

## “Boundaries, Belonging, and Becoming: My Life Through Media”

I was raised in a household influenced by teaching and political ideas. Since my parents were professors, they viewed the media as something organized and managed, so screen use was restricted while I was growing up, even into my later teenage years. These choices affected how I interacted with news platforms and digital networks, though I didn't realize it at the time. I didn't have constant phone access or endless streaming options available to me during my youth. Instead, there were boundaries designed to guard my focus, schedule, and beliefs, boundaries that annoyed me back then but now feel reasonable because I can better understand why they mattered.

My earliest memories of the media were limited. TV wasn't always on; it was saved for weekends, but only after permission was given. When the TV was on, I was limited to educational shows and channels such as PBS. Watching movies required prior approval and was usually a family activity. My parents stayed close whenever I went online, as they wanted to ensure that the things we were viewing were safe. They believed that what we see shapes who we become. The media influenced views on politics, self-image, and social norms. Exposure mattered because it guided belief formation.

My parents set firm limits on what I could watch, and time was limited due to concerns about distraction from homework, books, or face-to-face talks. Instead of allowing violent scenes, sexual material, or biased images, access got shut down; they saw kids as quick to absorb such ideas. Real-life cases mirrored media influence theories, which claim repeated messaging shifts beliefs over time. Because of this, they aimed to reduce those impacts while also considering how imitation works, which is that you pick up actions or views just by observing others. Although I resented the restrictions back then, looking back now makes their reasoning

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clearer, particularly given that they were shielding someone whose identity they didn't fully grasp but still treated as exposed to harm.

I started moving from just watching stuff to actually doing things in middle school. Because I got online later than most kids, I began with YouTube instead of chat-heavy sites. That change made me feel more in control. Instead of copying what everyone else watched, I gravitated toward videos and channels that portrayed lives different from mine. Those choices became a way for me to figure out who I was.

Media became a space for trying out ideas, picking up skills, or reaching out when needed. During times I wasn't ready to talk at home or school, it offered quiet comfort.

I started seeing gaps in the media early on; very few figures looked or felt like me. Being gay has shaped my experience for several years now. Yet this side of me rarely showed up in the films or series I followed growing up, particularly because my expression doesn't match common assumptions about LGBTQ+ people; I dress more femininely, which remains rare on screen even today. Whenever queer individuals appeared, they were usually reduced to jokes or flat tropes, teaching me quickly that popular culture favors some voices while pushing others aside. People like me have been labeled wrong, or left out completely, and being missing from stories sends its own quiet signal: you don't quite belong.

As I grew older, things began to change. The number of streaming services and independent creators has opened doors for LGBTQ+ narratives. Platforms like TikTok or YouTube began showing real talks about identity, which brought comfort through shared moments, yet also highlighted shifts in who controls media output. As old barriers faded, regular users took charge, spotlighting communities mainstream outlets usually missed.

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My social circles developed in two separate areas. In person, relationships often develop through school, athletics, or scholarly settings. Because my parents were involved in academia and government, I was usually surrounded by grown-ups who had strong educational backgrounds. Being close to them helped me feel comfortable in top-tier organizations, as my relatives knew how these places functioned. Exposure to this world influenced what I aimed for later, revealing careers where advanced learning and contacts mattered.

Web platforms provide access to unique forms of value; here, social capital refers to the strength of your connections and the benefits those ties can offer. Through digital connections, I discovered LGBTQ+ circles, advocacy hubs, and fan cultures. These communities provided words to describe feelings I once struggled to say, especially when face-to-face relationships lacked depth and intimacy. At the same time, they influenced my perspective on creative work. Posting thoughts or images shifted me from a passive viewer into someone actively shaping culture.

With the increasing use of social media, the effects have become clearer over time. Because smartphones speed up access, focus has become shorter, while comparisons have risen steadily. Instead of feeling secure, people began to measure their worth by the number of likes or shares, feeling pressured to keep up with polished online images. Filtered feeds kept showing people what they already believed, letting false information spread even faster, especially when emotional reactions drove the clicks. And as artificial intelligence got better at creating convincing content, it became harder and harder to tell what was real and what wasn't.

At the same time, anxiety crept in during longer breaks, since app designs favored intense behavior, pushing bold statements over quiet thinking. People shaped their self-image

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through showy acts rather than real bonds; meanwhile, it became clear how fast someone could vanish into the chaos.

Due to these shifts, my use of media has changed. Now, instead of reacting right away, I investigate claims first, particularly since fake photos, clips, or texts generated by AI are everywhere, making blind trust risky. To verify information, I check facts, run image searches in reverse, and also cross-reference different outlets. This practice didn't stem from anxiety, but rather from realizing how quickly incorrect information can influence views without our noticing. Using media now feels more purposeful; I pay attention to how swiftly lies travel when shared impulsively.

I worry about the broader societal effects, as social media tends to favor extreme reactions, drama, and flashy moments, which can deepen political divides when systems amplify the loudest, most hostile opinions. A lot of users develop one-sided emotional bonds that quietly influence their thinking without them noticing; meanwhile, teens face stress linked to looks and needing approval. With endless material streaming in, there's barely any downtime or quiet thought, altering how individuals form morals, pursue relationships, acquire knowledge, and even understand their identity. Devices have reshaped growing up, focus spans, and friendships among peers. The change came quickly, feeling intense and challenging to keep up with.

Looking back at how I used media, with what I've learned now, my view has changed; the early limits kept me safe from too much too soon. Yet those same rules had downsides: real understanding comes from doing, so blocking everything meant missing chances to judge content wisely. When I finally went online, I had to pick things up quickly on my own. That experience has shaped my current understanding of what's trustworthy and what's misleading.

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I can see how classroom ideas connect to my personal path. Instead, cultivation theory aligns with my initial views on queerness, the lack of visibility led me to think it mattered less. On the other hand, agenda setting guided what news caught my focus, mainly because online spaces highlight issues before people even engage. Similarly, social learning influenced my actions by watching influencers I looked up to; gradually, I adopted their speech, style, and habits from the content they shared. In contrast, symbolic interactionism shows why my self-image changed across digital environments, since we are developed through constant exchange, adapting to what each group expects.

I now understand better how the media relates to economics and power. Since I started using social media more, I've realized how revenue strategies, or ads, influence what gets produced. Streaming services prioritize shows that cater to market demands rather than social value. On social networks, personal information is collected to serve targeted advertisements. Tools like notifications aim to extend usage, as longer attention spans equal higher earnings. This insight has shifted my habits; now I carefully check sources rather than assuming credibility. Now, I engage with the media more mindfully, setting boundaries as necessary and closely monitoring my tendency to doomscroll. Because content affects my emotions and sense of value, I follow people who offer genuine insight or meaningful interaction, rather than superficial entertainment, especially those who steer clear of damaging narratives. Since visibility matters for young LGBTQ+ audiences, I remain aware of my own influence; even small posts might support someone silently struggling.

My connections have also changed; now I maintain smaller circles, both in person and online, focusing on those who offer genuine support rather than superficial approval. I receive

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updates primarily through digital platforms, yet I verify facts across different outlets, steering clear of automated feeds designed to fuel anger or spread false claims.

Examining media from a sociological perspective altered my perspective on my past and current behaviors. I now notice how systems influence who I become, primarily through what images or stories are shown. Online areas can build links between people, but also bring pressure over time. Still, personal power matters since we help form these platforms by what we post, whom we follow, or where we direct our focus. Now, I engage with the media intentionally, not just out of routine, which makes it feel more purposeful and thoughtful.