

The Impact of Dylan Mulvaney in the Public Sphere on LGBTQ+ Youth Culture

Introduction

The public sphere has witnessed multiple LGBTQ+ influencers, athletes, intellectuals, and more throughout the decades. Within the past two years, a new public figure appeared: Dylan Mulvaney. Dylan Mulvaney is a transgender woman who began her spotlight in the public sphere by documenting her transgender journey through daily videos on TikTok (Wikipedia, 2022). The transgender activist has become a worldwide transgender representation by appearing in major brand campaigns, receiving many awards, and even walking at New York Fashion Week (Teen Vogue, 2023).

Mulvaney has a large youth audience and with over 10 million followers and almost half a billion likes on TikTok (Wikipedia, 2022), and she has gathered the attention of many within the public sphere who question her impact. Therefore, Mulvaney's influence on youth culture will be analyzed to find out how transgender public figures affect younger audiences. This is relevant to explore as gender identity has become a predominant and important factor to youth identity and culture. Youth culture, defined by "the cultural practice of members of this age group by which they express their identities and demonstrate their sense of belonging to a particular group of young people" (Buchmann, 2001), depend on public sphere influences, such as Mulvaney, acting as a role model for LGBTQ+ youth within youth culture participants.

Transgender Representation

LGBTQ+ representation within the public sphere allows for a connection to be built between the content creator and the viewer. Representation is important as "audiences crave the opportunity to see, connect, and interact with these influencers, because they see themselves projected on them" (Samyroad, 2023). Representation is important exposure for youth audiences to see that they are valued and accepted as part of society. Mulvaney has said that she finds her purpose to be elevating others' voices and has used her platform to offer an online safe space for transgender youth (Sanders, 2023). Mulvaney has expressed she wants media representation to focus on the transgender experience being a joyful one, rather than a painful one which is often depicted online, and that embracing the way people are is part of the joyful experience (Mcnamara, 2023). Mulvaney's representation has expanded from online digital platforms, having been in advertisements for Ultra Beauty, Nike, and Bud Light, which have received lots of criticism especially from right wing public figures (Wikipedia, 2022).

Despite the negativity, Mulvaney acts as a beacon of positivity in the public sphere, both online and offline. Her positivity and detailed documented transgender journey that is widely available to the public allows her to create a connection with her young audience and impact youth culture. Mulvaney's young transgender audience see themselves within Mulvaney and see her online journey as a form of social acceptance. Mulvaney's public presence allows youth to express their identity and feel comfortable while doing so. She also presents a realistic view for expressing identity, and sets an example for participants in youth culture. Mulvaney is very open and realistic about her transition, explaining the time and effort it takes as well as the experiences she faces that cause her to grow as a woman. In Alex MacKenzie's article about transgender experiences, MacKenzie described Mulvaney's videos as vulnerable and communal and how Mulvaney's videos speak to her audience so strongly: Mulvaney allows other transgender women to connect to femininity which appears within her videos (MacKenzie, n.d.). For her younger audience, this is valuable as it connects to a missed-out childhood

that they did not experience due to their transition, and Mulvaney allows her audience to feel as though their transgender identity doesn't have to affect their childhood or "girlhood" (MacKenzie, n.d.).

Therefore, Mulvaney acts as a comforting and relatable public figure for transgender youths and creates a positive and joyful transgender representation, both online and offline. She impacts youth culture by posing as a transgender figure youth can relate to and understand and share similar experiences. Mulvaney's participation in the public sphere by being the face of multiple advertisements allows a connection to youth culture, persuading LGBTQ+ youths to be able to freely express themselves by knowing that there are transgender figures who have the same goals and dreams as them.

Awards and Goals

Dylan Mulvaney has received multiples awards due to her influence online. The most notable award that impacts LGBTQ+ youth culture is Mulvaney's Suicide Prevention Advocate of the Year award. The award was given by The Trevor Project which is "dedicated to providing crisis services for LGBTQ+ youth" (Carter, 2023). Mulvaney's collaboration with The Trevor Project raised \$200,000 for the organization and Mulvaney said "let's [...] empower LGBTQ+ young people and create a world where no young person ever feels that hope is out of reach" (Carter, 2023). Mulvaney being honored by this award is important for LGBTQ+ youth as up to 41% of young LGBTQ+ people have considered attempting suicide and half of that is made up of transgender and nonbinary youth (Carter, 2023). Therefore, having a transgender public figure being awarded and working in collaboration with the organization, LGBTQ+ youth identity is represented and accepted and influences youth culture as they can freely express their identity within this organization.

With increasing suicides in young gay males in the USA in the second half of 2010, projects such as the Trevor Project and the It Gets Better Project provide the support LGBTQ+ young desire (Pullen, 2014, pp. 63,65). Having a comforting and a recognizable face, such as Dylan Mulvaney, for such projects are valuable in encouraging youth to reach out. LGBTQ+ youth culture depends on a sense of community which is difficult when facing discrimination, however Mulvaney uses her public image to connect LGBTQ+ young people together and uses her platform as a safe space for this youth. Mulvaney's public platforms are a center for LGBTQ+ youth culture growth and expansion and allow youth to find their community with a public figure as their role model.

Dylan Mulvaney has also won woman-of-the-year award which is humanizing and valuable for the LGBTQ+ community. Transgender public figures are not honored with awards very often and Mulvaney winning this award allows LGBTQ+ youth to realize that it is possible and achievable to be an award-winner (Vargas, 2023). Dylan Mulvaney has relatable dreams and goals that LGBTQ+ youth culture values from a public figure. Public figures are often alienized, however there is an aspect of Mulvaney that humanizes public figures as people realize she is just like everyone else. This is a comforting message for LGBTQ+ youth who may also feel alienized from other youth and allows them to feel more accepted and comfortable within youth culture.

Mulvaney's Impact

Dylan Mulvaney has had an important impact on LGBTQ+ youth culture. Due to often discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities, LGBTQ+ youth culture has been limited and contained by society as the youth faced backlash for simply expressing their identity and forming groups of people with similar ideas, values, and identities. The entrance of Dylan Mulvaney into the public sphere, whose

purpose was only to share her identity journey, had a massive impact on the youth. Mulvaney acted as an adult figure the youth could look up to and especially relate to. Mulvaney's relatability and growing relationship with her fans formed a safe cultural community space for youth to feel accepted in as well as be further educated to continue exploring their identity. This safe space allowed for connectiveness between different youth audiences that encouraged the development of LGBTQ+ youth culture and encouraged the sense of belongingness between LGBTQ+ youth. Mulvaney's impact is further developed through her connection to the Trevor Project, which plays an important role in the mental health aspect of youth culture within LGBTQ+ communities, and her winning multiple awards. Having a transgender public figure encourages youth to follow and pursue their goals while feeling accepted and valued as an LGBTQ+ member of society.

In conclusion, Dylan Mulvaney is very impactful on LGBTQ+ youth culture as she uses her platforms and public image to strengthen the growth of such culture in the public sphere. Mulvaney acts as an important and relevant role model for youth to create a sense of belonging, connectivity, and vulnerability among young people. Mulvaney displays that transgender public figures are important in guiding younger audiences into learning to accept themselves and guiding the youth onto a positive self-exploration path to better understand and accept their identity, which plays an important role in LGBTQ+ youth culture. Therefore, Dylan Mulvaney has an overwhelmingly positive effect on LGBTQ+ youth culture and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole and stimulates cultural growth among LGBTQ+ youth.

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