

QUEER ASSEMBLY: CREATING A DIGITAL PLATFORM FOR
LGBTQIA+ STORIES AND EVALUATING IMPACT
ON SELF-ESTEEM

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my spouse, Stephanie, and my daughter, Finley. To Stephanie, thank you. Thank you for putting up with me along this almost six-year journey, including endless nights and weekends writing, working, and worrying—while at the same time supporting and pushing me to continue down this path. Thank you for standing by my side as our relationship grew along with my self-discovery.

To Finley, my goose, I hope that by living my truth open and outwardly, you will grow up to be compassionate and kind-hearted, accepting and curious, and never afraid to be yourself, no matter who that is. And I can only hope the world treats you the same.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. FRAMING THE PROBLEM	4
III. METHODOLOGY	7
IV. EXPERIENCE DESIGN	11
V. CONCLUSION	19
APPENDIX	23
REFERENCES	24

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. April 2022 iteration of QueerAssembly.com	8
2. Previous iterations of QueerAssembly.com	9
3. Queer Assembly Logo	11
4. Zilla (left) and Fira (right) typefaces	13
5. Portraits without filter (above) and with filter (below)	14
6. Images from Queer Assembly Event	18
7. Chart indicating survey results of self-esteem assessment	21

I. INTRODUCTION

Stories and, specifically as a focus in this project, personal narratives can be so much more than just words shared on a page—they are vivid memories, lost voices, and epic journeys. A well-timed story can create a movement, quell a storm and spark a revolution. They connect our experiences and become our legacy. We build a connection with the storyteller, strengthen their point of view in our memories, and allow them to shift our ideas, beliefs, and interactions. As the narrative unfolds, this shared understanding is built through learning and establishing our self-conscience to relate to one another. Dr. Suzanne Keen, a professor of literature at Hamilton University, describes this as narrative empathy, a pivotal step in understanding someone else's point of view, struggles, and perseverance (206).

In mainstream narratives, underserved communities, such as those who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning/Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+), can often be relegated to simplified depictions in either negative, non-affirming ways or typical tropes and stereotypes. These systematic issues stem back to the inception of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the introduction of the Hays Code—which prohibited sexual deviations from being on tv and in movies (How Queer Characters Have Evolved In Children's Animation). Film studios became fearful of backlash and loss of funding and contributed to the relative invisibility, the absence of fully realized and accurate representation of LGBTQIA+. There is less of a lack of representation in current media, but abundant true and accurate representation is absent (Fryberg and Townsend). In a 2011 study, *The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity*, respondents frequently requested to see realistic

depictions of queer individuals (Gomillion and Giuliano). Narratives that focus on coming out, familial struggles, or were through the filter of the flamboyant gay friend were common. While the former contexts can be relevant to the queer experience, it fails to showcase an individual as a whole, resulting in an incomplete embodiment of the individual and increased difficulty in building narrative empathy with listeners. A lack of narrative empathy suggests that queer individuals can be perceived with stigmatization, discrimination, or marginalization by non-queer populations.

Even from a young age, LGBTQIA+ individuals experience more significant mental health issues than their straight counterparts. Every two years, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) launches the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), developed in the early '90s to help monitor health behaviors and trends among 9th through 12th-grade students. The data is collected from 47 states and distributed in a methodology in which the CDC maintains a 95% confidence level in the outcome (“YRBSS Data & Documentation”). The most recent sample size in 2011 was 15,425. The data shows that when comparing feelings of sadness and hopelessness of heterosexual students and students who reported as a sexual minority, LGBTQIA+ students' sadness and hopelessness increased by over 20%. In comparison, heterosexual students saw a decrease of 7% from 2015 to 2017 (“YRBSS Data & Documentation”). In a study from the Human Rights Council, of over 10,000 LGBT Youth, 46% list family as the place they most often hear negative messages about being queer (*Growing up LGBT in America*).

While individual queer people can experience a unique constellation of personal hardships related to their identities, such as familial struggles, religious persecution, and

medical, housing, and employment discrimination, a media landscape that does not fully represent them and their experiences is something this population has in common; this under- and misrepresentation can have further exacerbating effects on this group's self-esteem. Stronger narrative empathy and emotional bonds have been seen to have a significant impact on increased self-esteem. This suggests having a broader reach of LGBTQIA+ communities around the world with this project will have the same positive effects (Hahm et al.).

II. FRAMING THE PROBLEM

Let us take a moment to consider how storytelling permeates into a digital landscape for queer individuals. Given that digital spaces allow for widespread aggregation and reach larger audiences, there is no lack of availability of LGBTQIA+ friendly websites and apps. However, with exceptions, the primary purpose of the majority of these applications is casual hooking up or finding a long-term romantic relationship—creating a representation gap in queer storytelling platforms. This becomes problematic as there are not enough social connection platforms for queer individuals under 25 years old, who often use digital platforms, such as social media, to seek a social connection and support from others (Baams et al.).

Lex: Queer Lovers and Friends is self-described as a social app that connects queer lovers and friends. However, categorically within the app store, it is listed as a dating app. The marketing language explicitly states that their driving purpose is to find a steamy date beyond a profile picture. Their conflating intent muddies the app's purpose by not having a clear focus. *The Amino app* is one of the few created for social connection and features multiple channels or groups to join with a large selection of LGBTQIA+ options. However, their non-curated format creates a space mixed with memes and recycled Tumblr posts, and its interface design is difficult to navigate. Other websites like *Storycorps* focus explicitly on storytelling to highlight crafted and structured personal narratives. However, within their collection, there are few stories noted as being from LGBTQIA+ individuals.

To say all LGBTQIA+ focused and friendly sites fall into a few categories such as dating, casual hookups, or news and gossip would be incorrect, as this is a cursory

categorization of sites and apps available. It would also be remiss not to acknowledge both digital and physical mediums explicitly created for and by the queer community. Digital collections such as *the LGBTQ Digital Collaboratory* feature over 40 different websites focused on oral histories. While most initiatives are working sites, many tied to higher education institutions, the aggregate list contains broken or missing links. There are plenty of active sites in the previous example and more beyond what is mentioned. This project, *Queer Assembly*, expands on the foundation of such sites by only focusing on queer-created content and the use of multiple formats to create an engaging experience. Ultimately, there is a need overall for a higher influx of queer stories and storytellers that will help achieve minimal normality and, hopefully, advocacy.

Physical publications like newspapers, magazines, and zines have filled the gaps of underrepresented voices for years. Often started in grassroots and underground settings, periodicals featuring LGBTQIA+ news and narratives continue to impact readers today. One example is from the *Black Queer and Intersectional Collective*, which has released two different zines, *Obsidian* and *Onyx*, in 2017 and 2018. These two publications uplift the voices of queer people of color by telling the stories of what pride means to the contributors. These physical pieces usually come with a limitation of reach and accessibility or require a subscription that lacks a digital space's anonymity. The organization *PrideMedia* has a magazine readership of over 700,000 individuals and sees close to seven million unique online visits over their six different brands, including *The Advocate*, *Out*, and *Pride*. Unfortunately, and in the case of *PrideMedia*, there are few digital spaces dedicated to LGBTQIA+ individuals outside of dating, hookups, celebrity, and entertainment. Without ubiquitous platforms dedicated to destigmatizing queer

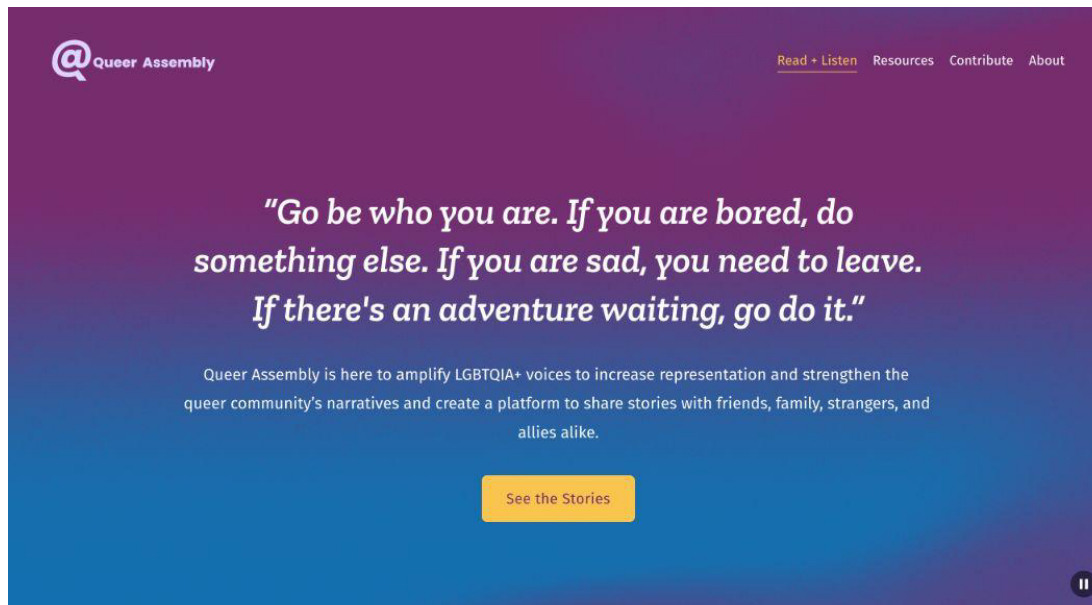
stories and building empathy between and within the underserved communities, LGBTQIA+ individuals will continue to see higher rates of low self-esteem and mental health issues.

The main focus of this work is to add to the holistic and realistic portrayals of queer individuals, which are abundantly overshadowed by flat depictions. There are many ways to be queer and everyone has a wide variety of intersectionalities. There is more to an LGBTQIA+ individual than coming out or transitioning. These are stories about landing the next big career, helping a friend in need, dealing with health issues, raising your kids to be compassionate, flying for the first time, taking the first step into the unknown, and more. They are queer stories because they are lived through the lives of a queer person. These stories are showcased on a digital platform to create discourse and interaction between two points in time—from the interviewee and the reader. When people experience media in multiple formats, such as audio, visual, and tactile, these experiences become more memorable. The Elaboration Likelihood Method (ELM) theory explains that the more effort someone puts into an interaction, the more information they will retain and the stronger their attitude will be (Scaliatine). The digital platform intends to establish a relationship of trust, vulnerability, and low intimidation with the audience to break any barriers regarding the topics discussed.

III. METHODOLOGY

A survey was created to identify individuals willing to share their stories in a remote interview. It also helped gather a baseline of current realistic queer media and understand one's motivation to share their story. This survey was shared on social media platforms and through personal networks as an attempt to collect responses from varying sexual orientations and gender identities. One hundred and thirty responded to the survey, with twenty self-selecting to be part of a panel of individuals to read and share stories from the LGBTQIA+ community.

The twenty individuals were sent an invitation to schedule an interview, asking them to share a personal narrative that featured an impactful moment regarding their LGBTQIA+ identity. Six participants signed up for an interview held over zoom in October of 2021. These participants represented a small amount of the queer spectrum (Gay, Bisexual, Lesbian, Cis-Gender) in terms of representations. Most prominently missing is the representation of gender minorities and people of color. As this repository grows, there is an opportunity to be intentional by ensuring it is being promoted and shared in safe spaces with greater intersectionalities. In late April 2022, two additional interviews will be added that are from a non-binary individual and a transgender woman. Each collected interview was transcribed and curated onto the *Queer Assembly* website (Figure 1) through multiple design iterations (Figure 2).



Collective Voices



David Demchuk | Gay | he/him

Chapter 1 | Representation In your space

David discusses queer media that had an impact on his life, and the importance of realistic representation.

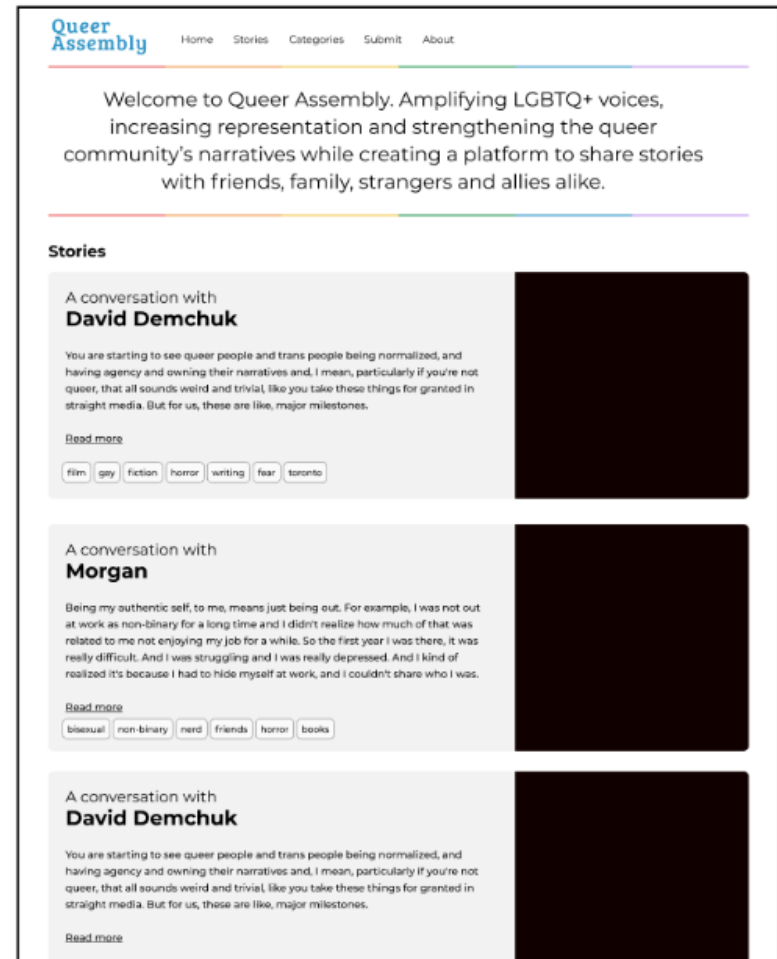
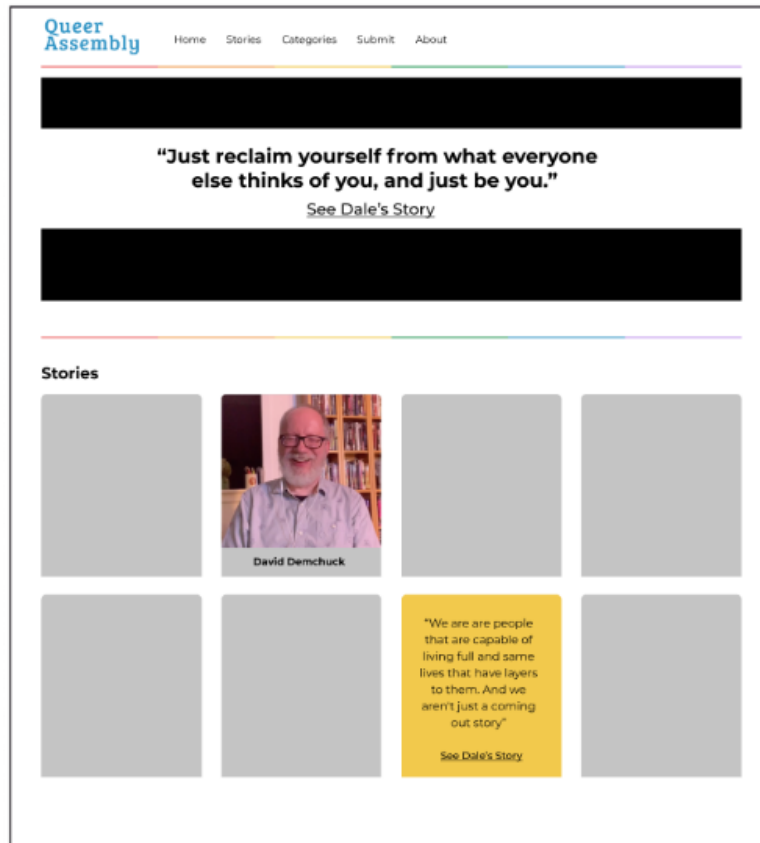
Chapter 2 | The beginning of a new chapter

David discusses his writing, focusing on authentic queer narratives while navigating his own personal story.

Chapter 3 | You're worth the wait

David talks about taking the time and having patience with yourself to create a self-discourse

Figure 1. April 2022 iteration of QueerAssembly.com



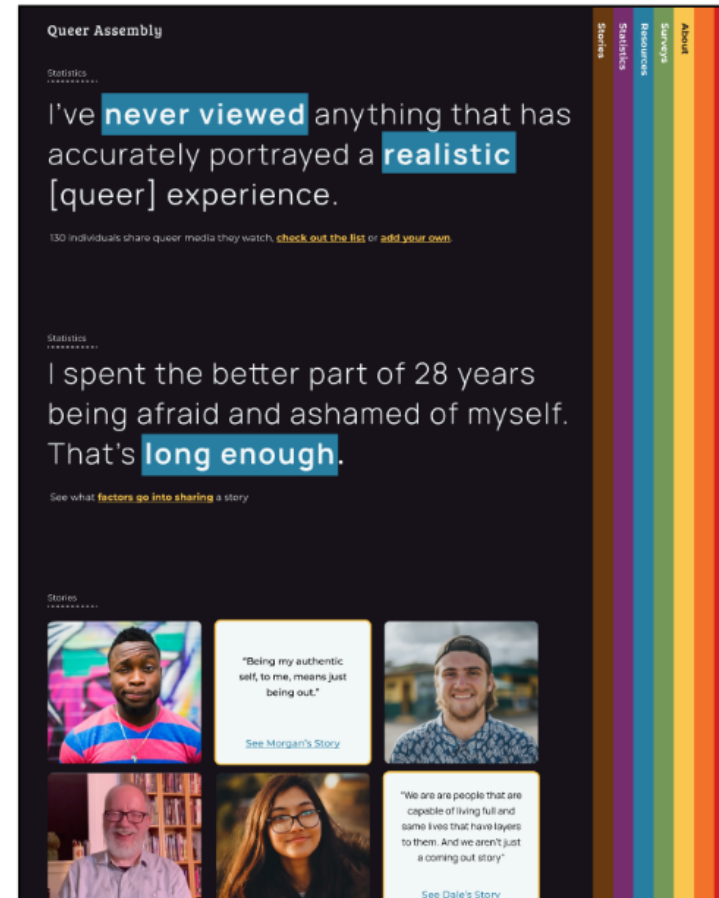


Figure 2. Previous iterations of QueerAssembly.com

IV. EXPERIENCE DESIGN

Brand Identity

The name of the project and website, [Queer Assembly](http://queerassembly.com), was explicitly selected for more than just a description of collaborative work and gathering for a common purpose, but as a battle cry rallying LGBTQIA+ individuals. While simplistic, the asperand (@) inspired logo, morphed with a Q, intends to emulate the meaning of the same symbol on social media platforms used to denote or tag users. Sometimes referred to as a handle, the @ is used ubiquitously for someone's profile or username, representing one individual's identity. The logo mark (Figure 3) pulling from the aforementioned feels felicitous. The site is currently live at queerassembly.com.



Figure 3. Queer Assembly Logo

Target Audience

The target audience of *Queer Assembly* is queer individuals under the age of 25, particularly those who are still defining and learning who they are regarding their sexual orientation, sexual attraction, gender expression, or gender identity. Having a safe platform is vital to queer individuals from high school to young adults and for those who do not have safe spaces accessible to connect with other queer individuals.

According to one of the first studies to examine the experience of queer youth online, GLSEN (*Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network*), CiPHR (*Common Information for Public Health Electronic Reporting*), and CCRC (*Crimes against Children Research Center*) reported over 62% of the 5,600 surveyed sexual minority young adults connected with other LGBTQIA+ individuals in a year prior, and there is a higher likelihood of these individuals looking online for information regarding their sexuality than compared to heterosexual students (2013). This audience has a clear need, and a digital environment resonates the most effectively.

Design Form and Function

Typography. Since the site's primary purpose is to allow visitors to read the shared stories, three factors had high consideration: legibility, readability, and tone. Although the drivers of selecting the typefaces were more utilitarian in approach, the form follows function mentality allows users to navigate the site easily. Working within the limitation of available typefaces in the content management system, *Zilla* and *Fira* were selected as the primary typefaces for *Queer Assembly*. Designed by *Carrois Apostrophe*, *Fira* sans has a larger x-height making it highly suitable for digital screens. The Berlin-based type foundry focuses on equality and freedom of speech and has applied this concept by creating *Fira* as an open-source format where anyone can use the font at no charge and submit for edits and changes—thus creating typography through collaboration. In addition, the terminals, joints, and tails of the letterforms are more stylized, adding more personality to the sans serif and creating a suitable pair for *Zilla* (Figure 4).

Zilla, a slab serif typeface designed by *Typotheque*, features smooth curves and chunky slabbed serifs that leverage slight irregularity with its serifs, curvature, and terminals to add a level of the individual personality without degrading readability while online. Their points of contrast help separate what a User Interface (UI) element is and what is the participant's voice.

I am a little tired of the coming-out
story. **There is more to us than that.**

We are people that are capable of living full and
same lives that have **layers to them.**

Figure 4. *Zilla* (left) and *Fira* (right) typefaces

Color. Leveraging rich and deep colors such as purples, blues, and yellows, the website's hues and values seek to show the vibrancy of the queer community. Specifically, the primary color purple pulls from the rich, tragic, and significant history of the queer community. As early as the 7th century, lyrical poet Sappho, renowned as “The Poetess,” wrote about a liking of women who were adorned with violet tiaras. The logo uses the color lavender, associated with being queer, homosexual in particular, as early as the late 1800s. Purple is used as the primary text color throughout the website, excluding reversed type or yellow links. Yellow is used as a complementary color to purple and a salient element due to its vibrancy and our eye's physiology that the wavelengths of yellow and green are the easiest colors to recognize. This will ideally increase interaction with buttons, links, and direct quotes from the interviewees. In the hero section of the website, these cool palette colors flow together, morphing, overlapping, and diffusing. They intend to tell the story of intersectionality and inclusiveness visually.

Image Treatment. Showing photography of the storytellers is a vital form factor in building a connection between both the listener and interviewees. However, since these

photos were collected remotely—and would continue to be in future phases of the site—there was a lack of consistency. Each photo has been edited to create more cohesion and reduce the color variances (Figure 5). In the future, an LGBTQIA+ artist would be hired to translate the photos into a hand-drawn sketch in order to build a stronger sense of attention, detail, care, and craft for each individual. These sketches would then be printed and mailed to the interviewees as an additional token of thanks.



Figure 5. Portraits without the filter (above) and with the filter (below)

A Place in the Current Climate

Social and political events have changed drastically over just a few years from the inception of this research and subsequent outcomes. So much so that it changes the placement of the work that I have done and its importance. In March 2022, Florida passed HB 1557, the "*Don't Say Gay Bill*," which prohibits classrooms from mentioning sexual orientation and gender identity topics. The state of Kentucky is advancing legislation that would prevent trans girls from competing in sports at all education levels. In February 2022, Texas Governor Greg Abbott ordered welfare officials to start abuse investigations into transgender kids receiving gender-affirming care. The order requires teachers, doctors, and many practitioners to report parents to child services if they uncover that children are receiving the affirming care. LGBTQIA+ people's rights and, most importantly, lives are under attack. Between deaths, discrimination, unjust treatment, and laws, there has never been a more apt time to show the strength we have together. Due to the current climate, something that started to create a platform for queer voices has become a statement against the injustice brought on by people who see us as less than the people we are. While, hopefully, these laws are rewritten, removed, or revoked, the design work that started as a platform for collaboration and storytelling has, in a sense, become a design for resistance. Art and design have been associated with acts of protest, revolution, and resistance for decades, creating a visual story for people to mobilize and unite in support of a cause. Simply by existing and standing as a rallying point for celebrating, acknowledging, and elevating queer stories amidst a world filled with homophobia and transphobia crime and legislation, the existence of *Queer Assembly* resonates on a grander scale.

A Place in Design Context

Designer John Voss co-founded *Queer Design Club* with the mission to promote and celebrate the intersection of queer and design. Voss has a point of view that I often resonated with, especially as I first pursued this master's degree. He posits that the design field is made up of titans, renowned and grand, whose work often shadows that created by teams or within the outer edges of the field (Voss). But as I have progressed in the discipline and in particular, the research, design is more of a collective. Design can be for authenticity and vulnerability. It can have the purposeful intent to reflect those using it and not as a tool to get value from others' perspectives. Throughout history, design has been tied with commerce, even though the twentieth century saw a period of exploration where "designer became author" or had a responsibility to society. Towards the end of the millennium, there was a shift back to a consumer-driven discipline (FitzGerald). But design has power in its accessibility. and by engaging, listening, and incorporating real people, it can act as a catalyst for change (Smith). And this is where my work, as it sits, and its future will stay within the design field.

Queer Assembly Event

To help promote the launch of the *Queer Assembly* website and to build community within and around the stories collected, a pop-up event was held at Geekdom in San Antonio. Geekdom, a coworking collaborative organization, is housed in the historic Rand Building in San Antonio, close to the epicenter of the tech industry downtown. Geekdom has multiple rooms for events and was selected due to its proximity to the downtown square, multi-purpose event space, and professional sound-proof podcast recording studio. This event was marketed on social media channels as a way for

attendees to listen, read and explore a collection of LGBTQIA+ voices in a safe place for open dialogue.

The Queer Assembly Presents Neglected Narratives: Share Your Story lasted 3 hours and was held on March 12, 2022. Local San Antonio residents identifying as queer or as allies were able to browse physical, digital, and audio excerpts from the individuals interviewed and featured on the website. It was paramount to have multiple points of interaction, including the use of the space, to add a level of immersion and connectedness to those who had told their story. Quotes from each interviewee were printed on 16" x 24" posters and placed around the room.

Additionally, a newspaper featuring articles about gender identity vs. sexual orientation and a book featuring long-form narratives were also available for event attendees to read. Spread around the room were recorded clips from previous interviews that allowed attendees to listen to a collection of short personal narratives, grouped by topics, through a small handheld speaker. The physicality of holding the speaker to listen to the actual person's audio melded the concept of physical and digital spaces while building more empathy and connection to the stories that had already taken place. While there was low attendance, presumably due to having a smaller reach in the groups the event was promoted within, safety concerns during the pandemic, and a potentially lower interest in the topic covered—quality outweighed quantity.

Of the five people that attended the event, each person fully-engaged with the materials provided (Figure 6). In a post-event survey, all attendees noted extreme satisfaction with the event. One participant stated, “my biggest takeaway is others’ perceptions of queer culture that enhance my own views.” Along with interacting with

printed and recorded material, the event attendees could interact and have conversations with other individuals. Since this was an intimate event, I was able to discuss with each person the importance of this project, give more details about the people I interviewed, and also how the project connects to my identity. After sharing my story, three participants signed up to share their story at a subsequent time. This event can be a blueprint for additional pop-up exhibits in local areas affirming and welcoming to an LGBTQIA+ audience. These public forums would allow individuals to spend more time and immerse themselves in the materials and stories.



Figure 6. Images from Queer Assembly Event

V. CONCLUSION

Outcome

The primary objective of creating a digital platform that captured realistic portrayals of moments impacted by their queer experiences was achieved. The secondary objective of measuring the impact on empathy and self-esteem after listening and sharing a story shows substantial promise (Figure 7).

Overall, it was a warm and rewarding experience interviewing and collecting interviews to showcase on the site for the former. Each person was thrilled with the opportunity to impact whoever might be reading the shared story and was delighted with having the conversation in the first place. All participants, even those in the anonymous survey, recognize the lack of queer representation in media and find value in filling the gap through these personal stories.

As for the later secondary objective, although the smaller sample size makes the numbers not statistically significant, there are initial indicators that depict the digital experience has an impact on self-esteem measurements (Figure 7). Participants were asked to measure their self-esteem on the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (Appendix I) before sharing their stories or attending the event and once again afterward. This self-esteem measurement consists of ten questions with answers using the Likert scale, with half of the questions reverse scored. Since they are reverse scored, the higher the graph, the higher the measurement of self-esteem. Except for one question, most either stay the same or move in a favorable orientation after viewing the digital website. Since the sample size is small, one must acknowledge variances that arise from collecting data at two different points in time, including situational changes and question comprehension,

which a larger sample size would offset. Additional research with a more extensive data sets would need to be conducted to determine correlation, causation, or any link between the digital platform and the impact on self-esteem and reduce variances in the data. This topic of additional research is an ample opportunity in the field. As posited earlier in *Chapter 1: Framing the Problem*, only a few studies specifically link storytelling within the LGBTQIA+ community to a grander scale.

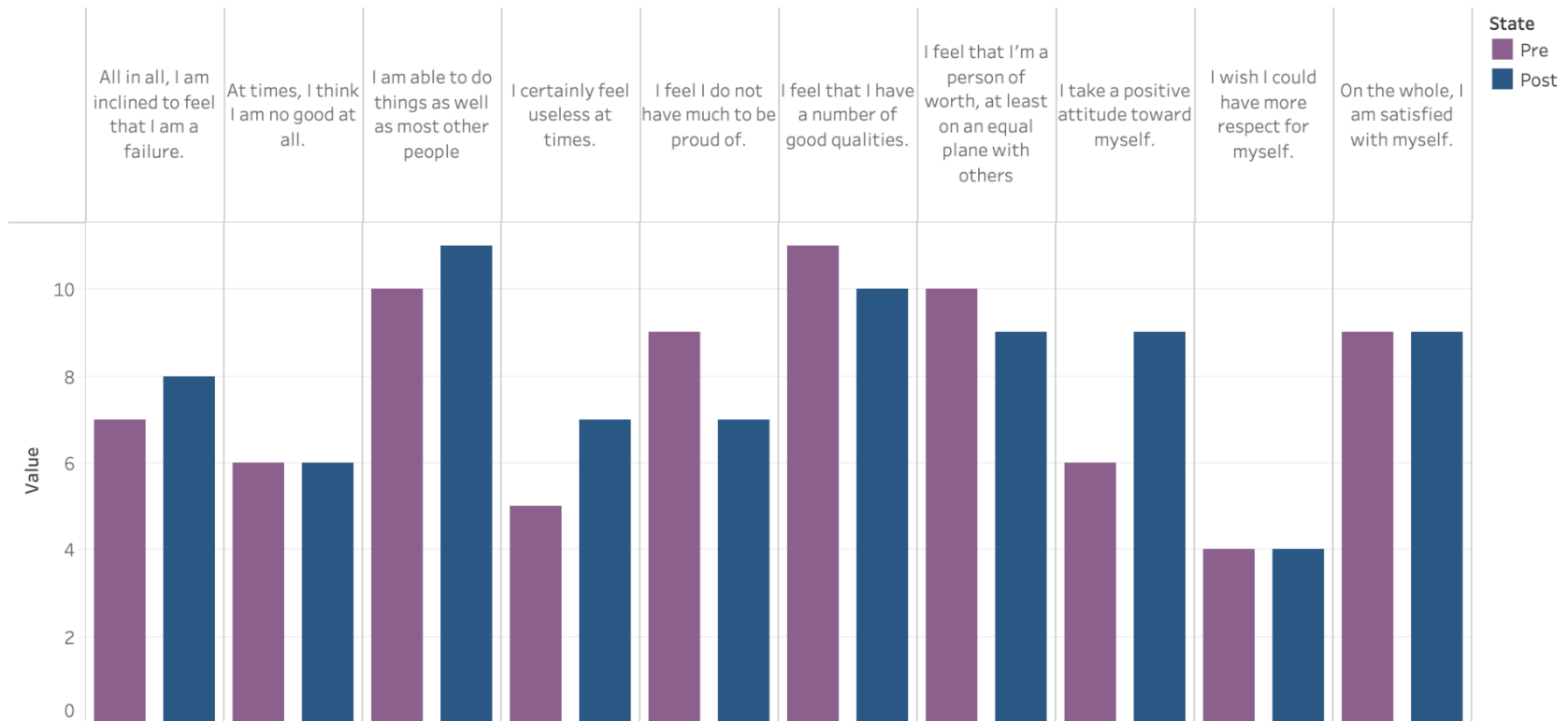


Figure 7. Chart indicating survey results of self-esteem assessment

Future Investigation

Queer Assembly is the beginning of creating a space that is a collaborative movement for LGBTQIA+ voices. The first iteration of both the event and website was hands-on and labor-intensive to create. These endeavors added a level of connection and intimacy however, it increased complexity and acted as a potential barrier to scalability. While the current site acts as a seed of expectations for those wishing to contribute, further investigation and iteration of the site would allow for a larger impact and collect a more diverse range of queer voices. For example, the site could adapt to allow others to upload their own story by allowing the participants to record, transcribe, and edit their own stories for submission, moderation, and curation. This needs to be investigated further to determine the level of complexity and risks for self-published content being appropriate and potentially curated. While this phased approach continues, *Queer Assembly* will be involved in local Pride events—such as *New Braunfels' Pride Fest*, in June 2022. A booth that will be used to promote the website, act as a meeting point for others to talk about the impact of sharing their narratives, and record stories on-site in the moment with recording equipment. By setting up a pop-up recording booth, the naturally larger event reach will be leveraged, resulting in more stories across multiple perspectives and experiences in a small amount of time.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, measured on a 4-point Likert scale from Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
2. At times, I think I am no good at all.
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I certainly feel useless at times.
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

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