

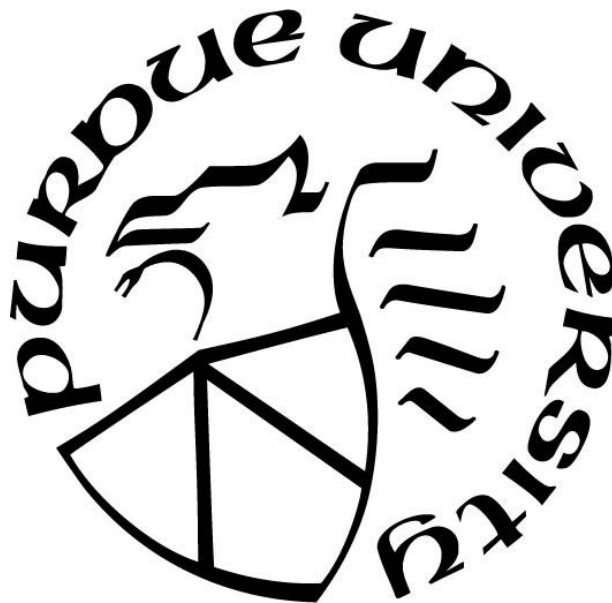
**POLITICAL DELIBERATION, BROKERAGE, DIFFUSION, AND  
CONNECTIVE ACTION ON @QUEERAPPALACHIA**

by  
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**A Thesis**

*Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of*

**Master of Arts**



Brian Lamb School of Communication  
West Lafayette, Indiana  
August 2020

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*Dedicated to all the queer kids living in hollers and heartlands.*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge Daniel Angus for providing me with an invaluable tool for collecting Instagram data. I would also like to acknowledge The Association of Internet Researchers for helping me workshop data collection and analysis ideas at their 2019 annual conference in Brisbane, Australia. Further, I would like to acknowledge my advisor, Dr. Seungyoon Lee, without whom this project would not have been possible. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my graduate student colleagues who helped me develop both the skills and the courage to undertake this study, with particular thanks to Bailey Benedict, Eric Wiemer, and Kirsten Gibson.

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## ABSTRACT

This project investigates the network structure and political importance of the popular Appalachian culture and politics page @queerappalachia. Promising users a feed filled with “community.content.culture,” @queerappalachia serves as a digital hub for anyone interested in queer perspectives on Appalachian politics and culture, regardless of their geographic location. The page’s over 3,000 posts include memes about Appalachian culture; celebrations of queer rurality (#saturdaynightinthecountry, #ruralresistance); references to big trucks, Mountain Dew, and The Trailer Park Boys; posts about opioid addiction, needle exchanges, and #harmreduction; jokes about communism and anarchism; calls for establishing #mutualaid drives; and signal boosts which highlight ongoing activist efforts in the region, including the Mountain Valley Pipeline protests and the Kentucky miner’s strikes. The page’s recalcitrant and anti-establishment content has attracted a surprisingly large following of around 230,000. But what does this expansive online network mean for Appalachian and Southern queer people?

Rural queer people often have limited access to offline political organizing due to their geographic location, but online political communities may be a way of increasing rural political engagement. However, the usefulness of social networking sites like Instagram for political organizing is contested. To better understand what @queerappalachia is and how it is being used, I have created a multidimensional network of the page, mapping how users interact with posts, hashtags, and each other. In particular, this study provides evidence for how the collective action concepts of “brokerage,” “diffusion,” “identification,” and “deliberation” are being organized and enacted within the @queerappalachia community. I have also conducted interviews with followers of @queerappalachia who have been identified as central by the network study. The interviews provide evidence of how people within the @queerappalachia network conceptualize their political identities in relation to the page and how users utilize the affordances of Instagram communities for political action.



## INTRODUCTION

Much of the scholarship on LGBTQ activism focuses on the well-publicized gay and lesbian liberation movements that coalesced in urban spaces like New York City and San Francisco, a trend that has been described as “metronormative” by queer movement scholars (Stone, 2018). Less attention has been paid to rural queer movements and the political organizing that happens in hollers and cornfields. Rural organizing is less visible than urban organizing in part because of the geographic distance that separates groups of activists in scarcely populated regions such as Appalachia, where queer people from rural areas of Tennessee, North Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, and Pennsylvania are separated by miles upon miles of craggy mountain ranges. However, the proliferation of social media has changed how rural queer people connect with one another by bridging geographic obstacles and facilitating communication (Hellis, 2018).

On the social networking site Instagram, the politics and culture page @queerappalachia, run by the “Electric Dirt Collective”—an unspecified group of Appalachian/Southern artists and activists—, offers “community, culture, and content” to some 225,000 followers. The page’s over 3,000 posts include memes about Appalachian culture; celebrations of queer rurality (#saturdaynightinthecountry, #ruralresistance); references to big trucks, Mountain Dew, and The Trailer Park Boys; posts about opioid addiction, needle exchanges, and #harmreduction; jokes about communism and anarchism; calls for establishing #mutualaid drives; and signal boosts which highlight ongoing activist efforts in the region, including Mountain Valley Pipeline protests and the Kentucky miner’s strikes. This content is catered to rural leftists and anti-establishment queer people who are proudly reclaiming hillbilly culture—a population made invisible by popular depictions of Appalachia as a region overwhelmed by cultural stagnation and political apathy (Vance, 2016).

Despite its recalcitrance, @queerappalachia has made a considerable impression on internet culture. The page’s follower count exceeds the population of some of Appalachia’s largest cities. It also exceeds the follower count of several well-known Appalachian and Southern nonprofits, including the Looking at Appalachia Project<sup>1</sup>, the Appalachian Prison Book

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/lookingatappalachia/?hl=en>

Project<sup>2</sup>, and the Southern Poverty Law Center.<sup>3</sup> @queerappalachia's follower count even exceeds that of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center<sup>4</sup> in New York City, one of the foremost hubs for LGBTQ community and advocacy on the East Coast. Clearly, @queerappalachia has been able to amass a large amount of support through highlighting queer life and politics in a region of the country that is generally misunderstood, oft maligned, and regularly forgotten about in annals of queer activism. It is conceivable that a space in which a critical mass of Appalachian and Southern queer people, activist, and artists have converged could serve as a vital hub for political advocacy and information exchange—a virtual forum keeping rural queers connected to issues like labor rights, environmental conservation, and community harm reduction strategies. @queerappalachia could also serve as a rare pulpit for reclaiming empowered rural identities and advancing counter-narratives about what it means to be Appalachian and Southern today.

Still, the connection between meaningful political engagement and online community membership is contested (Feton & Barassi, 2011; Keating & Melis, 2017). The ability of activists to mobilize critical masses of people in physical space is undoubtably important to affecting social change (Trere, 2012), but less is understood about the value of mobilizing critical masses of people in virtual space. However, a new generation of social movement scholars is considering the various ways that people become activists outside of those formal organizations which traditionally facilitated collective action (Clemons & Minkoff, 2004). The internet-enabled phenomenon of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; González-Bailón & Wang, 2016)—a form of collective mobilization that happens online—has been used to explain how activism flourishes on social networking sites (SNS). The large online followings which distinguished political movements like #blacklivesmatter and #occupywallstreet from their predecessors have created protest ecologies which span across multiple communities and issues. In the case of #occupywallstreet, networked online communication enabled activists to build power on the ground and tell their own stories about the movement without having to rely on traditional media gatekeepers (Penny & Dadas, 2014; Suh, Bogdan, & Chang, 2017). In the case of #blacklivesmatter, the proliferation of hashtags related to the movement on Twitter enabled

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/appalachianpbp/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/splcenter/?hl=en>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/lgbtcenternyc/>

Black people across the United States to engage in participatory narratives which raised global awareness about anti-Black racism (Byrd, Gilbert, & Richardson, 2017). @Queerappalachia is similar to these movements in its anti-establishment ethos and interest in developing counter-narratives about Appalachia and queer rurality. However, unlike #occupywallstreet and #blacklivesmatter, @queerappalachia's online network has never been empirically investigated. Further, @queerappalachia is unique in its exploration of rural queer life—its community challenges scholarly assumptions about queer activism which almost always situate queer political insurgencies in urban space and focus primarily on physical activism.

@Queerappalachia is also unique due to its particularly large Instagram following—previous studies on connective action have looked at activism on Twitter (Tremayne, 2014), and studies on online political engagement have looked at Facebook pages (Vitak et al., 2011), but relatively few studies have considered Instagram—a SNS replete with rich visual communication that has one billion monthly users<sup>5</sup> and is particularly popular among 18-29 year olds.<sup>6</sup>

The present study addresses these gaps by using multiple methodologies to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the posts, users, and hashtags that comprise @queerappalachia's network collude to form a politically-engaged “counter-public” (Hill, 2018). The first component of the study will be a multidimensional network analysis of the @queerappalachia community. This method will be used to examine the underlying structure of @queerappalachia, the interactions between its components, and how those interactions relate to the principles of collective action. The second component of the study will be a series of semi-structured interviews with members of the @queerappalachia community who have been identified through the network analysis as particularly active and central users on the page. These interviews will probe how community members consider their own identities in relation to the page, what the page represents for them, and how they specifically consider Instagram as a space for activist world-building. These methods will provide a comprehensive look into the dynamics of a unique and influential community that is actively challenging popular perceptions of Appalachia for a quarter million Instagram followers and the internet world at large.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://instagram-press.com/our-story/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Collective Action in Organizational Communication**

Understanding how movements form and what enables their success is essential to the study of social movements and organizing. Organizational communication scholars have used theories of collective action to explain how protest movements form, grow, and build power both on and offline. Classical theories of collective action focus on offline movements. In their formative study, Oliver, Marwell, and Teixeira (1985) theorized collective action as a model of production function and critical mass. More recently, Flanagin and colleagues (2006) argued that collective action is a fundamentally communicative act that involves crossing the boundary between the public and private realm. To develop a gradient taxonomy of collective action, the authors advanced a grid model that maps collective action on a scale of impersonal (members have no direct contact with one another) to interpersonal (high personal contact), and entrepreneurial (participation is not well-bounded by the organization) to institutional (organization defines rules and goals). This explication of collective action also explained how strong and weak ties form within activist organizations, though the authors made little distinction between collective action in online and offline environments (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006). In a study from 2012, Bennett and Segerberg likewise argued for a gradient understanding of collective action. They broke the concept of “collective action” into three categories: collective action, in which actions are led by formal organizations; connective action, in which individuals drive the actions; and hybrid action, in which organizations enable individuals to act. From their purview, these categories gain particular salience in virtual spaces, though they can also be applied to nonvirtual protest movements.

Borge-Holthoefer and colleagues (2011) have utilized the concept of “collective action” to explain how protest movements gain momentum and mobilize supporters. In their research, they suggested that collective action depends on the propensity of individuals to join the movement, the time individuals are recruited, how many peripheral members are integrated into the overall network structure, and reinforcement from multiple members of the network (Borge-Holthoefer, Rivero, Moreno, & Gonzalez-Bailon, 2011). Similarly, Oliver and colleagues argued that people make strategic and sequential decisions when engaging in collective action, thinking about what others have already contributed before contributing themselves. Considering this,

they suggested an ideal in which those who are least invested contribute to a cause first so that those who are most invested can carry the momentum forward later on (1985). From these perspectives, collective action is a complex and continually reinforced phenomenon which relies on the integration of network actors, reinforcement, and the activation of thresholds to create the kinds of “critical mass” that is necessary to propel social movements.

### **“Connective” Action Online**

In recent years, much of the work on collective action within organizational communication has shifted its focus to online political movements, perhaps because of the increased visibility of mass protests (e.g., #metoo and #blacklives matter) on social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) named the concept of “connective action” in their collective action taxonomy and explored it in the context of online movements. They suggested that online movements can be distinguished from offline movements by their massive scale, the accelerated rate at which they grow, and their ability to be flexible in adapting to shifting political currents and accommodating disparate issues. In considering connective action online, scholars have developed ideas about what factors facilitate connective action, the role of shared identity development in online movements, and the extent of connective action’s influence on social change.

In their work on connective action, Gonzalez-Bailon and Wang (2016) used the idea of “connection” to reflect the intricate webs of social ties that facilitate mass virtual movements. According to them, online networks are inherently diffuse and fragmented. Thus, network actors must engage in “brokerage” to connect parts of the network together (González-Bailón & Wang, 2016). The position of actors within an online network, then, is highly influential to their overall effect on the mass movement. Protest memes, for example, can spread rapidly on SNS—a process known as diffusion—when well-positioned users share them with other users (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The sharing of memes and tweets on smart phones and tablets as part of a broader protest ecology follows Bruno Latour’s (2005) actor network theory, which argues for recognizing nonhuman and digital components of a network along with human actors and organizations.

In their study on Occupy Wall Street (OWS), Suh, Bogdan, and Chang (2017) identified another factor that may aid in protest diffusion online: repression. They found that when OWS

encampments were shut down by the police or city governments, other protests spread more rapidly elsewhere. This anti-repression diffusion was more pronounced in cities that had OWS Facebook pages, suggesting that social media may play a role in highlighting repression and spurring subsequent actions.

Shared identity is one of the classical catalysts for collective action (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argued that online movements have broadened the definition of what counts as a “collective,” which can, in turn, lead to increased fragmentation and goal confusion. They questioned the utility of memes in creating group identity, instead focusing on the tendency of online movements to mobilize people’s individuality, encouraging them to plug in as individuals rather than as a collective. Echoing Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) claim about individuality, Gerbaudo (2015) argued that the communities that result from digital, image-based activism are highly personalized, individualistic, and transient in nature. However, Gerbaudo stressed that the utility of memes lies in their ability to spread rapidly, leading to protest diffusion which may, in turn, help cultivate a collective “we.”

Kasra (2017) likewise emphasized the utility of images for protest diffusion, arguing that image-based communication can aide in the development of shared identity in virtual protest movements. Though understandings of a shared identity may be different online, activist images allow people to engage in participatory narratives and join global political conversations that connect them with likeminded others (Kasra, 2017).

Despite the potential of connective action to enable brokerage, protest diffusion, and collective identity development, some scholars have argued that the power of collective action is curtailed by virtual movements, many of which fail to manifest concrete social change. For instance, using social media to organize may put activists under threat of increased surveillance, limiting their agency and making anti-establishment organizing less tenable (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). Still, queer and non-white Occupy Wall Street activists have argued that social media may provide a voice to contributors who feel unsafe engaging in direct action tactics (e.g. in the case of protestors who are trans/gender-nonconforming), in addition to giving marginalized activists a channel through which to influence the collective identity of the movement (Ng & Toupin, n.d.). Thus, though connective action should not be thought of as a panacea for all the problems that occur within movement organizing, it cannot easily be dismissed as a detriment, either. Rather, connective action should be thought of as an extension of traditional collective action theories,

and one that warrants scholarly attention, particularly as more and more political movements develop online.

Much of the existing literature on connective action focuses on well-established movements like Occupy Wall Street and easily-accessible social media sites like Twitter. However, as young people migrate to other social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, theories of connective action must be tested against these platforms, too. This study takes on this task by focusing on connective action in the context of an Instagram community which has, to date, received no scholarly attention. Queer Appalachia, unlike Occupy Wall Street, is an organization whose membership primarily exists online. Whereas OWS often used SNS as a means to organize offline actions, Queer Appalachia uses Instagram more holistically, encouraging their followers to support social causes, donate money, and share information through SNS. Connective action on @queerappalachia may look markedly different than it did on Twitter during Occupy Wall Street. My study will investigate how theories of collective action map onto this unique SNS based organization by illustrating the organization's multi-dimensional network structure and probing how users conceptualize their interactions with this specific page. My research questions related to collective action are as follows:

1. How do users and objects (e.g., hashtags, posts) on @queerappalachia interact in the collective/connection action process?
  - 1a. Which nodes and links of the page are most important to collective action?
  - 1b. How does @queerappalachia facilitate collective identity development?
2. How does the organizational structure of @queerappalachia reflect and/or subvert the gradient scale of collective action advanced by Flanagin and colleagues (2006)?
  - 2a. How is the network structure characterized based on density and hierarchy?
  - 2b. How do the different elements (e.g., posts, hashtags, users) of the network differ in terms of degree centrality?

### **Political Engagement Online**

Traditionally, political engagement measures have focused on a small subset of political activities—electoral politics, for example (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). However, connective action online—including, as mentioned, sharing memes, engaging in participatory narratives, or planning offline actions—have more recently been included into political engagement

theorizations. For instance, Ekman and Amnå (2012) argued for a new taxonomy of political participation that includes what they call latent political participation—e.g., offline and online interest in political issues—and manifest political participation—e.g., voting and participating in offline political actions. This scholarship builds on work by Jenkins and colleagues (2003) that suggested including civic engagement in addition to electoral participation when measuring political engagement. According to their study, general participation in electoral politics is declining, but there is evidence to suggest that people are making meaningful political interventions in other ways—through public activism, for example (Jenkins, Andolina, Keeter, & Zukin, 2003). Now that much public activism occurs in virtual public forums, the effects of online political activities on political engagement should be considered along with more traditional forms.

Many studies have supported the utility of online space in cultivating political engagement offline. In her overview of current research on social media and political engagement, Boulianne (2015) found overwhelming support for a positive relationship between social media usage and political engagement. She posited that social media networks influence individual users' behaviors, and that social media has the potential to rapidly spread political information—a finding supported by connective action literature (Boulianne, 2015). Similarly, Bakker and de Vreese (2011) found a positive relationship between a variety of internet usages and political engagement as measured through offline political participation and argued that new media may facilitate political engagement more than traditional media.

In support of Bakker and de Vreese's claim, there is evidence to suggest that many SNS users often log into their accounts to engage in political activity. A study from the Pew Research Center found that 66% of surveyed users used their social media platforms for a variety of political ends, including commenting on political posts, sharing political content, and signing virtual petitions (Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2012). Moreover, several studies have illustrated the political utility of specific SNS platforms—Twitter, for example—for organizing political actions and sharing political information (Bastos & Mercea, 2016; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011).

Other scholars have focused on determining which kinds of political SNS activities translate into political engagement offline. Macafee and Simone (2012) distinguished between social media's informative (information sharing) and expressive (content creation) uses in their



analysis of social media and political engagement, finding that expressive uses of social media relate to offline participation but that informative uses do not. Similarly, Vaccari and colleagues (2015) distinguished “lean-forward” political behavior online—e.g., commenting on a live-streamed debate or engaging with Twitter hashtags—from more distant forms of political involvement—e.g., “liking” political content. They concluded that “lean-forward” practices have strong associations with political engagement offline but distant engagement does not (Vaccari, Chadwick, & O’Loughlin, 2015).

Taking a more pessimistic stance, Bode (2016) argued that while social media usage could have the potential to spur political engagement, that potential is not uniformly realized because most social media users do not use their pages for political purposes. Other scholars have theorized about the particularities of why online political engagement does not translate into offline political engagement. Contradicting findings by Rainie and colleagues (2012), Keating and Melis (2017) argued that most young people do not use social media for political purposes. On the other hand, Gil de Zuniga (2012) found that social media usage does predict political participation offline, but only when considering other variables such as traditional media consumption, political knowledge and efficacy, and the size and strength of people’s political networks.

There may also be potential hazards to doing activism online. Trere (2012) found that while technology is inexplicably tied to modern activism, its use comes with the risk of exposure, privacy loss, and vulnerability to anti-activist authorities. Fenton and Barassi (2011) emphasized how social media use encourages self-centered participation in politics—a phenomenon that ultimately threatens political group identity and may lead to increased political solipsism. Further, online political engagement has been decried as a form of “slacktivism” by some social movement scholars (e.g., Cabrera, Matias, & Montoya, 2017). Regardless, as online political activities become subsumed into traditional measures of political engagement and solidified as an important component of modern political activism, it is necessary to consider the relationship between offline and online political activity.

The aforementioned studies have typically cast online political engagement as a conduit for offline political engagement, framing offline engagement as the “end goal” in political movements. However, there has also been work done on the value of online political engagement in its own right. For instance, Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) argued that online modes of political

engagement are clustered in a similar way to offline modes of political engagement, supporting the idea that online and offline political activities are fundamentally similar. Bode (2017) suggested that SNS sites may have high political importance among users as they are often one of the primary places where users get political information. Similarly, Towner (2013) developed survey measures of online and offline political engagement and then tested how each measure was affected by people's consumption of traditional or online political media, finding that consumption of online media increased both kinds of political participation more than traditional media. Comparing different forms of online activism, Vitak et al (2011) found empirical evidence to support that "lightweight" (e.g., political discussion, sharing political posts, etc.) political activity on SNS like Facebook can lead to more "heavyweight" forms of online political activism, like donating money and signing petitions.

### **Political Deliberation**

One form of "lightweight" political engagement that Vitak et al. (2011) stressed is political discussion. Gonzalez-Bailon, Kaltenbrunner, and Banchs (2010) have theorized political discussion online as an important catalyst for political engagement generally and connective action specifically. Political discussion often leads to political deliberation, or virtual debates about political issues which contribute to political learning (Gonzalez-Bailon, Kaltenbrunner, & Banchs, 2010). The importance of political deliberation is informed by Deliberation Theory, which argues that by having discussions with heterogeneous individuals, people are better equipped to make collective decisions. The width of discussion networks, measured by the total number of comments, and the depth of discussion networks, measured by the number of layers in a comment thread, have been posited as markers of deliberation quality (Gonzalez-Bailon et al., 2010). Additionally, Ikeda and Boase (2011) found that political discussion need not occur in an explicitly political forum to affect political engagement. Even when political deliberation occurs within conversations about other topics, it can still encourage political participation by "casually exposing people to political matters" (Ikeda & Boase, 2011, p. 660).

Other scholars have also attested to the importance of political deliberation online. Maireder (2013) argued that the internet opens more avenues for political deliberation by connecting people to others who are different from themselves, suggesting a link between the idea of "connective action" and the prevalence of political deliberation in online space. Further, a

study by Dang-xuan and Stieglitz (2013) showed a possible link between political discussion on social media and political persuasion, attesting to the persuasive power of deliberation. Some studies have looked at political deliberation on specific social media sites—Russmann and Stevenson (2016), for example, found that the interactive communication which Instagram facilitates through a focus on images, video, and text may increase the potential for political deliberation.

Still, there is research which points to the potential drawbacks of political deliberation, especially political deliberation online. In the same study in which they supported the value of political deliberation, Gonzalez-Bailon et al. (2010) included a caveat—though political deliberation can change hearts and minds, it can also lead people to adopt more extreme political positions. Expanding on this point, Penny and Dadas (2014) argued that the structure of SNS can make deliberation difficult and that digital affordances such as anonymity may make debating with opposing others less effective. Additionally, research on echo-chambers has suggested that social media may reduce the amount of political deliberation that occurs between people with opposing viewpoints (Sunstein, 2001). However, the existence of echo-chambers on SNS is contested (Garrett, 2009; Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, Wollebæk, & Enjolras, 2017; Weeks, Ksiazek, & Holbert, 2016).

Given this prior research, my study investigates the political engagement of users of @queerappalachia. The network graph will provide visualization of possible instances of deliberation/discussion embedded within posts. More specifically, I will address the following research questions related to political engagement:

3. How does @queerappalachia influence political deliberation and discussion, and other forms of political engagement on Instagram?

3a. Does the width (how many users are connected to one another) of comment threads and the depth (number of comment replies) of comment threads in the @queerappalachia network graph provide evidence of political deliberation?

3b. How important is the @queerappalachia page to users when it comes to political engagement?

## **Brokerage and Diffusion**

Theories of collective and connective action have identified several phenomena that are integral to building and sustaining activist movements online. In a study mapping the structure of activist networks on Twitter in the wake of the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements, Tremayne (2014) connected the success of virtual activist networks with the processes of: diffusion, in which messages are spread to users' social networks; brokerage, in which an actor in the network spreads a message to a previously unconnected part of the network; and attribution of similarity, in which users mobilize around a shared belief system or identity.

Scholars have theorized that online movements need instances of both diffusion and brokerage for growth and affective information exchange. Vasi and Suh (2016) distinguished between “spatial diffusion,” in which info is spread via interpersonal networks, and mediated diffusion, in which spatial proximity interacts with online information sharing and dissemination. Mediated diffusion, the kind of diffusion most common in online-enabled activist movements, relies on brokerage to connect disparate parts of the network (Vasi & Suh, 2016). Further explicating the diffusion process, Gonzalez-Bailon (2014) argued that diffusion has three steps: 1) sequential decision making—during which people within a network notice the way that others in the network have already become involved in a movement; 2) the activation of thresholds—during which users decide to join a movement because of how many people have already joined it; and 3) chain reactions—during which a domino effect takes place and the movement begins to spread. From a network perspective, scholars have argued that high network centrality enables actors to play an influential role in the diffusion process by virtue of how many other nodes they can reach (Borge-holthoefer et al., 2011). Further, scholars have distinguished between different kinds of information in the diffusion process, arguing that the diffusion of innovations and problem-solving heuristics are more important than the diffusion of information in activist movements, though information sharing is the most common form of exchange (Earl, 2010).

As for brokerage, scholars have theorized about which kinds of brokerage activities most efficiently spread information, ideas, and movements from one part of a network to another. Brokerage is one of the factors that has dominated explanations of connective action, and it is particularly valuable as a means of filling holes in network structures (Miller et al., 2011). González-Bailón and Wang (2016) argued that brokerage is most effective when a user shares information to SNS friends who are not friends with each other or aware of the movement generally—this reduces the amount of redundancy in a network. Further, Bennett and Segerberg

(2012) classified brokerage as a kind of resource mobilization through which organizational differences can be overcome and network integration can be achieved. Brokerage is particularly important in online networks where information sharing is mediated (Vasi & Suh, 2016), and protests that spread through online diffusion have been shown to be larger and more expansive than protests that spread through direct diffusion, though size is just one measure of a movement's success (McAdam, 2003; Tarrow, 2005).

The present study will use multiple methods including network metrics and qualitative interview data to examine how actors within the Queer Appalachia Instagram network might be engaging in processes of brokerage and diffusion. The following research questions will address these phenomena:

4. How are actors within the @queerappalachia Instagram page engaging in processes of brokerage and diffusion?

4a. Which nodes of the network (users, hashtags, and posts) are central to the diffusion and brokerage process as measured by betweenness centrality?

4b. What kinds of hashtags and posts are most central in the network?

4c. Are users sharing information from @queerappalachia to other users outside of the network? If so, how are they sharing it and what kind of information is it?

### **Online Political Movements and Counter-Publics**

How protest ecologies specifically evolve in online space has been the subject of much recent literature, with scholars focusing on both the affordances and pitfalls of using SNS for political organizing. Regarding the affordances of online space, Van Dijck (2006) theorized that social media gives users a great deal of agency to engage in online movements and discussions, which, in turn, can enhance cultural citizenship. Further, Segerberg and Bennett (2011) argued that movements on SNS like Twitter should be recognized as similar to offline political organizations because, like offline political organizations, they are embedded in various gatekeeping processes, change over time, and combine multiple protest ecologies. Similarly, Gonzalez-Bailon (2014) suggested that online networks have a unique capacity to sustain grassroots political organizations which rely less on traditional institutions to set agendas and coordinate behavior. However, this point does not elucidate the role of social media corporations in filtering and censoring information.

Considering the importance of online mobilization for grassroots organizing, researchers have used SNS to theorize about the existence of counter-publics—micro internet ecologies that challenge dominant narratives about marginalized groups and agitate for social change. In her work on networked publics, boyd (2010) considered internet communities as spaces where prevailing definitions about what constitutes a “public” are extended and complicated by the people who use them. Maireder (2013) posited that SNS users are political “bricoleurs” who create highly personalized online networks that contain a diverse mix of political medias and artifacts. In this space, the meaning of political events is subject to constant negotiation and users can challenge existing paradigms. This facet of user agency has been explored in relation the Occupy Wall Street Movement, where activists utilized Twitter counter-publics to engage in citizen journalism and promote activist-centered narratives about the movement (Penny & Dadas, 2014; Reich, 2011).

Counter-publics have also been explored in relation to Black Twitter—a subset of Twitter in which Black users build networks and challenge racism. Hill (2018) theorized Black Twitter as a counter-public where participants politically organize, engage in critical pedagogy, and develop forms of cultural resistance to state violence. Black Twitter has also been understood as a virtual space for civic activism and participatory narratives (Brock, 2012), and as a means for outsiders to empathize with marginalized communities (Byrd, Gilbert, & Richardson, 2017). Further, Jackson (2016) connected hashtag activism in the Black Lives Matter movement to more traditional forms of activism undertaken by Black feminists, positioning online communities as counter-publics for racial and gendered justice. She stressed the equalizing potential of virtual organizing in a world in which electoral politics often excludes minoritized voices.

Other online social movement researchers have focused on the particular components of virtual activism which enable movements to grow and become influential. Considering their ubiquity across all SNS, hashtags have been positioned as uniquely important to online movements—some scholars have even called SNS activism “hashtag activism” (e.g., Jackson, 2016). The relatively low cost of using hashtags has led some scholars to laud hashtag activism as a uniquely democratic endeavor (Small, 2011). In their study on hashtag activism, Blevins and colleagues (2019) looked at the hashtag #ferguson on Twitter and found that Black users employed the hashtag to refocus national conversations around police violence towards personal

narratives about how police shootings affect Black people's daily lives (Blevins, Lee, McCabe, & Edgerton, 2019). The #ferguson hashtag has also been credited with making Black Twitter users' quotidian experiences with police a matter of national significance and centering Black people's perspectives in media conversations about race (Jackson & Welles, 2016).

Though obviously influential, there is some doubt as to whether hashtags can sustain political movements. Communities which form around hashtags have been described as "ad-hoc" publics, networks of transient connections that are mobilized around an event or concept for as long as that event or concept is culturally relevant. Once hashtags fall out of use, the connections they facilitate may also disappear (Bruns & Burgess, n.d.). Still, other research has suggested that online activists use a host of political hashtags which connect them to multiple movements and protest ecologies, therefore enabling them to continue participating after movements change (Seegerberg & Bennett, 2011; Tremayne, 2014).

Image-based activism is also ubiquitous online, often in the form of memes, profile pictures, and image-driven citizen journalism. Kasra (2017) looked at how images—particularly selfies—can be used to mobilize supporters around a cause by encouraging participatory narratives. Gerbaudo (2015) focused on political profile picture frames used by activists and movement-sympathizers in the 2011 protest wave, finding that frames helped activist establish a collective identity but that their specific meaning was often too vague to inspire concrete action. Thinking about image more broadly, Tufekci (2013) studied "attention" as a salient concept in online activism, focusing on how public interest has shifted away from formal political gatekeeping institutions and towards "microcelebrities" on SNS—social media influencers, for example.

Though there is a body of research to support the effectiveness of online protest movements, there are also unique challenges to political organization that emerge in virtual space. For instance, scholars have argued that activists who solely participate in political movements online may become convinced that they are contributing more than they actually are—a phenomenon that has been derisively labeled "slacktivism" (Cabrera et al., 2017; Harlow & Guo, 2014). Further, though social media has been empirically shown to increase the scale of social movements, the size of activists' reach on SNS often comes at the expense of their security—instances in which activists have been targeted by authorities or counter-activists (e.g.,

doxxing) because of their online activities are increasingly common (Mundt, Ross, & Burnett, 2018).

The present study considers @queerappalachia as an example of an online activist organization and investigates the protest ecologies that it engenders. To date, much of the research on online political organizing has focused on Twitter and Facebook—SNS that are more accessible in terms of data collection and analysis. However, large-scale activist movements such as those that coalesced around #blacklivesmatter and #occupywallstreet also exist on Instagram—a relatively understudied platform popular with younger internet users. Considering that millennials and Gen Zers are highly involved in activism (e.g., Milkman, 2014; Tanaid and Wright, 2019), social movements scholars must also attend to how activism plays out on Instagram, both in large scale movements and in political communities like @queerappalachia. @queerappalachia can be understood as a counter-public—an online network that is challenging dominant perceptions about what it means to be an Appalachia, telling participatory narratives about rural queer life, and engaging in citizen journalism and networked action about issues important political issues. The following research question will address how actors within the @queerappalachia Instagram network engage in the creation of counter-publics:

5. In what ways does @queerappalachia challenge dominant narratives about Appalachian life?
  - 5a. How do users on the page conceptualize their Appalachian identities?
  - 5b. How do users on the page see @queerappalachia as a reflection of their own identities and values?
  - 5c. What political issues are most important to users?

## **Instagram**

As mentioned, Instagram is one of the least studied SNS platforms. It is newer than both Twitter and Facebook (Instagram launched in 2010<sup>7</sup>, six years after Facebook and four years after Twitter) and its relatively closed-off API<sup>8</sup> makes it difficult to collect large amounts of data. However, recent scholarship has explored the communication implications of this image-rich platform. Though analyzing visual communication is time-consuming, Russmann and Svensson

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/abrambrown/2018/09/25/kevin-systrom-in-his-own-words-how--instagram-was-founded-and-became-the-worlds-favorite-social-media-app/#312dd49c42bf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/developer/>



(2016) argued that online image-based communication is the next frontier in communication research—an opportunity to illuminate new trends and provide nuance for existing theories. Further, Russman and Svensson (2016) posited that photo-sharing websites like Instagram are the next evolution in SNS. Instagram allows users to cater their self-expressions and invoke various forms of self-presentation that form a public identity (Gerbaudo, 2015). This public identity can be used toward multiple ends, from social networking to engaging in everyday activism to participating in broad-reaching social movements.

Many organizations already use Instagram to market themselves and interact with their members. A study on how public health organizations use Instagram found that users interacted more with posts on Instagram than they did with posts on other SNS, suggesting that Instagram may be more useful than other SNS's in terms of establishing meaningful, prolonged, and interactive engagement with networked communities (Guidry, Jin, Orr, Messner, & Meganck, 2017). In their study on user engagement through Instagram, Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson (2016) investigated how political candidates in Sweden used Instagram to connect with their constituents, finding that candidates managed their public image via their Instagram pages. Similarly, Towner and Muñoz (2018) showed that politicians' posts on Instagram may influence agenda setting during campaigns and that there is a connection between Instagram posts and political issues covered in traditional media outlets. Another study showed that political candidates employ different frames on Instagram to mobilize their bases—for instance, the “ideal candidate” frame attracts more engagement than other frames, and posts that use text within images generated more engagement than other kinds of posts (Towner & Muñoz, 2018).

The politics of user-engagement on Instagram have been connected to the “attention economy” in which the ability of users to attract prolonged glances from other users is a precursor to social and, sometimes, economic capital (Zulli, 2018). This kind of user-engagement may be shallow and transient in ways, but some Instagram users have capitalized on the attention economy to engage in novel forms of activism. For instance, Alexander and Hahner (2017) theorized Instagram as an “intimate screen” through which ordinary people broach political issues by inviting people into their intimate lives and daily routines. Expanding upon the concept of the intimate screen, Locatelli (2017) investigated how representations of breast feeding on Instagram blur the boundaries between public and private life, with many users challenging what

constitutes acceptable breast-feeding representation by sharing personal stories and portraits of their bodies with their followers.

Personal narratives which, through their quotidian honesty, give voice to political experiences have been called “everyday activism” (Caldeira & Ridder, 2017). Everyday activism typically revolves around issues of representation and the creation of participatory narratives which address polemical issues, such as body weight in the case of the Instagram-enabled body positivity movement (Caldeira & Ridder, 2017). In their study on the body positivity movement, Webb and colleagues (2017) explored the intricacies of how people challenge representations online, illustrating how hashtags that seem basically similar (e.g., #fatspiration and #healthyateverysize) communicated markedly different messages—one geared towards challenging dominant narratives around weight (#fatspiration) and the other geared towards encouraging weight-loss (#healthyateverysize) (Webb, Vinoski, Bonar, Davies, & Etzel, 2017).

While some users may feel that Instagram enables them to make themselves visible, Instagram has also been critiqued for silencing and deplatforming users who challenge normative ideals—particularly queer users. Duguay (2016) analyzed images of a queer micro-celebrity Ruby Rose across Instagram and the now-defunct video platform Vine, finding that Rose’s Instagram posts were considerably more desexualized, normative, and self-censoring than her Vine content. Duguay suggested that this may be due to how conventional standards of beauty and gender normativity influence the attention economy of Instagram. In a study from 2018, Duguay concluded that queer women face unique barriers on SNS platforms like Instagram due to harassment, discrimination, and undue censorship—issues that Instagram has repeatedly failed to address. Further, Instagram has also been criticized for deplatforming sex workers (Tierney, 2018) and for relying on biased content-moderation algorithms which target queer and trans people, women of color, and fat people more than other populations (Salty Algorithmic Bias Team, 2019). However, Anderson (2019) argued that Instagram, despite its shortcomings as a platform, still enables queer people to normalize representations of queerness, address stereotypes and common experiences, and spark productive discussions about queer issues.

The present study adds to scholarly understandings of Instagram by probing how an Instagram page—Queer Appalachia—is constituted as an organization by relationships between users, hashtags, and posts. It also addresses how users of the page conceptualize their activism on

Instagram and how they interact with the platform generally by asking the following research questions:

6. How do users within the @queerappalachia network utilize the affordances of Instagram to engage in activism?

6a. What are the limitations of Instagram when it comes to doing activism?

6b. How does Instagram compare to other SNS in this context?

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

@Queerappalachia is an Instagram page run by the Electric Dirt Collective, a group “comprised of folks from different racial, socioeconomic, educational, and religious backgrounds” who come from Appalachia and the Southern United States (Queer Appalachia, 2019). The group’s broad aim is to challenge prevailing stereotypes about rural Appalachians and Southerners and to increase representation of queer Appalachian people, culture, and political issues. They also have an explicit commitment to redistributing the resources they have—social and financial—to marginalized Appalachian and Southern communities. The exact membership of the collective is unclear, though they do specify that they are based out of West Virginia, and some members of the collective travel throughout Appalachia and the South to sell merchandise and represent their causes. Their mission statement describes the organization as an organizing space that focuses on both art and activism (Queer Appalachia, 2019). To this end, they produce an annual Zine which features artwork from queer Appalachians, sponsor an affiliate organization called “Queer Appalachia Harm Reduction,” and run various social media pages through which they share cultural and political content. Their Instagram page (@queerappalachia) is the most popular account that they run. As of October 2019, it has about 223,000 followers (compared to about 32,000 on Facebook). @queerappalachia’s follower count on Instagram is over four times as large as the population of West Virginia’s largest city and capital, Charleston (United States Census Bureau, 2019). @queerappalachia’s Instagram follower count is also larger than the populations of several of Appalachia’s largest cities: Chattanooga, TN (179,139); Asheville, NC (92,452); and Roanoke, VA (97,032) (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

In addition to @queerappalachia’s large follower count, the page has been profiled by several major media companies, including *Slate* (Carey, 2018), *Out* (Tirado, 2019), and *Them* (Mcbee, 2018). These profiles laud @queerappalachia’s coverage of issues related to queer rurality, opioid addiction, poverty, and race and gender politics in the Bible Belt, portraying @queerappalachia as a boon for rural queer representation. However, the page has never been empirically investigated, so while its cultural significance may be solidified, relatively little is known about the posts, hashtags, and people that comprise its ecology. Further, the activist lives of Appalachian people—particularly Appalachian queer people—are understudied and often

unconsidered (Rice & Burke, 2018). This study considers @queerappalachia as a case-study of internet activism in a region of the United States in which myriad geographic, economic, and social barriers may curtail traditional forms of political engagement, such as large-scale protests and participation in electoral politics. The ways in which @queerappalachia is constituted as an activist organization will be explored using multiple methodologies including a network study and semi-structured interviews with @queerappalachia users.

## METHOD

### Mixed Methods

Mixed method research combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches “for the broad purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2017, p. 123). Myers (2014) suggested that mixed method research designs are valuable for several reasons. First, using multiple methodologies to explore the same research questions can validate findings. Second, mixed methods can illustrate findings more vividly than single-method approaches. Third, mixed methods can be used to achieve analytic density, adding breadth and complexity to research findings that, otherwise, may be simple or deceptively *complete*. Fourth, mixed methods can triangulate findings, allowing comparison, deeper analysis, and solidification of results. Finally, mixed methods research may also provide multiple perspectives from which to view a research project, thus helping researchers identify commonalities, breakages, and areas of contradiction and complexity within the research findings—what Richardson refers to as crystallization (Richardson, 1994). The complexity and scope of this project lends itself to a mixed method design. Both quantitative and qualitative data has been utilized to answer different research questions, triangulate findings, and crystallize insights on a relatively unexplored Instagram community. Table 1 lists research questions in this study and methods used to answer them.

Table 1: List of all RQs and what methods were used to address them.

Research Question(s):	Method:
RQ1: How do users and objects (e.g., hashtags, posts) on @queerappalachia interact in the collective/connection action process? RQ1a: Which nodes and links of the page are most important to collective action?	Analyzed via calculating centrality scores for nodes and links in the network over time.
RQ1: How do users and objects (e.g., hashtags, posts) on @queerappalachia interact in the collective/connection action process? RQ1b: How does @queerappalachia facilitate collective identity development?	Analyzed via interview questions 7 through 11 (see Appendix A)
RQ2: How does the organizational structure of @queerappalachia reflect and/or subvert the gradient scale of collective action advanced by Flanagin and colleagues (2006)? RQ2a: How is the network structure characterized based on density and hierarchy? RQ2b: How do the different elements (e.g., posts, hashtags, users) of the network differ in terms of degree centrality?	Analyzed by calculating the network's density over time, calculating percentage of ties that were between users, and calculating the centrality of political/cultural/promotional network posts and hashtags over time.
RQ3: How does @queerappalachia influence political deliberation and discussion, and other forms of political engagement on Instagram? RQ3a: Does the width (how many users are connected to one another) of comment threads and the depth (number of comment replies) of comment threads in the @queerappalachia network graph provide evidence of political deliberation?	Analyzed by calculating the width and depth of discussion threads, measured via the density of connections among users within a discussion thread and how many comment replies a thread generated.
RQ3b: How important is the @queerappalachia page to users when it comes to political engagement?	Analyzed via interview questions 11, 16, and 17 (see Appendix A)
RQ4: How are actors within the @queerappalachia Instagram page engaging in processes of brokerage and diffusion? RQ4a: Which nodes of the network (users, hashtags, and posts) are central to the diffusion and brokerage process as measured by betweenness centrality? RQ4b: What kinds of hashtags and posts are most central in the network?	Analyzed by measuring instances of users tagging other users in post comments or tagging new hashtags in post comments, analyzed by calculating betweenness centrality scores for posts, users, and hashtags.
RQ4c: Are users sharing information from @queerappalachia to other users outside of	Analyzed via interview questions 7 and 9 (see Appendix A)

## Network Study

For the first component of my study, I have created a multidimensional network of the @queerappalachia community in which posts, users, and hashtags are the nodes and tagging, and

comments and mentions are the ties. Scholars argue for the use of social network analysis tools to conceptualize the rapid formation of online political networks, which are becoming increasingly important to political discourse generally (Dang-xuan & Stieglitz, 2013). Multidimensional networks are useful for reflecting social and technological networks where there is a great deal of multiplexity—more than one kind of relationship between two nodes, or more than one kind of node interacting with other nodes (Lee & Lee, 2015). Additionally, multidimensional networks can show the interrelations between network components and thus the dynamism of networks in which multiple components co-constitute the network structure (Contractor, Monge, & Leonardi, 2011). Shumate and Contractor (2014) claimed that multidimensional networks, by virtue of their complexity, are better suited for capturing the complexity of organizational life than one-dimensional networks. Considering the interactive affordances of Instagram, it is useful to consider how all the ways that users can engage with @queerappalachia and @queerappalachia can engage with users constitutes a holistic network structure. Further, actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) posits that both human and nonhuman actors (including communication technology) constitute people's social ecologies. Thus, understanding @queerappalachia as an activist community requires understanding how human components of the network (users) interact with nonhuman components (hashtags and posts).

### **Data Collection**

For the network study, data was collected by manually coding @queerappalachia's posts. The posts were collected using a GitHub application called Instamancer (Angus, 2019) which crawls Instagram pages and collects post data including comments, hashtags, captions, and tagged users and then displays the data in a .json file. The .json file was displayed and sorted using Notepad ++. Relevant post data was manually transferred from the .json file into an excel document. Posts were pulled from the page's inception (May 2016) to November of 2019, and every 10<sup>th</sup> post was coded for inclusion in the network, providing a sample of about 300 posts. Usernames, hashtags, and posts were collected from the sample and copied into excel to form a network matrix comprised of nodes (posts, users, hashtags) and ties (tags, comments, mentions). Usernames were anonymized in the network graph, posts were numbered, and hashtags were kept in their original form. An illustration of the possible relations between nodes is provided in Figure 1.



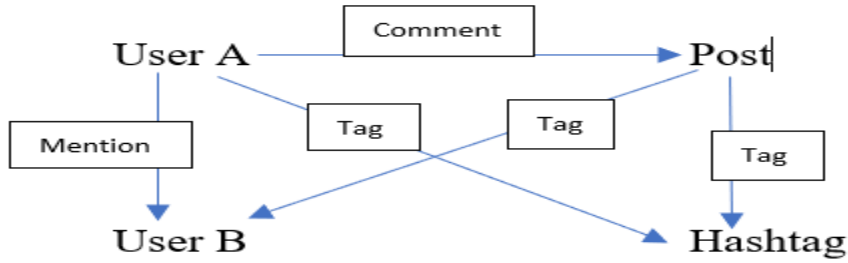


Figure 1: Illustration of the multidimensional network structure.

Attribute data was recorded by performing a brief content analysis on the posts, hashtags, and comments. Posts were coded as “political” (yes/no), “cultural” (yes/no), “promotional” (yes/no), or “other” (yes/no). Hashtags were coded as “political” (yes/no), “cultural” (yes/no), “promotional” (yes/no), or “other” (yes/no). These categories were not exclusive, and a post or hashtag could be coded as a “yes” for one or more categories. More information on these categories is detailed in Table 2. For @queerappalachia posts, both the post images and caption were analyzed to determine if the post is political, cultural, and/or promotional. For post comments, the number of likes and replies each comment received was recorded and comment text was given a “depth rating” according to a rating system illustrated in Table 3. Additionally, the number of likes and comments on each post was recorded.

Table 2: Post/Hashtag Content Analysis Category Information

Post/Hashtag Content Analysis Category	Description
Political	Post or hashtag references a political issue (e.g. racism, drug addiction, gun violence, #economicjustice), movement (e.g. communism, anarchism, #blacklivesmatter, miner's strikes), group (e.g. Appalachian's Against Pipelines, Appalachian Prison Book Collective), or action (e.g. striking, protesting).
Cultural	Post or hashtag references Appalachian/Southern culture broadly (e.g. queer rurality, rednecks, the country), Appalachian/Southern media (e.g. TV, news, music, zines), geographic regions (e.g. Kentucky, West Virginia), or groups/movements that are based in Appalachia/The South but do not have an explicitly political purpose (e.g. presses and zines).
Promotional	Post or hashtag serves to boost Queer Appalachia or the Electric Dirt Collective's organizational identity and/or merchandise (e.g. #electricdirt, #queerappalachia, posts about buying merch and/or zines, posts that fundraise for the group without an explicit political focus).
Other	Posts/Hashtags that fall into a category other than the ones already mentioned.

Table 3: Comment Content Analysis Rating System

Comment Content Analysis Rating	Description
1	Comment expresses a simple reaction to the content or an opinion without explanation, e.g. “lol,” “haha,” “that’s a good one,” or consists only of emojis, or comment only tags another user(s).
2	Comment asks a question, e.g. “when is the protest?”
3	Comment expresses an opinion and provides explanation e.g. “I agree with this because I’ve experienced it,” or comment answers a question, or comment expresses an intention to do an action, e.g. “I will call the governor’s office on Tuesday.”
4	Comment expresses an opinion and generates debate, e.g. comment generates replies which spur a discussion.
5	Comment does not fulfill any of the aforementioned purposes.

### Analysis

The @queerappalachia network was analyzed and visualized using Gephi (Bastian, Heymann, & Jacomy, 2009), a network visualization program. Data analysis used network metrics to address the following research questions: RQ1 (a), RQ2 (a, b), RQ3 (a), and RQ4 (a,

b, c). RQ2 was addressed by analyzing network density (Wasserman & Faust, 1994); hierarchy, as measured through network centralization and core-periphery measures; and the centrality of nodes within the network. RQ3 was addressed by examining the width and depth of discussion threads spawning off comment nodes, measured by how many users are connected to the comment thread and how many comment replies the thread generates, as well as comment depth. RQ4 was addressed by looking at attribute data in the network and determining which kinds of posts, hashtags, and comments are most central to the network. I also looked at the positions of users within the network to determine if there's evidence to suggest that users are sharing information with other users by tagging them in posts or linking new hashtags to existing posts.

## **Interviews**

### **Data Collection**

The second component of the study is a series of interviews with users on the page who are particularly active within the network. “Active” users were identified through the network study. This strategy follows Tremayne’s (2014) research, in which interview participants were identified by virtue of their centrality in the protest network; meaning, in this case, how often they engaged in brokerage, diffusion, and deliberation behaviors—activities which increased their degree within the network. These active users were able to provide novel insights into how they use the page and what it means to them. However, a disadvantage of using “active” users is that they may be particularly liable to see @queerappalachia as an activist community and to see their activities there as political in nature. However, the interview results were contextualized by network information, and interview subjects were also prompted to think about the limitations of @queerappalachia as an organization and the barriers that they may face as activists.

Potential interview participants were identified via the network data—users who had an overall degree of five or more, indicating activity within the network in the form of comments and tags, were singled out and contacted. Of 1,760 distinct users in the network sample, only 26 had an overall degree of five or more. The vast majority of users in the network sample had no prolonged activity on the page—many users appeared in the network only once, meaning they left one comment or were tagged in one post over the course of the 3.5 year period represented in this sample. Of the 26 users who had a degree higher than five, five users’ usernames were no

longer registered with Instagram and therefore could not be contacted. Twenty-one users had active usernames and were sent an interview invitation via Instagram's direct message feature. Only six potential participants responded to these invitations, and only five participants ultimately agreed to be interviewed. Five interviews were completed, recorded, and transcribed during April and May 2020. All interview participants were compensated for their participation in the research study. They will each be identified via a pseudonym in the results section.

All five interviews were between an hour and ninety minutes in length. Each participant was asked a series of 20 questions to guide the interviews, which were semi-structured, meaning they were partly guided by the questions I prepared and partly guided by the subject's responses and areas of interest. Past qualitative studies have suggested that interviews which are highly structured may make the participants feel like the researcher is speaking for them rather than to them (DeVane & Squire, 2008). I sought to avoid influencing the answers of participants, though I acknowledge that my subject positioning as a white, middle class, queer, cisgender woman may have influenced the way the participants responded to me (Boyd & Ramirez, 2012).

### **Analysis**

After the interviews were conducted and transcribed using Temi—an online automated transcription service—they were coded for emergent themes. I utilized “open coding” as the coding method (Burnard, 1991). Open coding has several steps. First, the interview transcripts are read by the coder and initial notes are made on the themes present in the transcripts. Next, open themes are created from the notes. Open themes are freely generated categories that often take the form of key phrases from the transcripts. Next, the open codes are sorted into higher-order concepts to reduce the number of categories—e.g., open codes all relating to activism barriers might be grouped together under the broad category “activism barriers.” After higher-order categories are created, transcripts are re-read to ensure that all the information in the interviews is accounted for in the higher-order concepts. When coding is complete, relevant quotes and phrases can be picked out from each category for use in the analysis. According to Burnard (1991), open coding is best suited for semi-structured interviews which ask open-ended questions, which fits this interview design. For this study, I read through all transcripts several times and created a list of 96 first-level codes which described prominent themes and concepts in the interviews related to the research questions. I then consolidated these first-level codes into

thirteen second-level codes, which were broad categories that common themes and concepts fell under. I then read through the interview transcripts a final time, making sure that all relevant concepts and themes were accounted for in the second-level codes and pulling out quotes to be used in the analysis.

Analysis of the interview data was used to address the following research questions: RQ1 (b), RQ3b, RQ4c, RQ5 (a, b, c) and RQ6 (a, b). RQ1 and RQ1b were addressed via interview questions which ask users about how @queerappalachia facilitates their activism both on and offline and questions probing how much users identify with the content posted by @queerappalachia. RQ3b was addressed by interview questions which ask interview subjects whether they consider themselves to be activists, which kinds of political issues they are involved in, and how they do politics via the page. RQ4c was addressed by asking users about the ways they engage with the page content and how they interact with it. RQ5, RQ5a, RQ5b, and RQ5c were addressed by asking interview subjects to reflect on their Appalachian identities, political values, and how the page does or does not reflect those considerations. Finally, RQ6, RQ6a, and RQ6b were addressed by asking interview subjects to consider the affordances and limitations of Instagram when it comes to activism, what is unique about the @queerappalachia community on Instagram, and how Instagram compares to other SNS sites when it comes to political participation. A full list of the interview questions can be found in appendix 1.

## RESULTS

The @queerappalachia network was comprised of 2,648 nodes and 3,389 edges. The density of the network was .0005, which indicates a very sparse network. The majority of users in the network had an overall degree of less than five (only 26 out of 1,760 users had a degree of five or higher). The network elements with the highest degree were the hashtags #electricdirt (degree = 130) and #queerappalachia (degree = 129). These two hashtags also had the highest betweenness centrality in the network, meaning they were most often on the shortest path link between any two nodes in the network. These hashtags, coded as “promotional” hashtags in the content analysis because @queerappalachia uses them to promote their organization and merchandise, are attached to most of the posts in the network. Thus, many posts, users, and hashtags are connected to one another through being connected to posts that use the hashtags #electricdirt and #queerappalachia. The hashtag #ruralresistance, coded as both a political and cultural hashtag, had the third highest betweenness centrality score because it is also frequently used in posts by the @queerappalachia moderators. These three hashtags organize and connect an otherwise sparsely connected network.

Because the network was large and difficult to visualize as a whole, I split the network up into seven timeslices for the analysis. Breaking the network into parts also enabled me to visualize the way the network changed over time—from the inception of the page in May of 2016 to when my data collection began in November of 2019. Longitudinal analysis was important because the Instagram page has grown tremendously in its nearly four-year lifespan. Additionally, it has evolved in tandem with the sociopolitical climate in The United States, and the network’s posts and hashtags reflect various major political events, including the election of United States President Donald Trump in 2016. Any of these political events could have conceivably altered the structure of the network (e.g. which hashtags are most central, which posts receive most engagement, etc). Each @queerappalachia timeslice captured an approximate six-month period: The timeslices are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: The @queerappalachia network timeslices.

<b>Timeslice Number</b>	<b>Time Period Captured</b>
<b>Timeslice One</b>	May 2016 to October 2016
<b>Timeslice Two</b>	November 2016 through April 2017
<b>Timeslice Three</b>	May 2017 through October 2017
<b>Timeslice Four</b>	November 2017 through April 2018
<b>Timeslice Five</b>	May 2018 through October 2018
<b>Timeslice Six</b>	November 2018 through April 2019
<b>Timeslice Seven</b>	May 2019 through November 4 <sup>th</sup> , 2019.

RQ 1 asks “How do users and objects (e.g., hashtags, posts) on @queerappalachia interact in the collective/connection action process? RQ 1a asks “which nodes and links of the page are most important to collective action?” RQ 2b asks “How do the different elements (e.g., posts, hashtags, users) of the network differ in terms of degree centrality?” And RQ 4a and 4b ask “Which nodes of the network (users, hashtags, and posts) are central to the diffusion and brokerage process as measured by betweenness centrality?” and “What kinds of hashtags and posts are most central in the network?” As a reminder, the @queerappalachia network is a multidimensional network in which users can be connected to posts, hashtags, and other users via mentioning, hashtagging, and commenting (see Figure 1 for a visualization). When considering how the network changes over time, users are less central to the network than hashtags and posts. Hashtags like #electricdirt, #queerappalachia, and #ruralresistance have the highest degree and betweenness centrality in the network because they are tagged in many of the network’s posts—these hashtags are essential to organizing and connecting the network, which also makes them essential for brokerage and diffusion. Without these hashtags, many of the posts on @queerappalachia would not be connected, and thus most users would also have no connection to one another. Posts in the network generally have a high indegree, indicating that posts receive a lot of engagement in the form of comments from users. Generally, users in the network have a low outdegree, indicating that most users do not frequently comment on different posts in the network, reply to other users’ comments, or mention other users when commenting. There is not a lot of evidence to suggest that users are regularly connecting other users to the network,



interacting with one another, or using new hashtags when commenting. Users are most frequently connected to one another by virtue of commenting on the same posts.

Ultimately, posts in the network are important to the collective action process in that they receive the most engagement from users—users are often connected to one another by virtue of commenting on the same posts. Hashtags, particularly promotional hashtags, are important to the collective action process in that they have the highest betweenness centrality, indicating that they play an important role in connecting unconnected parts of the network and organizing @queerappalachia’s content generally. Users do not generally play an important role when it comes to brokerage and diffusion, though there are a few users with higher betweenness centrality scores who tagged other users in post comments, which is a form of brokerage.

Considering the importance of posts and hashtags in the network when it comes to attracting user engagement and organizing information, it is necessary to consider which types of posts and hashtags attract engagement over time. In the seventh timeslice (Figures 2 and 3), which includes the most recent posts collected, posts about political issues are most common. The topics of the political posts, which can be gleaned by looking at the hashtags connected to them, reflect relevant political issues that were salient during the time period and/or are important to Appalachian and rural politics generally. Posts about similar topics are often connected by using some of the same hashtags. For example, Post 5 includes the hashtag #harmreductioninappalachianow, a common hashtag used within the network that reflects @queerappalachia’s interest in rural harm reduction strategies. Post 3 also uses the hashtag #harmreductioninappalachianow and focuses on the opioid epidemic in Appalachia. Post 21 uses the hashtags #nomvp and #nopipelines, indicating @queerappalachia’s support for the anti-Mountain Valley Pipeline protests in Western Virginia. Post 17 uses the hashtags #labororganizing, #workersrights, #minersrights, indicating support for the ongoing miner’s labor movement which is prominent in Appalachia.

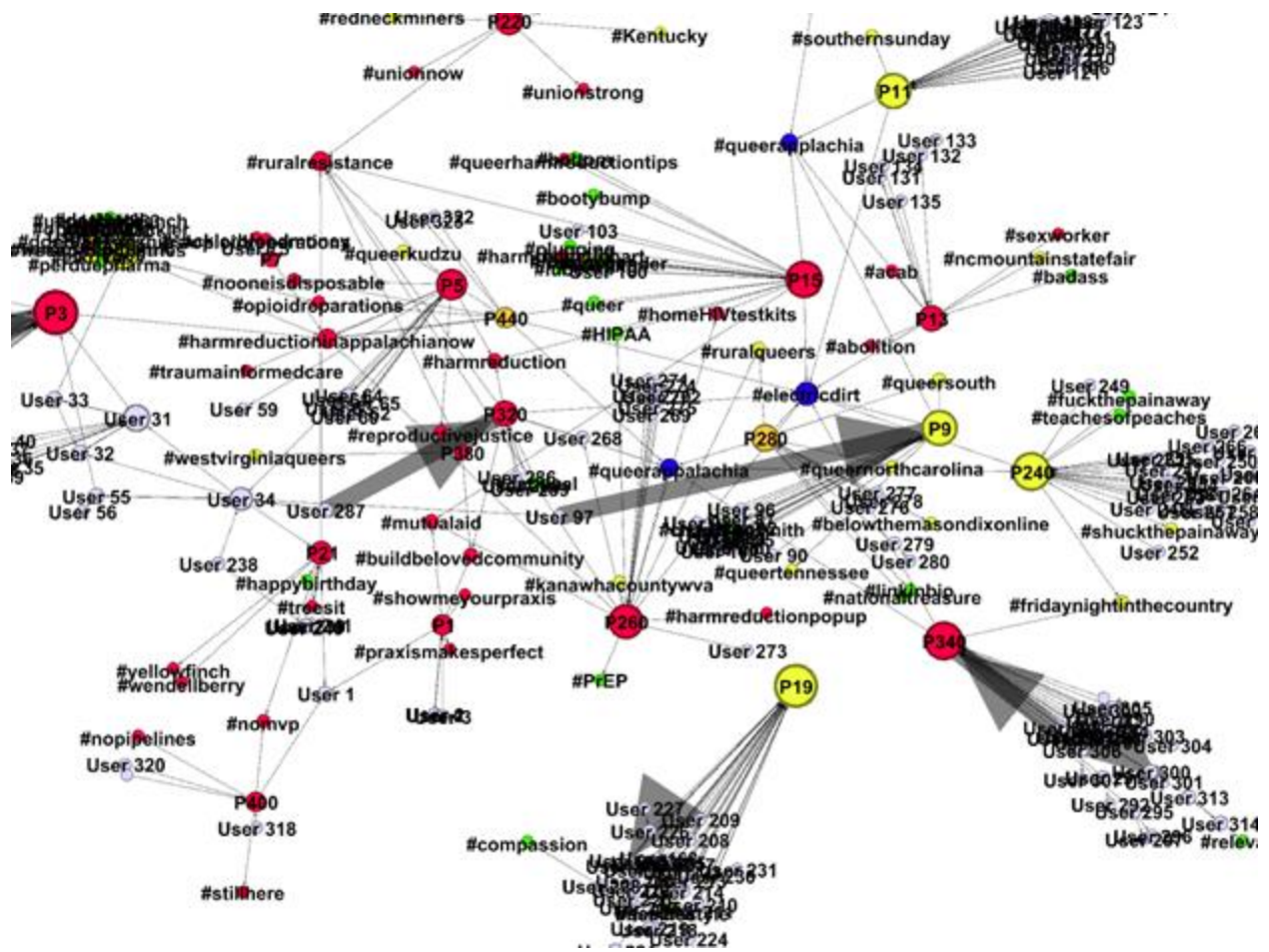


Figure 2: The seventh @queerappalachia timeslice network graph, bottom portion. Political posts/hashtags are in red, cultural posts/hashtags are in yellow, promotional posts/hashtags are in blue, political/cultural posts and hashtags are in orange, and posts/hashtags coded as “other” are in green. Node size is to in-degree.



political issues that were salient during the period of November 2018 to April 2019. Post 1040, for example, uses hashtags related to a gay conversion therapy law that was being debated in Kentucky at the time, and Post 660 discusses Black History Month (February). In terms of engagement, five out of the six posts with the highest indegree for this timeslice include political content. This suggests that political posts received more engagement in the form of comments than cultural posts in timeslice six. The post with the highest indegree in this timeslice focuses on a protest that occurred in Richmond, Virginia.

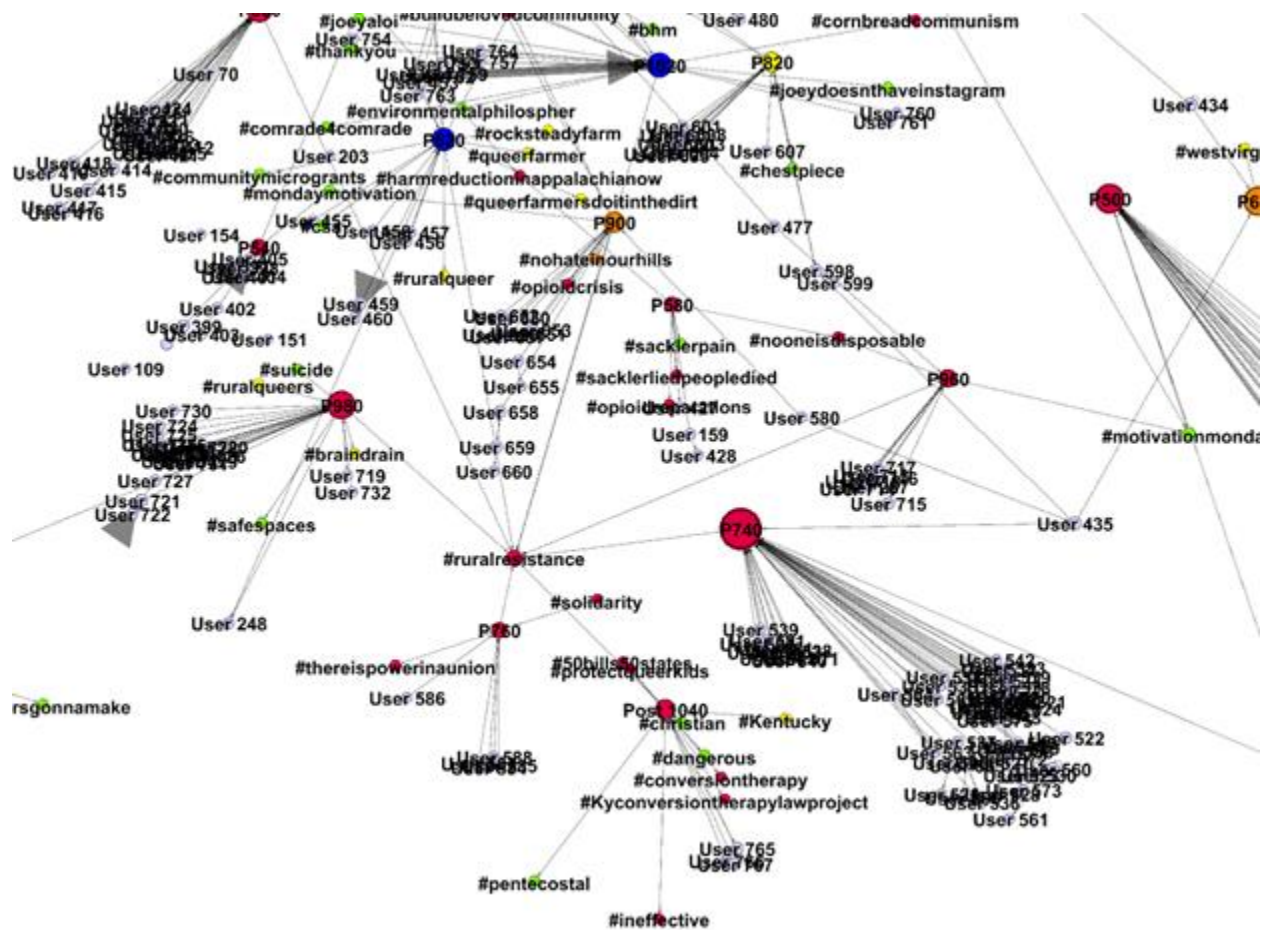


Figure 4: The sixth @queerappalachia timeslice network graph, bottom portion. Political posts/hashtags are in red, cultural posts/hashtags are in yellow, promotional posts/hashtags are in blue, political/cultural posts and hashtags are in orange, and posts/hashtags coded as “other” are in green. Node size is to in-degree.







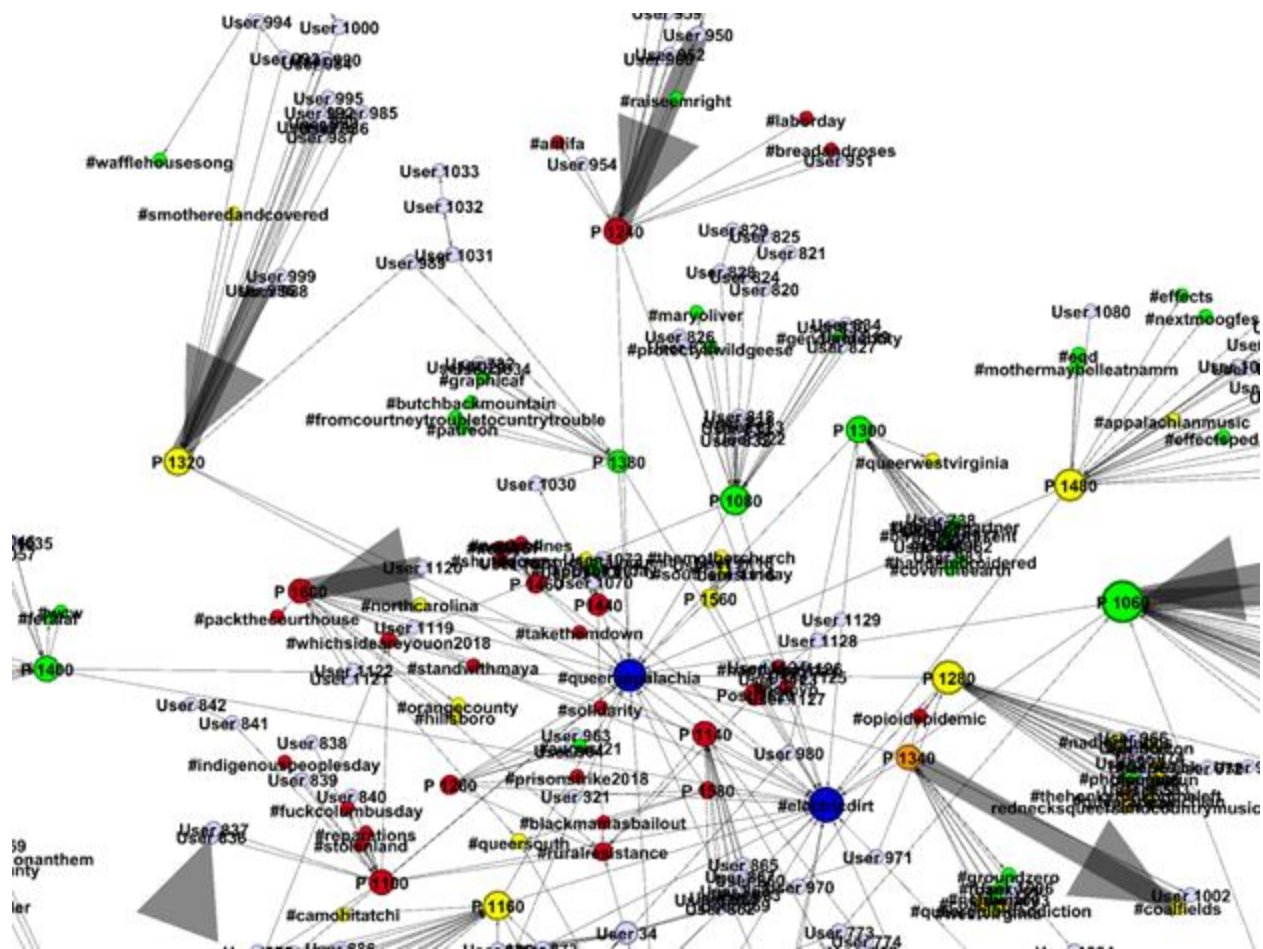
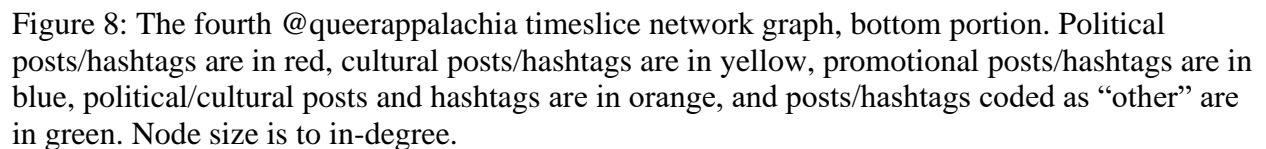


Figure 7: The fifth @queerappalachia timeslice network graph, upper portion. Political posts/hashtags are in red, cultural posts/hashtags are in yellow, promotional posts/hashtags are in blue, political/cultural posts and hashtags are in orange, and posts/hashtags coded as “other” are in green. Node size is to in-degree.

In timeslice four (Figures 8 and 9) there are also political posts which cover current events. Post 1800, for example, focuses on the West Virginia teacher strikes, and Post 1940 focuses on the 2018 Women’s March, which took place in cities across the country for several years following the 2016 election. There are also posts which focus on Appalachian issues specifically—Post 1920 discusses the pitfalls of the fossil fuel industry and uses the hashtag #dontbeafossilfool, and Post 1640 discusses #harmreduction. In this time period, cultural posts dominate in terms of engagement—three of the six posts with the highest indegree are coded as “cultural,” one is coded as “political,” one is coded as “promotional”, and one is coded as “other.” The post with the highest indegree is a cultural post, Post 1680, which is about the appropriation of rural cultural artifacts by non-rural people.









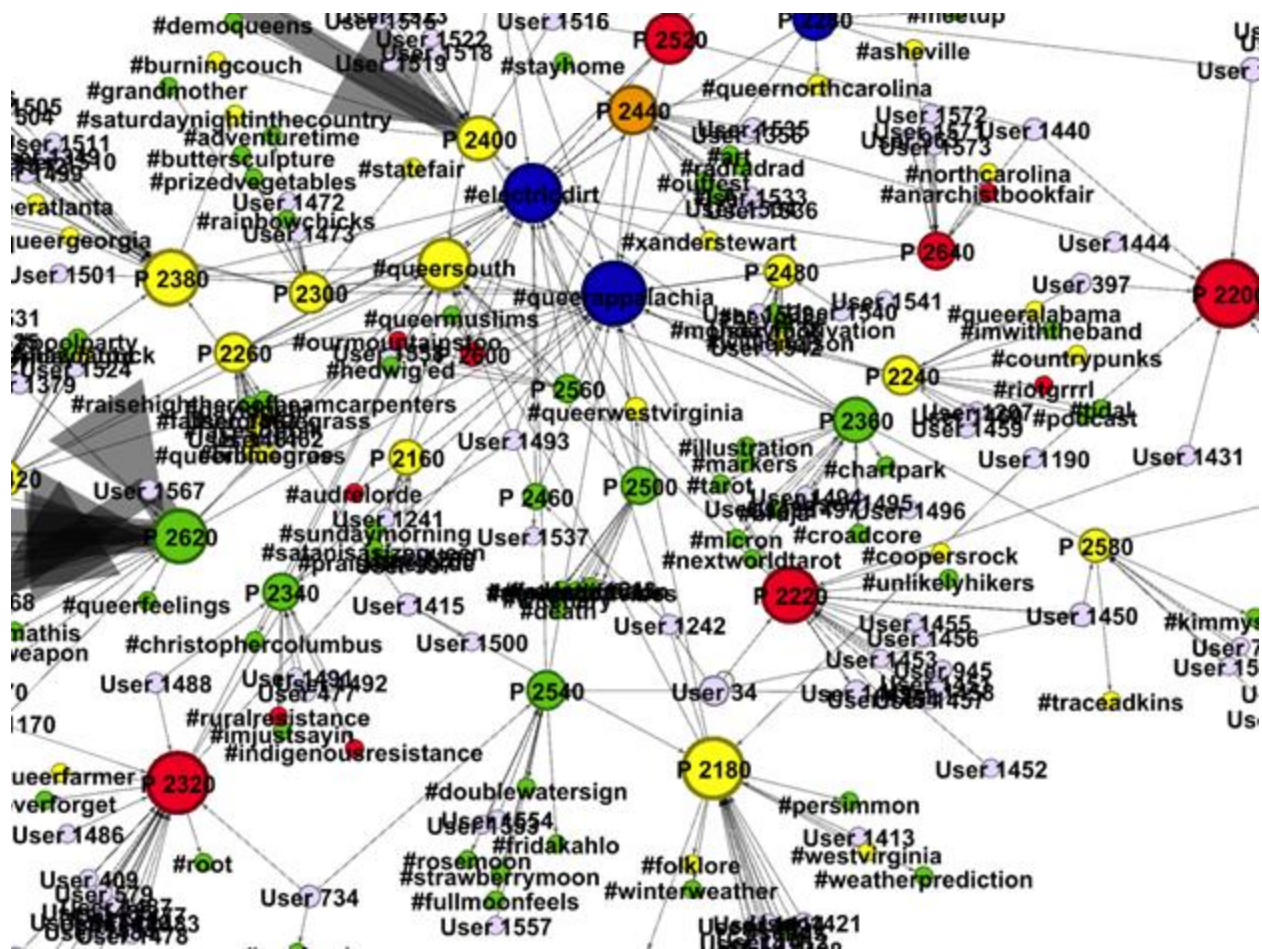


Figure 10: The third @queerappalachia timeslice network graph, bottom portion. Political posts/hashtags are in red, cultural posts/hashtags are in yellow, promotional posts/hashtags are in blue, political/cultural posts and hashtags are in orange, and posts/hashtags coded as “other” are in green. Node size is to in-degree





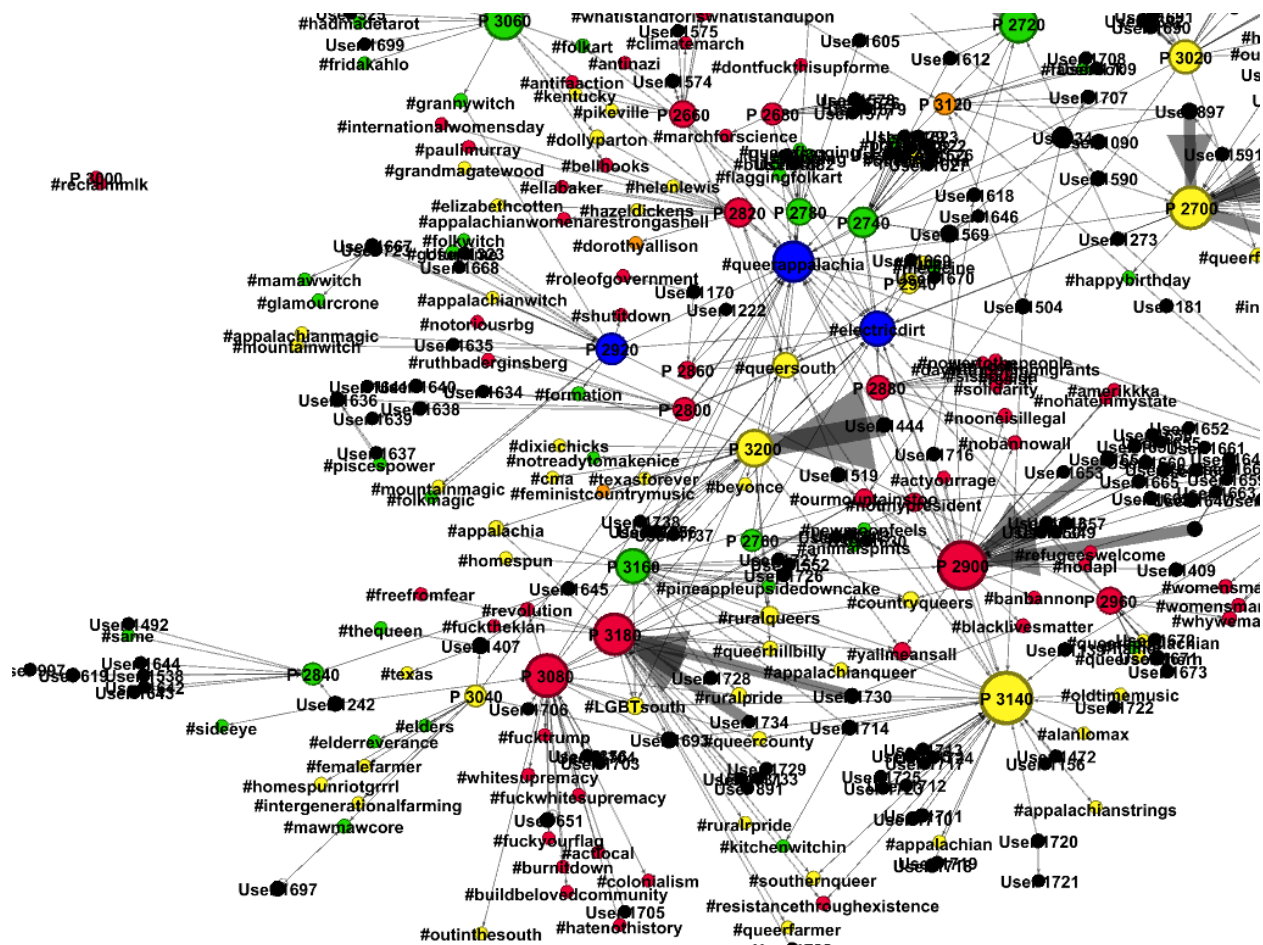


Figure 12: The second @queerappalachia timeslice network graph, bottom portion. Political posts/hashtags are in red, cultural posts/hashtags are in yellow, promotional posts/hashtags are in blue, political/cultural posts and hashtags are in orange, and posts/hashtags coded as “other” are in green. Node size is to in-degree.

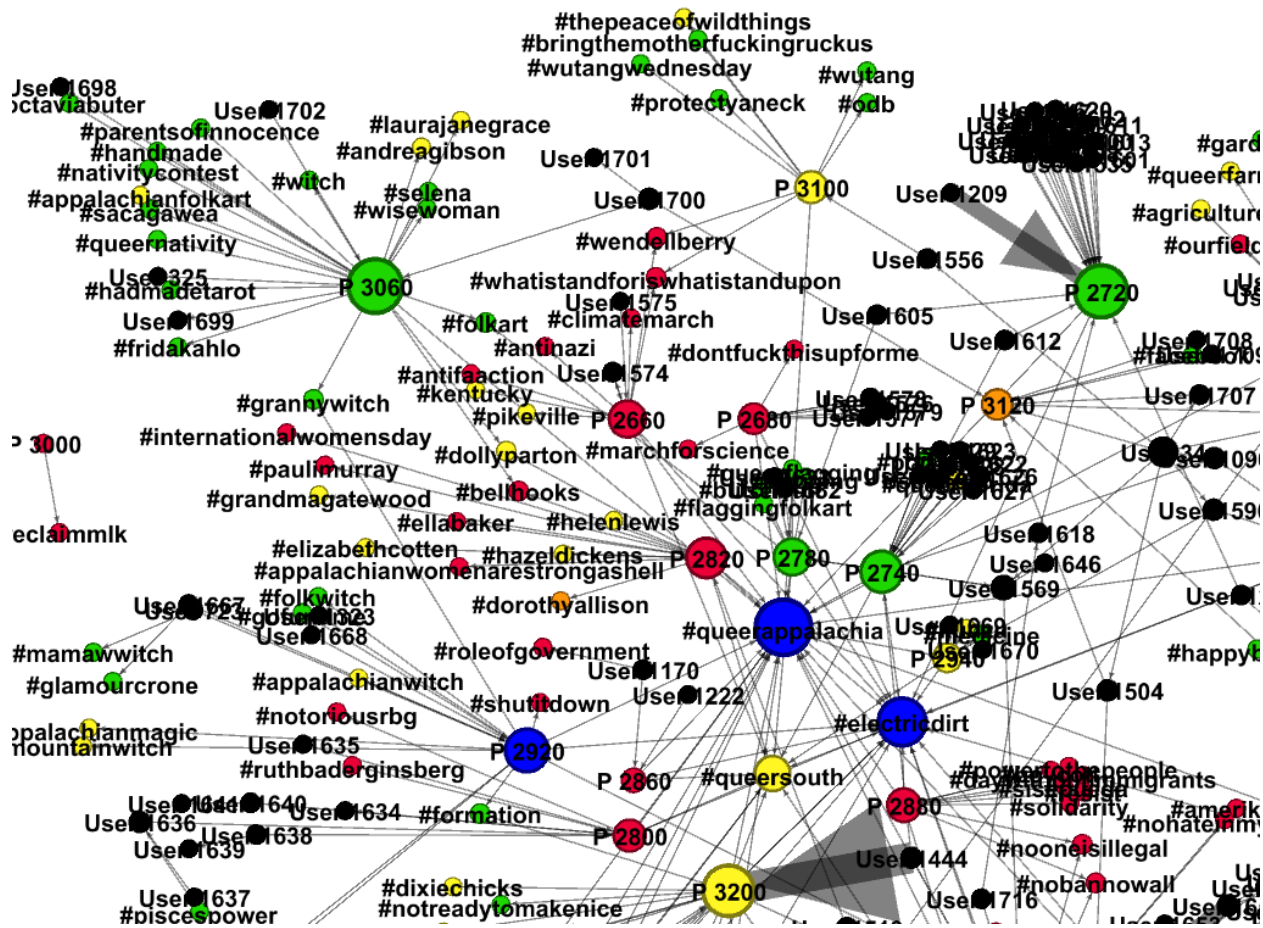


Figure 13: The second @queerappalachia timeslice network graph, upper portion. Political posts/hashtags are in red, cultural posts/hashtags are in yellow, promotional posts/hashtags are in blue, political/cultural posts and hashtags are in orange, and posts/hashtags coded as “other” are in green. Node size is to in-degree.

Timeslice one (Figure 14) includes the oldest posts in the network and has the smallest number of posts out of all the timeslices. There are only a couple political posts in this sample—one focuses on anti-racism and uses hashtags like #blm and #whitesupremacykills, and the other post focuses on #brynnkelly, a rural trans woman whose suicide was the catalyst for the project’s founding. Overall, posts have a much lower in-degree in this timeslice due to the relative lack of user engagement early in the page’s history. The post with the highest degree is Post 3260, which depicts a hand-painted mandolin—an Appalachian string instrument used commonly in Blue Grass music. Post 3340, which discusses the political legacy of Brynn Kelly, has the second-highest engagement.



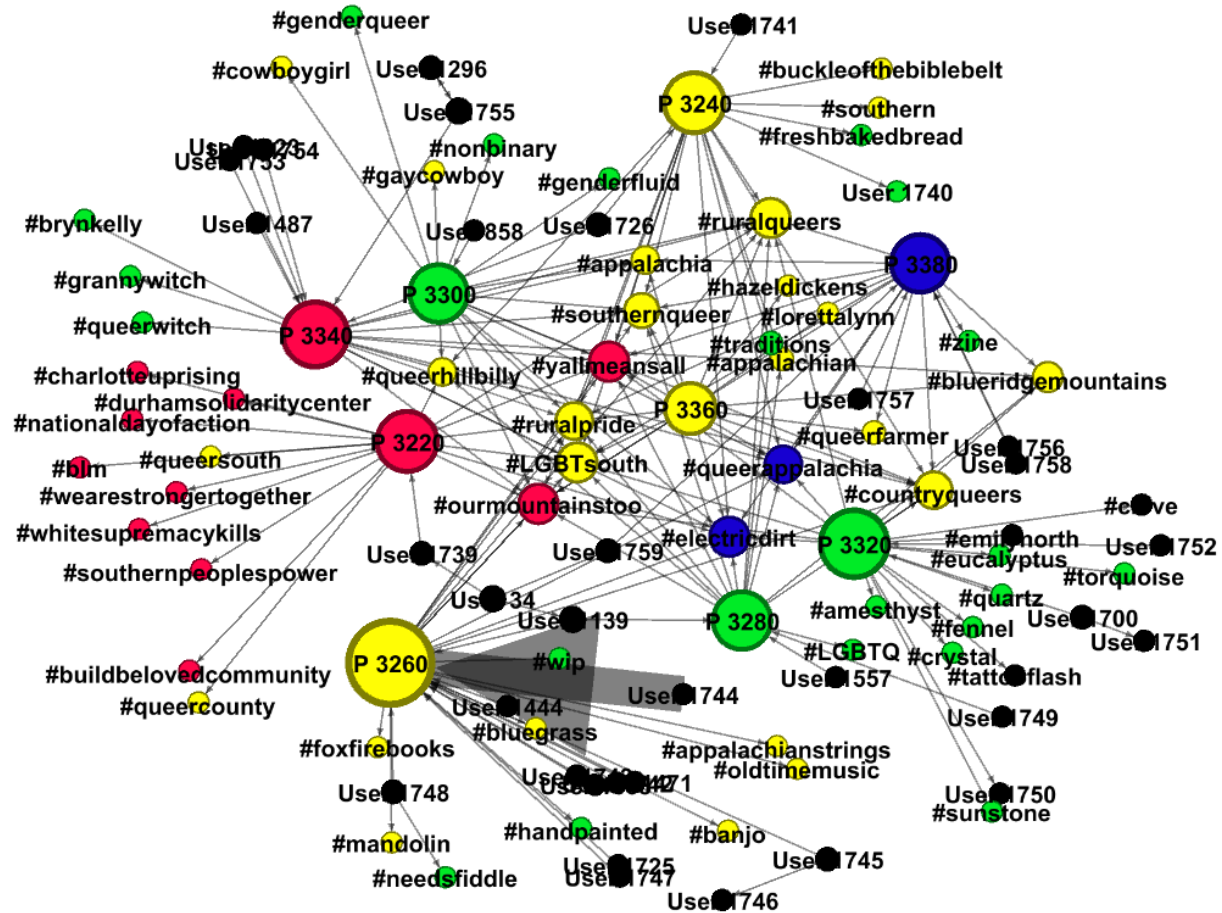


Figure 14: The first @queerappalachia timeslice network graph. Political posts/hashtags are in red, cultural posts/hashtags are in yellow, promotional posts/hashtags are in blue, political/cultural posts and hashtags are in orange, and posts/hashtags coded as “other” are in green. Node size is to in-degree.

Considering hashtags usage within the network, similar hashtags are prominent in the network over time. In the seventh timeslice, the hashtags #queerappalachia, #electricdirt, #harmreductioninappalachianow, and #ruralresistance have the highest degree. These hashtags also have the highest betweenness centrality in the sample, reflecting how often @queerappalachia moderators use them to tag and organize posts. Though #queerappalachia and #electricdirt are promotional hashtags used primarily as a way of connecting posts to the organization’s brand, #harmreductioninappalachianow is a political hashtag, and its prominent use speaks to the importance of harm-reduction related content on the page. In this timeslice, hashtags account for 35.03% of the network nodes.

In timeslice six, #queerappalachia and #electricdirt still have the highest degree among all the hashtags used. #Ruralresistance also has relatively high degree, but the hashtag #harmreductionnow and other political hashtags are not as prominent. This may be because @queerappalachia launched a new harm reduction initiative in August of 2019—more than a year after the last posts collected in this sample (April 2018). #Queerappalachia, #electricdirt, and #ruralresistance also have the highest betweenness centrality scores. Hashtags account for 26.78% of all nodes in this timeslice.

Similarly, in timeslice five, #queerappalachia and #electricdirt have the highest degree of all hashtags, as well as the highest betweenness centrality scores. Rural resistance is no longer prominent in terms of degree or betweenness centrality in this sample, despite it being used commonly in the two more recent timeslices. Hashtags account for 31.26% of the nodes in timeslice five.

In timeslice four, the hashtags #queerappalachia, #electricdirt, and #queersouth—a culturally coded hashtag—have the highest degree out of all hashtags used. These hashtags also have the highest betweenness centrality scores, though #electricdirt and #queerappalachia are more central than #queersouth. Hashtags account for 34.81% of the nodes in this timeslice.

These three hashtags are also most central in terms of degree and betweenness centrality in timeslices two and three, though #queersouth is less central in timeslice two than it is in timeslices three and four. Hashtags make up 39.95% of the network node's in timeslice five. In timeslice six, hashtags make up 52.5% of the network nodes.

In the final timeslice, timeslice one, a larger variety of hashtags are commonly used. This is perhaps because the page was new during this period and wished to attract more followers by tagging their posts with more hashtags. Eight hashtags (#ourmountainstoo, #yallmeansall, #LGBTsouth, #ruralqueers, #electricdirt, #ruralpride, #queerappalachia, and #countryqueers) all have approximately similar high degree scores and betweenness centrality scores. These hashtags are a mix of both cultural hashtags (e.g. #ruralqueers), political hashtags (e.g. #ourmountainstoo), and promotional hashtags (e.g. #electricdirt). Hashtags make up 77.65% of all nodes in timeslice one. Thus, @queerappalachia used more hashtags at the beginning of its history as an Instagram community—this percentage has gradually increased over time, and just a few hashtags (most notably #queerappalachia and #electricdirt) retain prominence over the course of the page's evolution.

RQ 1b asks “Does @queerappalachia facilitate collective identity development?” To address this question, I asked each of the five interview participants to describe what @queerappalachia means to them and how they use it. Participants Three and Five both said they use the page to maintain community with other rural people, even after moving away from their rural hometowns. This suggests that the page helps rural people retain and celebrate their rural identities regardless of their present geographic location. Speaking to the importance of staying connected to rural people, Participant Five said:

“I think that's the other thing that they [do] that's so important because you know, not only is the media like actively erasing us and commoditizing rural areas as places of non-existence...we ourselves just aren't aware of who is around us and who's within our reach.”

Further, Participants One, Two, and Four discussed how they use @queerappalachia as a resource to learn more about their Appalachian/rural identities, which, in turn, helps them feel prouder of their lineages and more connected to other Appalachian/rural people. Participant Two talked about how @queerappalachia has enabled her to see being Appalachian as a regional identity because @queerappalachia focuses on political issues from across the region, rather than focusing on a single issue or State. From her perspective, by focusing on issues from all over the region, @queerappalachia shows rural political struggle as inherently interconnected. She said:

“That's how we're going to change things is if...our movement is all through Appalachia, you know, it's not just that people from East Tennessee are only focusing on East Tennessee issues because that's not really how it works. It's affecting everybody in the region. What's affecting one person in the region is affecting everybody. So I think that that's super important...to show people like, hey, you're not alone. And also what's happening over there could easily happen here. It probably is.”

Though several interview participants cited how @queerappalachia helped them feel more personally connected with their rural or Appalachian identities, there is mixed evidence to support whether @queerappalachia helps users on the page relate directly with one another. Participants Two, Four, and Five discussed having connected with other users who are doing important political work in the region through their involvement with the page, but participants One, Two, and Four discussed deliberately avoiding commenting on the page's post or responding to other user's comments. Participant One detailed how she avoided commenting



specifically due to past confrontational experiences that turned her off interacting with other page users. She said:

“[Using Instagram’s story feature] you don’t have to worry about public comments because that just gets really annoying, people fighting with you in comment sections online. So, yeah, I like to share stuff just on the stories feature and then not have to worry about comments.”

@Queerappalachia evidently has enabled some users to feel more knowledgeable about and connected to their rural/Appalachian identities. Importantly, @queerappalachia coverage of political issues in multiple states may help rural people to develop a collective regional political consciousness that transcends specific geographic location. However, the hazards of leaving a comment in a public forum may discourage individual users from interacting with each other frequently. This may be a barrier to @queerappalachia users seeing other page users as members of the same virtual “community,” though several interview participants did note that it was comforting knowing there were other like-minded rural and/or Appalachian people on the page generally.

RQ2 asks “How does the organizational structure of @queerappalachia reflect and/or subvert the gradient scale of collective action advanced by Flanagin and colleagues (2006)?” Judging by the data collected on the @queerappalachia community, the network is more impersonal than interpersonal in terms of the interaction between users. As previously mentioned, the majority of users in the network have very low degree, meaning they have only commented on or been tagged in one or two posts. In the network graphs, users who have commented on posts are not typically connected with one another, meaning there is not a lot of comments made in reply to other comments. The very low density of the network shows that most users are not directly connected to one another in terms of their interactions on the page. Interview participants One, Two, and Four discussed how they generally avoided commenting on page posts and rarely interacted with other users directly, though participants One and Four mentioned occasionally talking with other users via direct messages. Since direct messages are private correspondences, they are not accounted for in the network graph. Overall, users in the network do not seem to interact frequently with one another directly.

As to whether the organization is entrepreneurial or institutional, @queerappalachia has characteristics of both types of organizations. On one hand, the moderators of @queerappalachia

have considerable control over how the page is organized and what content is posted—the centrality of the promotional hashtags #queerappalachia and #electricdirt illustrate this. Posts made by the moderators act as virtual hubs from which all other page activity (e.g. comments) emanates. However, interview Participant Three, who is a member of the Queer Appalachia collective, said that the content on the page is largely decided by what users want—if they respond well to a particular post, event, or idea, the page moderators take that into consideration and shape the page accordingly. Even still, the page mods are ultimately in charge of deciding what content is posted to the page. Additionally, users on the page can choose how to use the page, and the interviews suggest that community members use the page for a variety of purposes—many of which extend beyond the influence of the page moderators. Participants One, Four, and Five discussed using the page to get connected to other projects and groups doing work in the region. Participants Four and Five discussed using the page to amplify their own work, which the page moderators have habitually reposted. Participants One, Two, and Four discussed making frequent use of Instagram’s “story” feature, which allows users to reshare content on their personal “stories” temporarily. Thus, @queerappalachia shows that, in the case of online communities, collective action may be shaped both by the institution in terms of what content is highlighted and how that content is organized, and shaped by users in terms of how content is shared, reacted to, and amplified.

RQ 2a asks “How is the network structure characterized based on density and hierarchy?” The density of the overall network is very low (.0005), but there is some variance in network density over time. The density of timeslice one is .017, the density of timeslice two is .003, the density of timeslice four is .004, the density of timeslice five is .003, the density of timeslice six is .002, and the density of timeslice seven is .003. The oldest timeslice is much denser than the other timeslices, perhaps because the posts included in that timeslice all used the same set of hashtags. In terms of hierarchy, there is evidence to suggest that the hashtags #queerappalachia and #electricdirt became more central over time. In the seventh timeslice, there were eight hashtags that were all equally central. Over time, though the amount of different hashtags used by the page increased, #queerappalachia and #electricdirt dominated in terms of centrality because the page moderators used these hashtags on almost every post—whereas other hashtags (e.g. #harmreduction) were used more specifically.

Instagram is different than Twitter when it comes to how communities are created and organized. The page @queerappalachia is a relatively bordered community compared to discussion networks on Twitter, which are driven largely by conversations and “retweets” between users. Though @queerappalachia is a public page, conversations between users are generally limited to comment threads under posts made by moderators, which gives moderators a great deal of control in determining what kinds of conversations happen within the page. Twitter discussion threads, on the other hand, are rarely limited to a specific page or moderated by a small group of actors. Without the actions of the moderators (and particularly without the use of the hashtags #queerappalachia and #electricdirt), most network elements would be unconnected—and @queerappalachia would likely cease to exist as a recognizable “community.” This may be true of most Instagram pages. Unlike Twitter, where interactions between users typically span across pages and might center on particular hashtags or “trending” topics, Instagram users are bounded into relatively fixed communities due to their inability to “repost” content from other pages directly to their feeds. However, considering several interview participants mentioned making use of Instagram’s stories feature to share content, it could be the case that there is brokerage occurring via that function.

Though Instagram communities may be less permeable than Twitter conversation networks, a possible benefit of Instagram’s community model is that pages might appeal to more casual social media users. @Queerappalachia is one central hub where anyone can go and learn more about Appalachian culture and politics. Being involved in Appalachian/rural issues, then, is a one-stop-shop—users need not worry about having to find the right combination of hashtags/pages to follow to stay informed.

RQ 3 asks “How does @queerappalachia facilitate collective action, political deliberation and discussion, and other forms of political engagement?” and RQ 3a asks “Does the width (how many users are connected to one another) of comment threads and the depth (number of comment replies) of comment threads in the @queerappalachia network graph provide evidence of political deliberation?” As previously discussed, the overall density of the graph is very low. When looking at the density of connection between users, of the 3,453 edges in the graph, 231 are user-to-user comment edges. Thus, user-to-user comments make up 6.7% of all the edges in the graph. Overall, the density of connections among users is low. Looking at the network graphs, most comment threads do not exhibit a lot of depth, meaning there are not a lot of users

replying to other users. Most typically, the comment edges radiating from the page's posts are comprised of unconnected users who have left only one comment on the post; however, there are some instances of users leaving multiple comments. In the network graph, the frequency with which a user has commented on a post is represented by a thicker edge line. Users connected to posts by a thick line have commented multiple times on the post.

Of all the comment edges recorded (1,672), 1,332 of those comments were coded as having a depth level of "1," meaning the comment expressed a simple reaction to the post content or an opinion without explanation (e.g. "wtf" or "lol"). 84 comments had a depth level of "2," meaning the comments asked a question, e.g. "where is the protest?" 170 comments had a depth level of "3," meaning they expressed an opinion and provided an explanation, or they answered a question, or they expressed an intention to do an action (e.g. "I will call the governor tomorrow.") 18 comments had a depth level of "4," meaning the comment expressed an opinion and generated debate or started a discussion. The remaining comments were coded depth level "5," meaning they did not fit into the aforementioned categories. Overall, most comments (79.7%) were brief and expressed a simple reaction. However, 11.3% of comments had a depth level of 3 or 4, indicating some users did leave comments expressing detailed opinions, answering other users' questions, generating debate, or signaling intent to do an action.

RQ 3b asks "How important is the page to users when it comes to political engagement?" According to the interviews, some page users do use the page for political engagement. For example, participants Two, Three and Four discussed using the page to get involved with regional causes. Participant two had this to say about how @queerappalachia makes political organizing easier:

"Organizing has been a lot easier, you know, like...seeing the ways that I can become involved in certain issues. It's, you know, it's already there for me to just join in. And so I guess I use it mostly in that way, like news education and joining causes or ongoing fights that are going on."

Participant Three also discussed how @queerappalachia helped them get politically connected after they moved to a new, geographically isolated area. They said:

"I started following the project in 2016 and, you know, I wasn't exactly sure what it was, but I was really enjoying the page. It seemed like a great place to hear about events that were happening in my region, and a great way to get involved. I had moved to a new

place in Western, North Carolina and I felt very isolated. I had moved away from a really robust group of queer friends and community that were incredibly fun and supportive. And I guess I was just feeling a real lack of community. So I took to the internet to figure out what was happening around me and when I found Queer Appalachia, like I said earlier, I wasn't sure what it was exactly, but I did see that...it seemed like a hub of a place that would share events happening locally and regionally.”

Participant Three also credited @queerappalachia for making activism and ideas like “mutual aid” more accessible to a wider audience, since @queerappalachia allows users to get involved in politics from the comfort of their own homes. Further, Participant Five discussed how @queerappalachia’s large following has given the page an influential pulpit from which challenge stereotypes about Appalachian politics and culture. Knowing that they are not alone in their beliefs or identities may be a source of political empowerment for followers.

Though the majority of users on the page might be “casual” participants—plugging in only occasionally to leave short and undetailed comments—there is still evidence to suggest that the page has had a meaningful impact on the political engagement of those who have been active participants. And even casual users may benefit from the page’s mix of politics and humor which, as Participant Three said, makes activism and political education seem “accessible.” Further, though the network data gives a good idea of the structure of the community, there may be more political discussions happening behind the scenes on users’ personal pages or in their private inboxes—as well as offline in people’s homes and communities. Participant Four discussed how many of the people in their offline political community also follow @queerappalachia, and Participant Five discussed how knowledge of the @queerappalachia page even exists among his friend circle in California, where he goes to graduate school. In this way, @queerappalachia’s influence extends far beyond its virtual “borders.”

RQ 4 asks “How are actors within the @queerappalachia Instagram engaging in processes of brokerage and diffusion?” and RQ 4c asks “Are users sharing information from @queerappalachia to other users outside of the network? If so, how are they sharing it and what kind of information is it?” There is some evidence within the network of users tagging each other in comment threads. Of the 3,453 edges in the network, 331 are user-to-user mention edges, meaning user-to-user mentions make up 9.6% of edges in the network. User-to-user mentions are more common than user-to-user comments, but they still make up a relatively small portion of

network edges overall. Users very infrequently applied new hashtags to a post—user to hashtag edges accounted for only 37 of the total edges in the network (1.07%). The interview data provides some insight into other ways users might be engaging in brokerage behavior. As mentioned, participants One, Two, and Four discussed frequently making use of Instagram’s “stories” feature to share @queerappalachia’s content with their followers. @queerappalachia also commonly makes use of the stories feature to share information and other projects and pages with their followers. Brokerage on Instagram, then, may be occurring more via the stories function than via reposts, which are more common (and viable) on Twitter.

RQ 5, 5a, 5b, and 5c ask how users within the @queerappalachia community conceptualize their identities and relate to the page. RQ 5 asks “In what way does @queerappalachia challenge dominant narratives about Appalachian life?” and, according to the interview participants, @queerappalachia does challenge dominant narratives about Appalachian life in several ways. Interview participants Three and Five both discussed how @queerappalachia celebrates and uplifts queer Appalachian communities which are often made invisible by popular depictions of Appalachia as “Trump country.” Participant Five described a collaboration between himself and @queerappalachia, saying:

“I was trying to nuance some of the discourse that was being espoused online, which if you recall, was like really making Trump's election, uh, rural America's like cross to bear, which is just so, so wrong and like set so mistaken, like, and like kind of putting all of that blame on an already disenfranchised, like demographic of people”

Participant Five also discussed how queer people who live in rural or conservative areas are deemed “disposable” by queer people who live in big cities, a concept he refers to multiple times as “metronormativity.” This idea invokes the entitlement of urban queer people who have distanced themselves from areas of the country associated with conservative politics, Appalachia included. For Participant Five, being rural is “so much more complicated” than urban people presume. As an example, Participant Five discussed how rural queer people often do more work than urban queers when it comes to confronting and challenging the conservatism and racism in their communities. This work is also, he argues, more impactful in rural areas than it is in cities. Similarly, participant Three, who works for Queer Appalachia offline, described the mission of @queerappalachia as uplifting and celebrating rural queer perspectives, saying:

“You know, when they say Trump country, we know what, what folks mean, but there was a call for people to really examine what those communities look like and like celebrating and supporting the queer communities there.”

Participant Three cautioned against dismissing Appalachia and the South as “Trump country,” and highlighted how @queerappalachia offers a different narrative about the kinds of people who live and organize in Appalachia by specifically focusing on rural queer people. This work also continues offline. According to Participant Three, members of the Queer Appalachia collective often go on speaking tours to colleges and universities across the country, educating people about the diversity of perspectives, identities, and experiences that exist within Appalachia and the South.

Participants One and Two also discussed how @queerappalachia raises awareness of and uplifts marginalized communities, including trans rural people and Black-Indigenous people of color. These groups may be especially marginalized in rural areas, where they often struggle to find healthcare and supportive communities. Participant One discussed the importance of seeing marginalized groups represented on the page:

“I bet it is helpful [for] queer folks to have that type of representation and to like see themselves or ourselves reflected in a platform like that and to realize that we're not alone. So it helps people if people like, you know, maybe isolated otherwise, or if they're living in a really conservative area or facing a lot of discrimination, maybe they get some hope from, seeing these kinds of posts on social media from Queer Appalachia.”

By representing marginalized groups in Appalachia and the rural South, @queerappalachia shows marginalized people that they are not alone or isolated in their experiences, despite the real challenges of living in a rural area. Further, by sharing marginalized perspectives, @queerappalachia dispels myths that queer and trans people and BIPOC do not live in Appalachia or other rural areas. Awareness of these groups' existences in Appalachia may help non-queer and white Appalachians be better advocates for marginalized people. Participant Two discussed this when describing how, as a straight woman, she was able to learn more about being an ally to queer and trans people through using the page:

“That's why I love it so much is because that's how I am going to be able to understand all of those issues, you know, is by seeing this community and like being involved in it and being an ally and knowing how to best be an ally...it's good because it gets me

outside of my comfort zone, you know, and makes me kind of like...hold a mirror up to myself. Like, how are you, how are you helping? How are you engaging?”

Ultimately, all five interview participants spoke to some degree about how @queerappalachia challenges dominant perceptions about Appalachia and rurality by representing communities that are often ignored or made invisible by stereotypical terms like “Trump country.” @Queerappalachia presents a celebratory and unabashedly queer version of Appalachia and the South, and, according to Participant Three, @queerappalachia aims to educate its followers about the diversity within the region and complicate the idea that rural areas, and people, are disposable. An online community in which borders are more permeable and malleable than they are offline may be a particularly productive place to reimagine Appalachia’s political culture and open it up to new representations. According to Participant Two, @queerappalachia’s novel representation of Appalachian life may help some of the page’s followers be better allies to marginalized people.

RQ 5a asks “How do users on the page conceptualize their Appalachian identities?” When starting this project, I was curious as to whether active users on the page would identify as Appalachian, Southern, or rural. Considering @queerappalachia has hundreds of thousands of followers, there must be users within the community who have no personal connection to Appalachia or the South—voyeurs from large coastal cities or progressive strongholds in the Northeast. However, everyone I interviewed did have a personal connection to Appalachia, the South, or being rural generally. All five participants described growing up in a rural area somewhere in the Eastern United States. Participants One, Four, and Five said they identified strongly as rural but not as Appalachian per se. Participant Two identified as Appalachian and said her family had lived for a long time in Eastern Tennessee, though she has since moved away from Appalachia. Participant Three grew up in the Northern Appalachian Mountains in rural New York and now lives in West Virginia, but they felt conflicted over whether or not to claim an Appalachian identity.

All five participants discussed how their rural and, in some cases, Appalachian identities influence their politics and involvement with the @queerappalachia community. Participants Two and Four described how being Appalachian or Southern connects one to an historical activist lineage which includes decades of labor rebellions and civil rights struggles. Reflecting on the history of anti-racist organizing in the American South, Participant Four said:



“But like for me being a Southern abolitionist, like anti-racist white person who was organizing in multiracial Black led spaces, I feel like I'm like part of a lineage that has been doing that for a long time. So...that part is really rooted. Like that's a lot of what grounds me and keeps me moving forward. The fact that there is so much history and there are so many ancestors that have quite literally risk their lives for this fight.”

Similarly, Participant Two reflected on how Appalachian culture is “inherently activist,” even though the region frequently gets typecast as politically regressive and conservative. She explained:

“I think Appalachians come from a very, like I said, they're very brave...I think we come from a culture that is kind of like inherently activist, you know, like when you hear about the coal miners and when they tried to unionize and they were being murdered because of it, but they kept going...like that's who we are as people, which I am so glad that I have that in me.”

For these participants, feeling pride in their Appalachian/Southern identities comes from being rooted in a storied history of anti-establishment political work. @queerappalachia extends this lineage by posting about the history of activism in the region as well as contemporary issues. Participants Two, Three, and Four also spoke to how @queerappalachia's mix of political and humorous content particularly validates and affirms their rural, queer identities by highlighting the importance of storytelling and pleasure within political work. Participant Two explained the significance of humor within an Appalachian lineage:

“It's a mix of goofy, silly, pride, and jokes. Cause like that's a big part of our heritage, you know, like storytelling and fables and riddles and jokes and that kind of thing. That's a big part of our heritage, but also like the other side of that...the injustice and what we need to be doing in the fight, and how to fight and how to gather our community together to be stronger.”

Similarly, Participant Three explained how memes and sexual humor take on a special significance in the context of queer, rural life. Meme's about queer sex may not be a traditional form of political participation, but Participant Three points out that queerness itself is about the intersection of pleasure and politics. In this quote, they are describing a @queerappalachia project they spearheaded called “Mutual Aid Lube,” where they sold lube for queer people to benefit Appalachian mutual aid projects:

“I just kind of decided to take it on as an idea that was like rooted in humor as well as activism which I think is really important, just like the QA page will have its fisting memes next to it's like Marxist theory. I think that more of our projects need to engage with these like two sides of queer identity, like this side that's about the joy and pleasure. And then the side that's more about the heavy politics.”

Projects like “Mutual Aid Lube” celebrate queer identity and sexuality while also providing tangible political benefits to Appalachian people. In this way, @queerappalachia’s use of humor and storytelling uplifts Appalachian and queer traditions while also foregrounding the importance of making political change.

Though many participants focused on the pleasurable and uplifting aspects of their rural and/or Appalachian identities, several participants also discussed the challenges of growing up in a rural area. Participants One, Four, and Five discussed feeling “outnumbered” within their conservative hometowns and struggling to find like-minded communities. Participants Two and Five discussed their experiences leaving their rural hometowns to live in large metropolitan areas. Describing the tension between desiring to leave rural America and missing it after moving away, Participant Five said:

“I moved across the country to kind of be as far away from those things as possible, but what happened doing that was that I left a lot of things behind that were important. And, you know, I kind of unintentionally erased the labor of a lot of people who remain in those places. And I became very aware of that. I'm very aware that the grass isn't always greener. When I arrived on the West coast...I realized there was a huge void in my life and that the people there who I thought I was going to really relate with and find community within were actually more othering than the place that I left.”

For these @queerappalachia community members, rural identity is both a source of pleasure and pride and a source of contention and pain. I saw my own journey reflected in Participant Five’s account of moving away and realizing that the grass is not always greener elsewhere. After I moved away from my rural hometown, I also experienced a sense of loss and realized that I had taken my rural community for granted. Growing up, I had been taught to internalize anti-rural and anti-Appalachian stereotypes. Still, growing up queer in a rural area is difficult and isolating. Participants Two and Four discussed how online communities like @queerappalachia may encourage young people to stay in rural area. @Queerappalachia makes

rural identity a point of pride and provides a much-needed (virtual) community space where people are safe to be themselves. In rural America, offline safe-spaces for queer kids are often non-existent. “I wish I had had Queer Appalachia when I was growing up” Participant Four said.

RQ 5b asks “How do users on the page see Queer Appalachia as a reflection of their own identities and values?” All five interview participants discussed how they saw their interests and identities reflected in @queerappalachia’s content and initiatives, and several interview participants also discussed some of the page’s shortcomings. Participants One, Four, and Five talked about how @queerappalachia’s content is an important reflection of non-stereotypical rural experiences. Participant One described her experience growing up in rural America and how representations of hillbilly culture—pickup trucks, county fairs, etc.—remind her of her upbringing. She said that some of her non-rural friends had been dismissive towards “hillbillies” and had based their assumptions of rural America on stereotypes. As rural queer person, Participant One felt that @queerappalachia’s emphasis on being both queer and country was validating and important, even though many people see these identities as contradictory. She said:

“I had lots of friends who were poor and redneck and were kind of discriminated against, by other kids in school for being rednecks, and were [also] queer. They are lesbians or they are bisexual. Cause there's definitely, always queer people everywhere. And those were my friends in school, like the queer redneck.”

Though the existence of queer people in rural spaces is often ignored by popular depictions of hillbillies and heartlands, @queerappalachia affirms that there are indeed “queer people everywhere.” Similarly, Participant Five talked about how @queerappalachia humanizes rural people and makes the political labor that rural queer people and radicals perform to make their communities more livable visible. He discussed the political work he does every day as a rural queer person talking to family members about queer issues and anti-racism. According to him, @queerappalachia makes these conversations easier by providing political resources and a sense of strength in numbers. He said:

“[political education] that's labor I'm doing all the time. So again, championing queer people or just radical people in rural places who are, who are doing this type of work all the time...that's what I think Queer Appalachia shows. I think they really substantiate that claim. They did for me at least.”

Participant One also discussed how @queerappalachia reflects her interests by connecting her with regional issues and causes that she might otherwise feel isolated from. She emphasized how @queerappalachia has enabled her to support and stay updated on the anti-pipeline protests happening in Western Virginia, even though she lives in Central Virginia, a couple hours from the Blue Ridge Mountains. Participant Two made a similar point when discussing how @queerappalachia helps queer rural people to feel less ostracized by providing a virtual community hub where like-minded people can come together in support of the same causes. She said:

“There's a community of people out there in the region who are like me, you know, who think like me and like care like me. And so in some ways it was kind of healing finding them because you know, like you grew up in a small Appalachian town and...you feel like nobody else there thinks like you, and you're kind of the odd man out. Finding this group of people was kind healing in a way like, Oh, I'm not alone. Like I love being Appalachian and...I can do both. I can be a liberal and be Appalachian. It was validating in some way to have that community.”

@Queerappalachia's virtual community evidently has helped some users “heal” from the contradictions of being a rural person who also wants to be politically involved, being a rural person who is a liberal or leftist, and/or being a rural person who is queer. Though these interview participants may have felt isolated and marginalized in their small hometowns, @Queerappalachia provided proof that there are other queer and radical people living in rural spaces, and this proof can be what rural people need to feel empowered in their own identities.

Several participants also discussed the ways in which they feel @queerappalachia does not reflect their identities and interests. Participant One, a bisexual woman, felt that the page's emphasis on “queerness” in general failed to adequately represent bisexual visibility specifically. The lack of bisexual visibility within the queer community has been called “bi-erasure” (Gonzalez, Ramirez, & Galupo, 2017). Participant One also discussed how the page could include more indigenous perspectives, considering indigenous people were the original settlers of Appalachia. Participant Five discussed how @queerappalachia has, in the past, given a platform to non-rural people who have appropriated rural culture. He grappled with the paradox of @queerappalachia's ever-growing platform and their desire to stay true to their homespun roots, saying “the community still feels like their number one priority, but I think it's becoming an

increasingly difficult task for them...just because of like the responsibility being greater, and the visibility that they now have and the way that visibility gets used.” Conversely, Participant Three discussed how, from their perspective as an organizer with the Queer Appalachia collective, the page has tried to avoid gatekeeping what it means to be Appalachian or Rural, despite increased pressure from some people in the community to have a more stringent vetting processes.

Participant Four, who has been involved in Southern and rural political organizing for some twenty years, discussed how, for them, the page represents a kind of youthful urgency that may be detrimental to long-term activist goals. They suggested that the page should work more closely with community elders and pushed back against organizing spaces which emphasize urgency above all else, saying:

“It's like a youth and urgency...which doesn't really show through when you're working with elders or when you are an elder, because you're like, urgency, that makes me burn out...we don't do that anymore. We do well thought out like intentional type stuff. I do see like a little bit of a lack of forethought going into it, which is like an element of urgency.”

While the page certainly provides much-needed representation of rural queer and radical communities, most of the interview participants felt that there were ways that @queerappalachia could better reflect the identities and interests of its community members, particularly as the page's following gets larger and harder to moderate. Participant Three, who helps the Queer Appalachia collective decide what to focus on, discussed the ways in which @queerappalachia tries to respond to the needs and wants of their online followers, saying: “when we do pivot or add things on, it's really in connection to what people are asking of us...or when we make like a post about something and people jump on it and really get excited about it.”

RQ 5c asks “What political issues are most important to users?” All of the interview participants identified themselves as politically active people. In every case, the participants' interest or involvement in activism predated their involvement with the @queerappalachia community, though the participants were often motivated to start following @queerappalachia for political reasons. Participants One, Two, Three, and Four discussed being involved in environmental activism and LGBTQ liberation issues—two political topics that are often discussed on @queerappalachia's page. Participant Two, an Appalachian artist and activist, discussed her long-term involvement with Appalachian-specific political issues, such as

mountain top removal and fracking. Participant Three discussed how becoming involved with @queerappalachia made them more cognizant of and interested in disability justice issues and labor rights issues. Participant's Two, Three, and Five talked about their involvement in "non-traditional" forms of activism, particularly arts-based activism. @Queerappalchia often uses art to broach political topics, and Participant Five discussed how Instagram is useful for arts-based political work, saying:

"Going back to what I said earlier about sort of like sexualizing my body...the other impetus for doing that is to garner attention. And then once I have that attention, I can choose how it's used and how it's redirected. And so my Instagram really showcases that because like, when you glance at it...you wouldn't expect that there's political content necessarily, but when you read any of the captions, there's usually is some kind of political commentary and it's usually slightly different than...the popular discourse. That's sort of how I view social media to deliver those messages."

Participant One also detailed the affordances of Instagram for political purposes by saying that political content on Instagram is very "accessible." Similarly, Participant Three discussed how Instagram is a "safe-space" away from the prying eyes of family members and offline friends—it allows people to experiment with identity and find new content easily, and thus can be used as a radicalizing tool. Considering this, all participants said it was possible to engage in meaningful political work on Instagram, and they all saw @queerappalachia as a fundamentally activist community that has championed political issues like harm reduction and rural visibility.

RQ 6 asks "How do users within the @queerappalachia network utilize the affordances of Instagram to engage in activism? And RQ 6a and 6b ask "What are the limitations of Instagram when it comes to doing activism?" and "How does Instagram compare to other SNS in this context?" Speaking to the affordances of virtual spaces like Instagram for activism, Participant Three discussed how @queerappalachia can be accessed by anyone in the world, and so has created global consciousness about Appalachian politics and culture. Participant One discussed how Instagram can be used as an effective education tool, and Participant Five discussed how plugging into political issues and causes online is more accessible for disabled people and rural people who, because of ability or physical isolation, may be unable to join political movements

in-person. This point may be especially relevant in the present moment, where COVID-19 has made in-person organizing untenable for many people.

Though all participants generally agreed that activism could be done on Instagram, many also discussed the pitfalls of online activism. Participant One explained how Instagram's "influencer culture" can push some people to get involved with political causes for social clout or to appear more politically "woke" to their followers. Participants Two and Four discussed how "activism fatigue" is common on social media due to the constant influx of political information. Being constantly bombarded with political issues may engender apathy in some people. Participant Three discussed how @queerappalachia's large follower count has made the page vulnerable to trolling and harassment, which can make speaking out about political issues difficult. Further, Participant Five discussed how pages with large follower counts might struggle to stay authentic to the communities they claim to serve. Participants One and Two identified offline activism as being more meaningful than online activism, emphasizing the importance of enacting "small changes" in one's local community. Within virtual communities, it can be difficult to foreground a local context; however, online political work can be done by anyone, anywhere. Ultimately, all participants had a nuanced understanding of online activism, drawing attention to the benefits of virtual organizing as well as the pitfalls.

## DISCUSSION

The results presented in this study provide much to consider regarding the structure of the @queerappalachia network and the utility of the page, and Instagram communities generally, when it comes to political communication and collective action. Analysis of the @queerappalachia network shows that @queerappalachia is a community comprised primarily of sparse connections organized around a few central hashtags (#queerappalachia and #electricdirt, primarily) and popular posts with high in-degree. Users in the @queerappalachia network are not generally directly connected to one another, and so the page moderators, who determine what content is posted and which hashtags are attached to post content, have a great deal of power in organizing the page. However, insights from the interviews suggest that page moderators determine what is posted on the page in response to what members of the @queerappalachia community want. Throughout the page's history, @queerappalachia has posted content that engages with relevant political issues (e.g. Donald Trump's election, the Women's Marches, controversy over confederate monuments), and that celebrates Appalachian and Southern culture and history (e.g. Appalachian music and folklore traditions, Southern food and farming). They have started several campaigns in response to input from community members—their harm reduction initiative and rural mental health initiative are examples of this. Posts related to Appalachian/Southern politics and posts related to Appalachian/Southern culture have attracted considerable engagement from the @queerappalachia community, and there were 18 posts and hashtags in the network that were coded as both political and cultural (e.g. #ruralresistance).

### **Cultural Posts and Political Engagement**

In their research on political discussion and political engagement, Ikeda and Boase (2011) suggested that political discussion does not only occur in explicitly political forums. Political learning can be, in fact, the result of casual exposure to political topics via forms of media that are not explicitly political. This study distinguishes between political and cultural posts on the @queerappalachia page, but this distinction can be challenged in the context of political engagement. Members of the @queerappalachia network who were interviewed attested to the importance of seeing humorous posts that celebrated Appalachian/Southern culture side-by-side with posts that brought up important political topics. Several interview participants



referred to the history of Appalachian folklore and storytelling, which has been acknowledged in academic literature (e.g. Hufford, 2002). By calling upon this lineage, the interview participants connected the humorous references to Appalachian and Southern cultural artifacts (e.g. camouflage, pick-up trucks) that @queerappalachia has become known for with a long history of Appalachian and Southern people using humor to convey important messages about community, family, and politics. Though not all of @queerappalachia's posts are explicitly political, there may still be political utility to a post about the infamous Dolly Parton song "9 to 5," or a post about a trans Appalachian person learning to play the mandolin.

It is also important to acknowledge that Appalachian and Southern people have long been the butt of cultural jokes. Several interview participants referenced living in "Trump Country," a derogatory term used by liberals in reference to the South and parts of the Midwest. Pop culture has also oft parodied Appalachian and Southern people, portraying them as backwards, regressive, ugly, and stupid. Taylor Swift's viral video for "You Need to Calm Down" is a good example of this—"rednecks" who live in a trailer park are positioned as the enemy to Swift's supposedly liberal, LGBTQ-inclusive battle cry.<sup>9</sup> Interview Participant Three talked about @queerappalachia's critique of this music video, and how members of the Queer Appalachia collective were subsequently harassed by Taylor Swift fans. Swift's video—and other cultural references which position rural people as inherently bigoted—fail to acknowledge the existence of rural queer people and rural leftists. Further, rural queer people are also marginalized and harassed in the communities that we come from, which can make Southern/Appalachian cultural artifacts seem inaccessible or hostile to us. The memes that @queerappalachia posts, regardless of whether they are explicitly political or not, may help rural queer people reclaim and "queer" rural culture. Turning a pair of overalls or a camouflage prom dress into a symbol of rural queer pride is an empowering form of resistance within a cultural milieu that portrays rurality and queerness as contradictory.

In their closing comments, interview Participant Four stated that "being in right relationship with yourself" is one of the most important forms of activism someone can do. The memes, jokes, and cultural references on @queerappalachia's page give rural queer people a way of seeing rurality and Appalachian identity as something worthy of celebration, and thus provide an affirming connection to the histories and artifacts that many of us disowned while we were

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dkk9gvTmCXY>

growing up in an environment that made us feel invisible. This study cautions against seeing political utility only in online content that is explicitly political, particularly when it comes to studying marginalized communities for whom cultural acceptance and affirmation is an inherently political issue. This point has also been made in reference to Black Twitter, a micro-public in which all kinds of user-produced media, including memes and participatory narratives, take on political significance by virtue of being produced by and for Black communities (Hill, 2018).

### **Hashtags and Brokerage**

This study found that hashtags were essential in organizing information on the @queerappalachia page. The promotional hashtags #queerappalachia and #electricdirt were particularly important to connecting disparate parts of the network, especially as the network evolved over time to include more topics and hashtags. Hashtags were also used to connect posts that discussed similar issues---#harmreductioninappalachianow, for example, was commonly used on posts related to harm reduction, and #thereispowerinaunion was commonly used when discussing labor issues such as the Kentucky miner's strikes. Importantly, hashtags like #queerappalachia and #electricdirt were so significant to the network only because page moderators frequently used them. Indeed, almost all hashtags within the network were used by the page moderators. There is little evidence within the network of users adding hashtags to posts. This distinguishes @queerappalachia from political discussion networks on Twitter, which are often formed around hashtags (#blacklivesmatter, for example) that are deployed by users wishing to join the discussion. Though past studies on Twitter have theorized that hashtags are important because they are democratic and emergent (e.g. Small, 2011), hashtags may be significantly less democratic within Instagram communities, which are primarily organized by moderators rather than users.

The way hashtags are utilized within the @queerappalachia Instagram community has implications for how the concepts of brokerage and connective action translate to Instagram specifically. Most studies on #hashtag activism have focused on Twitter. On Twitter, hashtags have been posited as particularly important to diffusion and brokerage processes because they allow users to easily join political conversations that are happening across pages (Jackson, 2016). Further, hashtags enable political issues to increase in scale and reach very rapidly—a hashtag

can quickly become “viral” on Twitter by showing up in the “trending” section of the site (Tremayne, 2014). However, scholars have also suggested that the conversation networks that form around hashtags are too temporal and contingent on platform algorithms to change social conditions offline (Bruns & Burgess, n.d.).

@Queerappalachia has used “viral” hashtags in the past to connect posts with larger social movements (e.g. #blm or #blacklivesmatter), but many of the hashtags the page uses are unique to the page’s content (e.g. #harmreductioninappalachianow). At the beginning of the page’s life, the page moderators used a larger set of more general hashtags (e.g. #queersouth) under every post, which showcases brokerage on the part of the moderators who were trying to increase the reach of the page. Presently, the page only uses a couple hashtags (#queerappalachia and #electricdirt) consistently, and neither of these hashtags are connected to a broader social movement, so perhaps not as useful for brokerage. It is possible the @queerappalachia moderators stopped using more general hashtags after they had amassed a large enough following. Interview Participant Three discussed how the page’s follower count has stayed relatively stable over the past few months, though it sometimes increases after @queerappalachia is mentioned in press. Followers of the page are exposed to the page’s content regardless of what hashtags are attached to a post. In other words, followers do not need to be following the hashtag #harmreduction to be exposed to harm reduction-related content. In this way, the community that @queerappalachia has built may be less transient than communities that coalesce around a singular hashtag on Twitter. Whereas hashtags may quickly become more or less popular, the @queerappalachia community is relatively stable over time, and its followers are exposed to a diversity of content that covers many political and cultural issues. On the other hand, the boundaries of the @queerappalachia community are more defined than they would be on a Twitter discussion network—if a user does not follow the page, it is unlikely they would be exposed to the page’s content incidentally via a trending hashtag. They would have to be tagged in one of the community’s posts directly or see a post shared to one of their friend’s pages. This may be generally true of Instagram communities that cater to a niche audience, but Instagram users can still attach a trending hashtag to their posts to be found by a larger audience. A recent example of this is when the hashtag #blacklivesmatter became a popular hashtag on both Twitter and Instagram following the 2020 police brutality uprisings. @Queerappalachia also participated

in this, adding #blacklivesmatter to many of their posts, which would make them available to a larger audience.

There is evidence within the network that users are tagging other users in @queerappalachia's posts, which is a form of brokerage and information diffusion. @Queerappalachia may gain new followers because of this brokerage behavior by existing followers, but what is more interesting in the context of this study is the brokerage going on "behind the scenes." Several interview participants referenced using Instagram's "story" function to share information from @queerappalachia's page to their followers, and several also discussed having private message conversation with other Instagram users who had replied to these stories. @Queerappalachia itself makes frequent use of the stories feature to share and amplify content. The impact of these other forms of brokerage are difficult to measure because Instagram stories only last for 24 hours and are only visible to a user's followers. Instagram keeps no public record of how often posts are shared via the stories function, though a user can see how many people have "viewed" their stories. @queerappalachia illustrates that Instagram "Stories" may be more influential to spreading information on Instagram than hashtags, and so future research must endeavor to capture how Instagram "Stories" fit into the brokerage and diffusion process.

### **Connective Action**

@Queerappalachia is a unique case study for understanding connective action. On one hand, direct interaction between users is infrequent, making the network more impersonal than interpersonal (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006). The way that users interact within the @queerappalachia community is certainly different from how members of a community organization might interact. Public good theory, which examines how agents within communities come together to create public goods, stresses the importance of connectivity and communality to public organizing. Connectivity is defined as the ability of all actors within a network to communicate with one another directly, and communality is defined as the ability of all actors within a network to access the same information (Fulk et al., 1996). Technically, all members of the @queerappalachia network do have the ability to contact each other directly (via comments or Instagram direct messages) and they all have access to the same information (posts and stories), but there is no evidence within the network that users communicate with each other directly often, and several interview participants said they generally avoided commenting on the

page's posts. A community group in which organizing members have little direct contact with one another might struggle to materialize change offline, particularly in a rural area where critical mass is difficult to achieve. However, there are at least some @queerappalachia community members who feel that this dynamic works on Instagram. Future research should endeavor to understand more about how political collectives on Instagram are able to successfully organize without direct communication among members.

Prior studies on Instagram have suggested that online political collectives are often fragmented, and that image-based activism encourages people to engage with political issues in personalized, individualistic, and transient ways (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2015). @Queerappalachia may be able to pull a large group of people together under the same "community" in a way that is less transient than the "ad-hoc" publics that form around trending hashtags (Bruns & Burgess, n.d.), but the page moderators only have so much control over how individual users use the page. When discussing politics in general, several interview participants stressed that their political identities and personal identities were inextricably entangled—especially on social media. Participant Five, for example, uses eroticized images of his body on Instagram to broach political issues, and Participant Three uses queer art projects like "Mutual Aid Lube" to communicate the importance of health care and harm reduction. These political projects are individualized and personal, but they are not necessarily shallow. For some @queerappalachia community members, one of the page's strengths was how it emphasized the inherent political significance of being queer, Appalachian, and/or rural. For queer people generally, the personal and the political are difficult to separate. The United States' long history of marking queer sexuality as politically deviant by codifying anti-sodomy sentiment into law exemplifies this. Discussing the importance of image-based activism, Tufekci (2003) claimed that "attention" has political capital within virtual environments. Participant Five illustrated this by detailing how his Instagram posts, which draw attention to his body and sexuality, can covertly broach political issues. Other forms of personalized, entrepreneurial (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006) forms of political engagement, such as sharing political memes, could have a similar effect. However, the ubiquity of personalized political engagement still begs the question: what is the "collective" in online collective action?

## Collective Identity

There are ways in which @queerappalachia does mobilize its large follower base to engage in more structured, less individualistic political action. Several interview participants discussed how @queerappalachia has used its platform to raise awareness of political issues like the Mountain Valley Pipeline and harm reduction, and Participants Three and Five discussed how @queerappalachia has been able to raise a large amount of money for various regional groups. @Queerappalachia has a large captive audience at its disposal, and there is evidence to suggest that they have been successful at inspiring a sense of collective identity in that audience. Several interview participants discussed using @queerappalachia to maintain a sense of community with other Appalachians and rural people, even when they themselves had moved away from the region. Further, interview participants cited feeling more connected with their Appalachian/rural identities as a result of engaging with the content on @queerappalachia's page, which portrays rurality as something to be celebrated. Participant Five discussed how popular narratives around rural/Appalachian culture erase the existence of queer and/or radical Appalachians, and that queer Appalachians, as a result, often feel marginalized and isolated in the places they grew up. By showing that the rural queer community is larger and louder than it might appear from the vantage point of someone growing up in a small town, @queerappalachia makes collective identification with a rural queer identity possible. Thus, @queerappalachia shows the importance of online spaces for collective identity development, particularly in the context of identities that are not well represented in popular culture. A queer rural kid growing up in a small town might have no idea that other queer rural people exist. However, online communities can act as virtual hubs where people from across the region—and many who have since left rural America or Appalachia—come together.

Still, this study does not show that users on the @queerappalachia page regularly interact with one another directly or develop close personal relationships. So how then does @queerappalachia ease rural queer people's sense of isolation? Gerbaudo's (2015) research on Facebook profile picture frames provides some explanations. According to Gerbaudo, Facebook users who use the same profile picture frame (e.g. a frame that expresses support for the Black Lives Matter movement) may feel a shared affinity even if they never interact directly because they have symbolically attached themselves to the same idea. Similarly, two members of the @queerappalachia community who "like" the same content do not have to interact directly to

develop an understanding that they share similar interests. Even just belonging to a niche internet community with anti-establishment politics as a rural or Appalachian person could inspire a sense of shared struggle, marginalization, and commitment. Thus, when interview participants discuss feeling a sense of “community” on @queerappalachia, there may be a symbolic element to what “community” means to them in this context. The knowledge that there are other rural people who laugh at the same things they laugh at and care about the same things they care about is powerful, especially in a region of the country marked by geographic isolation. Several interview participants discussed how @queerappalachia made them feel more connected to regional issues. Rather than thinking just about the political issues that affected their specific state or town, they thought more about “Appalachian” politics writ large. In that way, @queerappalachia has inspired some of their community members to come together as “Appalachians” rather than Virginians, West Virginians, Kentuckians, etc., and this is reflected in the way they’ve been able to garner broad support for regional causes like the Mountain Valley Pipeline protests and the Kentucky miners’ strikes.

Gerbaudo’s (2015) discussion of Facebook profile frames makes clear that profile frames and other symbolic representations of sameness are often too vague to inspire concrete political actions and commitments. Though @queerappalachia does, at times, make specific asks of their followers (such as in the case of asking for donations), much user engagement on the page is still individualized—users choose whether or not to “like” a post or share it to their followers. Further, @queerappalachia does not take a hard stance on what constitutes Appalachian or rural identity. Interview Participant Three, who works with the QA collective, discussed how @queerappalachia does not want to “gatekeep” Appalachian identity. “Gatekeeping” could be considered a form of institutionalization for an Instagram page—in deciding who is an insider and an outsider, page moderators take a more active role in dictating their followers’ engagement. However, refusal to delineate boundaries can also lead to problems. Participant Five spoke at length in his interview about the danger of Instagram pages losing authenticity and community accountability as they grow. He also discussed the existence of “culture-vultures,” or non-rural people who are appropriating Appalachian/rural identity for personal gain, within the community. This presents a challenge for @queerappalachia and similar communities. If the boundaries of Appalachian/rural identity are too vague, members of the community may start to feel like @queerappalachia lacks authenticity and deidentify with it, in the same way that other

subcultural relics come to be associated with “posers.” On the other hand, if the boundaries are too strict, people who may otherwise benefit from seeing their own lived experiences reflected on @queerappalachia may feel unwelcome within the community, and the community might cease to grow. There are clear tensions here in defining who fits within the @queerappalachia “collective,” and these are tensions that many online communities with permeable boundaries grapple with. Take, for example, the existence of white Twitter users who pose as Black to gain social capital within Black Twitter communities (Wheeler, 2019).<sup>10</sup>

### **Political Deliberation and Discussion**

Overall, there is not a lot of evidence within the @queerappalachia network to suggest that @queerappalachia users are regularly engaging in political deliberation via their contributions to comment threads. Considering Russmann and Stevenson’s (2016) definition of political deliberation as reciprocity in comment threads, this study did not find reciprocity in comment threads because user-to-user replies were rare. Therefore, users were not often engaging in the reciprocal back-and-forths that Russman and Stevenson (2016) posited as essential to political deliberation. Further, the majority of user comments were brief and reactive (e.g. “lol,” “oh my god”), and most users in the network only commented once or twice on a @queerappalachia post in the three plus years captured by this sample. Several interview participants confirmed that they commented infrequently or avoided commenting directly on @queerappalachia’s content, even though the community members who were interviewed were among the most active users on the page. Participant One discussed how she avoided comments because of past hostile encounters with other @queerappalachia users, an experience which reflects Penney and Dadas’ (2014) critique of political deliberation in online spaces. They argue that virtual affordances such as anonymity may lead to harassment and hostility in online political forums.

The relative dearth of political discussion in comment threads within the page does not necessarily mean that @queerappalachia does not inspire or help facilitate political discussions that might occur privately on Instagram or offline. Interview participants One, Two, and Four discussed using @queerappalachia as a resource to learn more about Appalachian history, culture, and political issues like harm reduction, and Participant One said that she had sent the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/oct/15/emoblackthot-twitter-paper-magazine>



@queerappalachia page to friends in the past as a way of teaching them more about Appalachia and LGBTQ+ politics. @Queerappalachia's large following may also be important to political deliberation in a general sense. Interview Participant Five said that, because of @queerappalachia's following, they have been able to influence viral conversations about metronormativity and rural queer experiences. Participant Three also discussed how @queerappalachia has been able to influence political discourse writ large, giving the example of when a representative from GLAAD—one of the largest and most influential LGBTQ organizations in the country—sat in on a @queerappalachia organizing call. So, even if individual users are not frequently engaging in political debates within the @queerappalachia community, @queerappalachia's content may still be utilized as a political resource, and there is evidence to suggest that @queerappalachia has been able to influence broader political conversations surrounding LGBTQ issues and rurality.

Deliberation Theory argues that having conversations with heterogeneous individuals about political issues makes people better equipped to make critical political decisions and handle civic responsibilities (Gonzalez-Bailon et al., 2010). It is unclear to what extent @queerappalachia brings together dissimilar people. The community focuses on the under-considered experience of being both queer and rural, which is certainly important, but a consequence of focusing on a specific experience may be that the community is largely comprised of like-minded people. Further, the page's unabashed focus on queer sexuality (e.g. arts-based campaigns like "fistmas") could alienate straight people who are not familiar with queer sexual culture. Interview Participant Two discussed how @queerappalachia's queer content could sometimes be inaccessible to her as a straight woman; however, she regarded this inaccessibility as a teaching moment—something that challenged her to become a better ally to queer people. Indeed, the queer community members I interviewed focused primarily on how @queerappalachia was a welcome escape from marginalization, and how it felt good to be in a community comprised of like-minded others. Interview Participant Three talked about @queerappalachia and Instagram as a "safe space" where queer people could feel free to experiment and be themselves. Virtual "safe spaces" have been theorized as particularly vital for marginalized people who lack access to offline safe spaces and affirming communities (Maliepaard, 2017). Though the existence of online "safe spaces" might contradict the tenants of Deliberation Theory, which focus on the importance of political debate in heterogeneous

environments, marginalized people's unique experiences with power should be taken into account when considering the political utility of communities like @queerappalachia. Rural queer people are often all too familiar with how it feels to have one's right to safety, healthcare, and dignity reduced to a political debate, and it is understandable that rural queer people might desire to exist in a virtual space where their humanity is not regularly questioned.

## **Counter-Publics**

Counter-publics are micro internet ecologies that challenge dominant narratives about marginalized groups. The porous boundaries of virtual space have been theorized to extend and challenge normative assumptions about what constitutes a "public" (boyd, 2010). As evidenced by the interviews with @queerappalachia community members, @queerappalachia has extended and challenged what "the public" looks like in the context of Southern, Appalachian, and rural communities. Though normative renderings of rural life often ignore the existence of rural queer people, @queerappalachia puts rural queer experiences in focus and offers new narratives about what it means to be rural, Appalachian, and/or Southern. A feature of virtual counter-publics is the existence of "participatory narratives," in which members of marginalized communities are given a platform to speak for themselves (Brock, 2012). Though the moderators of the @queerappalachia community ultimately have control of what gets posted on the page, the page users who were interviewed generally did feel well represented and validated by @queerappalachia's focus on rural queer life, often seeing their own experiences reflected in the topics that the page covers.

Another feature of virtual counter-publics is that they give outsiders a window into the lives and experiences of marginalized communities, which can in turn cultivate empathy (Byrd, Gilbert, & Richardson, 2017). Several interview participants did discuss how @queerappalachia had increased their awareness of marginalized communities living in rural America, particularly Black Appalachians, queer and trans Appalachians, and indigenous Appalachians. In a region of the country that is often assumed to be overwhelmingly straight, white, and conservative, @queerappalachia's focus on the contributions of marginalized Appalachians to Appalachian culture is important. At the same time, @queerappalachia also discusses the challenges of being a marginalized person in a rural area—starting a campaign, for instance, about trans rural people's lack of access to health care. Understanding the struggles that queer rural people face

may equip outsiders with the tools to become better, more empathetic allies. However, virtual allyship may ultimately be less impactful than allyship *in* rural communities, which, judging from interview participants' experiences living in rural areas, is still lacking.

Possible drawbacks to online counter-publics include increased surveillance of people who engage in them (Mundt, Ross, & Burnett, 2018), and the difficulty of defining and sustaining membership in counter-publics because of the relative low-cost of entry and exit. Interview Participant Five touched on the latter drawback when discussing his concerns surrounding cultural appropriation within online communities dedicated to marginalized experiences. When I first started this project, I was also concerned that the most active users on the page would have no real connection to Appalachian/rural identity. I was worried that the page would be comprised primarily of voyeurs who appreciated, but could not actually relate to, rural life. Though my interview sample was a very small portion of all the people who follow @queerappalachia, all five of the community members I interviewed did have a personal connection to Appalachia, rurality, or the South and felt very strongly about seeing these identities represented on @queerappalachia. Further, despite critiques of virtual political communities being primarily comprised of “slacktivists” (Cabrera et al., 2017; Harlow & Guo, 2014), all the people I interviewed had long been involved in political advocacy, both on and offline. All five interview participants used @queerappalachia for political purposes, but their interest and engagement in political issues predated their discovery of @queerappalachia. Additionally, all interview participants agreed that while online activism was possible, it should be paired with offline commitments. Though there may be users within the @queerappalachia network who do not engage in political activism and who cannot personally relate to being rural/Appalachian/Southern, there are at least some (active) users who do have a deep personal investment in rural representation and political advocacy.

The implications of what constitutes a “public” on a proprietary platform (Instagram) is also important to consider. Though several interview participants discussed Instagram activism as “accessible,” many rural people, particularly poor rural people, still lack consistent access to the internet (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2019).<sup>11</sup> For these Appalachians, Instagram would not be a viable place to seek out queer community. Further, Instagram has been implicated in censorship and undue moderation of certain political content—particularly the content of trans and queer

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.prb.org/appalachias-digital-gap-in-rural-areas-leaves-some-communities-behind/>

people and sex workers (Tierney, 2018). The very algorithms that Instagram uses to moderate content have implicit biases which, in the past, have disproportionately deplatformed users who use sexuality to make political statements—the same kind of image-based activism that Participant Five described as important (Salty Algorithmic Bias Team, 2019). It is worth considering how a community could be “public” on a platform that polices what kind of content is allowable and who can access it. Future research should further explicate the contradictions between “publics” and the companies that own and manage social media sites and the technological infrastructures that host social media sites

## **Instagram**

The findings of this study also contribute to understanding more about the affordance of Instagram for political communication. When asked directly about the affordances of Instagram, a couple interview participants discussed how politics is more “accessible” on Instagram than it is on other SNS. The accessibility of Instagram was connected to the SNS’s emphasis on images which, according to the interview participants, are more easily digestible than large blocks of text. Further, Instagram images were also discussed as more engaging than other forms of media—people on Instagram may be drawn into thinking about political issues by first seeing a flashy or provocative image. Scholars and artists have theorized about the importance of images in communicating political ideas. Russmann and Stevenson (2016) argued that Instagram images and videos make political communication more interactive and, thus, more appealing to a generation of young people who have grown up attached to interactive media. Gerbaudo (2015) argued that Instagram images allow users to express themselves and create a public identity, sometimes based around activism and politics. Alexander and Hahner (2017) posited that Instagram is an “intimate screen” in which users broach political issues through personal expression of their daily lives and routines, and Zulli (2018) argued that in Instagram’s “attentive economy,” drawing in another users attention via a flashy or provocative image can increase social and economic capital. Even before the advent of Instagram, political artists like The Guerilla Girls<sup>12</sup> used provocative images (which often contained nudity and sexual references) to make political points (Demo, 2000). A political meme or a salacious photo posted on @queerappalachia (such as a nude photo of a gay man whose genitals are covered up by a

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/>

peperoni roll, posted recently) is, in a sense, an extension of the image-based political art that was being created by groups like The Guerilla Girls over twenty years ago.

Interview Participant Five also discussed how SNS-based activism is more accessible for people who are disabled and may be unable to physically go to a march or protest. The accessibility of online activist spaces for disabled people has been written about by disability activists (Chavarria, 2018).<sup>13</sup> Further, a study by Bora and colleagues (2017) on activism accessibility found that many disabled people preferred having an online way of engaging with protest movements—e.g. donating, signing a petition, or sharing information. Thus, differences in ability should be considered when discussing the utility of virtual activism, and online political engagement should not be inherently deemed “lesser” than offline engagement. However, content posted on Instagram may not be accessible to all disabled people—users regularly post photos and videos without adding alt-text or descriptions that can be read aloud by assistance software, for example. Activists who endeavor to create accessible virtual spaces should be aware of how to include descriptions, alt-text, and other accessibility features in their posts.

Another affordance of Instagram discussed by Participant Four is how quickly messages scale-shift, or rapidly spread across virtual networks (Tremayne, 2014), on Instagram. Though Instagram does not allow users to repost content as easily as Twitter or Facebook does, users can amplify content by sharing it to their stories, and if a page with a lot of followers like @queerappalachia reposts content to their stories, it can be seen by possibly hundreds of thousands of people. Considering this, scale-shifting on Instagram may be reliant on influential pages that can broadcast a story to a large audience. Conversely, on Twitter even a message by a user who has few followers can be quickly reposted by anyone who “follows” a hashtag that user used or who is in that user's extended network.

Though scale-shifting is good for information diffusion (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) and can lead to political messages becoming “viral,” researchers should avoid assuming that all scale-shifts are inherently good for protest movements. Interview Participant Four detailed a potential drawback of scale-shifting when they discussed the “youthful urgency” of the @queerappalachia community. In virtual spaces, urgency is commonplace—messages can be shared with rapid speed and the context of how long it actually takes to accomplish meaningful

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<sup>13</sup> <https://hellogiggles.com/lifestyle/people-with-disabilities-internet-protest/>

political change can be quickly lost. Proponents of the “slactivism” critique suggest that viral social movements often think they’ve accomplished more than they actually have (Cabrera et al., 2017; Harlow & Guo, 2014); however, any young activist is liable to believe that change can happen quickly, particularly in the context of virtual organizing where change (in the form of scale-shifts) *does* happen quickly. Participant Four, who had been involved with both online and offline activism for over twenty years, warned about the potential for burn-out and missteps when change is pushed too quickly and at too great a scale. Participants One and Two echoed this sentiment when discussing how small political changes are often the most impactful, especially when made locally. Future research on Instagram should endeavor to understand how scale-shifting influences feelings of burn out among activists, and the implications of what “local” change looks like in the context of virtual spaces.

In conclusion, @queerappalachia’s intentional merging of politics and culture shows that even social media content which is not explicitly political can have political importance. Further, the way in which the page moderators of @queerappalachia use hashtags to promote their community and organize page content has implications for brokerage, diffusion, and #hashtag activism generally. Hashtags are one of the most important components of the @queerappalachia network, but they are almost exclusively used by page moderators. This distinguishes the @queerappalachia community from Twitter political discussion networks, in which hashtags are an emergent strategy used primarily by individual users. The control which the moderators of @queerappalachia have over the organization of the community may make @queerappalachia less transient than the “ad-hoc” publics which form around trending hashtags, but there is still evidence to suggest that users have the ability to engage with the page in highly personal, individualized, and meaningful ways. There is also evidence to suggest that @queerappalachia inspires a sense of collective identity in its users by emphasizing the importance of Appalachian solidarity; however, users on the page do not often communicate with each other directly, and this may have implications for assumptions about “connectivity” in virtual communities. There is mixed evidence to support the existence of political deliberation within the @queerappalachia community. Future studies on political deliberation should consider the importance of virtual “safe spaces” for marginalized people, rather than assuming that communities of like-minded others are bad for deliberation. Future research should also investigate how Instagram’s “stories” function is used for political brokerage. Finally, though this study suggests that Instagram can be

a viable platform for activism and political engagement, it is still necessary to consider how a “public” can exist on a private platform.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study may also be used to help activists who are interested in online collective action improve policy and practice related to virtual organizing. First, online activists should understand that various kinds of content—including humorous content, memes, and participatory narratives—can have political utility. An SNS post does not have to be explicitly political to inspire political discussion or to have political meaning, particularly for marginalized communities for whom storytelling and humor already have political significance (e.g. Appalachian communities). Online activists should also be aware of the significance of hashtags when it comes to organizing virtual communities. In this case, hashtags deployed by community moderators were essential to connecting an otherwise sparsely connected community. Within an Instagram community that covers lots of different political and cultural topics, using similar hashtags on posts that cover the same topic can help connect and organize content. Activists on Instagram should be particularly aware of how brokerage and diffusion commonly occur on the platform. Because Instagram does not keep a record of how often posts have been shared to users' stories, page moderators may be unable to quickly gauge how far a message has spread. Asking users to tag the community in their story shares is one way of quantifying how many times a message is shared. Asking users to tag friends in comment sections is another way of promoting brokerage and diffusion.

The findings presented here suggest that @queerappalachia has been able to inspire a sense of collective identity among their followers by highlighting the shared experiences that rural, Appalachian, and Southern people have in common. Other political Instagram communities should also think about how to cultivate a sense of shared identity among their followers. @Queerappalachia was able to promote solidarity between different groups of people by explicitly connecting similar political issues (e.g., mountain top removal and the Kentucky miner's strikes) in their posts. Using humor and cultural references in post content may also be an effective way of promoting collective identity development. SNS communities, particularly large communities, should think critically about what it means to be "authentic." Large political communities may fail to address the needs of the communities they claim to serve, which could lead some followers to disidentify with the community. On the other hand, communities that



excessively gatekeep their membership may fail to grow or gain traction. Soliciting regular feedback from followers may help pages gauge the authenticity of their work.

Online activists should also consider the importance of political deliberation within their communities. According to Deliberation Theory, conversing about political topics within heterogenous communities improves civic engagement. However, communities that cater to marginalized people may benefit from being relatively homogenous—being surrounded by like-minded others can make marginalized people feel safer and more validated in their identities. The idea that being around like-minded others improves self-esteem is one of the major tenants of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Online activists must weigh the benefits of encouraging political deliberation versus providing a safe space for marginalized people to discuss their experiences without being questioned or harassed.

Finally, online activists should consider the accessibility of Instagram as a protest platform. Though Instagram is theoretically accessible by everyone, anywhere, at any time, in reality many people—particularly poor people in rural areas—do not have consistent access to the internet. For these people, online activism that does not have an offline component is not accessible. Further, considering that Instagram has been critiqued by activists for censoring political content, jeopardizing activist privacy, and deplatforming marginalized people, there are important limitations to consider when utilizing Instagram as a tool for political work. This may be especially true for activists who work with sex workers and/or engage in illegal or anti-establishment protest practices. Online activists should be aware that nothing posted online is completely private and protect their identities accordingly. Online activists should also be aware that Instagram posts are not inherently accessible to disabled people, though online activism has been posited as more accessible to disabled people than direct action work. Adding alt-text, image descriptions, and other accessibility features to Instagram posts makes them more convenient to disabled activists.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study which could be improved upon in future research. Rather than capturing the whole @queerappalachia network, this study captures a sample of the @queerappalachia network, meaning there are components of the network that are missing. A network study of the @queerappalachia community which includes all posts and comments on the page might provide new insights into how the page is organized, but the scale of such a study was beyond what was possible in the time allotted for this study. Similarly, this study also had a small number of interview participants. Ideally, the qualitative analysis would have included up to 15 interviews, but the lack of active users in the network sample and the difficulty of reaching people over Instagram proved challenging. Future research should consider other ways of recruiting interview participants, such as via their emails. Finally, political deliberation and collective identity development could have been investigated quantitatively using survey instruments, but time prevented sending a survey to @queerappalachia's followers. A survey would likely be a productive addition to the methods used here and could help contextualize network data and data from the interviews. This study provides a good foundation for understanding the under-studied SNS Instagram via a case study of the @queerappalachia community, but there are many ways the research presented here could be extended. Much of the research on Instagram is still exploratory, but scholars and programmers are rapidly developing new tools (such as Instamancer, the scraper used here) to aid in collecting Instagram data. These new developments will hopefully carve a path for future researchers to think critically about how people are using Instagram for political and social organizing.

## CONCLUSION

Though I have now lived outside of Appalachia for several years, I still find it surprising when activists I meet in the Midwest tell me they know about Appalachian issues like the Mountain Valley Pipeline and the Kentucky miner's strikes because they follow @queerappalachia on Instagram. Growing up in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, I never imagined that there would be media that celebrated Appalachian people, culture, and politics. All the depictions of Appalachian people I saw on TV were disparaging and stereotypical. These negative representations colored my own ideas about the place I was from. Eventually, I grew to despise Appalachia for its supposed backwardness and political conservatism. When I realized I was queer, I thought that moving away from my rural hometown was the only solution to a seemingly impossible contradiction. As I watched my college-bound friends get ready to move to bigger cities, I wanted that life for myself as well. But my college journey did not take me to a city on the coast; Instead, I enrolled at a small liberal arts college in Southwest Virginia and went from living in one small mountain community to living in another. I thought I would regret staying in the mountains, but at school I had a window into understanding Appalachia differently. I took an Appalachian Literature class and learned about working-class miner's rebellions, John Brown, the African roots of blue grass, and indigenous sovereignty in the Blue Ridge. I also started working with an Appalachian LGBTQ+ history project. My work with the project had me using social media frequently to communicate with and organize other Appalachian queer people. Through this, I learned that there were queer communities all over Appalachia, even if they were hard to find initially. Then came @queerappalachia, and, for the first time, the experience of being queer and Appalachian was codified into a virtual community space—a hub where all of us, anywhere, could come together.

My motivation for studying the @queerappalachia network comes from an understanding that rurality has long been an obstacle to engaging in conventional forms of activism. Though in-person political organizing certainly has a history in Appalachia and rural America generally, feeling isolated and politically marginalized is a near-universal experience for rural queer people. For those who can access it, social media may be an important tool for combatting social isolation. This point has never been more compelling than in the present moment, where a deadly virus has forced all of us to reconsider what social connection looks like. Rural activists have

long been using the internet to organize in their communities and build social networks that transcend geographic location. However, virtual activism has often been dismissed as “slacktivism,” a term that takes for granted the existence of offline activism in all communities. Though critiquing the way that social media corporations influence and filter political communication on SNS is important and necessary, the rural context that @queerappalachia reflects nuances the political efficacy of virtual spaces. For rural queer people who do not feel comfortable being out and politically outspoken in their small communities, Instagram communities may provide a “safe space” alternative in which exploration, expression, and political engagement is more possible.

@Queerappalachia is a case study in how Instagram communities are utilized by marginalized communities for political purposes, and this research builds upon the foundations laid by scholars who have explored Black Twitter and the online communications of the Occupy movement as protest ecologies. This research also builds upon prior studies on image-based activism online, a still underexplored form of political communication that shares similarities with offline arts-based activism. In a media culture where interactive media platforms are ubiquitous, image and video-based activism will continue to be influential. Further, interactive media provides a helpful illustration of the blurring between online and offline, virtual and “real.” As media evolves to reflect our offline lives and experiences ever more faithfully, traditional distinctions between on and offline political communication may be challenged. Indeed, online political communication is already influencing offline political reality. President Donald Trump’s tendency to communicate policy decisions and engage in political feuds via his personal Twitter page is a testament to this.

Appalachian cultural traditions have long enabled Appalachian people to use unconventional means, such as storytelling and folklore, to make political statements. I see @queerappalachia as an extension of this tradition. @Queerappalachia uses memes, art, images, and videos to celebrate rural culture, uplift the experiences of rural queer people, and raise political awareness of historical and modern regional political movements. With a follower count larger than any Appalachian city, @queerappalachia has been an influential force for challenging stereotypical depictions of Appalachian culture. But in a region of the country still rife with poverty, worker exploitation, and environmental destruction, much work still needs to be done, both on and offline. Virtual organizing is not a panacea fit to solve all the problems that rural

Americans face. However, from my vantage point, communities like @queerappalachia are important because they illuminate something that I did not have as a young person growing up in Appalachia: like-minded, vibrant, defiant community. As I was talking with interview participants about what @queerappalachia means to them, a couple of us imagined how our lives might be different if we had had @queerappalachia growing up. Though we all had different experiences of being rural and/or Appalachian adolescents, all of us shared the experience of wanting to escape from our hometowns, of seeing the communities there as hostile and unwelcoming to us. I look back now and think of all the days I spent walking the country roads by my parents' house, feeling unprecedented and alone in my existence, and so eager to leave. I know there are still many queer kids living in hollers and heartlands, far away from any hub of queer cultural activity. But perhaps instead of drafting escape plans, they are opening their smart phones and sowing seeds of rebellion.

## **APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Can you start by telling me a little about yourself?
  - Where are you from? Where do you live now?
2. Are you interested in politics?
  - Do you consider yourself an activist?
  - What kinds of politics are you interested in?
  - What kind of issues are particularly important to you?
  - Are you involved in any kind of political organizing?
    - If so, can you tell me about a specific organization, group, or project you're involved in?
    - What kinds of activities do you engage in on behalf of this org/group/project?
  - How important is activism to you? Why?
  - What, if anything, makes doing activism difficult for you?
3. Are you involved with activism/politics online?
  - Do you use your social media pages to get involved in activism/politics? How?
  - Which SNS platforms do you use most for activism/politics. Why?
4. Do you consider yourself an "Appalachian?"
  - Why or why not?
  - What does being an Appalachian mean to you?
  - How do these aspects of your identity affect your politics?
    - Do these aspects of your identity make activist work challenging? Why or why not?
    - Are there communities of activists where you live? How would you describe them?
5. When did you first start following Queer Appalachia on Instagram?
  - Do you follow Queer Appalachia on other platforms as well?
  - How long have you followed Queer Appalachia in general?
  - How do you feel about them as an organization?
6. What were some of the reasons you followed Queer Appalachia?
7. Could you describe what being a member of Queer Appalachia means to you?

- How do you typically use the page?
  - What are some things you really like about the page?
  - What are some things you dislike about the page?
8. How does Queer Appalachia reflect your identity and/or interests?
- How does QA \*not\* reflect your identity and interests?
9. How do you generally interact with posts on Queer Appalachia's Instagram?
- What kinds of post do you interact with most often? What kinds of topics interest you the most?
  - What kinds of interactions (likes, comments, shares, etc) do you engage in most frequently and why?
10. What kinds of political issues do you see QA posting about, engaging with, and/or amplifying?
- How do you feel about QA's coverage of these issues?
11. Are there any political issues that QA has increased your awareness of?
- Can you name any specific issues?
  - Have you subsequently become more involved with any of these issues? How?
  - Have you donated, participated in a direct action, etc?
12. Are there political issues that you want QA to cover more?
- Can you name any specifically?
  - Why do you think QA is not covering these issues?
13. Let's talk about QA as a community. How often do you interact with other users on QA?
- How would you characterize your relationships with other users of QA?
  - Do you think there's anything particularly interesting about QA on Instagram?
  - How would you characterize the relationship between QA as an organization and the QA community on Instagram?
  - How hands-off/hands-on is QA as an organization when it comes to Instagram?
14. Do you know anyone offline that also follows Queer Appalachia?
- Have you formed any relationships with other users on the page?
  - If so, can you describe these relationships?
  - Do you do political/activist work with any of these people? If so, describe it.

15. How do you think about the relationship between your offline politics and your membership in QA?

16. Let's end with some more general questions. Do you think of QA as an activist community? Why or why not?

- If yes, do you think it's been successful? Unsuccessful? Please explain.

- What, if any, causes do you think have been further by QA? Name some specifically if you can.

17. Do you feel like you personally use QA for political/activist reasons? Why or why not?

18. How does you understand the relationship between your activism and your involvement with QA on Instagram?

19. Do you think it is possible to do political activism on Instagram? Why or why not?

- What do you see as the most valuable form of political activism?

- How do you compare Instagram activism to activism on other SNS?

20. Is there anything else you want to say about QA, activism, or any of the other topics we've covered today?



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