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To cite this article: Alice Marwick, Jacob Smith, Belle Basnight, Dahlia Boyles, Margaret Donnelly, Stephanie Kaczynski, Evan Ringel, Sarah Whitmarsh & Carolina Yabase (2024) Child-Sacrificing Drag Queens: Historical Antecedents in Disinformative Narratives Supporting the Drag Queen Story Hour Moral Panic, *Women's Studies in Communication*, 47:4, 459-479, DOI: [10.1080/07491409.2024.2396288](https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2024.2396288)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2024.2396288>



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Child-Sacrificing Drag Queens: Historical Antecedents in Disinformative Narratives Supporting the Drag Queen Story Hour Moral Panic

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses critical disinformation studies to analyze claims that LGBTQ+ communities “groom” children at “Drag Queen Story Hour” (DQSH). We identify anti-homosexual narratives in previous moral panics: the 1950s sexual psychopathy laws, Anita Bryant’s 1977 *Save Our Children* campaign, and the 1980s Satanic ritual abuse panic. Using critical discourse analysis, we find all disinformative narratives from previous moral panics present in the DQSH discourse, while new themes center transgender people and parental rights. We consider concerns over DQSH a moral panic responding to the gradual mainstreaming of gender nonconformity and increase in LGBTQ+ civil rights and social acceptance.

KEYWORDS

Disinformation; LGBTQ; transgender; drag; moral panic; Christopher Rufo

In the autumn 2022 issue of *The City Journal*, conservative activist Christopher Rufo published an unusual article titled “The Real Story Behind Drag Queen Story Hour.”¹ Rufo explained the basic tenets of queer theory, summarizing works by Gayle Rubin (“a lesbian writer and activist” immersed “in the subcultures of leather, bondage, orgies, fisting, and sadomasochism in San Francisco”), Michel Foucault (“a notorious sado-masochist”), Pat Califa, and Judith Butler. He argued that the project of queer theory is to upend the sexual hierarchy, writing, “Where does this process end? At its logical conclusion: the abolition of restrictions on the behavior at the bottom end of the moral spectrum—pedophilia.” After tracing a brief history of drag, Rufo stated that its goal “is to obliterate stable conceptions of gender through performativity and to rehabilitate the bottom of the sexual hierarchy through the elevation of the marginal.”

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2024.2396288>.

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Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) is a series of library events for children, originally launched by queer writer and activist Michelle Tea in San Francisco in 2015 in her capacity as executive director of Radar Productions. She imagined them as a non-heteronormative alternative to typical library programming that would be welcome to queer families like her own (Kaleem, 2023). The events were immediately popular; there are 27 US and six international chapters of the Drag Story Hour nonprofit, and DQSHs have taken place in all 50 US states.² To Rufo, DQSH is a strategically watered-down version of queer theory aimed at indoctrinating children into sexual contact with adults. He characterizes it as “an intellectual and political project that requires drag queens and activists to work toward undermining traditional notions of sexuality, replacing the biological family with the ideological family, and arousing transgressive sexual desires in young children.”

Rufo’s amplification of conservative frames of DQSH as “child grooming” spread rapidly. Protests took place around the country at libraries holding DQSH programming. In 2023, 14 states introduced bills to ban drag shows in public spaces. Tennessee Senate Bill 3, the first to pass, targets “adult cabaret performances” with “male or female impersonators who provide entertainment that appeals to a prurient interest” “on public property” or “in a location where the adult cabaret performance could be viewed by a person who is not an adult” (Burga, 2023; Tennessee Senate Bill 3, 2023). Given the enormous strides in LGBTQ+ civil rights and social attitudes in the United States over the last two decades, it is difficult to understate the extent or success of this moral panic.³

In this paper, we consider the DQSH child grooming myth a moral panic fueled by disinformation, defined as false, inaccurate, or misleading information spread intentionally for profit, ideology, or harm (Freelon & Wells, 2020). Using a critical disinformation studies approach (Kuo & Marwick, 2021), we position the DQSH child grooming myth as a disinformation narrative that, like many others, is successful precisely because it leverages preexisting tropes. To make this case, we identify disinformation narratives prominent during analogous moral panics—the “sexual psychopath” panic of the mid-twentieth century, Anita Bryant’s 1977 *Save Our Children* campaign, and the Satanic Panic of the 1980s. Each of these was chosen due to both its historical significance and potential thematic commonalities. Like the panic surrounding DQSH, the “sexual psychopath” panic and *Save Our Children* relied upon a fear of homosexual men assaulting young children. The Satanic Panic shares similarities insofar as drag queens are often represented as demonic and are viewed as indoctrinating children to satanic ideals. We briefly discuss the anti-DQSH campaign, then identify repeated disinformation narratives in a corpus of anti-DQSH discourse. We find that both previous and contemporary moral panics rely on disinformation about LGBTQ+ people and issues. All narratives from previous moral panics exist in the anti-DQSH campaign, while new disinformative narratives focus on nonbinary and transgender people and emphasize parental rights and ownership of children. Our research shows that anti-DQSH discourse is a moral panic primarily fueled by conservative operatives, bloggers, and pundits. This research demonstrates the effectiveness of historically grounded disinformation narratives in fueling moral panics and affecting political change and the necessity of calling them out as disinformation.

Literature Review

Moral Panics and Queer Life

Stanley Cohen defined a “moral panic” as a situation in which a “condition, episode, person, or group” emerges as a significant threat to social values (1972, p. 1). The moral panic must be disproportionate to the actual harm its subject poses, particularly “compared with other, more serious problems” (Cohen, 2002, p. vii). Moral panics often arise from perceived threats to the status quo, particularly among dominant groups who fear losing power (Davis & Kettrey, 2022; Maly, Dalmage, & Michaels, 2013). When a traditional value is perceived as endangered, moral panic narratives frequently construct the perceived threat as a “folk devil” that must be destroyed (Cohen, 1972; Tettey, 2016). In general, expressions of queer culture and identity publicly disrupt heteronormative understandings of gender as binary and synonymous with one’s sex. Therefore, to be gay is to be a moral threat to heteronormativity (Tettey, 2016). In his analysis of Ghanaian media, political scientist Wisdom Tettey found that homosexuality is often constructed as a moral panic, materialized in “an assault on the country’s future, especially its youth” (2016, p. 16).

Moral panics over queer people in the United States have a long, unfortunate history. In the 1950s, a moral panic over “sexual psychopaths” resulted in 21 states and Washington D.C. passing “sexual psychopath laws,” which targeted adult men committing “sex crimes” against children (Fejes, 2016, p. 16). These laws presumed that people who commit sex crimes are mentally ill “degenerates” with “no control over their sexual impulses” who should be committed to mental institutions (Sutherland, 1950, p. 544). In practice, “sexual psychopath” was often used as a code word for “male homosexual,” and the laws were frequently applied to private same-sex behavior among consenting adults (Fejes, 2000; Freedman, 1987; Leon, 2011). Historian Estelle Freedman summarizes: “At times it appeared that a major motive of the psychopath laws was to prevent the contagion of homosexuality from spreading from adults to youths” (1987).

Despite enormous public concern, Chrysanthi Leon argues that sexual psychopath laws were fueled by moral panics featuring “unfounded assumptions and generalizations that have led to ill-advised public policy” (2011, p. 7). Freedman similarly maintains that the sexual psychopath panic did not map to any actual increase in sex-related crime (1987, p. 84). Given the lack of basis in empirical fact, sexual psychopath laws were justified through a series of fallacies, such as the stranger fallacy (fear of sex attacks by monsters) and the bogeyman fallacy (sex offenders are inherently deviant and criminal) (Leon, 2011, pp. 23–24).

News media echoed these disinformative narratives, depicting homosexuals as “sick” and “predatory” and characterizing offenders with words like “monster,” “pervert,” and “criminal.” Such local press coverage often prompted police crackdowns on homosexuals (Fejes, 2016, p. 19). The rapid increase in state sexual psychopath laws, which in practice frequently denied defendants’ constitutional rights (Lave, 2008), illustrated how fear of sexual violence to children was used to mobilize the public against sexual minorities (Freedman, 1987, p. 94).

A similar focus on children surrounded Anita Bryant’s 1977 *Save Our Children* campaign, which sought to rescind a Miami ordinance banning discrimination against homosexuals in housing and employment. Bryant and her campaign became a national

flashpoint and served as a blueprint for conservative anti-gay activism in the 1980s and beyond (Fejes, 2016; Frank, 2013; Johnson, 2018). The campaign focused heavily on alleged harms to children from gay men. *Save Our Children's* campaign material included claims like "Metro's pro-homosexual ordinance is an open invitation to recruit our children," that homosexuals wanted the "repeal of all laws governing the age of sexual consent," and the "right to be legitimized in their perverted lifestyle so that they may influence our children to adopt homosexuality." One pamphlet featured images of local news clippings about incidents of child sexual abuse committed by gay men (Figure 1). Fred Fejes notes that the Christianity and the *Save Our Children* campaign were inextricably linked, concluding, "one has to go as far back as the campaign for Prohibition... to find a political debate so shaped by religion" (2016, p. 8). *Save Our Children* inspired anti-gay activist efforts defeating similar ballot initiatives in Cincinnati, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Lewiston, Maine. As legal scholar Anthony Niedwiecki summarizes, "They were successful because their political campaigns focused on how gays and lesbians were harmful to children, from equating homosexuality with pedophilia to claiming that schools would be required to teach about and promote homosexuality" (2013, p. 127).

The DQSH narrative also echoes elements of the Satanic Panic (1983–1990), the myth that daycare workers were abusing children in service to Satan, which led to hundreds of false allegations and arrests of innocent people (Hughes, 2017; Phillips & Milner, 2021; Polletta & Callahan, 2017), part of a larger "growing cultural anxiety about satanic menaces to children" (DeYoung, 1998, p. 260). Phillips and Milner contend that the Satanic Panic originated in a Christian fear of an evil force whose purpose is to disrupt society (2021). Sarah Hughes links this moral panic to the increased political influence of the New Right in the 1980s, arguing that the



Figure 1. 1977 "Save Our Children From Homosexuality," back cover. Pamphlet distributed by *Save Our Children* in Miami Beach, Dade County, FL (Foster, 1977).

Christian conservative movement perceived all threats to the white nuclear family as “demonic.” In the 1980s, more women entered the workforce and required child-care, threatening the ideal of a stay-at-home mother (2017, p. 707). Danger to children is a repeated topic of moral panics (Cohen, 2002), and serves as evidence that when “traditional” family values decline, horrific things can result (Polletta & Callahan, 2017, p. 10).

The connection between the Satanic Panic and DQSH exemplifies how moral panic narratives repeat across history. In their analysis of discussions of DQSH on the conservative subreddit *The_Donald*, sociologists Alyssa Davis and Heather Hensman Kettrey found that users similarly perceived DQSH as threatening the status quo (2022). Redditors attack DQSH by linking it to the decline of conservative values and recycling past moral panic narratives, including “claiming DQSH performers are Satanic pedophiles who seek to recruit, groom, and sexually abuse children” (2022, p. 34). This repetition lays the groundwork for a conspiracy theory. By alleging that the purpose of DQSH is to “recruit and indoctrinate children” into the LGBTQ+ community, which also perpetuates the myth that sexuality is a choice, conservatives position the social and civic gains made by LGBTQ+ Americans over the past few decades as an insidious plot. In these narratives, conservatives and (white) children are the victims, and drag queens stand in for the entire LGBTQ+ community, social justice warriors, and the Left as a whole (Davis & Kettrey, 2022).

We take up sociologist David Altheide’s call to extend the interdisciplinary study of moral panics power for “social control” (2009, p. 80). This project extends Davis and Kettrey’s analysis of conservative narratives around DQSH on Reddit by identifying disinformative narratives in previous moral panics and noting their presence or absence in a corpus of DQSH narratives gathered from blogs, hyperpartisan news sites, newspapers, editorials, cable news, and social media.

Disinformation as Narrative

We situate the proliferation and circulation of anti-LGBTQ+ discourse surrounding DQSH as a disinformative narrative. Disinformation is often understood as viral bytes of incorrect information infecting truthful social discourse. In contrast, we conceptualize disinformation as a set of narratives that interface with and build upon existing stories (Reddi, Kuo, & Kreiss, 2023). Reddi et al., emphasize that disinformation and propaganda often function as narratives which are collective, flow across media types and communities, and express social power inequalities. Narratives are the architecture of a story—the infrastructure through which a story is told, organized, and expressed. Brian Richardson describes a narrative as “a representation of a causally related series of events” (2000, p. 170). They can be fictional or nonfictional, and spread through gossip, entertainment media, or news. The story may be expressed differently, but the constitutive structure is consistent. For example, the story of Romeo and Juliet is told in its original theatrical context, translated into movies like the 1968 Zeffirelli film, and even adapted into *West Side Story* and *Gnomeo & Juliet*. Individual characters and plot choices vary, but the architecture and narrative structure remain the same as the substituted characters still function to tell the larger story.

Narratives are central to the formation of individual identities and political communities. Individuals make sense of themselves and their world through the stories they tell, listen to, and consider legitimate (Roberts, 2004). These narratives often reaffirm their values and understanding of self. States strategically craft political narratives, defined by McLaughlin, Velez, and Dunn as “communication messages that convey a particular understanding of sociopolitical reality” that people use to “learn about the political world” (2019, p. 157). Nonstate actors also use narrative forms of persuasion, such as Cherian George’s concept of “hate spin,” political narratives leveraged by social groups to spur their members to action, which “stitch various grievances together in a unitary narrative that resonates with in-groups and their allies” (2017, p. 161). These political narratives translate complex political concepts into simple stories that people can identify with and retell, often shoring up in-group identity against an imaginary other (Kumar, 2004). The political narratives of DQSH are a form of Reddi et al.’s “identity propaganda,” “narratives that strategically target and exploit identity-based differences in accord with preexisting power structures to maintain hegemonic social orders” (2023, p. 2201). T. J. Billard further describes “gender critical” narratives as disinformative narratives that “craft negative generalizing tropes about trans populations” (2023, p. 237). In this sense, narratives are never merely sets of facts, but stories where facts can be rearranged and potentially fabricated to serve a narrative function.

Narratives, however, are never experienced outside a larger social context. As sociologists Francesca Polletta and Nathan Redman note, most studies of narrative persuasion occur in experimental conditions and “do not capture the ways in which people consume stories in the real world” (2020, p. 7). We conceptualize disinformation as narrative intertwined with “deep stories,” the engrained stories people tell themselves to understand their emotions and cultural anxieties (Hochschild, 2016; Polletta & Callahan, 2017). The meaning of any one story relates to a larger constellation of others; Marcks and Pawelz write that disinformation campaigns require “a network of narratives in which side stories function as support for the master narrative” (2022, p. 1418). For instance, the narrative that trans girls and women unfairly usurp the athletic achievements of cisgender girls and women evokes preexisting narratives of trans youth as deviant, and gendered meritocracy in the separation of men’s and women’s sports, justifying trans-exclusionary policies (Billard, 2023). A narratological approach to disinformation does not imply that all forms of disinformation include a full narrative arc; instead, it shows how effective disinformation campaigns construct a story that people interpret to make sense of the world.

Moral panics allow individuals like Rufo to capitalize on a preexisting deep story by constructing a disinformative narrative that ties disparate events into an overarching narrative. Sociologist Howard Becker calls this role “a moral entrepreneur,” where individuals capitalize on existing moral panics to invoke themselves as moral crusaders (1963, p. 145). As Sarah Cleary writes in her analysis of the Satanic Panic, “In order to gain public support for the enforcement of [social] rules, crusaders or moral entrepreneurs appeal to various narratives of harm loaded with emotional issues such as the vulnerability of children and distill them into one dominant and, more importantly, tangible threat” (2022, p. 171). Anita Bryant, Christopher Rufo, and other pundits like Alex Jones serve as moral entrepreneurs who architect a disinformative narrative by

strategically connecting the vulnerability of children with the threat of queer and trans people. Moral entrepreneurs are effective because they can coalesce already existing fragmented moments of discourse into a connected, purposeful campaign.

This paper takes a narratological approach to disinformation to analyze moral panics over LGBTQ+ Americans. We ask:

RQ1: What anti-gay themes and tropes were furthered in previous moral panics over LGBTQ+ Americans and children, including the sexual psychopath laws, the Satanic Panic, and the *Save Our Children* campaign?

RQ2: What anti-gay themes and tropes are furthered in press coverage and social media posts about *Drag Queen Story Hour*?

RQ3: How do anti-gay themes and tropes differ between previous moral panics and the DQSH panic?

Method

This project follows a critical disinformation studies approach “grounded in history, culture, and politics” which “centers questions of power and inequality” (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). We use scholarly literature and archival material to trace three antecedents of a contemporary disinformation campaign. Critical disinformation studies is appropriate for this topic as the DQSH moral panic is strategically and politically designed to target and harm marginalized people (drag queens and transgender, genderqueer, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming individuals).⁴ We demonstrate that news coverage and legislation targeting DQSH draws on long-disproven disinformative narratives of LGBTQ+ Americans.

We selected three previous moral panics for comparative analysis: the sexual psychopath moral panic of the mid-twentieth century, the 1977 *Save Our Children* campaign, and the 1980s Satanic Panic. We relied primarily on secondary sources (see [Supplemental Online Appendix A](#)) to identify themes in the sexual psychopath moral panic and the Satanic Panic, as they have been well documented by historians and sociologists. For the *Save Our Children* campaign, in addition to secondary sources, we collected all coverage of the ordinance, Anita Bryant, and the campaign from *The Miami Herald*. We also obtained archival material from the James M. Foster papers at Cornell University and transcripts of Anita Bryant’s speeches from YouTube.

To identify anti-DQSH discourse, we conducted NexisUni (formerly LexisNexis Academic) searches from May 2017, when the first high-profile articles about DQSH were published, to December 2022. NexisUni indexes blogs, local news, cable news transcripts, and mainstream media, providing us with a broad sample of sources. The mainstream media often fuels moral panics (DeYoung, 1998), but most often through local news and talk shows rather than national news media (Victor, 1998). Researchers were assigned date ranges and conducted two searches: “drag queen” and “story hour” or “story time,” and “drag” and “library” and “grooming.” We included a result in our corpus if it contained anti-DQSH discourse, including news sources with quotes from protesters, blog posts, newspaper articles, cable news transcripts, and editorials. We excluded coverage which did not include anti-DQSH language and non-English sources,

resulting in 199 items from May 2017 to December 2022 (Table 1). We used Parler to find in situ discussions of DQSH in Proud Boys groups given that the right-wing extremist group has emerged as a primary antagonist, organizing protests around the country (Tensley & CNN, 2022b). For the privacy of users, we have removed the username for the Parler posts referenced in the analysis. Finally, we read all of Christopher Rufo’s tweets and published writing pertinent to Drag Queen Story Hour, with Rufo’s tweets serving to provide context for Rufo’s mainstream appearances.

We conducted Critical Discourse Analysis to identify common narratives across the corpus given its focus on the relationship between ideology and discourse and appropriateness for controversial social issues (Fairclough, Wodak, & Mulderrig, 2011; Heitner, Muenks, & Sherman, 2015). The unit of analysis was a text (news story, social media post, transcript, etc.). Each text was reviewed by at least two coders. In coding each text, we carefully attended to how language was used to reflect hegemonic power structures and cultural values. As coders read through the corpus, they noted larger cultural narratives supported by the texts, either explicitly or implicitly. We then compared these narratives to those identified in earlier panics.

RQ1: Narratives in previous moral panics

To identify narratives in the three historical moral panics under analysis, we drew from academic sources (see Supplemental Online Appendix A). We recorded a theme if it was mentioned in multiple sources, resulting in eight themes. We describe each narrative and provide examples from secondary literature, noting that many themes overlap.

Homosexuality spreads from adults to children. Visible in both sexual psychopaths and *Save Our Children*, this myth holds that LGBTQ+ adults can “make” young people gay through molestation or simply exposing impressionable youth to gay adults. Jenkins writes, “Although ostensibly intending to save children from generalized moral decay, [*Save Our Children’s*] approach revealed a subtext: its assumption that homosexuals would corrupt children by sexually molesting them, transforming victims into fellow perverts in the process once described as proselytizing. A slogan that apparently originated with Bryant herself asserted, ‘Homosexuals can’t reproduce, so they have to recruit.’” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 124)

Homosexuals are pedophiles. Present in both sexual psychopaths and *Save Our Children*, this myth holds that gay men are child molesters and a threat to children. As Jenkins writes, “Prevailing therapeutic orthodoxy viewed homosexuality as a form of arrested psychosexual development, one likely to be associated with an unnatural attraction toward children” (2004, p. 62).

Table 1. Number of DQSH items in the corpus by year.

Year	Sources
2017	10
2018	22
2019	44
2020	8
2021	29
2022	86

Homosexuality is a form of mental illness. This belief was widespread during the sexual psychopath panic, given that homosexuality was classified as a mental illness from 1952 to 1973 by the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. It was also present in the *Save Our Children* campaign, as Bryant believed homosexuality was a "sickness" and "perversity" (Fejes, 2016, p. 110).

Homosexuality undermines America. This theme ran through the sexual psychopath panic. As Fejes writes, "In the late 1940s and early 1950s [homosexuality] was seen as a sign of the weakness in America's national fiber, a weakness that opened the door to Communist subversion" (Fejes, 2016, p. 9). This theme was also present in *Save Our Children*, with one speaker at a rally stating "If this bill passes in Dade County in favor of the gay crowd ... it could be the end of the United States of America" (Fejes, 2016, p. 134).

Homosexuality threatens Christianity. Prominent in the *Save Our Children* campaign, this narrative claimed that homosexuality endangers Christian values. Anita Bryant said, "As a Christian mother I have a right to protect my children. I don't want to have bad role models subjecting them to an alternate lifestyle that's against God's word" (Fejes, 2016, p. 134).

Exposure to homosexuality threatens parents' rights. During the *Save Our Children* campaign, Bryant repeatedly argued that exposing her children to openly homosexual teachers was a violation of her "civil rights as a parent." As Frank explains, "Appropriating civil rights rhetoric and conflating it with the rhetoric of child protection, these anti-gay activists described their own investments in the following way: 'The civil rights of parents: to save their children from homosexual influence.'" (2013, p. 127).

Satan is a threat to children. Prominent in the Satanic Panic, this ranged from "concerns about demonic influences in heavy metal music, fantasy role-playing games, tarot cards and Ouija boards; to urban legends about mysterious satanists abducting fair-haired, blue-eyed children from shopping malls; to rumors of covert satanic cults filming child pornography; to tales about satanic child sex rings" (DeYoung, 1998, p. 260).

Satanism is a threat to American Society. Victor summarizes a primary trope of the Satanic Panic: "In this frame, Satan-worshippers are seen as being actual agents of Satan, who are trying to spread immorality of all kinds, in order to destroy the moral order of American society and hasten Satan's takeover of the world ... satanic cult crime and SRA [Satanic Ritual Abuse] in particular are simply more examples of the growing moral corruption in American society by 'evil' people, who reject God and true Christianity" (1998, p. 555).

To answer RQ1, both the sexual psychopathy and *Save our Children* panics repeated persistent anti-LGBTQ+ narratives, particularly equating homosexuality with pedophilia, the myth that older LGBTQ+ people "spread" homosexuality to younger people, framing homosexuality as a mental illness, and considering it a threat to America. The *Save the Children* campaign coincided with the emergence of the Evangelical religious right, and was one of the first activist efforts to frame LGBTQ+ sexuality as a danger to Christianity. Notably, it was also undergirded by a strong emphasis on parental rights, which, as historian Gillian Frank (2013) chronicles, also served as a foundation for campaigns against desegregation and the Equal Rights Amendment. The Satanic Panic did not focus on homosexuality—the targets of the panic were mostly female day care providers—but it too was propelled by Evangelical Christianity. Notably, all three

focused on threats to children, who served as synecdoches for the United States, endangered by Satanism and general moral decay.

We turn to Drag Queen Story Hour to examine the presence of these narratives in a contemporary LGBTQ+ moral panic.

Discourses around Drag Queen Story Hour

Media coverage of DQSH began in February 2016 and was mostly neutral or positive until May 2017. This changed after the AP Newswire, *Smithsonian* magazine and *The New York Times* published positive stories about DQSH. According to NexisUni, the day after the *Smithsonian* article was published, the first blog post criticizing DQSH referred to it directly. *Acculturated* and *The National Review* then cross-posted a critical editorial on May 30. Early articles mostly framed the events as “indoctrinating” children into liberalism and characterized them (inaccurately) as taxpayer funded. The narrative shifted in mid-October 2017 when a social media post by drag queen Xochi Mochi about participating in DQSH at the Michelle Obama Neighborhood Library in Long Beach, California went viral (Figure 2). Mainstream conservative media picked up the posts and described Mochi’s appearance as “demonic.” Photos circulated alongside commentary lambasting DQSH events, most notably from *InfoWars*’ Alex Jones. From 2017–2019, conservative blogs like *Moonbattery* published a constant stream of anti-DQSH posts, often referencing gender-affirming care, transgender people, LGBTQ+ books in school libraries, and other controversial issues. This dropped off sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, as all in-person library events were canceled, and the nation turned its focus to racial justice issues.



Figure 2. Xochi Mochi’s Facebook post (MacGuill, 2017).

While blogs continued to drive far-right discourse around DQSH and LGBTQ+ issues, conservative politicians largely avoided the topic. The backlash to North Carolina's anti-trans "bathroom bill," which passed in 2016 and resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars of lost business income and the election of a Democratic governor, potentially contributed to a dearth of legislation targeting LGBTQ+ individuals. But as right-wing discourse about DQSH continued to spread and politicians started to act, opportunistic conservative actors saw an opportunity to translate anger to legislation.

Conservative activist and author Christopher Rufo is best known for playing a role alternatively described as "fueling" (*Washington Post*; *New York Times*) or "inventing" (*New Yorker*) right-wing narratives around the insidiousness of critical race theory (CRT). Rufo became a fixture on conservative media platforms like Fox News by mid-2020, calling for government action to remove the scourge of CRT from the federal bureaucracy. Within weeks of then-U.S. President Donald Trump watching Rufo's September 2020 interview with Tucker Carlson, he issued an executive order prohibiting what he called "race or sex scapegoating" in federal diversity training. The language from that executive order spawned regulations in at least 22 U.S. states.

Despite Rufo's political successes around CRT, he saw an even greater opportunity as a moral entrepreneur in anti-LGBTQ+ narratives. In March of 2022, he characterized conservative sentiments around LGBTQ issues as "deeper and more explosive" than racial issues (*New York Times*). Though Rufo made isolated remarks around LGBTQ+ issues before March 2022, he quickly seized on the grooming narratives used by conservative bloggers and, increasingly, in mainstream conservative media like *Fox News* and *The Daily Caller*. Furthering those narratives by juxtaposing LGBTQ+-focused content with narratives about child sex abuse, Rufo called on conservatives to use the phrase "radical gender theory" when discussing DQSH, trans rights, and other LGBTQ+ issues, arguing that the use of a single, inflammatory term builds on his previous work targeting CRT by forcing liberals into a "debate [on] the specifics."⁵

RQ2: DQSH Narratives

In answer to RQ2, we identified 13 disinformative narratives in our corpus of anti-*Drag Queen Story Hour* discourse. We explain each in detail, with examples.

DQSH is "grooming" and LGBTQ+ people are "groomers." This popular disinformation narrative holds that queer people, particularly men and trans women, are predators who use DQSH to access children, "turn" them gay, and molest them. As *The Christian Newswire* writes, "LGBT child recruiters, including convicted child sex offenders, are using public libraries and public schools to normalize extreme sexual deviance to very young children to persuade them to identify as 'gay' lesbian bisexual and transgender, to lower their resistance to sexual molestation by adults and to encourage abnormal experimentation among themselves" (July 29, 2019).

DQSH causes gender confusion. This narrative suggests that exposure to drag queens might confuse children, influencing them to identify as genderfluid, nonbinary, or transgender. It is at least partially based on a 2018 debunked scientific paper which claimed that "rapid-onset gender dysphoria" is a "social contagion" in which youth pretend to be transgender to get attention, but are not actually trans (Billard, 2023).

For example, *ConWebBlog* wrote, “Gender dysphoria is a serious psychological condition. It is not genetically determined, but rather is influenced by environmental factors.... Therefore exposing young children to something like drag queen story hour can predispose them to the development of gender dysphoria and the many negative consequences that go with it” (June 20, 2019).

Gender nonconformity is a form of mental illness. This holds that gender-diverse identities are not “real” but manifestations of mental disorders. A post on Parler tagged #dragqueen #pride and #trustthescience implied that all nonbinary gender identities are a form of mental illness and that “science” proves that there are only two genders (Figure 3). Drag queens are frequently referred to in passing as mentally ill; James Howard Kunstler wrote in *Dollar Collapse*, “Instead [of traditional schooling], we have the inappropriate curricula around adult preoccupations with sex, such as the Drag Queen Story Hour, for which mentally ill men are invited to act-out impersonations of women-as-monsters” (May 8, 2022).

DQSH undermines America. Surprisingly, we found many equations of DQSH with communism and/or socialism, although the connection remains unclear. *Natural News* wrote, “Part of turning America into a communist hell-hole involves big media warping the minds of future generations, starting with kids in kindergarten and nursery school. Some parents think they are supporting gay rights by taking kids to public gay strip clubs (Drag Queen Story Hour or Disney movies at the theatre), but it’s all part of a communist plot to strip children of family values, ethics, morals and religion. This turns future generations into Democrat voters who think all that matters is the extreme liberal agenda, that includes taking cancer-inducing gender-bender drugs and getting

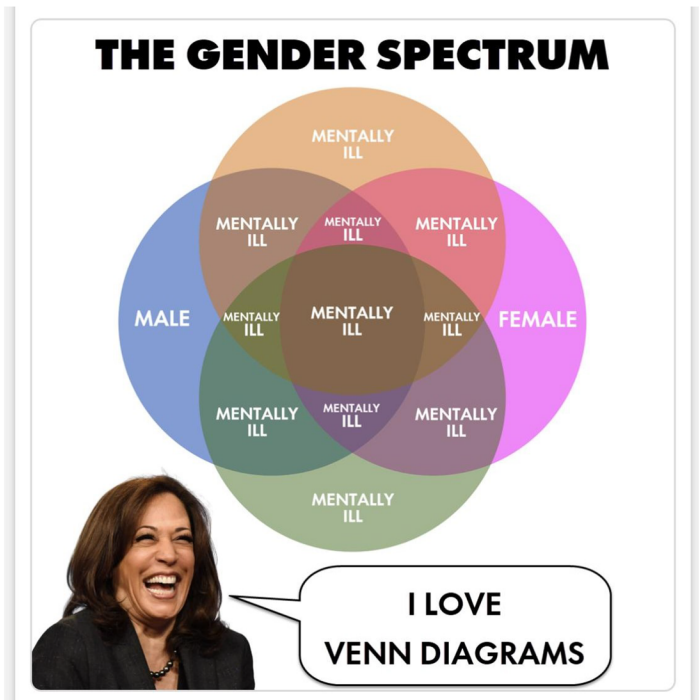


Figure 3. Meme posted on Parler February 11, 2023.

genitalia-mutilating surgery to 'switch genders' (which isn't even possible)" (December 4, 2022). This frame allows people who "fight back" against DQSH to frame themselves as "good patriots" (Wayne Dupree.com, September 11, 2019).

DQSH threatens Christianity. This narrative frames DQSH as a strategic effort by progressives to destroy Christianity. *Moonbattery* wrote, "Public libraries across the country invite men dressed in women's lingerie to read stories promoting sexual perversion to small children.... For the progressives in control, the depraved LGBT agenda is not an end itself. It is rammed down our throats 24/7 because it is a means to an end—namely, the end of Christianity" (December 8, 2022).

DQSH threatens parents' rights. This common narrative holds that DQSH infringes on parents' rights to control their children's awareness of LGBTQ+ issues, potentially threatening the nuclear heterosexual family. *The Federalist* wrote, "The point of the indoctrination, though, isn't only to create more 'gender-nonconforming' students. It's to break down family structures and parental authority. The goal isn't simply to teach and encourage transgenderism in our schools. It's to lay claim to the students themselves, over and against their parents and families, for purposes that go far beyond the promotion of gender identity. After all, you can't very well reshape society according to your utopian vision if something as solid as a family is standing in the way" (September 5, 2022).

Satan threatens children and America. While bloggers accused DQSH participant Xochi Mochi of purposefully dressing demonically, drag queens are also literally equated with Satan, as in an *Infowars* interview with science fiction author Vox Day. In answer to Alex Jones' question "What is the whole point of this coming out at our children, the LGBT movement?" Day explained, "Oh, it's all satanic pedophiles. They're pure evil. And this strips away all of the veneer. It's not about Democrats versus Republicans. It's not about liberals versus conservatives. It's not even about nationalists versus globalists. It's ultimately about Christians versus Satanists. These are the children of the devil. And that's why they want to destroy Western civilization. That's why they want to destroy Christian civilization ... these are child-sacrificing drag queens" (June 18, 2019).

Progressive parents use queer/trans children as a status symbol. This narrative holds that LGBTQ+ children will increase liberal parents' "woke" credentials, thus DQSH participation is a form of virtue signaling that harms the child. *Fox* host Jesse Watters said, "You have really dumb middle class suburban moms who are trying to score woke points and prove how hip and cool and allied they are with the LGBTQ community and they're bringing their children to these kinds of events, and they're basically serving up their kids for the sexual gratification of these people who should not be around children ... they are trying to separate your child from you, turn them into a, an activist for their movement, and really undermine our civilization, our Judeo-Christian values. That's what this is really about" (December 16, 2022).

DQSH will eliminate gender categories. This story claims that DQSH will contribute to eliminating binary gender in favor of gender diversity. The *Illinois Review* wrote, "One of the more outrageous efforts by Leftists and the homosexual community today is a program aimed at our children to embrace a multi-gender philosophy.... Men dress in full female regalia, loaded with makeup and then they read stories to little pre-school and kindergarten-age children about how being a homosexual is 'fun,' claim

that it is a way to ‘express your individuality,’ and that there is no such thing as ‘boy’ things and ‘girl’ things. ‘Children,’ they say, ‘should feel free and open to choose whichever gender they would like’” (September 12, 2018). Why this is worrisome or harmful is left unsaid.

DQSH indoctrinates children into liberalism. This narrative alleges that DQSH is a leftist strategy to brainwash children. *Right Wing News* posted, “From personal experience I would blame the extremely left-wing librarians for allowing [DQSH] to happen, with the whole point to be less about reading to children or teaching them to accept gay people (and there’s quite a difference between a run of the mill gay person and a drag queen) than it is to swallow the left wing, conservative-hating agenda” (October 20, 2017).

DQSH traumatizes children. One instantiation of this narrative frames drag as inherently sexual and often incorporates provocative videos of drag queens from drag brunches or evening performances. A TikTok video of a little girl at a drag performance appeared on *The Daily Caller* and *WayneDupree.com*, the latter writing, “How many more of these disturbing videos of children being sexualized and groomed by adult liberals do we need to see before somebody steps in and puts an end to it? The ‘Drag Queen and kids’ phenomenon needs to end. Quickly. This is child abuse. This is a sick perversion. This is grooming and it will traumatize these children” (February 28, 2020). In other cases, LGBTQ+ books or concepts are framed as psychologically damaging. *The Western Free Press* wrote, “I do not find it hard to believe that no elementary child is mature enough to handle being educated in gender fluidity. Nor can I accept that teaching children there is gender neutrality is psychologically safe” (July 22, 2018).

DQSH, gender nonconformity, and gender affirming medical care is child abuse. This much larger narrative is widely leveraged to restrict access to gender-affirming care. In an October 17, 2017 episode of *Infowars*, Alex Jones framed DQSH as a liberal trojan horse: “... if parents will put up with [DQSH], it moves the Overton window psychologically, where you’ll accept sexualization, you’ll accept vaccines, you’ll accept forced drugging.... This is a conquering by a group of brainwashed, powerless, normally mentally ill people in my view who believe they’re a part of this beautiful vanguard revolution having the tax payers pay to have their genitals cut off, and teaching children how to do it.... This is child abuse, as Camille Paglia has said.... The final frontier is your children. They’re not gonna have kids, they can’t procreate, they cut their genitals off. ... It’s all about forcing you to cut your genitals off.... This is a pervert cult run by big crazy scientists that control the whole thing.”

Drag is misogynist. We only saw a few examples of this narrative in the US, although it is widespread in the UK due to the acceptability of anti-trans narratives in British feminist circles (Billard, 2023). A Scottish feminist group told *The National*, “Drag is not for children, it is often a highly sexualized caricature of women with misogynistic undertones that many find offensive ... DQSH UK excludes lesbian and bisexual women and we don’t see the singular representation by DQSH UK of our community as representative or progressive. Pride has moved on in the last 50 years and our children should see that” (August 23, 2022).

We analyze these results in RQ3.

RQ3: How do anti-gay narratives differ from previous moral panics to the DQSH panic?

We found every narrative identified in the historical moral panics existed in anti-DQSH discourse, perhaps explaining its success. Many were tweaked to reflect changing sensibilities and current concerns. For example, *DQSH is “grooming”* combines *homosexuality spreads from adults to children* with *homosexuals are pedophiles*. It also directly repeats the *Save Our Children* claim that gay and lesbian teachers are dangerous because they must “recruit” children. *DQSH causes gender confusion* leverages contemporary language of “gender dysphoria” to reimagine *homosexuality spreads from adults to children* and *homosexuality is a form of mental illness*. This belief is rooted in strong anti-trans sentiments, as the notion of a child identifying as gender nonconforming is deemed shameful or repugnant. (No evidence suggests that exposure to LGBTQ+ ideas, books, or individuals directly leads to gender dysphoria or homosexuality.) *Gender nonconformity is a form of mental illness* similarly focuses on trans and gender-diverse identities, since homosexuality is no longer considered pathological.

DQSH undermines America is remarkably like *homosexuality undermines America*. Both claims equate queerness with communism or socialism. This makes slightly more sense in the Cold War context of the 1950s; its emergence here probably relates to the widespread acceptance of socialism among Gen Z, who also identify as LGBTQ+ far more than previous generations (Jones, 2022; Saad, 2019). Similarly, *DQSH threatens Christianity* is a direct retread of *homosexuality threatens Christianity*, since both position queer identities as an affront to Christian religious mores. *Satan is a threat to children and America* repeats Satanic Panic narratives that draw on Evangelical Christian beliefs of a corporeal Satan, indicating the mainstreaming of Evangelical discourse in American politics since the 1970s.

The historical antecedent of *DQSH threatens parents’ rights* is *exposure to homosexuality threatens parents’ rights*, which existed in the *Save Our Children* campaign but is a major theme throughout anti-DQSH discourse. This narrative implies that children belong to their parents, who should decide what ideas they encounter. Historically, parents’ rights have been used to argue against civil rights reforms and school integration, and currently support anti-CRT discourse and pushback against school COVID-19 protections (Clark, 2022; Frank, 2013). This narrative also justifies policies that ban LGBTQ+ books from school libraries, require parental permission for students to use pronouns or names other than those assigned at birth, or allow youth to access gender-affirming medical care (Mayo, 2021). Since 2022, 147 parents’ rights bills have been introduced in state legislatures; while they vary in scope, they overwhelmingly focus on racial justice and LGBTQ+ issues (Cahn, Ziegler, & Eichner, 2023). (The famous “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida is titled “the Parental Rights in Education Act.”)

We also identified six new disinformative narratives. Two (*DQSH traumatizes children* and *DQSH, gender nonconformity, and gender affirming medical care is child abuse*) use contemporary language around “trauma” and “abuse” to justify violent backlash against DQSH and LGBTQ+ identities. “Abuse” and “trauma” function as floating signifiers, enabling readers to “fill in the blank” with what constitutes abuse, from reading a book with LGBTQ+ characters to questioning one’s gender assigned at birth. The backlash against gender-affirming medical care goes far beyond DQSH, prompting

an array of statewide bans. For example, Oklahoma's SB129 would make "gender transition procedures" for "children" under 26 a felony, while Wyoming SF0111 criminalizes any gender transition "procedure or drug" because it is child abuse. Such drastic bans are only justifiable if gender-affirming care is reframed as abusive and harmful. Similarly, *DQSH will eliminate gender categories* is only worrisome if one believes that diverting from binary gender is harmful in some way.

Progressive parents use queer/trans children as a status symbol and *DQSH indoctrinates children into liberalism* circumvents the argument that progressive parents should have the right to take their kids to DQSH. Throughout the corpus, liberals and progressives are depicted as anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-family, and even satanic. If progressive parents participating in DQSH are abusing their own children and more concerned with "woke credentials" than their kids' well-being, conservatives fighting DQSH are protecting children from their clueless or malicious parents.

Finally, *drag is misogynist* was relatively uncommon in our US-focused dataset as it draws from feminist language and ideas generally absent from US conservatism, and US feminists overwhelmingly support LGBTQ+ rights. However, anti-trans narratives are acceptable in mainstream UK feminist discourse, and "trans-exclusive radical feminists" like J. K. Rowling have massive followings. Thus, our examples came primarily from UK news sources.

In answer to RQ3, anti-DQSH narratives activate older mythologies about LGBTQ+ Americans that have circulated for at least 80 years. These include very damaging accusations of child abuse and mental illness. We were surprised by the consistency across the four panics, particularly in framing homosexuality as communist and threatening America. The fact that demonstrably false, age-old disinformation about LGBTQ+ people still holds deep narrative power shows the persistence of hatred and fear of minoritized gender and sexual identities. The new narratives in anti-DQSH discourse primarily concern the rise of gender diversity and the decline of binary gender norms. The coherence of these disinformative narratives across time, however, show that they contribute to a climate in which all LGBTQ+ identities are threatened.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that anti-LGBTQ+ disinformation repeatedly circulates during moral panics in which gender and sexual minorities become scapegoats for imagined crimes against children. The concerns voiced during *Save our Children* that LGBTQ+ teachers would cause an epidemic of child abuse did not come to pass. The sexual psychopath panic was based on scant evidence and justified criminalizing consensual sexual behavior among adults. The Satanic Panic is considered a blotch on modern American history, as hundreds of innocent people were accused of horrific, sensational crimes without evidence, often resulting in incarceration.

For something to be classified as a moral panic, there must be widespread fear and social concern over a group of evildoers that is out of proportion to their purported harm. There have been no documented cases of a child molested due to a DQSH event. It is, of course, possible that DQSH increases acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, but whether that is troubling depends on your point of view. Statistically, support for

LGBTQ+ people has increased in the last 25 years, but public opinion about trans people is less stable. Although trans people are some of the most marginalized people in society, they are repeatedly blamed for a host of social ills, from child abuse to misogyny to upsetting the gendered division of sport. Drag queens become “folk devils,” responsible for the “very social strains and concerns that fomented the moral panic in the first place” (DeYoung 1998, p. 268).

Moral panics like DQSH create moments where multiple narratives converge; conspiracy theories, targeted disinformation campaigns, and deep stories merge into a collective narrative structure. The convergence of historical narratives from previous anti-LGBTQ campaigns, Evangelical fears of Satan and emphasis on parental rights, and worries over the increased visibility of gender-diverse young people produced a potent brew. Most Americans who do not know any trans people or drag queens primarily learn about them from the media. As Fejes writes, “If ... the movement for gay rights foundered on the public meanings—the images, words, and stories that the ‘typical’ heterosexual had of homosexuals and that constituted a ‘common sense knowledge’ of homosexuality—one would have to ask: what were these meanings? Where did they come from? Who created them?” (2016, p. 6). By creating an alternate body of knowledge about drag queens, trans folks, and LGBTQ+ issues in general, the sources discussed in this paper create a disinformative, yet coherent, picture that justifies hate.

Conclusion

In 2022, queer theorist Judith Butler spoke to CNN about anti-LGBTQ legislation. “Right-wing movements appeal to an enormous anxiety people have that their worlds are falling apart and that gender and critical race theory have this enormously destructive power,” they said. “There is a lot that is very wrong and very terrifying about our world. But to focus that anxiety on gender and critical race theory without even knowing what these are is both a deflection and a way of inflaming prejudices against queer people and Black and brown people” (Tensley & CNN, 2022a). Christopher Rufo, the architect of the anti-CRT movement and amplifier of the DQSH panic, represents a fear-driven response to social change which recognizes the diverse needs of Americans in a multiracial, pluralist democracy.

Rufo represents a “moral entrepreneur,” capitalizing on a moral panic for his own self-interest (Becker, 1963, p. 145). He amplified and intellectualized disinformation narratives circulating through blogs, social media, and hyperpartisan outlets since 2017. These narratives were clearly a response to greater social acceptance of gender diversity, particularly transgender people. By no means did Rufo invent the moral panic surrounding DQSH, but instead coalesced an already existing discourse into a larger, unified narrative, connecting drag queens and queer theory to broader fears of child abuse and social degeneration. By focusing on threats to children, Rufo and his ilk were able to demonize drag queens to reinforce conservative gender norms. Rufo’s proven role in perpetuating anti-CRT legislation also shows how disinformation narratives contribute to legislation targeting DQSH and LGBTQ+ issues. We see this in the array of anti-drag bills proposed round the country, bans on gender-affirming

health care, and attempts to remove LGBTQ+ related books from libraries. These measures aggressively reassert heteronormativity and strict gender binaries, and cause material harm to LGBTQ+ people, their families, and loved ones. In the worst cases, they result in violent acts, from threats against Target employees selling pride merchandise to mass shootings.

The Club Q shooting in Colorado Springs occurred less than a month after Christopher Rufo appeared on Tucker Carlson, repeating the claims from his *City Journal* article: “[The founders of DQSH] want to sexualize children, they want to subvert the middle class family, and they want to basically eliminate what they call the hierarchy in favor of creating a connection between adult and child, which has of course long been the kind of final taboo of the sexual revolution.” The call to protect children underlies every one of the anti-gay efforts listed in the previous paragraph, although, of course, the concerns of queer children or families are absent. By reframing queer adults as potential “groomers,” the DQSH moral panic justifies bigoted and authoritarian legislation, attempting to instate rigid adherence to gender norms completely at odds with the reality of modern life. We call for politicians, scholars, citizens, and corporations to identify this as a moral panic; to call out anti-trans and anti-gay rhetoric as disinformation, and to reaffirm and increase their commitment to LGBTQ+ civil rights.

Notes

1. *The City Journal* is a magazine and website run by conservative thinktank the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.
2. When researching the number of states in which DQSHs were held, we found that protests against DQSH also took place in every state.
3. We use LGBTQ+ throughout to reflect modern terminology and gender diversity, encapsulating transgender, genderqueer, nonbinary, and other gender identities. Older moral panics primarily used terms like “homosexuality” and focused on gay men and (to a lesser extent) lesbians.
4. “Drag queen” generally refers to a cisgender homosexual man or transgender woman performing femininity, but drag is a diverse art and includes people of all genders and sexualities.
5. <https://twitter.com/realchrisrufo/status/1554605480374374402>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Center for Information, Technology, & Public Life at the University of North Carolina and their philanthropic funders.

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