ABSTRACT

KELLYNOEL WALDORF. “the Virginia Woolf Cubs or something like that”: Identity construction and symbolic power through the social labeling of GSM women. (Under the direction of Professor Agnes Bolonyai.)

In the United States, struggles related to gender, sexual, and romantic minority (GSM) identity labels can be seen in popular media as well as the sociopolitical sphere. The fact that the politically correct terminology for many of these identities has been rapidly changing over the past few decades only escalates such tensions. Thus, social labels for GSM people prove to be a site of intense conflict and contestation. This paper interrogates these social labels, particularly in relation to GSM women—*What tensions exist in the struggles over the symbolic power of naming regarding GSM women’s identity construction by the self and other? How do GSM women navigate these tensions of social labeling and construct meaningful identities by positioning themselves vis-à-vis various social labels and, in turn, broader ideologies and sociocultural norms?*

Using a methodologically plural queer linguistics approach, I provide quantitative analysis of survey data from 120 participants (GSM and non-GSM) using logistic regression to explore trends in perception of GSM-related lexical items as well as qualitative analysis of nine interviews with self-identified GSM women to examine the tensions therein. Building from Bourdieu’s (1991) conception of nomination as a struggle for symbolic power, I use Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004) tactics of intersubjectivity as analytical tools for exploring the ways GSM position themselves and take stances (Du Bois, 2007; Ochs, 1996) in relation to social labels which, in turn, serve to align with or resist dominant societal structures and ideologies which are dialogically (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986) linked to the words. I argue that many of the tensions of these words stem from a lack of definitional and/or connotational consensus contributing to a struggle for symbolic power in which these GSM women try to construct positive and meaningful identities with words that often have low symbolic efficacy and carry immense ideological baggage.