resistance a group may encounter.

3. Group differences in denial

As was discussed, different groups present a different challenge in a given stage of epistemic oppression, and are thus expected to be subject to more attempts at silencing through denial. Being gay is expected to be perceived differently than being transgender. Each group (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) is expected to be in a different stage of the dynamics of epistemic

[7] Epistemic agency and its ability to facilitate group-making makes it an important element in the development of moral progress. This will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

exclusion, as each group's acceptance (both in terms of their literal existence and their knowledge contributions) is differently threatening to the CHP's goal, the gender binary. Because of this, the following hypotheses were formed:

Hypothesis 1: There is a difference in the likelihood of denial between groups.
1a: There is a difference in the likelihood of literal denial between groups.
1b: There is a difference in the likelihood of interpretive denial between groups.
1c: There is a difference in the likelihood of implicatory denial between groups.
1d: There is a difference in the likelihood of negative comments between groups.
1e: There is a difference in the likelihood of positive comments between groups.

If differences between groups are found, it would provide support for the dynamics of epistemic oppression, as they would be accepted differently based on the stages they are in.

Results

Being bisexual had the lowest association with denial, while the gay group significantly differed and was more likely to encounter denial ($p<0.01$, OR = 0.66642843, 95% *CI* [0.4780238, 0.9529831]). There were no significant differences between the gay and transgender groups ($p>0.1$, OR = 0.77004798, 95% *CI* [0.5309958, 1.1371753]). The lesbian group also did not significantly differ from the gay and transgender groups ($p>0.1$, OR = 1.03683123, 95% CI [0.7477818, 1.4760031]).

The bisexual group was again the least associated with literal denial, differing from the other groups; the gay one experienced significantly more literal denial than the bisexual group ($p<0.001$, OR = 0.03997061, 95% *CI* [0.01254845, 0.11039667]). The lesbian group was significantly more likely than the gay group to encounter literal denial ($p<0.01$, OR = 0.40378004, 95% *CI* [0.21557199, 0.82564320]. The transgender group, while not showing significant differences from the lesbian group, was most likely to experience literal denial ($p>0.5$, OR = 1.20263158, 95% *CI* [0.63890296, 2.46747431]).

The bisexual group was again the least likely to experience interpretive denial. The gay group showed a significantly higher chance of interpretive denial (*p*<0.001, OR = 0.188, 95% *CI* [0.114, 0.321]). The lesbian group also significantly differed from the gay group, showing higher likelihood of experiencing interpretive denial (*p*<0.001, OR = 0.428, 95% *CI* [0.27273363, 0.704]). Lastly, the transgender group also differed from the lesbian group, with the highest likelihood of encountering interpretive denial (*p*<0.01, OR = 2.055, 95% *CI* [1.324, 3.344]).

Once again the bisexual group was least likely to encounter implicatory denial, and the gay group differed from the bisexual group (*p*<0.1, OR = 0.666, 95% CI [0.1143, 0.321]). However the gay group did not show significant differences compared to the lesbian (p>0.1, OR = 1.036, 95% *CI* [0.272, 0.704]) and trans (*p*>0.1, OR = 0.77, 95% *CI* [1.324, 3.344]) groups.

Bisexuality was least likely to encounter negative comments. The gay group was significantly different from the bisexuals, and more likely to experience negative comments (*p*<0.001, OR = 0.094, 95% *CI* [0.058, 0.155]). The lesbians also differed from the gay group and were the second most likely to encounter negative comments (*p*<0.001, OP = 0.182, 95% *CI* [0.118, 0.284]) after transgender people (p<0.01, OR = 0.534, 95% *CI* [0.345, 0.840]).

The bisexual group was the least likely to receive positive comments, and the gay did not significantly differ from the bisexual one (*p*<0.1, OR = 0.925, 95% *CI* [0.750, 1.147]). The lesbian group did show a difference from the gay and bisexual groups (*p*<0.001, OR = 0.404, 95% *CI* [0.325, 0.505]). The trans group did not significantly differ from the lesbian group (*p*>0.1, OR = 1.007, 95% *CI* [0.800, 1.272]).

LGBT group differences in denial and the cisheteropatriarchal epistemic oppression

Bisexuality was least likely to encounter every form of comment. How threatening to the CHP a group's acceptance is does seem to influence the amount and kind of responses given. It is possible that bisexuality is seen as closest to the norm of heterosexuality due to its potential for forming heterosexual relationships. For example, common questions such as "why did you choose to be gay?" reflect an assumption that being gay or straight is merely a lifestyle choice

where there is one correct choice of being heterosexual, and the other should not be pursued, i.e. being bisexual is merely a fact of how we are, but people are supposed to make a decision, pick a side and an appropriate way of life.

In a society where monogamy is favored, choosing a partner would effectively mean a bisexual person has chosen to be gay or straight. Some who would like to protect the CHP system even make the claim that most people are bisexual. An example is the seemingly unexpected view of Dennis Prager – host of a radio show, and a co-founder of PragerU, a conservative advocacy group that makes videos to promote stances and narratives aligned with typically American conservative points – who stated in an interview that he believes bisexuality is the norm (The Rubin Report, 2017, 1:06:08). While at first glance this may seem like a progressive observation, it is in fact an attempt at moralizing homosexuality. That is, it can be framed as a correct moral choice to be heterosexual – we are all bisexual and have the ability to make a choice to live a heterosexual life. Bisexuality is then seen unremarkable due to it not being taken seriously as an identity and merely seen as an undefined, pre-sexual state (resonating with assertions that bisexual experiences are "just a phase" to get over). Hence, there is little interest in addressing this identity seriously at all, as it is the least threatening to a CHP.

coming out as gay was overall more likely to provoke denial than being bisexual, though less so than the lesbian and transgender groups, but had the same likelihood of positive comments as bisexuality (together they had the lowest amount). As discussed earlier, gay men are now seen as men, and as such taken more seriously under a CHP system. When sharing information about their sexuality, they are seen as having the agency to determine and credibly express their sexuality more so than those of other genders, since the CHP system determines them as more valid agents than the rest and the results indicate social media users may perceive them in such a way as well.

An objection to this reasoning might be made in line with Dembroff's view of gay men not being seen as "real men." Perhaps this could mean their epistemic power is not favored on the basis of them being men, but for some other reason. However, as argued, gay men tend to be seen as men nevertheless (and perceive themselves as such), and the CHP advantages men due to sexism.

Even if gay men do not embody the ideal of the "real man" fully, they do so partially through being men who can behave according to the masculine ideals in other ways. For example, gay men who behave in typically masculine ways are more advantaged than those who do not (Hoskin, 2019). This shows gay men can also be seen as judged as men, and hence, a gay man's sexuality would indeed be seen as more legitimate than a woman's (especially in comparison to one who is not a "real woman" and is therefore further disadvantaged).

This – in contrast to the other groups – relative high acknowledgement and greater trust of gay men renders them a lesser threat to the order of the CHP epistemic system compared to lesbian and transgender people[8]. Gay men are, despite their diminished status in the CHP hierarchy, still men; they do not threaten the fundamental ideas of sexism and cisnormativity. Hence, consistent with the idea of denial being used as a mechanism to protect the CHP system from threats, gay men face greater amount of resistance compared to bisexuals, but lesser resistance compared to lesbians and transgender people.

Note, however, that gay men, along with bisexuals, had the lowest amount of positive comments as well. In addition to this, they were more likely to receive negative comments than the bisexual group, but less likely than the others. This may indicate that denial is not a form of epistemic resistance only along the lines of group membership. It points to a more dynamic process of an audience's response to attention or acceptance. If a group is largely ignored, it does not pose a threat to the epistemic order. If there is more positive attention, there might also be more denial responses in order to counteract the acceptance and potential changes this may cause.

Coming out as lesbian was overall even more likely to result in denial than coming out as a gay man. However, there was a lesser likelihood of negative and positive comments. As Wittig (1992) points out, women tend to be defined in relation to a man. Because of women's definition in relation to men, they are typically treated as if lacking sexual wants and autonomy – it is the man who possesses these traits, while women passively take part in what men want. In choosing

[8] Note that they are still a threat to the goal of the CHP. Even though they might be first to be included through first and second-order changes, they are part of the larger group of people the CHP aims to erase and silence with the rest of the groups.

to identify as a lesbian, a woman refuses to be identified in this way – she no longer places herself in relation to a man, but rather exercises her sexuality independently of one.

This is a greater challenge to how the CHP is structured compared to identifying as a gay man because it not only challenges what is seen as having the correct sexual expression, but also having the correct associated gender in order to do it. In other words, being a lesbian does not only threathen the "hetero" part of the CHP, but also more directly challenges the "patriarchy." Hence, lesbianism can be seen as a greater threat to the system and responded to with more denial-based resistance.

Being transgender was the most likely to receive denial responses. This is also in line with the explanation that transgender identities are more challenging to the CHP system as they threathen the fundamental ideas of an objctive gender binary. The idea of being able to change one's gender or sex disrupts the strictly defined roles needed to maintain the epistemic system as it is. This group challenges the strict, static notions of gender and sexuality. While being non-heterosexual does alter the perception of one's gender, as Dembroff (in progress) argues, it is not challenging to the entire narrative of the CHP system. Furthermore, as discussed earlier in this chapter, within Dotson's (2014) framework of epistemic oppression in relation to the epistemic goal of maintaining the gender binary, acceptance of transgender identities requires a more extensive change in thinking about the binary compared to the surface-level integration of gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities.

Along with the transgender group, the lesbian group received the most positive comments. The lesbian group was second most likely to receive negative comments, while the trans group was most likely. This again points to a relationship between the perception of acceptance on the side of those defending the CHP and responding to queerness negatively. This does point to a more complex relationship between the level of visible support and acceptance for a community, its threat to the epistemic goal, and the amount of resistance encountered – the lesbian and trans groups had an equal amount of support, yet different amounts of negative or denial-containing comments. Similarly, the gay and bisexual groups both had the lowest amount of supportive comments, but bisexuals had less negative and denial-containing comments.

All forms of denial were found in the coming out posts' reactions, and group differences between LGBT people were found. The study of social media interactions has allowed for a close analysis of the dynamics between oppressor and oppressed, where the interactions can be documented. In this case, it does seem that the dynamics of epistemic oppression could come in the stages proposed, as there do seem to be differences between groups, indicating that they might be differently perceived based on their status within the CHP and how threatening it is to its epistemic goal.

Social media has illuminated the reactions people have to expressions of queerness, makng it possible to assess the status quo better than before. As discussed, this could be a reason for why the groups who get the most positive comments tend to also receive the most denial and negative comments – once a group starts gaining support it can be recognized as being threatening to the goal of maintaining the gender binary and resisted. This idea is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

While it may be that social media has merely shown the reactions, it is also important to consider the possibility that it has shaped them instead. Not only do social media platforms often determine a user's relationship to information through filtering different kinds of content or providing the spaces to create echo chambers, these platforms may also shape the response outcomes through moderation practices. This potential effect of social media on the outcome content will be explored next, as the topic of Chapter 4.

4. Platform structure, content moderation, trust, and epistemic agency

While I have discussed social media in a broad sense so far, it is important to discuss the differences between platforms. Different platforms host different communities with various political leanings. For example, Twitter tends to have a reputation of being more left-wing and liberal (Wagner, 2018; Cohen, 2022); Reddit is not known for a political orientation, and it largely depends on the community one is in; while others, such as 4chan, or even YouTube, can be seen as platforms contributing to the rise and spread of right-wing ideas and ideologies

(Munn, 2019). Furthermore, there are differences in the structure of the sites, their rules, and their cultures.

Based on the consideration of social media platforms as themselves being potentially determining factors in the presence of oppressive speech, the second set of hypotheses were formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 2: There is a difference in the likelihood of denial between platforms.
2a: There is a difference in the likelihood of literal denial between platforms.
2b: There is a difference in the likelihood of interpretive denial between platforms.
2c: There is a difference in the likelihood of implicatory denial between platforms.
2d: There is a difference in the likelihood of negative comments between platforms.
2e: There is a difference in the likelihood of positive comments between platforms.

If there are differences between Reddit and Twitter in regards to the likelihood of one showing more denial, it could indicate that some social media platforms have been built in a way that enables and perpetuates the dynamics of epistemic oppression and silencing as a result of how moderation is structured differently on each site, as well as the effects of algorithms on the content and outcomes. Both will be considered in relation to denial and epistemic oppression.

Results

The two platforms studied here, Reddit and Twitter, did indeed show a significant difference between one another. There was less likelihood of literal denial on Reddit compared to Twitter ($p<0.001$, OR = 5.403, 95% *CI* [3.679, 7.949]). There was much less likelihood of interpretive denial on Reddit compared to Twitter ($p<0.001$, OR = 5.403, 95% *CI* [4.305, 6.782]), as well as implicatory denial ($p<0.001$, OR = 1.371, 95% *CI* [1.155, 1.621]). Lastly, there was much less likelihood of negative comments on Reddit compared to Twitter (p<0.001, OR = 5.316, 95% CI [3.983, 7.100]), and greater likelihood of positive comments on Reddit compared to Twitter ($p<0.001$, OR = 2.190, 95% *CI* [1.971, 2.432]).

Reddit and Twitter's denial

Reddit seems to be a platform that has created a space in which there is less likelihood of encountering comments with hateful messages or comments dismissing the experiences of queer people compared to Twitter. A reason for this might be the way the online communities are structured on each platform. Reddit is organized into smaller communities based on interests which contain teams of moderators (themselves Reddit users who take on the responsibility) who can directly intervene by either deleting comments or posts, asking users to change a certain behavior, or banning users from participating within their community. Moreover, Reddit communities may set rules on how members are supposed to behave. This may include the kinds of posts that are (not) allowed; types of comments that may not be allowed; the kind of language expected, allowed, discouraged, or prohibited; etc. Twitter, on the other hand, does not have such a community-based format. Rather, posts are often open for anyone with a Twitter account to share or comment on. Such an open format becomes much more difficult to manage by the platform in comparison. Evaluation of content and intervention does not take place as quickly, thus, one could argue that conditions are often more tolerant of denialist or hateful behavior as moderation of an entire platform cannot be as nuanced and careful as individual communities.

A factor that could have contributed to these results is the fact that Reddit is organized through communities around particular topics, while Twitter is not. This may affect the users in two ways: they might be incentivized to behave in a friendly way in order to not lose their membership in a particular community, or they might not be within that community to discuss their opinions on queer issues. Twitter, on the other hand, with its open structure could be encouraging greater engagement with all topics without giving one a stable community context to act within. This could perhaps encourage one to state their thoughts on all issues they come across and have an opinion about. Further research could help illuminate the mechanism behind the differences in observed behaviors.

As denial can be used to create harmful environments against disadvantaged groups, removing this kind of content can be justified, despite it not being overtly hateful or aggressive towards queer people. If the dynamics of oppression and the ways in which they take place in online

environments are recognized, it provides an opportunity to reshape a platform and limit oppressive practices towards queer people.

It is worthwhile to point out that while the two platforms did show differences, both denial and negative comments were present on both Reddit and Twitter. Reddit simply seemed to have either a more efficient system of removing them, or less tolerance towards them. As the comments were not collected with the goal of analyzing the role of moderation, the ones removed through the process of moderation were excluded from the analysis. Perhaps further research on moderation can shed light on its role in, and effects on content. However, with the present results, it is interesting to consider this question as I did encounter comments removed by moderators. Often, responses to removed comments remain available, in many cases, the content of the comment is relatively easy to estimate, whether based on the responses themselves or the replies quoting parts of the original comment (see Figure 5).

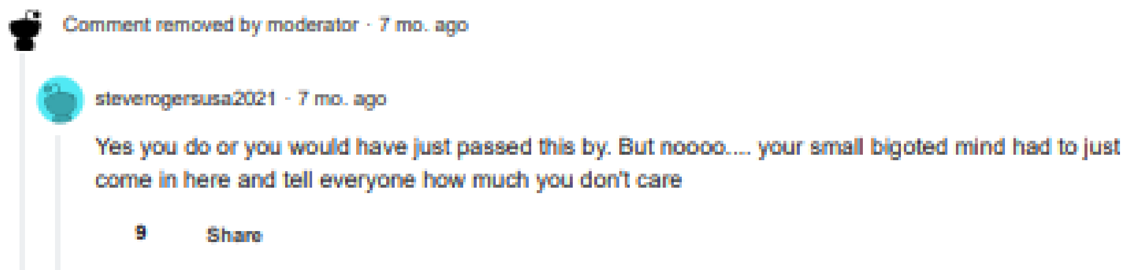

Figure 5. A comment removed by a moderator to which the replies are visible. The response makes it relatively clear that the original commenter stated that they do not care about the information being presented (steverogersusa2021, 2021).

Accounting for moderation on Twitter was more difficult compared to Reddit. It was not always clear which content was removed by a moderator, as there was no clarification given as to whether deleted comments or suspended accounts were due to the comments on the threads analyzed. This is likely due to much of the content being before the relatively new policy of stating that a tweet was removed for violating Twitter rules. On Reddit, this was not the case, as comments removed through the process of moderation state “comment removed by moderator.” Such transparency can provide greater clarity on the rules of a platform or community, as well as

greater accountability for moderators. It also provides a way to observe whether anti-queer content is being taken seriously as an issue by social media platforms.

While moderation practices are not always fully disclosed, we can discuss general differences between platforms depending on the different content allowed. On Twitter, content moderation is partially done through an algorithm that tries to detect content that might be unallowed on the platform; it might also mark some content as "sensitive," or even as potentially containing misinformation. Users may appeal to human moderators employed by the platform in cases where they do not agree with the judgments made by the algorithm. Reddit, having a community-based structure, employs a decentralized approach to content moderation. Users can directly communicate with the "mods" (users who are responsible for moderating a community) regarding decisions made. The platform does have site-wide moderators who act in cases of reported content or communities deemed inappropriate.

While the kinds of moderation are different, research has indicated that there seems to be no difference in perceptions of fairness when it comes to whether a person or algorithm evaluates the content in question on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook (Vaccaro et al., 2020). People also tend to feel like appeals to the platform are futile, and that rules are not enforced consistently (Vaccaro et al., 2020). However, such research has not taken into account community-based social media, where rules are stated more clearly and generally presented in accessible language. On Reddit, there are possibilities to directly contact the community's moderators and discuss your case with a Reddit community member, rather than a less accessible platform moderator. On other platforms, moderation is less personal and tends to be perceived as arbitrary due to a lack of accessible and explicit rules of conduct provided on the site (Vaccaro et al., 2020).

While content moderation seems to be helpful in creating an environment that hosts less negative and denial-based behavior, it involves restricting what is allowed to be said, and can evidently be perceived as being unfair by some. In the past several years, questions about content moderation have come up, such as: Should social media companies as powerful private entities have the power to decide which content is appropriate and which is not? How can we know what the truth

is precisely in order to claim something is false? A portion of this movement has been in regards to queer issues, especially transgender issues. The right has been especially critical, framing their wishes to post arguably hateful and harmful content as an issue of free speech. The "hate speech versus freedom of expression" debate has been relevant in discussions of online content moderation in the last several years (Tontodimamma et al., 2021). While important and worth further exploring, it falls outside of the scope of the discussion. However, other arguments have also formed that are more immediately relevant to the notion of epistemic oppression. Rather than being openly negative, these arguments focus on questioning who is able to, or who may determine the precise truth in order to make decisions about removing content.

Recently, popular right-wing figure Jordan Peterson made a video criticizing Twitter for not allowing him to misgender and deadname transgender actor Elliot Page, claiming that Twitter's rules were not precise enough as to what part of his statement is hateful or unfactual[9] (Jordan B Peterson, 2022). In such a scenario, denial is arguably weaponized in bad faith, as there seems to be a simple solution to his questions of what precise moment a transgender person's name and pronouns should begin to be respected despite a past of using other ones: when the person asks others to do so[10]. As Townley (2003) has discussed, trust is an important element in forming knowledge as a social practice. In disbelieving queer people when stating their identity and their experiences, those who do so hamper the development of knowledge about this community and through this control, their resources to creating communities and better circumstances in a society that does not function in their favor. Oppressors are in a position to control marginalized people's lives or their epistemic contributions through diminishing their credibility due to their lesser status in a society (Dotson, 2014, p. 124). Claims such as "they're just confused" or "these issues are not important" establish that there is little or no trust in queer people – they cannot be taken seriously as reliable sources of knowledge. This affects how they create community and advocate for their needs.

[9] The importance of transparency comes up again, as Peterson claimed it was not clearly stated what the precise reason was.
[10] This is of course a pragmatic solution, but indicates that we may indeed not have precise answers to some skeptical questions. However, importantly, neither do those who pose them.

When taking into account the political reputation of the sites – Twitter supposedly being a left-wing platform, and Reddit giving users the ability to host a variety of communities of various political leanings (i.e. some communities might be very right-wing, while others might be left-wing, while others might be mixed or centrist) – the results are surprising. Twitter seems to host a greater amount of denial-containing and negative comments, while also having a smaller amount of positive comments. Furthermore, only about 1.2% of the comments seem to have been removed through some form of moderation, while on Reddit, the rate is nearly three times higher with 3.4%. The reason this is unexpected is because the left generally tends to hold more accepting attitudes towards LGBTQ people (Woodford et al., 2012), and for example, left-leaning political advocates tend to explicitly support queer rights.

It is possible that the assumption that Twitter is a left-wing platform is false. There seems to be mixed evidence about the platform's potential bias. Some research has indicated that more conservative accounts are suspended from the platform, however, this effect was explained by the finding that conservatives tend to share much more misinformation than liberals (Yang et al., in press). Research into Twitter's algorithms has indicated an opposite bias. It seems that the right tends to benefit more from its content's amplification on the site (Huszár et al., 2021). Another study suggests that there is little bias on the platform in either direction (Mukerjee et al., 2022). Current research does not point to a straightforward answer, and it seems to matter which element of the platform is being considered specifically.

In the case that Twitter is indeed a left-leaning platform in terms of its users' views, the results of this study might indicate that the content or beliefs of the individuals would matter less. Instead, the structure of the platform itself would be key in influencing the results based on the kinds of behaviors it incentivizes. Even if Twitter has more left-leaning users, which might not be the case, its structure may be such that it allows for easier expression of anti-queer content due to moderation being less reliable and consistent, as well as the little community-based accountability for both individual users and communities present on the platform. If this is the case, site structure would be an important factor for facilitating epistemic agency among marginalized groups, as well as discouraging epistemic resistance against them. Furthermore, as

Huszár et al. (2021) suggest, the algorithmic bias might simply be more powerful than the users in terms of determining the content, regardless of their general political leaning.

As the site structure does seem to be an influential factor in the dynamics and outcomes present on the sites, I will consider the roles of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, as both algorithms and a platform's community structures may interact with users' feeds and influence their behavior.

Building denial on social media platforms: Epistemic bubbles and echo chambers

Denial can both be built in and achieved through reproducing the offline norms on social media platforms. It is salient to explore internet echo chambers and epistemic bubbles as both are built on denial. As (Nguyen, 2020) points out, while often used interchangeably, echo chambers and epistemic bubbles are different phenomena. Their differences are relevant to the kinds of denial that occur and how they arise and remain.

Epistemic bubbles function in a way that excludes information from a person's experience. It filters out some forms of content to provide the user content they would like to see. On Reddit, it would be easier to create a filter bubble; one can select the communities they want to be part of and hence, they can very specifically control content they want to see. Twitter, being more open and providing the ability to share various content regardless of the theme, would be less prone to the creation of bubbles.

Through epistemic bubbles, literal denial can be built into our online environments. For example, queer content and perspectives might be excluded from a person's timeline because they do not want to see queer posts or discss such issues. Their own prejudice might become a way of building an online world of comfort, where there are no queer people or issues. However, it is not an active form of denial – they would not seek out to actually disprove or invalidate the existence of queerness in the world, it might simply not be something that appeals to them.

While seeming relatively harmless and conflictless, epistemic bubbles might enable the perpetuation of epistemic oppression and injustices. Social media platforms often have the power to determine the kinds of content recommended or promoted (Nguyen, 2020). In other words, to a large extent, marginalized voices may remain so. Queer issues might be seen as undesireable and hence hidden unless one specifically shows interest in such content. However, this exclusion might bring harm to those who have queer experiences or desires due to the lack of acceptance and resources available that might help queer people navigate the world safely, and without the language to understand, share, or communicate their experiences. To a person who is simply has no interest in queer information, epistemic bubbles might not be so harmful. To those who do have unusual or somehow prohibited experiences which they cannot communicate or make sense of, having the language and environment that helps them understand themselves can be of great importance.

Literal denial works to uphold the system that was built upon the idea that there are no queer people, or that there ought not to be. Hence, the default expected lifestyle is the heterosexual one, and anything outside of this way of life is simply unallowed or unsupported. Furthermore, people who have feelings and experiences outside the expected roles often lack the language to identify themselves. If they do not have the means to discover what being (e.g.) bisexual is, they might never realize the opportunity they have to realize their sexuality. Epistemic bubbles could be a means of regulating knowledge in the online world as well, aiding the exclusion of queer lifestyles and identities.

Epistemic bubbles, while potentially harmful, are fragile. Nguyen (2020) points out that epistemic bubbles do not challenge the credibility of an outsider's perspective of information, they merely omit content (p. 144). Therefore, it is easier to counter the exclusive effects of epistemic bubbles. If the information typically omitted is presented, the person receiving the information, unlike in echo chambers, is not encouraged to dismiss the new information. Hence, the effects of the built-in denial are weaker and are possible to overcome through providing information.

Compared to epistemic bubbles, echo chambers create a much more complex environment of denial. In echo chambers, voices that differ from the main narrative created and sustained are actively discredited. This can make echo chambers highly resilient (Nguyen, 2020, p. 146). Their members are not merely unexposed to opposing information, they actively engage in ways to preemptively discredit either those who oppose their views or the views themselves. An example of such an action would be establishing the belief of the existence of a global gay agenda – those who are queer are either promoting queerness and those who voice their support have fallen victim to this conspiracy against their interests. When confronted with either the existence of queer people or issues, those who have developed such beliefs would be equipped to resist the information or narratives they encounter that are contrary to their established beliefs.

As analyzed in Chapters 2 and 3, the various implementations of denial might be used to discredit the epistemic agency of marginalized people or perspectives. Denial-based beliefs may also be used as ways of protecting one's view. Interpretive denial, used in expressions such as "they are just confused" can not only be dismissive, but also become part of a view that designates queer people as incapable of contributing to knowledge due to their characterization as somehow being less capable of perceiving reality or themselves. Another method of protecting the goal of the CHP within echo chambers is through implicatory denial. As mentioned, conspiratorial ways of considering outside views might arise. However, queer contributions might be shut down with responses such as "no one cares about this" or "there are more important things to focus on." Through this, the relevance of queerness even being discussed at all is challenged, framing the one bring up the issue or doing the coming out as being merely self-centered and hence not worth taking their input seriously.

This chapter dealt with the various differences between Reddit and Twitter. Importantly, factors such as moderation, algorithms, and site structures may heavily influence both user behavior and outcomes in terms of the content. Platforms consistently differed in terms of the likelihoods of encountering all forms of denial, indicating that site structures may be built in ways that help maintain the CHP. However, this also means that perhaps queerphobia might be curbed to some extent through better design. The question of whether social media has features that could enable progress in terms of queer issues and movements, as well as our moral developmeent as a society

in regards to queer issues will be discussed in Chapter 6. First, however, I will discuss the evolution of denial over time, if there is any.

5. Does denial evolve through time?

Because of the change in how information is presented to an individual, it becomes very difficult to engage in literal denial. Denying some information exists when it is immediately presented to someone, and importantly, doing so publicly, might put the person reacting to the content in a position where they appear to be out of touch with a seemingly obvious reality. In comparison, reacting to information before social media does not incentivize such reactions. Outside an environment where one is in the presence of others at the time, they can simply ignore pieces of information, making literal denial easy to maintain and of little consequence to the one who expresses it.

Overcoming literal denial (generally) does not guarantee that there will be no denial at all. Instead, it might be the case that the other forms of denial become more common. Hence, social media, despite providing greater access to information, does not remove the intention behind the use of denial in the first place. The goal and standards of a society remain in place, driving the denial and being perpetuated through it. In other words, when something cannot be literally denied anymore, rather than accepting it, people continue the already established ways of a society. The presence of social media merely transforms how these aims are upheld, while the epistemic goal of the gender binary remains. .

As opposed to passively denying information, social media incentivizes its users through its interactive structure, in which they are expected to engage with one another, into more active[11] forms of denial, arguably more frequently as well. The user now either needs to express either interpretive or implicatory denial (or as a generally negative comment). Due to such developments, the dominant form of denial is likely to have changed with social media becoming commonly used. Because of this, the differences between different time periods were considered.

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[11] By active forms of denial it is meant that outside the bounds of social media, one could simply use literal denial and ignore the existence of queer people. Without the access to common responses to queer issues, they would not engage with such content to defend the CHP as queer voices and their support were silenced or invisible.

Through social media, the amount of literal denial was expected to decrease over time and for other forms of denial to become more prevalent.

Hypothesis 3: There is a difference in the likelihood of denial between periods.
3a: There is a difference in the likelihood of literal denial between periods.
3b: There is a difference in the likelihood of interpretive denial between periods.
3c: There is a difference in the likelihood of implicatory denial between periods.
3d: There is a difference in the likelihood of negative comments between periods.
3e: There is a difference in the likelihood of positive comments between periods.

Results

The results, in large part, showed no significant differences between the three periods. There was no significant difference between the periods ($p>0.1$, OR = 0.997, 95% *CI* [0.438, 2.873]; $p>0.1$, OR = 0.688, 95% *CI* [0.299, 1.993]) in terms of literal denial. There was also no significant difference between the periods ($p>0.1$, OR = 0.927, 95% *CI* [0.530, 1.783]; $p>0.1$, OR = 1.117, 95% *CI* [0.645, 2.131]) when it comes to interpretive denial. There was less likely to be implicatory denial in period 1, 2008-2012, ($p<0.001$, OR = 0.147, 95% CI [0.111, 0.191]) compared to period 2, 2013-2017, ($p<0.01$, OR = 0.619, 95% CI [0.320, 0.571]), and it was less likely for there to be implicatory denial in period 3, 2018-2022, compared to 2 ($p<0.001$, OR = 0.425, 95% CI [0.320, 0.571]). Furthermore, there were more likely to be positive comments in period 1 ($p<0.001$, OR = 0.034, 95% CI [0.020, 0.055]) compared to period 2 ($p<0.001$, OR = 4.774, 95% CI [2.984, 8.239]), and it was more likely for there to be positive comments in period 3 compared to 2 ($p<0.001$, OR = 11.161, 95% CI [7.000, 19.215]), but there was no significant difference between the periods in terms of the likelihood of negative comments ($p>0.1$, OR = 1.195, 95% *CI* [0.592, 2.855]; $p>0.1$, OR = 0.975, 95% *CI* [0.483, 2.330]).

The non-evolution of denial

The results did not indicate the progression of denial hypothesized. This could be the case for several reasons. The most obvious is that there might not be such a development of denial.

However, the results might also be a result of how the analysis was carried out. The period selection was arbitrary – the available years for data collection were divided into equal amounts of years. Considering the long term development of the queer rights movement, it could be the case that some form of shift between the dominant kinds of denial occurred that was not reflected in the current dataset. Furthermore, it might be the case that there are more nuanced period differences, rather than general ones, i.e. a more careful consideration of significant events for each group could potentially demonstrate different results.

Considering the differences between groups discussed in Chapter 2, it seems that a complex relationship between the various factors is emerging. The time periods as delineated in this study do not seem to be a very influential factor with the exception of the relation between the time period and implicatory denial, as well as positive comments. However, the differences between group membership and platform may help create a clearer picture of which factors contribute most to the experience of denial and how it may change. The initial reasoning behind the linear progression through the forms of denial from one period to the next was that one would not be able to use literal denial as a method to resist queer realities once access to information is provided. It was expected that the dominant form of denial would then evolve to a more complex form until the only form of denial left as a possibility being implicatory. However, this does not account for the element of responding to support.

A general pattern emerged among the results indicating that perhaps receiving support could also result in receiving greater amounts of denial. Further research could help examine the relationship between the support queer people receive and the amount of denial in greater detail. While we cannot establish causality between the two variables research conducted, the implications of such a relationship could be valuable to consider in the study of oppressor-oppressed relations.

Support and resistance

In order to protect the epistemic goal of the CHP, the gender binary, in response to support given to queer people or issues, those who protect this concept might speak up in order to resist the

acceptance of and progress away from their preferred system. Some may voice disapproval directly, through hateful comments. However, as the support for LGBTQ people has grown, it has also become less acceptable or tolerated to be openly and directly disapproving of queerness. Instead, resistance against open expression of or discussion about queerness has predominantly been through denial-based statements. Claiming that no one cares or accusing a person of coming out for attention does not directly express hatred of queer people. Rather, it frames the response as something uninteresting or unnecessary to discuss.

Beyond the responses to information about queerness itself, there is another dimension of denial that may occur. Social media has enabled a way for people to respond publicly not only to queer content, but also to other responses. For example, saying “who cares?” is not only a response to queer content, but a response to others caring.

Social media where one can perceive a variety of responses to content and respond to others, such as Reddit and Twitter, gives people outside traditional forms of media the power to express their thoughts on such platforms. Before the widespread use of social media, making public coming out announcements as a celebrity or well-known person had to be done through either television or some form of written communication with an audience, such as newspapers and magazines. Such forms of media made it impossible to see many individual reactions gathered in one place and what they were. Through social media, people may express their support, disapproval, or use any form of response they feel is necessary (within the limits of the social media format).

It could be the case that once support is expressed and one can witness the progress on issues, they could then, in support of the CHP system, begin to express disapproval. If largely unsupported or ignored, there would be little need for denial-based responses as the lack of support of queer issues indicates there is no threat to the gender binary. Before social media, there was simply no access to the range of responses available today. With the growing acceptance and relative success of the LGBTQ movement (in the Western world), and the

availability of the responses to queer content, denial would increase in response[12]. Because of such changes to one's environment and access to new forms of information and responses, social media plays a crucial part in LGBTQ movements and their opposition today. It can extend the dynamics of offline systems of oppression, but transform them through the different ways of interaction the online world enables, such as gaining access to greater amounts of information about or exposure to communities that might otherwise not be safely available to interact with.

This chapter dealt with the analysis of denial over different periods of time. The results indicated no relationship between the different forms of denial and time, however, it is possible that this outcome occurred because of a flaw in the methodological setup of the study. I will extend the question of whether social media influences responses over time through discussing the question of whether moral progress has been made due to characteristics of social media.

6. The cisheteropatriarchy's move to the internet and moral progress

The level of support for a group that exists beyond the internet itself can shed light on the relationship between information and the goals of the CHP offline, and the interaction and developments that take place on social media. Based on the study conducted, the position of transgender people is least accepted out of the 4 groups. This seems to often be the case both offline (European Union lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender survey, 2014) and online. What this tells us is that the CHP is a system that migrated from the offline world to the online. One mechanism that could have enabled this is the social nature of hate. As Walther (2022) points out, people comment hatefully in order to make friends (and marginalized people are an easy target), or form and strengthen social bonds. In this way, the mainstream culture in the offline world may begin to enter the online spaces as well. Another mechanism aiding the spread of the CHP to the online world is language. The same systems of language end up structuring thoughts and expressions of those participating on social media. Hence, social media, while a new space, is not entirely independent of the world outside of it, nor is it a space of endless opportunities and no consequences for those who break the already established rules of the patriarchy.

[12] While groups that are most likely to receive support also seem to be most likely to receive denial, the study was not designed in such a way to test the relationship between the two variables. However, future research could help study this potential connection between denial and support.

While the CHP might be reproduced online, the internet does indeed provide a different space for expression. The absence of a physical body on social media makes expression of marginalized groups, positions, or experiences means there is much less risk. Specifically, queer people may form groups, give support to one another, help one another by providing information that may not be otherwise accessible, or engage with a larger range of people. In the offline world this might be impossible in many cases, as queer people might put themselves at risk of physical harm when engaging with those who might oppose them.

With more people coming out the group can gain greater epistemic power. For example, the trans community has gone from being largely invisible to being the center of political debate in the past several years. This has been not only due to the efforts of activists, but also in large part due to the people who have come out publicly as being transgender on social media. The public nature of social media allows for an announcement that can directly reach many people and be easily shared with many others. In pre-social media times, this was not available. One might announce that they were LGBTQ to a group of people, but it would not be as permanent of a statement as posting it online, and it would likely reach fewer people. Of course, the news could have been shared interpersonally, but I would like to note that being "outed" by another person (willingly or not) would not be the same as seeing such an announcement. For one, the person receiving the information might be more likely to believe it if they did so through the LGBTQ person themself[13]. Further, being able to proudly announce information yourself might in many cases be seen as more empowering and dignifying, rather than it being talked about without the person themselves being there and having the ability to speak up for themself, especially in cases where one would be "outed" to others against their wishes. When coming out online through a post or personal messages, the LGBTQ person's presence is assured in the sense that if their "outer" would still then refer to a post or their messages[14]. The content would be in their own words, rather than the "outer" having the ability to reinterpret what a person's coming out meant. Through this, queer people gain greater control over their own narratives, the words they use to

[13] Because of this, they would be much less likely to engage in what Cohen (2013) would classify as "literal denial," opening the doors for further discussion about LGBTQ issues.
[14] Evidence such as linking to a post, showing a screenshot of a post or message, or even the post or message itself can be asked for and seamlessly provided, whereas such a thing was not possible before widespread use of social media.

express their experience, and if it reaches people in that form through social media, it gives the one coming out more power than they had before social media times.

Moral progress, social media, queerness

Though the research was not carried out with this purpose, the results suggested that there was an increase in the amount of support over time. This brings up the question: If our social practices have changed towards showing more support for queer people during their coming outs, has there been moral progress made in regards to this issue? Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 1, many overtly use or imply the claim that being queer is no longer an issue in denial-based claims such as "who cares?" or "they are 'coming out' as queer because it benefits them." Hence, I will reflect on moral progress in regards to queer issues, the role of epistemic agency in making moral progress, and what this means for denial.

Since I have discussed progress in queer acceptance (and its relation to denial), I would like to consider the idea of moral progress specifically in relation to queer acceptance and social media. Furthermore, the relevance of the body as a factor in the actions one can take are touched upon. Greater consideration of the risk of physical harm in this case is also important, as it affects the immediate safety of those building a movement and advocating for acceptance through their ability of being openly queer identifying. This is relevant for examining the relation between epistemic oppression and its relation to social and political actions or circumstances. We could also use the notion of moral progress to reflect on the effects of the changes caused, and perhaps whether social media has mechanisms that affect the position we are in morally. Hence, I would like to examine the relations between moral progress, risk of immediate bodily harm, and social media in the case of coming out and societal acceptance. I will argue that the widespread use of social media has affected the risk present in the dynamics of moral progress, and in a sense accelerated them if viewed through a non-realist account.

As the results have demonstrated, people do receive negative and denial-based comments as opposition to their announcement when coming out. I argue that there is a relation between the risk of being harmed as an individual by coming out and moral progress. Furthermore, I argue

that elements of this risk can serve as mechanisms for achieving progress within movements of queer acceptance. I will focus on risk as one element in the dynamics of moral progress, specifically through the case of publicly coming out in online environments. As Kitcher (2021) already discusses risk of coming out as an element in the dynamics of moral progress in terms of the acceptance of homosexuality on a societal level, I would like to use the notion of coming out in pre-social media times as a starting point for my discussion and expand on it through comparing the role of social media in today's complex dynamics of risk and progress to situations where this process was occurring in a different environment. Furthermore, I will expand the discussion from homosexuality (Kitcher's example) to the queer community in general, as both same-gender attracted people, transgender people, and otherwise queer people tend to face similar forms of negative moral judgment, as has been discussed already.

As mentioned above, the results also show support for people coming out. Considering the proposed relationship between positive and denial-based comments, it might also shed light on the dynamics of how progress develops.

Non-realist moral progress

Before discussing moral progress in the context of risk and queer movements, I will introduce the notion of moral progress itself. The concept at first glance seems to involve a strong realist position. As Moody-Adams (1999) discusses it, moral progress is indeed associated with moral realism. The notion that we can determine what moral progress is seems to imply a certain objective goal we know we are progressing to. However, in a similar vein to Hermann (2019), I would like to avoid such a commitment to strong claims of moral realism, as this view would face the difficult challenge of explaining the exact moral facts, as well as how we have access to this knowledge. Instead, I will follow Hermann's (2019) approach in adhering to a non-realist conception of moral progress.

In Hermann's (2019) account, moral realism is characterized as "the meta-ethical view that moral statements are true or false independently of what human beings think about them" (p. 301; Erdur 2018, p. 227, in Hermann (2019)). The non-realist approach is based in social

practices rather than a "mind-independent" reality. Furthermore, instances of moral progress can only be evaluated retrospectively, as changes at different levels (e.g. socially, institutionally, etc.) point us to their presence (Hermann, 2019, p. 304).

This idea of morality being situated in social practices provides a basis for an analysis of risk of harm as an instigator of moral progress that is not realist. Hermann's (2019) interpretation of "semantic depth" – the complexity moral concepts have – is a key element. These complexities are due to the complexities of human practices (Hermann, 2019, p. 303). As Hermann illustrates, "[d]eepening our understanding of the concept of justice means coming to understand more of the nuances of the concept by, for instance, coming to see new aspects of human life as constituting problems of justice." (p. 304). We can now examine particular social practices on different levels as part of moral progress itself, rather than working with an assumption that we already know what a concept encompasses.

The risk of coming out and moral progress

There has been little discussion devoted exclusively to the relationship between risk and moral progress. Moody-Adams (1999) discusses risk as one of the four essential characteristics of engaged moral inquirers: "[they] must be willing to assume great personal risk in order to advance the causes they advocate" (p. 176). However, while such actions imply a very deliberate connection to moral values in and of themselves, it does not provide us with an account of moral progress where we can connect the risk of harm of coming out for reasons that might not be explicitly moral (perhaps related to merely an interest of sharing information) to moral progress. Nevertheless, the very practice of coming out carries a risk and an effect on a moral cause regardless of whether it is meant to be advocacy or a sharing of personal facts.

In the past, queer rights movements urged people to come out despite the associated risks of losing a job, being rejected by friends and family, and facing violence and discrimination (Hood, 2020). In the 1970s, Harvey Milk, the first openly gay politician to hold office in the US, further pushed this notion. The purpose was for people to "realize that they had friends, coworkers and family members who were gay" to defeat an anti-gay proposition (Hood, 2020). The proposition

was indeed defeated, in large part due to the strategy of more people coming out. In this case, there does seem to be a clear risk of harm to those who were coming out. However, we can also observe a moral shift through the change in social practice; the proposition failed – at least in part – because more people were coming out. LGBTQ people were starting to be seen as being of equal worth and deserving of equal rights.

Interestingly, there does not seem to be an explicit moral element in this particular movement[15]. It seems to be a fight to keep or advance one's rights[16] – self-protection in a sense – rather than with the goal of moral progress on the issue of queer people's status. This means that coming out was not part of a particular strategy to specifically advance moral progress by "engaged moral inquirers," as Moody-Adams would argue (1999, p. 176). Instead, it seems to be more in line with Hermann's (2019) approach where moral progress is carried out through the social practices of people, with a focus on achieving what is seen as a better life, and not an objective moral goal in a realist sense. The risks taken, therefore, are contributions toward new social practices, which then characterize our society morally, rather than the positions taken in moral inquiries, through which discussion of particular moral principles advances us morally in a linear manner.

coming out online seems to build similar dynamics to coming out offline in that people can also aim towards particular societal or political goals, while facing risks in doing so. It is difficult to distinguish the moral progress that happened in the past regarding homosexuality from the progress that might happen now, as they are not entirely separate movements. However, looking

[15] In LGBTQ movements there is often an underlying moral appeal. However, the appeal itself may refer to things such as harm, rights, or visibility rather than morality in and of itself. Arguments have not been solely based on points such as: "we must advance gay rights because it is simply the morally correct thing to do as a society" or something of the sort as a particular argument to advocate for a better position of LGBTQ people in society. Rather, its morality is implied in the social practices proposed. There are perhaps a few exceptions to this. However, even slogans such as "gay is good" (Long, 2012, p. 126; Ball, 2010), in their contexts, seem to be in large part a response to a negative framing of homosexuality in the first place, rather than only a specific appeal to a moral progression towards viewing homosexuality as being good.

[16] The question of whether rights are moral entities may come up as a potential objection to this distinction. I would point out that rights are not necessarily moral entities, and in this case, while they may retrospectively be considered moral progress due to being a change in social practices, they are not inherently moral entities. Their primary goal is a practical one – lowering harm to oneself and one's community. If we were to take a realist perspective of moral progress, rights could more strongly be considered a moral entity as we would have a realist goal of which value we are aiming to achieve through such actions, however, as mentioned, moral values were rarely specified as the goal of the moral development. As the perspective taken in this thesis is a non-realist one, we cannot say that rights are inherently a moral entity, but rather tools towards a practical goal that can be judged as moral once the changes made can be evaluated.

at broader LGBTQ developments, we can assess the dynamics of the progress in transgender rights and acceptance. It could be argued that the LGB and T communities are two separate ones, with somewhat unrelated needs, who advocate for different things – for example, trans activists often focus on access to trans specific healthcare, whereas LGB activists have focused on issues like marriage equality. However, the forms of moralization, discrimination, and prejudice against both communities are arguably very similar. What is more likely is that they differ in the stage of acceptance they are in – as was established in Chapter 2, gay men are the most likely to be accepted, while trans people are least, corresponding to the expected positions within a CHP hierarchy. Oppression of both groups would be in line with the goal of the CHP to maintain the gender binary. Because of this, kinds of moral progress made would be comparable[17].

As argued earlier, the majority of progress in transgender acceptance and rights has arguably occurred in the social media era and the transgender community has become a popular topic of debate in the past several years. Social media has given users the power to reach larger amounts of people, and for the information provided to be shared easily. Before social media, people could have shared their identity with others, but not in numbers that might be reached today and their announcement would be a less permanent one. Furthermore, coming out on social media provides a reference to how someone sees their identity and experience in the person's own words. This can be a part of why the progress of trans acceptance movements online has occurred arguably quicker than the one of gay movements in pre-online times. Whereas most people can be "outed" through other people sharing this information, and through this their identity containing some reinterpretation by the messenger, being "outed" with one's own words as evidence can give people an opportunity to be empowered through their "outing" (even when there is intent of harm). The people are treated as real agents, making it easier to see them as people worthy of equal respect who can speak for themselves[18]. An obvious reason for the empowerment of deciding to come out through social media seems to be the removal of

[17] Smith (2018) has outlined some ways in which the gay and trans movements have paralleled one another in key ways, while also pointing out a few differences. He points out: "Transgender people are told ignorant things. You can change how you feel. You are confused. You are eroding the fabric of society. You want to ruin children. You don't belong here. You want silly rights. These are all charges that were commonly laid against gay people in countries that now have same-sex marriage and widespread acceptance of gay people. That is not to say that gay people in countries like Britain and America never hear these statements any more, but they are far less acceptable than in the past."
[18] The person would not be disempowered (or less so) by the one relaying the information.

immediate risk of physical harm online as one is presumably doing this act in the safety of their own home or another safe environment away from the threat of physical violence. This might contribute to group's or an individual's epistemic agency – the risk of harm is lesser, and through being able to express oneself more freely, it becomes easier to form communities and work together as groups based on common identity and experiences[19].

Social media and the importance of epistemic agency

The risk of harm is different between offline and online "outing." The very notion of what constitutes harm has been changed through social media. Kitcher (2021) discusses the moral progress of societal acceptance of homosexuality (p. 47). Specifically, he mentions the importance of risk-taking of queer people in the 1970s in the development of a morally progressive view on homosexuality (p. 46). However, he does not go into greater depth about the kinds of risks present. As mentioned above, the risks were ones of harm to the individual: loss of employment, rejection by friends, family, and community, discrimination, violence and abuse, and even death. Nowadays – and especially because of risks taken by queer people in the past – there seems to be somewhat of a lesser risk of such harms in Western societies. These societies have made moral progress in relation to queerness[20], particularly when it comes to advancing human rights to this community, making it less dangerous for people to come out (and stay "out") as LGBTQ.

In the online world, harm may look different, making it difficult to directly compare to the "traditional" ways of coming out in the offline world. The element of physical violence is non-existent on social media. This is not to say that the risk of violence is eliminated (chapters 2-5 specifically discuss how social media interactions might perpetuate epistemic violence). However, the immediate threat is removed[21]. In this aspect, coming out on social media comes with less risk of immediate physical violence. Even if there is a risk in the offline world, the

[19] This, of course, may not necessarily be linked to moral progress. For example, we may consider the quick rise of right-wing narratives through social media, enabling a faster track towards moral regress instead.
[20] Moral progress can only be evaluated retrospectively (Hermann, 2019, p. 304).
[21] To clarify more precisely: this does not mean that there is no violence in the online world, nor that no physical violence can follow. It is an observation that one cannot be immediately physically harmed upon posting or announcing something through the internet space itself.

person can have a barrier of being prepared for the worst if they expect it might happen, again lessening the risk as opposed to in-person coming out. This is perhaps one reason why coming out on social media could be potentially easier, helping create a stronger movement quicker.

While physical harm is not immediately present, other forms of violence arguably are. There can be online harassment, bullying, even doxing and threats. One example is how queer youth experience higher online peer and sexual victimization rates than heterosexual and cisgender peers (Ybarra et al., 2015). There are also less immediately visible forms of violence[22] – the tactics of silencing and oppression used to resist the message and credibility of the person coming out. Nevertheless, despite the change in the form of violence, it seems that online spaces are felt as safer compared to the offline world (Ybarra et al., 2015). This makes sense, as online one can have greater control over their environment. They have the option to block harassers or those questioning them in bad faith, partially removing harmful behaviors from their surroundings. People may form friendships with online LGBTQ peers who advise and support them (Lucero, 2017; Berger et al., 2021). Further, with the help of their online friends' support – which queer people, especially youth, may not have offline – some form of parity in power with their oppressors can be achieved in terms of having a group which provides support in times of online attempts of harm. Hence, group belonging can also give queer people greater power to protect themselves from online harassment, reducing the risk of online harm experienced, and enhancing their epistemic agency. Again, this increased sense of safety from participating in the online world may be potentially empowering more people to be openly LGBTQ, thus enabling the building of a movement of people coming out. This may be one way of laying the foundation for resisting epistemic oppression through utilizing the greater epistemic agency gained as a group in a marginalized position. In other words, once more queer people can find support for their experiences online, they can begin to confirm and gain confidence in their experiences of the world, instead of being discouraged by the practices of epistemic oppression, especially denial-based tactics of silencing through making individuals doubt their own experiences as queer people. An example is the most common form of denial – being told no one cares that one is gay since it is no longer an issue to be gay, implying the coming out is done for attention. In

[22] Dotson (2011) discusses epistemic violence as a failure in reciprocity between the speaker and audience, and as discussed in Chapter 2, the dynamics commonly encountered in situations of coming out constitute a form of epistemic violence and can be considered an oppressive practice.

such a case, the queer person may doubt themselves and their experiences, such as their impression of having to come out in an environment where it is assumed that they are not queer (as is the assumption operating behind the CHP system). However, once being able to find other queer people online to help affirm their experiences[23], they may become less vulnerable to such silencing.

We are left with a question of what precisely the relationship between risk of harm and moral progress is in this case. In regards to the start of the offline LGBTQ movement, the relationship seems fairly straightforward: the greater the moral taboo, the greater the risk of harm to the individual. However, moral progress in the direction of acceptance is achieved over time and the risk lessens. Online social media platforms have made the relationship between risk and moral progress more complex. By virtue of eliminating the possibility of direct physical harm, it seems that by default we have lessened the amount of harm done to queer individuals. Yet, it is not immediately and intuitively clear whether this would constitute moral progress. Perhaps it is not if we view it in a more realist sense, as Moody-Adams (1999) does. However, as per Hermann's (2019) account, our social practices have changed, resulting in a morally changed society (regardless of whether this is a small or large leap forward). As I would like to avoid realist accounts of moral progress, I am more inclined to conclude in line with the view that our morality has changed along with our social practices. It certainly seems as if online spaces – providing a greater amount of safety compared to offline spaces. These digital realmshave allowed for coming out in greater numbers and mutual support, while allowing for the rest of society to see queer people as real agents and giving them the space to present themselves as such in the first place. Throught this kind of visibility, queer people caninfluence change in how they are seen and treated, enable changes in the social circumstances and practices, and therefore, make progress morally on a societal level where queer individuals and communities can contribute to or share knowledge while being listened to and understood as an epistemic agent.

[23] Importantly, Townley (2003) makes such a connection about trust, epistemic agency, and the social nature of epistemology and its importance for marginalized communities, as discussed in Chapter 2.

7. Conclusion

This thesis dealt with the question of what forms of denial are found as responses to coming out posts. I argued that denial is necessary to create and maintain the cisheteropatriarchy as a system of knowledge about the world. Denial was then characterized as a mechanism of epistemic oppression and a form of silencing, which are used in the maintenance of the CHP.

Denial was in line with the expected dynamics of epistemic oppression and silencing in the case of between group differences. This indicates that denial is present as a mechanism protecting the epistemic goal of the gender binary, as the less epistemically threatening groups were least resisted, while the more threatening groups were more resisted. The different forms of denial were also present in different amounts across platforms, indicating that site structure and culture do make a difference in the outcomes of denial, influencing the dynamics of epistemic oppression and silencing. The evolution of denial over time was also discussed, though the results did not indicate a change. Methodological and theoretical reasons for these results were explored and I speculated on the potential relationship between publicly visible support and the expression of denial and negativity towards queer people. Lastly, I extended the discussion about the evolution of denial over time through the considering the notion of moral progress and social media in relation to queerness.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations of this research. First, the presence of bots and trolls could skew the results when they are taken at face value. Whitney Phillips (2011), in her exploration of trolling communities on Facebook, illustrates how trolling becomes a social bonding tool for creating online friendships between trolls rather than an honest expression of their opinions. It could be the case that such trolling could take place on online coming out posts as well. When large amounts of comments are analyzed, it becomes difficult to individually assess the commenter and determine if they might be a troll or not. It is likely that such factors influenced some of the results. Similarly, bots are also difficult to identify when such large amounts of comments are analyzed and may cause similar inaccuracies.

However, I would argue that perhaps they are a lesser concern for the questions studied than it may seem at first glance. While reactions may not necessarily be genuine opinions of those posting them, they are nevertheless targeting people belonging to marginalized groups and responding in ways that express the same prejudice and are in favor of the CHP regardless of the intention behind them. If someone privately believes they support queer people, but decide to comment in ways that perpetuate their silencing, a question can be raised if the former is really the case considering it achieves the opposite of the troll's beliefs. The presence of bots may be considered in a similar way as the presence of trolls. Their comments might not be made by a person, but they do express the beliefs of people who genuinely aim to maintain the CHP and silence queer expression.

Another limitation is that only posts and comments in English were collected for the analysis. It may be the case that there are different internet content or cultures based on language. In this sense, English frames the discussions available according to norms and events in English-speaking countries. Because of this, the results reflect only a portion of the available information on social media. Research into the differences between comments in different languages (both in terms of content and amounts) might provide further insights into practices of silencing and their role in various forms of a CHP.

It might also be considered a limitation that the identities of the commenters are not known. One might question whether the denial-based comments are all made by people who do belong in the CHP. It might be the case that LGBTQ people also write negative or denial-based comments. This complicates distinctions between oppressors and oppressed, and the dynamics implied in such relations. In fact, there were denial-containing comments made by people who claimed to be LGBTQ themselves (Figure 6).

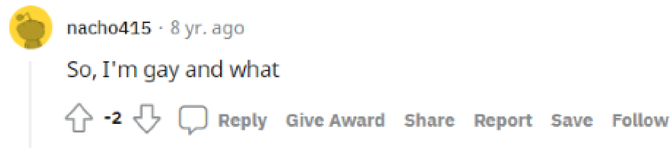

Figure 6. A Reddit user claiming to be gay and expressing that they question the relevance of coming out (nacho415, 2014).

There are several ways to explain such comments. One of them is that some LGBTQ people might try to gain an advantage as an individual by stressing that they dislike queerness being publicly brought up. This, like other negative comments, may help them form or maintain social bonds, while also gaining some power by aligning themselves with the dominant beliefs. While threatening to the CHP, queer people are not outside of this system, but also function within it. They also participate in the maintenance of the socially dominant narratives. Some might find ways to justify the status quo in order to improve their subjective well-being by accepting the state of the world as just, showing favoritism towards the more dominant group's beliefs (Jost & Hunyady, 2010).

Another possibility is that some of the comments may not be made by LGBTQ people, but by non-LGBTQ people who oppose them while claiming to be queer. A popular example of such an attempt was Dean Browning's; a white, conservative US politician who strangely tweeted about how he as a gay black man he supported Donald Trump's presidency[24] (Jennings, 2020; Figure 7). Collins et al. (2020) provide another case of how one group may pose as another online in order to advance their political goal, in this case how white nationalists have posed as Antifa members to create fear of and dislike towards the group. It is possible that those who have strong beliefs in the CHP system may be making queer-negative claims while posing as members of the LGBTQ community in order to advance their points while appearing to take claims by LGBTQ people seriously and avoid accusations of queerphobia. Such cases may be difficult to take into account if the accounts are dedicated to pretending to be an LGBTQ person, and more research is needed to help in their detection. Spotting trolls, bots, and fake LGBTQ accounts would allow for more nuanced, in-depth research of queerphobia online compared to the carried out here.

[24] While difficult to determine for sure, despite his claims of attempting to quote a follower, many did not believe this was the case, and that he unconvincingly used other accounts to make such tweets (Jennings, 2020).

Figure 7. Dean Browning's tweet posted by another Twitter user after the original was deleted (Rubashkin, 2020).

Strengths

There are also several strengths of the research carried out. The first one is the number of comments that were collected for the analysis, allowing for a sample that provides more accuracy and hence more reliable insights about the general population. Another strength is that the analysis included both quantitative and qualitative elements. This allowed for both an in-depth analysis of the comments in terms of their function within the CHP and an interpretation based on Cohen's (2013) theory, as well as an overview of the amounts these comments are made in and what this means for the groups and platforms discussed. Together, the analysis

provides evidence for the consistent occurrence of denial containing comments and their role in the upholding of the CHP. Another positive aspect of this analysis are its uses of Dotson's (2014) theory of epistemic oppression in new directions, expanding its uses in queer and social media studies, as well as linking denial as one of the mechanisms trough which epistemic systems resist change; it is a starting point for further research into the topics discussed.

Future research

As indicated in earlier chapters, there are a few areas that future research can expand on. One may be why there seems to have been less attention given to coming out announcements during earlier social media times. It may be the case that there were less users, and therefore less users to respond to such events. However, users were engaging with each other and posts on other topics, so it becomes particularly interesting to consider why there might have been less engagement with coming out posts. One explanation may be that, as discussed, internet culture on earlier social media differed from its offline counterpart, while nowadays such spaces are part of mainstream culture to which it matters more whether one is queer or not. Another possible explanation could be that there was more literal denial of queerness in the past compared to today and this affected behavior on social media. In other words, people might have been avoiding the issue and not responding, or they might have built their online communities in ways which there would have been a smaller probability of coming across queer experiences. It might have been the case that the non-queer community simply did not have much exposure or engagement with queer posts. Once social media provided a way for queer people to form communities online, it might have helped the growth of a more prominent online queer culture, one to which non-queer people could become aware of and gain access to, making queer issues easier to come across and consider as relevant to respond to.

Future studies might shed further light on the issues discussed in this thesis by considering coming out posts made by average users, as opposed to celebrities. This study, due to limited resources, was based on content about well-known people because it made the process of collecting a large enough number of comments easier. Future research could perhaps utilize social media scraping methods to collect a wide range of comments on coming out posts by

people who are not famous. This would allow for greater insight into the dynamics of discussing queerness online and its responses.

Another issue worth investigating is the mechanism behind the expressions of denial. It might be the case that different people have different reasons for making the same comment. This thesis argued for the protection of the gender binary as an epistemic goal within the CHP (through narratives that queer people themselves might also subscribe to) as a factor that motivates denial responses in terms of their content. However, the reason a queer person might have a negative or denial-based response could be different from a cisgender heterosexual person's. As this thesis did not make a distinction between the identity of the users, future studies could consider it a relevant factor to explore and provide greater nuance to the discussion.

Comparisons between rates of denial, positive, and negative comments might be better contextualized by collecting comments from posts on topics other than coming out and queer issues. It may be the case that such comments are present throughout all of social media and the current results reflect that. Furthermore, comparing comments between different languages may provide additional nuance in the study of the CHP and its presence on social media.

More research is also needed on moderation structure and its effects on users' behaviors and its effects on the outcomes of comment sections of posts in order to better understand the observed outcomes. Lastly, the effects of algorithms need to be better understood and taken into account in studies involving social media, as they largely control the content one is exposed to and the view they may build of the world, whether in regards to queerness or otherwise.

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Appendix

List of celebrities used for the collection of comments

Aaron Carter

Carl Nassib

Elliot Page (both lesbian and transgender coming outs considered)

Fergie

Jojo Siwa

Lana Wachowski

Lilly Wachowski

Lindsay Lohan

Ricky Martin

Tom Daley

Logistic regression models

Literal denial likelihood per group

```
            Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept)  -3.7268     0.3051 -12.214  < 2e-16 ***
groupG       -3.2196     0.5415  -5.946 2.76e-09 ***
groupL       -0.9069     0.3392  -2.674   0.0075 **
groupT        0.1845     0.3413   0.541   0.5888
---
Signif. codes:  0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1
```

Interpretive denial likelihood per group

```
            Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept)  -3.0093     0.2184 -13.779  < 2e-16 ***
groupG       -1.6671     0.2622  -6.359 2.03e-10 ***
groupL       -0.8467     0.2409  -3.515 0.000439 ***
groupT        0.7207     0.2353   3.063 0.002189 **
---
```

Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1

Implicatory denial likelihood per group

	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(>|z|)	
(Intercept)	-2.37024	0.16534	-14.336	<2e-16	***
groupG	-0.40582	0.17555	-2.312	0.0208	*
groupL	0.03571	0.17302	0.206	0.8365	
groupT	-0.26130	0.19377	-1.349	0.1775	

Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1

Negative comments likelihood per group

	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(>|z|)	
(Intercept)	-2.6119	0.1831	-14.261	< 2e-16	***
groupG	-2.3544	0.2480	-9.493	< 2e-16	***
groupL	-1.7037	0.2228	-7.648	2.05e-14	***
groupT	-0.6271	0.2262	-2.773	0.00556	**

Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1

Positive comments likelihood per group

	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(>|z|)	
(Intercept)	-0.976915	0.103700	-9.421	< 2e-16	***
groupG	-0.077583	0.108429	-0.716	0.474	
groupL	-0.904336	0.112148	-8.064	7.4e-16	***
groupT	0.007194	0.118157	0.061	0.951	

Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1

Literal denial likelihood per period

	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(>|z|)	
(Intercept)	-4.541165	0.449589	-10.101	<2e-16	***
d_period_2	-0.002323	0.469580	-0.005	0.996	
d_period_3	-0.373247	0.473313	-0.789	0.430	

Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1

Interpretive denial likelihood per period

```
         Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept) -3.65066    0.29240 -12.485   <2e-16 ***
d_period_2  -0.07474    0.30630  -0.244    0.807
d_period_3   0.11068    0.30212   0.366    0.714
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

Implicatory denial per period

```
 Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept)  -1.9126     0.1372 -13.943  < 2e-16 ***
d_period_2   -0.4791     0.1460  -3.282  0.00103 **
d_period_3   -0.8553     0.1472  -5.811 6.21e-09 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

Negative comments likelihood per period

```
   Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept) -4.20042    0.38079 -11.031   <2e-16 ***
d_period_2   0.17857    0.39505   0.452    0.651
d_period_3  -0.02457    0.39516  -0.062    0.950
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

Positive comments likelihood per period

```
Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept)  -3.3543     0.2541 -13.198  < 2e-16 ***
d_period_2    1.5632     0.2572   6.078 1.22e-09 ***
d_period_3    2.4125     0.2557   9.435  < 2e-16 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

Literal denial likelihood per platform

```
  Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept)  -5.2711     0.1404  -37.55   <2e-16 ***
platform      1.6871     0.1959    8.61   <2e-16 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

Interpretive denial likelihood per platform

```
        Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept) -4.15553    0.08121  -51.17   <2e-16 ***
platform     1.68700    0.11583   14.56   <2e-16 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1
```

Implicatory denial likelihood per platform

```
Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept) -2.60749    0.03959 -65.860  < 2e-16 ***
platform     0.31620    0.08635   3.662  0.00025 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1
```

Negative comments likelihood per platform

```
 Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept)  -4.6661     0.1042  -44.79   <2e-16 ***
platform      1.6709     0.1472   11.35   <2e-16 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1
```

Positive comments likelihood per platform

```
 Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept) -1.47669    0.02573  -57.38   <2e-16 ***
platform     0.78428    0.05359   14.63   <2e-16 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1
```