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Spring 2023

## The Queer Performance

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The Queer Performance

Owen Coldsnow

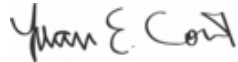
School of Communication

**Honors Research Project**

Submitted to

*The Honors College*

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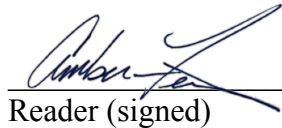


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## Abstract

For my project, I decided to make a documentary focusing on the experiences of queer, University of Akron students appropriately called, “The Queer Performance.” As a member of the LGBTQ+ community myself, it was particularly important to me to document the unique challenges that queer students have to face. One specific challenge that rings true for me is putting on many different personas in different situations, and I wanted to see how this compared and contrasted with other members of the community. According to Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory, everyone puts on an act when they are around people, but each of these acts are still part of one’s true self. Going off of this I wanted to see where students felt they were putting up more of an act, and where they felt they did not have to act as much. Overall, I wanted to highlight a group that has done so much for me as a community and welcomed me with open arms.

## Introduction

As a queer student, sometimes it can feel like you act very differently depending on who you are around. I wanted to examine this behavior through a media theory-related lens. For my project, I planned on interviewing LGBTQ+ students on campus to try to understand the different personas they may perform throughout their time at college. I wanted to find when, where, and why college students feel the most “themselves.” Another important question is how they found these spaces. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community myself, I found it difficult but extremely rewarding to find these spaces where I felt I did not have to put on as much of a performance. I think this project could help other students learn how to find their place or their people in college. I also think it is important for people to understand that just because they act differently around others, it does not mean they are being fake or not being themselves.

I based my video around the idea of Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory. Goffman’s Theory states that people are always putting on a performance around others. However, it also states that those performances are still reflections of themselves. Goffman believed that every performance is an authentic part of the self (Barnhart). I think it is important to understand both people’s front stage and backstage behaviors. Front stage behaviors are the actions that others can see, such as the way we move and talk. Backstage behaviors are what we cannot see, like people’s thoughts or what they do when they are completely alone. While this may be difficult or even impossible to see fully, I think it is possible to get close by using the right set of questions. Goffman’s other concept in his Dramaturgical Theory is that these performances tend to express who someone wants to be or an idealized version of themselves. These are also important answers to find. I finalized the questions and made a script of how I would expect the

video to look by the middle of October and finished interviewing and recording all of the students by the end of the semester. That way I was able to review all of my footage over Winter break and decide if I feel it is lacking in some way, such as a certain topic not going in depth as others. Then I would have had January to do reshoots if I needed to go more in depth and I spent around two weeks editing starting in late January through the first week or two of February, so that I was able to start revising it with my sponsor as soon as possible.

The final output is a video composed of interviews of LGBTQ+ students across the University of Akron detailing their experiences of finding their “safe space” and when they feel most like themselves. Other questions in the interview included what kind of person they want to be and in what situations they see themselves reflecting this behavior. I also wanted to see a comparison of their social media presence compared to their real life personas and see how similar or different they are. I wanted to accompany this with b-roll of these different spaces and these students interacting with other people, as well as shots of them doing what makes them feel most like themselves. For example, if I were the subject, it could be a shot of me in an outfit I like, or dancing with my friends. I expected this video to be presented at a seminar in the Honors Commons lounge. I think it would have been nice to have an officer from the LGBTUA or Pride in STEMM come speak about their experiences as well.

Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory stood out to me right away during my Media Theory course. In this course we talk about many different theories and how they can apply to mass media. Through this project I hope to narrow in on how this theory can apply to queer college students, but I am planning on adding a segment focusing on their performances on social media. I have also had many classes that help me prepare for an interview scenario. Newswriting prepared me by teaching me what kinds of questions to ask in an interview. This is my fourth

semester in ZTV, which has taught me production skills necessary for this project. I was in Lowdown in ZTV for two semesters, the music and arts program, where I learned soft skills of being able to make an interviewee feel comfortable when talking in front of a camera. In my video production class that I took in the Fall 2022 semester, I learned how to light interviews and how to direct them in order to tell a story. I also learned the type of b-roll that makes sense to put in these interviews and where to put them.

## Methodology

### Equipment

For this project, certain equipment was necessary to complete it. Most obviously, a camera was essential for getting high-quality footage for my documentary. I used a Canon EOS 90D DSLR Camera, which is what I also use professionally when recording video. I knew that by using this camera, I would be able to film in 4K quality at 30 frames per second, which is exactly what I needed for this project. Also important for this project was the microphone; audio is just as important as video so a good microphone is a significant factor for my documentary. I was able to borrow a Zoom audio recorder and a Shotgun Microphone from the University of Akron's ZTV with the help of my project sponsor, Juan Contreras. Similar to the audio equipment, I also borrowed lighting equipment from ZTV. I used a key light and a fill light when recording the interviews, something I learned in my Studio Production class. For b-roll, I typically used one or no light as I wanted these parts to look natural and I wanted the people on film to not get distracted by the lights. Next, a tripod was necessary for filming the interviews. If the camera was handheld it would be too distracting to the audience with slight movements.

This is used sometimes in documentaries when the feel of it is faster and more dynamic, but I knew that mine would feel softer throughout so I used a tripod. Lastly, arguably the most important equipment, was a laptop and editing software. For this project, I used my personal laptop, which is an MSI GS75 Stealth; it is great for video editing as it has 8GB of RAM dedicated just to video. For my editing software, I used Adobe Creative Cloud's Premiere Pro. It is a paid subscription service but I've been learning how to use it for the past six years, so I knew I could use it for what I wanted for this project.

## Timeline

After making sure I have the needed equipment ready, next came planning with my participants. The first step was to create questions to be able to lead my interviewees. After that was to record the interviews with queer students at the University of Akron. Then came filming and acquiring b-roll footage. Lastly came editing the video. Here is my initial timeline for the project:

*By October 15th, 2022* - Have a list of questions ready for interviews.

*By October 22nd, 2022* - Schedule interviews with students.

*By November 19th, 2022* - Finish shooting interviews with students and schedule time to shoot b-roll footage.

*By November 26th, 2022* - Obtain any necessary permissions for b-roll footage.

*By December 10th, 2022* - Finish shooting b-roll footage of interviewees.

*By December 31st, 2022* - Finish reviewing all footage and have an outline ready for what the final video will look like, also schedule reshoots if necessary.

*By January 14th, 2023* - Finish recording any reshoots if applicable.



*By February 11th, 2023 - Finish editing all footage.*

This was a tentative timeline and some changes were made along the way. Any changes will be noted subsequently.

## The Process

While thinking of how I wanted the final product to look, I created a list of questions to ask each interviewee. With these questions I wanted to get a sense of the different ways people might act depending on the situation they were in. The questions were about what tendencies they portray with their families versus when they are with their friends. Another important question that I had was about where they feel most comfortable. Due to the nature of the interview, many follow-up questions were made on the spot, so they are not all included here.

The following is the preliminary list of questions for the interview:

- How do you act around your family/friends/classmates/etc.? What kinds of habits do you tend to show more? What parts of yourself do you feel you might hide, if anything?
- What do you do when you are alone? What thoughts go through your mind?
- Throughout your time in college, where do you feel the most like you are not putting on an act? How did you come across this space/people/etc?
- What qualities in other people do you most admire? Do you see these traits in the way you act?
- What is your social media presence like? What qualities about yourself do you highlight?

After creating this list of questions I realized that the documentary should feel more intimate, so rather than a large group of people, I decided to only interview one or two students

to get more of their stories. After finding two students who were willing to be participants in this documentary, they scheduled a time to interview. Going along with this intimate feeling mentioned earlier, I had decided to film these interviews where the participants live, so in their dorm and apartment. On the shooting days I first explained to each what the final film would look like, where it would be distributed, and asked if they had any questions before we started. Both students wanted to retain a little privacy so they asked if they could only go by their given names in the video, rather than using their family name as well. I assured them that only their first names would be in the video and then we proceeded with the interviews. First, I set up all of the filming equipment including lights, the tripod, the camera, and the microphone. Then, I made sure to frame the interviewees correctly so there was enough space above their heads. The first interview with Megan lasted about a half hour, and the interview with Jayden later that week lasted almost an hour. After the interviews, I scheduled a time to come film them for b-roll. After obtaining necessary permissions from others that might be included in the footage, I joined the interviewees to film them. (Megan uses they/them pronouns, so they will be referred to as such in this report) Megan is involved in the K-Pop Club on campus, so I went to a meeting and filmed, focusing on them, but occasionally getting other people in frame as well, I made sure to let everyone there know that I would be filming and I got permission before and after filming them as well. On the other hand, Jayden was not willing to film b-roll as he did not feel comfortable being filmed in this way, but assured me that he would provide b-roll for the project at a later date.

By this time, the school semester had ended, both Megan and Jayden had sent me any other b-roll that they had. I had no schoolwork to focus on at the time so I was able to dive into all of their b-roll and I created a rough outline of how the interviews would be spliced together. I

then chose what b-roll would go where during the video and after reviewing this outline decided that reshoots were not necessary for this project. From this point on I worked on editing, starting with basic edits for each interview like color correcting and audio edits. The next step involved cutting up and putting back together all of the interview segments. After this, I added in the b-roll, trying to cover up as many of the jump cuts as possible. Next, I looked for Creative Commons-licensed stock footage and audio to use in the background of the video. The final touches were all text-based, adding graphics throughout the video to highlight emotional moments, adding lower thirds, and creating a title card and credit roll. At this point, all that was left was to review the film with my sponsor, readers, and interviewees, and revise the documentary based on their feedback.

## Literature Review

### Starting the film-making process

When making a documentary, there are many aspects to be concerned about. Important factors during the film-making process include the aesthetic of the film, the engagement of the filmmaker, and the ethics towards the subjects. The aesthetic of the film describes how the documentary will look and what will be included in it. The engagement of the filmmaker encompasses how the entire documentary is filmed. Will the filmmaker be in the film themselves, will they only narrate, or will they just observe and nothing more? These are the questions that determine how to proceed. Ethics towards the subjects can include showing care, paying attention to power dynamics, and keeping the subjects aware of what the end product will be.

In terms of what the final cut of the film will look like, documentaries are often figured out after a majority of the filming has finished, as opposed to a narrative film which is typically painstakingly planned in advance. Sarah Pink, of Monash University, describes her thoughts after finishing the filming stage of her documentary; “Once we had produced the film I began to ask myself what and whom it was for, how this was situated in relation to the circumstances of its production, and what my ambitions were for its dissemination and use” (Pink, 2022, p. 783). According to Pink, after finishing filming, one is able to really look at what story their documentary will tell. I think this is especially true for any sort of observational or nonfiction storytelling. You can have an idea of where to go, but the actual story will be dictated by what footage you are able to take.

Pink gives two pieces of advice to answer the question of how involved a filmmaker should be in their documentary, Pink says to “Emphasize the sensoriality of film, by prioritizing human corporeal experience and engagement with the world and developing experiments in invoking the nonrepresentational filmically” (Pink, 2022, p. 786). The first is to be engaged with the subject and participants. An engaged filmmaker will in turn make the world they film more real and engaging to the audience. The other part of the advice is to develop experiments. As a documentarian, it is not always feasible to record constantly for extended periods of time so a good practice is when you know there is a certain event or action you want captured, to lead or prompt the participants to show this. This is the part that many filmmakers get into trouble with as they also need to make sure they are being ethical in their filmmaking.

Ethics are important to remember in any situation but especially when making a nonfiction film with real people such as a documentary. There is a distinction many do not make between ethics and morals. While morals are societal norms and values, “Ethics mark the

outlines and the underlying principles for the right actions” (Sanders, 2010). Similar to psychological studies, one of the most important things to obtain from subjects of a documentary is their informed consent. In psychological studies this means that patients must be told about what the treatment is, what it is for, and what risks there are, they should also be able to stop and withdraw from the experiment at any point should they so choose. A similar idea should be used when making a documentary. Subjects of a film should be aware of what the final product is supposed to look like and what values it represents. They should be able to stop filming at any point if they get uncomfortable, and they should be aware of the risks of being involved and how much of their information is getting published. According to Sanders, “The overriding question of ethics is what to do with people and how to represent them appropriately” (2010). So how do you represent people in the most appropriate way? One such method is the collaborative approach where the subjects of the film have control over their portrayal in it, this will typically involve showing participants a draft of the work and letting them decide if they want anything cut or added to the film (Sanders, 2010). Pink also advises to be collaborative when it comes to documentary filmmaking and ethics (2022). With participants being completely aware of what will end up in the final film, you can be sure that you are making the documentary in an ethical way.

Another important aspect of filmmaking is for the filmmaker to become engaged in their documentary through a process called participatory observational filmmaking. In this, a filmmaker becomes deeply involved in the participants’ lives and records them as their life develops around them (Pink, 2022). This is a particularly time-consuming method of filmmaking, but is one that requires much less planning and prompting of situations. To demonstrate the engagement of the filmmaker to the audience, these such documentaries often

display the documentarian asking questions directly to the participants. A much less time consuming form of this practice is called design anthropological filmmaking. In this method, the filmmaker only records the subject one or a few times, but makes sure to be in contact beforehand so they can plan what kinds of footage they may need. In this form it is much more likely for filmmakers to create scenarios rather than just happening to film events by circumstance.

### Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory relates interpersonal communication to a stage production. It describes front stage and backstage behaviors and how they differ. In the front stage in a play, actors are being watched by the audience, so they are acting and performing; while in the front stage in interpersonal communication, is when people are in front of others so they act according to what they think the group expects from them. Whereas in the backstage, there is no performance, this would be when we are alone and have privacy so we don't need to modify our behavior. Goffman believed that people put on these performances in order to show their desired self. But through these performances, or our presentation of self as it is also called, we start to self-actualize, and become more and more like this desired self we are trying to portray. Similar to how Goffman believed each of these parts makes up the whole self, philosopher Judith Butler argues that the way we perform develops our identity. Butler goes as far as to say that our identity itself is just a facade made by the way we act, and the way we feel acting naturally is from social pressure of gender expectations (Butler, 1998, p. 271). This idea, like Goffman's, is another take on the same concept where human actions create the whole sense of self. Unlike Goffman, Butler focuses on how these actions are learned and are influenced by

gender. Another of Goffman's ideas, "is that individuals have both expressions that they give and those that they give off. In the case of the former, impressions that the individual intends to produce are communicated, but with the latter, impressions that were not intended to be given are received by the audience" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 101). This is especially important in communication; whenever a message is given, the message received by the audience might seem completely different.

Bullingham and Vasconceles (2013) argue that Goffman's dramaturgical theory relates to social media and other computer-mediated communications. They found that people tend to make their online persona similar to their offline one by emphasizing certain aspects of themselves but minimizing others. This is similar to how Goffman believed we put on performances in front of people in order to show our desired selves. "Embellishment of self can be viewed as a subtle and limited form of persona adoption, especially when participants might not even consider that they are representing themselves differently or when there is no obvious obligation to present one's self as one appears offline" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 110). I'm interested to see how this will relate to the LGBTQ community on campus. I, for example, was born male, but tend to prefer an androgynous style, so I feel like my social media reflects that, showing off non-gendered moods and photographs and minimizing masculine features of myself and my personality. So I am inclined to think that others may share a similar story.

### Young Queer Identity

When it comes to queerness and college, one thing that often gets brought up is the idea of a safe space. A safe space can be either a physical place or just an idea. The concept of a safe

space in regards to the LGBTQ community started in the 1960s and 1970s, where there were physical locations where queer people could be themselves without having to be afraid of the anti-sodomy laws of the time. However, the term has also been used to describe an idea, for example, a teacher or counselor might say that it is a safe space around them in their office or classroom, to help get minority and female students to feel more comfortable speaking up around them. Today, students often think of a safe space as an LGBTQ or BIPOC center on a college campus. While the debate on safe spaces remains, many students continue to find solace in these centers on college campuses around the country. The president of Wesleyan University explained that a genderqueer, non-white student had thanked him for his role in defending the idea of safe spaces on campus. He said, “This person has a lot of risks going on and simply wants places like us white guys have always had, where they can kick back and not feel the need to defend or explain themselves” (Brown & Mangan, 2016). Safe spaces, physical or metaphorical, have continued to prove their importance in years past and in modern times.

So how exactly are safe spaces created? First we need to understand why they are. “It's about creating an atmosphere where we can express opinions freely without being harassed or judged” (Brown & Mangan, 2016). So if a safe space is a place where we feel we are not being judged, it is likely that we show more of our full selves in these situations than in other front stage situations, or in other words, we are putting on less of a performance. “The five safe space frames which are articulated in this article are: fortification of the queer space, preserving participants’ anonymity, creating an inclusive space, creating a space of separation for distinct identity groups, and controlling unpredictable influences on the participants in the space” (Hartal, 2018). These five categories help us to understand what exactly makes a safe space. An important distinction made is that safety refers not only to being free from physical harm, but



also a mental and emotional safety. Another important topic is the idea of intersectionality, how multiple parts of identities interact with each other. For example, just being in a queer community might not keep you free of racial discrimination, or vice versa. So an important goal of a safe space should be to limit or stop other discriminations even if they don't relate to the main topic. According to Hartal (2018), safe spaces are usually only constructed with one idea in mind, whether it be anti-homophobia, anti-racism or others, but are rarely focused on these intersectionalities. A true queer safe space should be devoid of racism and classism and others in addition to its main lack of homophobia.

I think queer people especially have become used to putting on a performance that hides most of who they are for fear of backlash. So when queer students find this safe space, they can feel a great amount of relief and comfort being able to finally let more of their true self present itself. That is what I hope to accomplish in this documentary, to see and hear stories from LGBTQ students on how and why they drop parts of their mask and where they feel comfortable doing so.

## Reflection

Through the creation of this documentary, there were both rewarding and challenging moments. The most rewarding part of this process was being able to learn from and connect with other members of the LGBTQ+ community. By conducting interviews and filming observational footage, I have been able to gain a deeper understanding of both the shared experiences that we might have as well as the different challenges we have faced as queer students. This project has opened my eyes to how important community can be to individuals of stigmatized groups like the LGBTQ+ community.

## Challenges

There were also many challenges involved in the making of this project. Due to the intimate nature of the documentary, the need to make the students feel safe and respected during the process was heightened. This meant that I had to make sure I was communicating thoroughly and often with the interviewees and it also led to a deficit of usable b-roll as the participants were only comfortable with certain videos and photos being used. Not unique to the nature of this project alone, planning ahead is always a challenge when it comes to working with other peoples' schedules; I found this true as well, as I had to reschedule one of my interviews. Luckily, this did not have too much of an impact on my overall timeline or my final product. The other big challenge was figuring out what parts of the interviews to include in the final video. I had to walk a fine line when editing as I did not want to edit the clips too much to where it seems as if I purposefully edited out their true experiences. At the same time, I tried to edit out parts where the interviewees stumbled over their words or awkwardly laughed so as to not embarrass them when they saw the final product.

## Academic Impact

By creating this documentary I have been able to demonstrate the skills I have learned throughout my undergraduate career. I was able to recall concepts that I have learned not just in filmmaking courses like Multiplatform Production, Studio Production, and Video Production, but other Communication classes like Legal Issues in the Media, Media Theory, Principles of Social Media, and Intercultural Communication. I've also been able to show other skills I've learned in non-Communication courses like Psychology, Women's Studies, and even Spreadsheet Modeling. Most of all, I've been able to showcase all that I've learned in my time at ZTV as

well as in my internship-turned-job as a video editor at Akron's Soap Box Derby. I also hoped to both showcase and learn more from the LGBTQ+ community as I have found such a welcoming home among the community. In total, this project is the culmination of all of the skills and talents I have learned throughout my years as an undergraduate at the University of Akron.

## Special Thanks

Throughout this project I have had help from many people at the University of Akron and I'd like to take a moment to recognize them.

- Juan Contreras, my project sponsor, professor, and ZTV General Manager.
- Dr. Amber L. Ferris, my project reader and Media Theory professor.
- Dr. Kara Kvaran, my project reader and Women's Studies professor.
- Dr. Kathleen Clark, my School of Communication Honors advisor and Preparatory Course advisor.
- Jayden and Megan, participants and interviewees in my project, now close friends.
- The University of Akron, Williams Honors College, and School of Communication, where I was able to grow to learn all of the necessary skills that I have now.
- ZTV and the Soap Box Derby, the places where I have utilized and practiced video production and editing.
- K-Pop Club, where I was allowed to film b-roll for my project.

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## Appendix

Link to upload of “The Queer Performance:”

<https://youtu.be/ATZyPpZFrIc>