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“Queer as hell media”: Affirming LGBTQ+ youth identity and building community in Metro Atlanta, Georgia

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ABSTRACT
Within the United States, the American South holds the largest number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) people, which totals to 3.8 million (LGBTQ in 2016). Metro Atlanta is uniquely situated within the South’s geography; the City of Atlanta is hailed as a queer mecca while the suburbs and surrounding rural areas are assumed to reproduce and reinforce racist, conservative, and religious ideologies. A total of 12 qualitative interviews with LGBTQ+ youth (ages 18–26) at Kennesaw State University offer a more nuanced understanding of being LGBTQ+ in the South by shedding light on the ways they thrive, form relationships, and seek out knowledge regarding LGBTQ+ identity and experience. Findings highlight that LGBTQ+ youth utilize all forms of media to affirm their identities, create like-minded communities, and take up space as a “fuck you” to the imagined cisheteronormativity in Georgia. The article centers the voices and critiques of LGBTQ+ young people as they negotiate competing discourses of queer acceptability and inclusivity, turning to new media platforms as spaces where they can find safety, as well as curate themselves and their experiences.

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Introduction
This year [2018] with the release of Love Simon, everybody is excited a major motion film [has] an LGBTQ[+]1 character. Well, yes, we are glad for that, but he is also, you know, a white male, middle-class. His parents support him. It is a good story, but it is just lovey-dovey, wishy-washy. I think the LGBTQ[+] community is just so diverse. Like, that one identity could not even begin to express the identity of the community. And I think that is kind of reflective for where we are at right now. We have a long way to go as far as how we stigmatize or do not stigmatize, identify, and include people of color within this community (8/23/18, Transcript 2, pp. 4–5, Kennesaw, GA).

The quote above comes from the transcript of an interview with Roland, a 20-year-old, white gay cisgender male, who discusses the portrayal of...
LGBTQ+ people in popular media and uses the teen romantic comedy *Love Simon* as his example. *Love Simon* was adapted from the 2015 young adult novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, which is written by Albertalli, a cisgender heterosexual white female author, and turned into a major motion picture produced and written by cisgender queer white men, including director Berlanti (Sperling, 2018). The text is based in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia and stars a white cisgender gay closeted main character, his diverse friend group, and supportive cisheteronormative parents. The plot revolves around a blackmailer who threatens to out Simon while he searches for the identity of an anonymous online pen pal Blue he has started developing a relationship with.

Situated within the context of Metro Atlanta, Georgia, we reflect upon the stories shared by LGBTQ+ youth as they discuss the ways they engage new media, which can be defined as “popular culture and online communication” (Ito et al., 2009, p. 9), create community, and affirm their identities, by asking: how can media be used by LGBTQ+ youth as an avenue to create a safe space for oneself and foster community? As we uplift the voices of LGBTQ+ young people, we also want to situate ourselves: author one is an anxious Canadian-born white cisgender queer man, and author two is a white gender non-conforming queer person who grew up in a small Southern town; we both live and work in Metro Atlanta and are invested in challenging cisheteronormativity and queer normativity in our lives, in the State of Georgia, and beyond. Our interviews exist alongside the research participants in order to think about queerness in Georgia with them.

Queer media like *Love Simon* may reproduce a privileged model of LGBTQ+ experience and such a narrow view, by definition, excludes more diverse narratives, as our research participants discuss with us. Concerning to us is how Simon repudiates Ethan, a Black gay, gender non-conforming youth, stating: “I wish he wouldn’t make it so easy for them [the bullies].” Simon’s concern with Ethan is that they are far too queer and unable to pass. As we note throughout the article, there is so much beauty, possibility, and promise in queerness’ intelligibility (Britzman, 1995; Muñoz, 2009). *Love Simon* does not represent the breadth and depth of diversity amongst LGBTQ+ youth. Roland’s critique is especially important given his experiences growing up in rural Georgia. As Roland indicates, *Love Simon* normalizes the main character’s cisgender male, class, and white privilege, in addition to presuming all LGBTQ+ youth have supportive and loving families. We dare to imagine a major motion picture about Roland’s coming out story, one in stark comparison to the cisheteronormative assumptions embedded in the tropes of *Love Simon*.

While Roland and Simon are both white, and share a lot in common, the text, which is based in suburban Atlanta, does not reflect economic,
social, historical, and cultural differences he has experienced in Georgia: LGBTQ+ youth are often required to survive in violent households, or if they choose to come out, experience neglect or abandonment (Abramovich, 2013; Ferguson & Maccio, 2015; Shelton, 2015). In addition, they can experience physical and emotional abuse (Peter et al., 2016), bullying and harassment at school (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2008), and societal discrimination (Lee & Ostergard, 2017). This compounded, multifaceted trauma becomes palpable in queer narratives. Roland is aware of the issues facing LGBTQ+ youth in Metro Atlanta as he recently had chosen to tell his religious and conservative family that he is gay.

Another research participant Percy, 21-year-old white pansexual gender nonconforming individual, noted: “I forget that not everyone is queer as hell, which is probably because I surround myself [with] that media” (8/24/18, Transcript 4, p. 9, Kennesaw, GA). In opposition to normative queer media like Love Simon, Percy notes that they surround themselves with queer media, whether texting with peers, using Discord or Reddit and playing video or tabletop games to engage “queer as hell media.” In our interview, Percy shared that the 2017 Queer Eye reboot—Netflix original series featuring four queer cisgender men and one non-binary person who provide makeovers to participants across Georgia—with the inclusion of an episode that revolves around a transgender man, has helped them and their mom engage in dialogue around LGBTQ+ issues; however, they note that their dad has not been as welcoming of dialogue around being pansexual and gender non-conforming. Like Roland and Percy, LGBTQ+ youth in this study engage media to challenge dominant cisheteronormative constructions of queer experience, in addition to creating their own storylines and communities that may seem antithetical to cisheteronormativity in the South and in the State of Georgia specifically. Below, we offer our research design and resulting methodological approach that centralizes a queer analysis to make sense of the stories shared by LGBTQ+ youth as they negotiate and engage new media.

Queering the project: methodology and methods used

We engage the stories shared by LGBTQ+ young people through a queer analysis, which “look[s] for what denaturalizes, disrupts, or resignifies the relation[ship] conventionally drawn between gendered embodiments, erotic desire, and sexual identities” (Leung, 2008, p. 2). Leung’s theorization of queerness is situated within post-colonial studies, which critiques the ways Western queerness has traveled across state and national boundaries and has become normalized. This research centralizes qualitative methods, specifically one-on-one semi-structured interviews, to highlight and centralize
the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth whose very existences are “queer as hell” and work toward challenging the normativity of queer representation through their engagements with new media.

A queer analytic looks to unearth counter narratives that exist beyond or between the normativity of representation. As Britzman (1995) notes:

the “queer,” like the “theory,” in Queer Theory does not depend on the identity of the theorist or the one who engages with it. Rather the queer in queer theory anticipates the precariousness of the signified: the limits within its conventions and rules, and the ways these various conventions and rules incite subversive performances, citations, and inconveniences. (p. 153)

Our analysis challenges the ways certain identities and institutions are deemed natural, which can leave queer others to be constructed as deviant, defiant, and/or defective (Dyer, 2017; LeFrançois & Diamond, 2014). As Muñoz (2009) argues “queerness is not yet here. … We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (p. 1). While a queer analysis offers opportunities to critically engage the unexpected and gaze sideways at the seemingly normal, for Muñoz, it is the impossibility of queerness that makes way for its very possibility. If queerness is ever fully realized, even as an identity, its potentiality is lost and reduced when known.

This research project is situated within a larger exploration of the ways academic institutions can be inclusive of LGBTQ+ peoples and communities, where practices of cis heterosexism are normalized in the South generally and also within the State of Georgia. All of the interviews were conducted in a safe space at Kennesaw State University chosen by the research participant. Twenty-three LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff members (see Table 1) participated in the research project. Semi-structured one-one-one interviews were conducted to try to understand the phenomena from participant’s perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Participants were asked questions such as their involvement in LGBTQ+ communities on campus and within the local community, the services and supports they use and available to them, any challenges that they may face, as well as their recommendations for social change.

This article utilizes the stories and experiences shared by 12 (52% of participants) of the young people (ages 18–26) who participated in the project—they shared stories of inequality, their experiences negotiating Southern culture, and the ways they create community and stay connected with peers through the use of new media technologies. We omitted 11 stories of participants aged 27–46 (48% of participants) in order to center the voices and experiences of the young people as they narrate and make sense of their own lives. We opted to shine the light on young people’s stories, given that their perspectives, as well as their media practices, are often
## Table 1. Participant demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript date</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sexuality</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8/21/18</td>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Queer/Pansexual</td>
<td>Nonbinary Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/23/18</td>
<td>Ronald</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Cisgender Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Upper/Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/24/18</td>
<td>Rini</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Lesbian/Queer</td>
<td>Transgender Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/27/18</td>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/27/18</td>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/30/18</td>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Queer/Demisexual/Panromantic</td>
<td>Gender Nonconforming</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lower/Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/30/18</td>
<td>Ronda</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Lower/Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/06/18</td>
<td>Riley</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/06/18</td>
<td>Zee</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Upper/Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/07/18</td>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Asexual/Panromantic</td>
<td>Transgender Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/07/18</td>
<td>Blair</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lower/Middle to Upper Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/15/18</td>
<td>Jenn</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lower/Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/28/18</td>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>n/a (did not want to disclose)</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/1/18</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/2/18</td>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>n/a (did not want to disclose)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/11/18</td>
<td>Olley</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Upper/Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/15/18</td>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Upper Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/1/18</td>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mixed-Race</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/5/19</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Upper/Middle Class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
disengaged, taken less seriously, or repudiated by adults (Greensmith & Sakal Froese, 2018; Ito et al., 2009).

We used purposive and snowball sampling methods (Byrne, 2001) to challenge participant selection methods and connect with LGBTQ+ youth who may be interested in engaging in a discussion of the normativity of queer representation with regards to their vocational experiences and Southern livelihood; a flyer was sent through different university listservs as well as reached out to faculty and staff across the campus to share the flyer with colleagues and students. No incentives were provided to participants. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be students, alumni, faculty, or staff at Kennesaw State University, and identify as LGBTQ+ who are 18 years or older. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and destroyed upon completion. Once each interview was conducted, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality; many participants declined and a name was chosen on their behalf. In addition, participants were asked to self-identify (e.g., gender, sexuality, and class) instead of choosing from a series of categories to create opportunities for participants themselves to queer the data gathering process. Participants were also asked to share recruitment information with others that might be interested. To ensure the utmost reliability of the data, member checking was used, which involves research participants reviewing their transcript to ensure accuracy, while giving them a chance to review the material and adding or deleting content as they see fit. Primary and secondary coding was used to draw out thematics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

**Queer new media engagements: storying the self**

We situate LGBTQ+ young peoples’ narratives within the existing literature on engagements with queer media. In discussing the queer archive, as a physical and digital space, Alexander and Rhodes (2015) note that queerness can be cultivated as occurring within a historical moment; the queer archive also has the potential to produce queerness through a (re)construction by highlighting divergences in collective experiences of pain but also of possibility. The new media LGBTQ+ young people engage in/with can act as both producing and engaging the queer archive: they use symbols and signifiers to reconstruct meaning and do so by filling existing gaps as a means of queer inclusion and/or highlight how queerness is excluded. LGBTQ+ youth engagements with new media act to create space for themselves, as well as their identities and experiences. While Alexander and Rhodes note that the queer archive may be difficult to find as physical and digital spaces, LGBTQ+ youths’ engagements with new media enter and expand upon queer archives with seeming ease. We suggest that
LGBTQ+ youth engagements with new media may not be as overwhelming as engaging queer archives, as they are negotiating digital spaces to represent themselves, their identities, and maybe more importantly, gain a connections to queer others.

*It Gets Better (IGB)* campaign, which can be read within the lexicon of queer media, sought to support young people through their experiences with everyday violence, particularly in high school. “Successful” fourth celebrities and political figures, such as Barack Obama and Ellen DeGeneres, posted videos, often on YouTube, to share their stories in hopes of inspiring LGBTQ+ youth to look toward the future and possibility beyond their pressing experiences of insidious violence. Grzanka and Mann (2014) note that the *IGB* campaign often centralizes the normative, reproductive queer subject. The problem, we note, is not the messages adults share with stories to uplift LGBTQ+ youth from their persistent pain; rather, we are concerned with how these videos travel to produce a hegemonic story of queer acceptability and respectability that is made possible through queer media, like YouTube. *IGB* normalizes the continuation of queer trauma—as queer media, it enforces trauma as a central part of queer life instead of working toward challenging larger systemic forms of inequality.

Responding to the inadequacy of some queer media representations, specifically referring to the *IGB* campaign, Haimson (2020), who synthesizes transgender youth’s Tumblr posts, as well as interviews, queers the binary between “better” and “worse,” noting from non-binary participant Ellis: “things are getting better … but other things are getting worse” (p. 8). Ellis speaks about how being better and worse is constructed through having to negotiate mental health struggles, increased pressures placed upon them to be a successful and productive, as well as fearing of discrimination due to their gender identity. Evolving out of Ellis’ story, we note that it is imperative that normative queer media be challenged and decentered—noting that LGBTQ+ youth respond to, construct, and play with media.

Ito et al. (2009) notes that young people are cultivating their lives through at an ever-increasing speed that create new, innovative, and creative “practices of sociability, learning, play, and self-expression” that grow “out of resilient social structural conditions and cultural categories that youth inhabit in diverse ways in their everyday lives” (p. 2). The authors highlight the ever-expanding world young people find themselves that combines “technical, social, cultural, and place-based systems” that are neither “decomposable or separable” (Ito et al., 2009, p. 31). While we note that young people live and thrive within a media ecology, we also highlight that for LGBTQ+ youth, their engagement with media offers them a space to cultivate their identities and discover “queer as hell” spaces. We seek to
empower, similar to Blackburn (2002), and recognize these digital spaces create places to reflect on and recognize oppression outside of normative cis-heteronormative and queer experiences. These spaces allow LGBTQ+ youth to understand themselves to be agents of change. As Blackburn notes, LGBTQ+ youth make deliberate choices to identify and story their experiences—notably through their new media practices.

Wargo (2017) addresses the ways LGBTQ+ youth use and negotiate new media like Tumblr and Instagram as safe spaces to story their experiences and speak back to the everyday oppressions they encounter. Camille, who self-identifies as a multi-racial lesbian, posts selfies and other images as one way to respond to racist and sexist inequality she experiences at school by showcasing the beautiful parts of herself, like her lips: “My lips are my best feature … also, my lips and my mouth tell my story. My followers should see it” (Wargo, 2017, p. 567). In essence, Camille utilizes new media as a space of self-expression, but more importantly, a place to exist where her schooling environment normalizes the inequality she experiences. Driver (2005) argues that LGBTQ+ youth “make use of the Internet as a realm to try out, play with, and perform their identities and desires through provisional combinations of images, words, and narratives” (p. 111). Thus, the digital “moves us away from … description [and] … privileges experience as we create and compose new … narratives” (Wargo, 2017, p. 16). For LGBTQ+ youth, engaging new media lies in the possibility to create the self in a space within, but also, outside of cis-heteronormativity. Engaging with new media practices of LGBTQ+ youth, such as using the #LGBTQ+ or posting selfies to decenter white queer normativity, is to experience the ontology of the self through posting and digitally constructing oneself in relation or opposition to queer normativity, effectively creating and curating “queer as hell media.”

**LGBTQ+ youth speak out**

Before highlighting the ways LGBTQ+ youth utilize new media, we share how their experiences are produced and mediated through the geography and culture in which they live: the South generally and the State of Georgia specifically. One of the larger themes—which the adults interviewed in the larger study share—suggests that living as LGBTQ+ in Metro Atlanta is contextual and felt differently amongst LGBTQ+ Southerners and folks living in the South. The realities facing LGBTQ+ youth are contextual to that of Metro Atlanta and provide a glimpse into how varied LGBTQ+ youths’ experiences with new media are, despite the persistence of cis-heteronormativity.
**Experiences of inequality**

In various degrees, all the youth interviewed shared stories of how to live in Metro Atlanta, Georgia, has presented challenges; the LGBTQ+ youth discussed stories of apathetic teachers in high school, the ways school policies were anti-LGBTQ+, as well as discussions of LGBTQ+ youth spaces being sparse as they attended high school. Luke, a 19-year-old white queer/pansexual nonbinary man, discussed their experiences attending the same private Christian elementary and middle school: “It was written into the school rules that if you said anything along the lines of, ‘Oh I’m gay’ or ‘Oh I’m a part of this [the LGBTQ+] community’ they could kick you out. I spent so long just shoving it [being LGBTQ+] down that I did not know as a child that people my age could be gay” (8/21/18, Transcript 1, p. 2, Kennesaw, GA). Luke’s identity echoes many participants who share that educational spaces did not offer enough room to “be” LGBTQ+. Luke shared that much of the anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric manifested through school rules, regulations, and norms that Luke is able to matter-of-factly state that from his experience, he was unable to imagine his younger self as “gay,” almost as though “gay” experience was never in the lexicon of his immediate community. Throughout the interviews many of the youth participants oscillated between saying gay and queer to refer to LGBTQ+ peoples and identities. Luke notes that the private school policies made being “gay” impossible.

Laura, an 18-year-old white bisexual cisgender female, shares a very different high school story:

I joined the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA); it was not very well known. I was one of three people who were in it, and the teacher was very passionate and was so loving and caring. She just wanted us to not only make a difference within ourselves but in the community. In that process [of volunteering and getting involved], I figured out who I was and was able to love myself even more knowing that there is this huge, vast community that I did not even know about. (8/27/18, Transcript 5, p. 2, Kennesaw, GA)

Unlike Luke’s story, Laura highlights the potential of community for LGBTQ+ youth at school in the form of a GSA. This experience seems to have provided Laura with a noteworthy gateway into the local LGBTQ+ community as well as allowed her to connect with other youth and role models.

Surrounded in what appears to be a beautiful story of queer love, Ronda, a 19-year-old, Black lesbian cisgender woman, shares a story: “This is the only time I have held hands with a girl. Me and this girl would hold hands during [United States] History class, and people would look at us funny, but we really did not let it affect us. Those were really great experiences for me” (8/30/18, Transcript 8, p. 11, Kennesaw, GA). While Ronda notes that
grade-eight was the first and last time she could outwardly be affectionate toward another girl, she shares that her peers would look at them “funny.” Ronda’s story is especially powerful given that her family is hostile toward LGBTQ+ peoples, sharing an encounter with her uncle, who said: “That if he saw a gay person, he would kill him.” This only solidifies her original grade-eight act of resistance as she chose to “not let it [the funny looks] affect” her. As Ronda notes, she, like many LGBTQ+ youth of color, is unable to “come out” as she has to negotiate her own safety at home and school.

In conjunction with many of the stories research participants shared of attending university, Niko a 25-year-old, nonbinary white gay/queer person, discusses the challenges with living at home while attending college:

If you are like 18 or 19, and you are coming to Kennesaw State University right after high school, you probably still live with your parents. You are probably making all your choices based on not getting kicked out, and if your parents are not going to be supportive of you wanting to go on [hormone replacement therapy], having that available on campus is one way you can just do it without having to ask them. (8/30/18, Transcript 9, p. 8, Kennesaw, GA)

Niko notes that LGBTQ+ youth often make decisions based on their housing predicament. This becomes particularly difficult for LGBTQ+ youth of color, like Ronda, whose homes are a source of violence and are unable to find access to local, affordable housing. While the specifics as to how young LGBTQ+ people negotiate transitioning while living at home are not specified, Niko does note that the college community provides many youth access to information and resources, including doctors who will support hormone replacement therapy.

Charles a 26-year-old, white queer, demisexual-panromantic gender non-conforming person, speaks about how the service and supports available to LGBTQ+ peoples do not translate from on campus to off campus:

We have lost some of the club and community spaces in the City of Atlanta. There was an 18+ club that ended up closing down. From everyone I have talked to that grew up there from 18 onwards, they said it was a great place to just foster community. With a lot of the LGBT bookstores and things like that closing down in Atlanta, it is hard to have conversations that are outside Grindr, which is catered towards hookups. (8/30/18, Transcript 7, p. 3, Kennesaw, GA)

Charles’ story offers complexity to the larger concern of LGBTQ+ inclusion in Atlanta, where all the queer businesses are centralized, and speaks to age restricted spaces; many youth 20 or younger (given the legal drinking age is 21) can feel especially isolated given the lack of services and supports available in all schools but also within the larger community. Reflecting on his past experiences allows Charles the space to legitimize having a LGBTQ+ space on campus given that he grew up in a rural
community and may have had to “pilfer, rummage, finding anything I
could to reassure myself that I was not alone” (8/30/18, Transcript 7, p. 6,
Kennesaw, GA). Charles brings up the online hookup application Grindr as a
tool that may not welcome conversation or opportunities to build com-
munity. The discussion with Charles sheds light on the ways some queer
spaces, like Grindr, may not support the identity development of
LGBTQ+ youth.

For many divergent reasons, whether growing up in a violent household
or attending a cisheteronormative high school, some of the LGBTQ+ youth
shared stories of living in Metro Atlanta can reinforce subtle yet insidious
cisheteronormative violence. While being LGBTQ+ in Metro Atlanta may
always feel oppositional to cisheteronormativity, the youth interviewees
shared that they effortlessly engage new media to explore their identity,
develop relationships, and engage “queer as hell” media.

**New media: negotiating self and creating community**

Considering the experiences shared by some of the LGBTQ+ youth, we
wondered together about the ways LGBTQ+ identities and communities
are created and sustained beyond the physical space of their university
campus. While many LGBTQ+ participants indicated the university had a
space for LGBTQ+ students, about which some LGBTQ+ students, faculty,
and staff were critical, they made use of new media to assert their queer
identities and build community.

As Percy shares: “Probably for young people right now it is still a lot of
it is going to be online. … I have not had a face to face conversation with
my closest friends in a week. But I have talked to them every day” (8/24/
18, Transcript 4, p. 17, Kennesaw, GA). Leigh, a twenty-three-year-old,
white gay cisgender woman, notes that “[p]eople turn to the internet
because it is safe, it is anonymous. You can get a wide variety of experien-
ces. Online communities are huge, YouTube is big. Facebook, I think, is
for the other people” (09/16/18, Transcript 13, p. 20, Kennesaw, GA). Percy
and Leigh’s sentiments discuss the ways new media can be used to commu-
nicate with friends, and engage in safe(er) conversations. Leigh speaks to
the safety and anonymity possible within platforms such as YouTube or
Facebook, which can allow youth to create space for themselves where they
can cultivate and “play” with their own identities as well as find resources,
education, and support. Notably, Leigh of all of the youth interviewed, was
the only one who mentioned using Facebook—specifically the group chat
function that allows her to connect with a community of folks to connect
with other lesbians who are caring for/loving their disabled trans partners.
Like Percy and Leigh, Luke shared that they have found their current friends through Twitter. As Luke shares:

I found pretty much all my online friends through Twitter. For me it is ... we liked the same television show and so I was following—or I followed—a few people who were posting about it, and then one day I responded—they followed me back—and then we just started responding to each other’s post and from there on that went off. ... And I started to realize after some time that a lot of the people I was meeting with these interests were also LGBTQ+. (8/21/18, Transcript 1, p. 8, Kennesaw, GA)

While Percy earlier indicates that they surround themselves with queer as hell media, Luke notes that due to mutual interests, like a television show, Twitter facilitated sustainable friendships with LGBTQ+ peers.

Luke does not go into detail as to what television show sparked their friendships, but Blair, a 20-year-old, white lesbian cisgender woman, happily shared how her friendships were formed through Twitter, Reddit, and Discord. She shared that her friend network traverses national and state boundaries with one friend even from Canada. One of the television shows she discusses with me is Adventure Time, an animated fantasy series that aired on Cartoon Network from 2010 to 2018. “It is a kids show. But they had their finale and they had the two girl characters kiss at the end of it. So that is kind of a big deal ... It is a step forward, but I wish it could just be more explicit. I wish it was not considered, like, you cannot mention that to children, you know, it is inappropriate for children to know and I am, like, well, why is it” (09/07/18, Transcript 14, p. 22, Kennesaw, GA). This queer/lesbian representation in Adventure Time was important to Blair, even though it fell short of adequately representing a queer/lesbian relationship. However, despite her frustrations, she reads the inclusion of a kiss between two female characters as queer progress.

While many of the research participants discussed using new media as an opportunity to find and extend their friend network, Niko shared a story of the power of media such as YouTube to create, share, and learn from one another:

I know that a lot of people who use YouTube to get advice and tutorials. It is a really good way for a trans girl to learn how to use makeup or for a trans guy to learn how to bind properly without injuring himself. Just having that online community can give people resources that they might not be able to find in person just because everything’s on the internet. You can just search, and there it is. (8/30/18/3, Transcript 9, p. 8, Kennesaw, GA)

Niko highlights the importance of queer media and using the platform YouTube to disseminate safe and important information to transgender youth. These videos are often curated to challenge the normativity of queer, more specifically, trans representation and offer viewers the opportunity to share their experiences. By creating these virtual spaces, streamers can help
other queer people detail their experiences, provide helpful “life hacks,” and collaborate alongside their subscribers on the evolution of their own queer identities. This can form a community with the ability to bridge across time and space. The videos, and resulting dialogue in the comment section, can aid in supporting young trans peoples’ understandings of self as well as gain information regarding their bodies that are rarely available in popular media outlets or Georgia’s safe sex (or abstinence only) education.

Both Ronda and Roland illustrate the power of Reddit in learning about queer sexuality. Ronda shared how she learns about “lesbian experiences with their partners” by using Reddit or Tumblr. She notes: “Those are the main places that I go. [laughs] I do not want to go too far because I do not want to look at porn or anything” (8/30/18, Transcript 8, p. 5, Kennesaw, GA). Although Ronda is unable to find an affirmative space at home, she utilizes new media to experiment with her identity and grow as a Black lesbian despite the stifling atmosphere she lives within. Ronda’s discussion of Reddit is important, as it is known to know the “dark … of the internet,” and yet Ronda finds this space incredibly productive to learn about lesbian identity and experience. Reddit still allows users the freedom of “anonymity-based sociability” and despite not requiring users to select their gender, name, or profile picture, still ranks among the leading websites for internet traffic and engagement (Triggs et al., 2019). The website still allows users to create their own “subreddits,” which allow users to post content in special topic forms relating to their preferred topics, upvote in support downvote in dislike, and comment on the submissions of others. Users of Reddit are given the freedom to delete and recreate accounts at will, allowing users to discreetly question, comment, and upvote with a diminished fear of discovery (Triggs et al., 2019).

Roland shares: “You can go to a sub-Reddit, there’s one just called ‘Gay.’ And you can just go there and read peoples’ thoughts. Read peoples’ experiences, and I think that was empowering to me to see that these people are out there. These people are real” (8/23/18, Transcript 2, p. 10, Kennesaw, GA). For Roland, reading these personal accounts of other “gay” people create spaces of affirmation and legitimization of his identity. This may prove especially imperative in environments where being “gay” is not an option as Ronda speaks to. Instead of picturesque cis-heteronormative depictions of queerness like Simon in Love Simon, Roland insists, “these people are real,” legitimizing their queer stories and letting their voices be read/heard.

Taking up alternative forms of media can be helpful in LGBTQ+ young peoples’ self-construction; they too, have the ability to engage with playful identity construction through the use of tabletop and video games. Percy
shares a story of playing the video game *Fortnight* and a fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*):

I play a lot of video games. And, I am getting into *D & D*, which is amazing because it can be so cool for trans people because you can be whoever—which is crazy! The video games in which you get to choose ... a lot of times you only get to play characters that are cisgender white men—that is the default. Some games are changing it up now, like, the massively popular, *Fortnight*, until you have “skins”—which is where you get to choose what you look like—it just kind of cycles through a bunch of random ones. So, you can get [to be] people of color, women, men, all sorts of stuff. (8/24/18, Transcript 4, pgs. 9–10, Kennesaw, GA)

Games such as *Fortnight* and *D&D* provide them a space to play with gender, and more importantly, to exist, as an avatar or character, as the gender they see themselves to be. For many video games are an opportunity to play; for others, they can reify dominant cisheterosexual paradigms—cisgender-boys/men who play cisgender-female characters because they deemed attractive or desirable (Thompson, 2018). For Percy, and referring back to Muñoz’ theorization of queerness as “not yet,” being able to be a character is not only a playful act but a becoming action—to exist in a cisheterosexual world and be unapologetically gender non-conforming or trans. Game spaces give LGBTQ+ youth the framework and flexibility to make changes or dismantle the gender binary by allowing for creative innovation and deep personal identity development. Being an elf bard, a half-orc warlock, or having the ability to choose your “skin” provides many LGBTQ+ youth a platform not just to learn about gender, but also to exist in a world where their gender is not questioned: a fantasy turned into reality.

New media platforms provide LGBTQ+ youth the space they need to thrive. LGBTQ+ youth can create space for themselves, their community, access support, and necessary information. Although tangible spaces, like high schools, may not make room for all LGBTQ+ youth in Metro Atlanta, new media allows youth to make space for themselves. Some of this is inadvertent gravitation of LGBTQ+ identified individuals to similar media, whereas other connections are purposely bridged through YouTube channels or gaming. New media allow LGBTQ+ youth to create themselves, to play with their identities, and construct their own narratives through avatars, stories, and queer content frames LGBTQ+ life as a plurality and as possibility in the South. Some of this may be gradual, like as in the case of Ronda, whereas others may submerge themselves in their trans identity like Percy.

“Queer as hell media”: LGBTQ+ youth challenging queer normativity

For many of the LGBTQ+ youth participants, physical spaces, whether their university environment, home-life, or workplaces may normalize
cisheteronormative Southern ideologies and cultures. New media spaces, such as finding friends on Twitter, playing with identity in D&D, or searching for “lesbian experiences”—but not porn or anything—on Reddit, provide LGBTQ+ young people opportunities to curate and create their identities as a sort of archive—one in which engages “queer as hell media” by reading, engaging, and remaking meaning into their lives. Queer curation signifies the pursuit of difference and an invitation to exist outside of and ultimately challenge cisheteronormativity by operationalizing all and any versions of queerness. LGBTQ+ young people are producing, consuming, and making—curating—queerness in their own way and for their own purposes through their new media engagements: effectively, LGBTQ+ are seizing control over queer content in ways that are both caring and careful (e.g., Ronda scrolling through Reddit for affirmation while not explicitly engaging with queer pornography). Follow Britzman (1995), who argues that queer theorizing provides space to engage difference beyond the bounds of representation, for LGBTQ+ youth, the queer curation process is not for just an individual experience; rather, queer curation works to sediment radical possibilities that engage and defy normative scripts and representations, such as ones present in Love Simon. While some of the LGBTQ+ youth have found solace in some queer spaces, whether their high school GSA, participating in LGBTQ+ student clubs on campus, or finding community through meaningful faculty or staff relationships, for the majority of the interviewees, their everyday realities of living in the South, particularly in the State of Georgia, contributed to their desire to engage new media practices as ways to discover, uncover, and potentially recover themselves in queer ways that engage a multiplicity of queer perspectives, experiences, and identities.

Important, here, are the stories of Luke, Niko, and Percy who note that transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, or gender non-conforming youth in Metro Atlanta are often written out of queer spaces; thus, engaging in critical innovation with queer new media and constructing images of the self through new media provides them possibility and opportunity. While we note that normative queer media has the potential to be read as reproducing homonormative or transnormative (Duggan, 2012; Vipond, 2015) symbols and signifiers, LGBTQ+ young people engage these and other forms of queer media as a way to express and curate themselves, play with identity, and take up space as LGBTQ+ youth in the South. Ultimately, we argue, engaging with new media is a practice of being and becoming “queer as hell.” We end by returning to the issue of representation, which Roland note in his discussion of Love Simon. As LGBTQ+ youth participants have shown, their lives, experiences, and engagements are complex, complicated, and can be even problematic as they restory their lives through the use of
new media. Their stories offered push beyond Simon’s “coming out story” and offer multifaceted representations of and engagements with “queer as hell” media.

Notes
1. The +, positive symbol, or *, asterisk symbol: “signals greater inclusivity of new gender identities and expressions and better represents a broader community of individuals” (Tompkins, 2014, p. 27). For example, some research participants, were interpolated by the acronym LGBTQ+ and identified as non-binary or demisexual.
2. Cisheteronormativity “extends the more commonly used ‘heteronormativity,’ [by] describing the oppressive, pervasive orientation and organisation [sic] of society around a compulsory heteroromantic heterosexuality, which can in turn alienate those that identify their sexuality queerly … in order to include the compulsory cisgender norm that oppresses and alienates trans people” (Marzetti, 2018, p. 702).
3. Metro Atlanta, defined by the 2012 US Census as the combined statistical area of “Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Marietta” is used to encapsulate the City of Atlanta as well as some of the amalgamated suburban sprawls (Wilson, 2012). While Kennesaw State University is situated within the City of Kennesaw, and thus falls outside of the US Census boarder, we nonetheless use “Metro Atlanta” as a way to organize the research participants—they commute across city and county borders to go to school, work, and home.
4. It Gets Better has been widely criticized for the ways its stories and narratives reproduce the “good life”; in particular, the ways success is measured in and though economic and cultural capital. Sakal Froese and Greensmith (2019) note that the systems of inequality young people find themselves, typically mattering at school in the form of “bullying”, are rarely questioned, instead, young people, in order to be recognized, need to place themselves into neoliberal mechanisms of productivity and worth, which public figures amplify in their videos. Ellen has been criticized for her inequitable treatment of crew members, and at the age of 62, is worth $330 million (Hoffower, 2020).

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