



# Queer

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**Queer** is often used as an umbrella term for people who are non-heterosexual or non-cisgender.<sup>[1][2]</sup> It is alternately used to refer to all people who reject sexual and gender norms and share radical politics characterized by solidarity across lines of identity.<sup>[3][4][5][6][7][8]</sup> Queer is also a self-identity term for many people (similar to but distinct from gay, lesbian, and bisexual), characterized by rejection or disruption of binary categories of sexual orientation and gender.<sup>[9][10][6][11]</sup>

Originally meaning 'strange' or 'peculiar', *queer* came to be used pejoratively against LGBTQ people in the late 19th century. From the late 1980s, queer activists began to reclaim the word as a neutral or positive self-description.<sup>[4][12][13]</sup>

In the 21st century, *queer* became increasingly used to describe a broad spectrum of non-heteronormative sexual or gender identities and politics.<sup>[3]</sup> Academic disciplines such as queer theory and queer studies have emerged to examine a wide variety of issues, either informed by this type of perspective, or to examine the lives of LGBTQ people. These share a general opposition to binarism, normativity, and a perceived lack of intersectionality, some of them connected only tangentially to the LGBTQ movement. Queer arts, queer cultural groups, and queer political groups are examples of modern expressions of queer identities.

Critics include LGBTQ community members who associate the term more with its colloquial, derogatory usage;<sup>[14]</sup> those who wish to dissociate themselves from queer radicalism;<sup>[15]</sup> and those who see it as too amorphous or trendy.<sup>[16]</sup> Supporters of the term include those who use it to contrast with a more assimilationist part of the gay rights movement, and to signify greater willingness to defy societal norms in pursuit of gender and sexual identity liberation. They may associate it with the advancement of radical perspectives that were also present within past gay liberation movements, such as anti-consumerism or anti-imperialism, or with events such as the Stonewall rebellion.<sup>[17][12]</sup>

*Queer* is sometimes expanded to include any non-normative sexuality expression, including cisgender queer heterosexuality, although some LGBTQ people view this use of the term as appropriation.<sup>[18]</sup> Some non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender individuals self-describe themselves as *queer* for the relative ambiguity and rejection of explicit categorization this provides compared to labels such as lesbian and gay.<sup>[19][20]</sup> PFLAG states that as such a personal identity, *queer* is "valued by some for its defiance, by some because it can be inclusive of the entire community, and by others who find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities."<sup>[21]</sup> Recent studies have found that 5–20% of non-heterosexuals and 21–36% of trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people identify as queer.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Origins and early use

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Entering the English language in the 16th century, *queer* originally meant 'strange', 'odd', 'peculiar', or 'eccentric'. It might refer to something suspicious or "not quite right", or to a person with mild derangement or who exhibits socially inappropriate behaviour.<sup>[3][1]</sup> The Northern English expression "there's nowt so queer as folk", meaning "there is nothing as strange as people", employs this

meaning.<sup>[23]</sup> Related meanings of *queer* include a feeling of unwellness or something that is questionable or suspicious.<sup>[3][1]</sup> In the 1922 comic monologue "My Word, You Do Look Queer", the word is taken to mean "unwell".<sup>[24]</sup> The expression "in Queer street" is used in the United Kingdom for someone in financial trouble. Over time, *queer* acquired a number of meanings related to sexuality and gender, from narrowly meaning "gay or lesbian"<sup>[25]</sup> to referring to those who are "not heterosexual" to referring to those who are either not heterosexual or not cisgender (those who are LGBTQ+).<sup>[25][26]</sup> The term is still widely used in Hiberno-English with its original meaning as well as to provide adverbial emphasis (very, extremely).<sup>[27]</sup>

## Early pejorative use

By the late 19th century, *queer* was beginning to gain a connotation of sexual deviance, used to refer to feminine men or men who were thought to have engaged in same-sex relationships. An early recorded usage of the word in this sense was in an 1894 letter by John Douglas, 9th Marquess of Queensberry, as read aloud at the trial of Oscar Wilde.<sup>[28][29]</sup>

*Queer* was used in mainstream society by the early 20th century, along with *fairy* and *faggot*, as a pejorative term to refer to men who were perceived as flamboyant. This was, as historian George Chauncey notes, "the predominant image of *all* queers within the straight mind".<sup>[30]</sup>

Starting in the underground gay bar scene in the 1950s,<sup>[31]</sup> then moving more into the open in the 1960s and 1970s, the homophile identity was gradually displaced by a more radicalized gay identity. At that time *gay* was generally an umbrella term including lesbians, as well as gay-identified bisexuals and transsexuals; gender nonconformity, which had always been an indicator of gayness,<sup>[31]</sup> also became more open during this time. During the endonymic shifts from *invert* to *homophile* to *gay*, *queer* was usually pejoratively applied to men who were believed to engage in receptive or passive anal or oral sex with other men<sup>[32]</sup> as well as those who exhibited non-normative gender expressions.<sup>[33]</sup>

## Early 20th-century queer identity

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, *queer*, *fairy*, *trade*, and *gay* signified distinct social categories within the gay male subculture. In his book *Gay New York*, Chauncey noted that *queer* was used as a within-community identity term by men who were stereotypically masculine.<sup>[34]</sup> Many queer-identified men at the time were, according to Chauncey, "repelled by the style of the *fairy* and his loss of manly status, and almost all were careful to distinguish themselves from such men", especially because the dominant straight culture did not acknowledge such distinctions. *Trade* referred to straight men who would engage in same-sex activity; Chauncey describes trade as "the 'normal men' [queers] claimed to be."<sup>[30]</sup>



Drag Ball in Webster Hall, c. 1920s. Many queer-identifying men distanced themselves from the "flagrant" public image of gay men as effeminate "fairies".<sup>[30]:16,298</sup>

In contrast to the terms used within the subculture, medical practitioners and police officers tended to use medicalized or pathological terms like "invert", "pervert", "degenerate", and "homosexual".<sup>[30]</sup>

None of the terms, whether inside or outside of the subculture, equated to the general concept of a homosexual identity, which emerged only with the ascension of a binary (heterosexual/homosexual) understanding of sexual orientation in the 1930s and 1940s. As this binary became embedded into the social fabric, *queer* began to decline as an acceptable identity in the subculture.<sup>[30]</sup>

Similar to the earlier use of *queer*, *gay* was adopted by many U.S. assimilationist men in the mid-20th century as a means of asserting their normative status and rejecting any associations with effeminacy. The idea that *queer* was a pejorative term became more prevalent among younger gay men following World War II. As the gay identity became more widely adopted in the community, some men who preferred to identify as *gay* began chastising older men who still referred to themselves as *queer* by the late 1940s:

In calling themselves gay, a new generation of men insisted on the right to name themselves, to claim their status as men, and to reject the "effeminate" styles of the older generation. [...] Younger men found it easier to forget the origins of gay in the campy banter of the very queens whom they wished to reject.<sup>[30]:19-20</sup>

In other parts of the world, particularly England, *queer* continued to be the dominant term used by the community well into the mid-twentieth century, as noted by historical sociologist Jeffrey Weeks:

By the 1950s and 1960s to say "I am queer" was to tell of who and what you were, and how you positioned yourself in relation to the dominant, "normal" society. ... It signaled the general perception of same-sex desire as something eccentric, strange, abnormal, and perverse.<sup>[35]</sup>

## Reclamation

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### General

Beginning in the 1980s, the label *queer* began to be reclaimed from its pejorative use as a neutral or positive self-identifier by LGBTQ people.<sup>[3]</sup> An early example of this usage was by an LGBTQ organisation called Queer Nation, which was formed in March 1990 and circulated an anonymous flier at the New York Gay Pride Parade in June 1990 titled "Queers Read This".<sup>[4]</sup> The flier included a passage explaining their adoption of the label *queer*:

Ah, do we really have to use that word? It's trouble. Every gay person has his or her own take on it. For some it means strange and eccentric and kind of mysterious [...] And for others "queer" conjures up those awful memories of adolescent suffering [...] Well, yes, "gay" is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the



Queer resistance banner at a march

morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer. [...] It's a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy. Yeah, queer can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him.<sup>[4]</sup>



The Taiwan Gender Queer Rights Advocacy Alliance (TGQRAA) held a march in Kaohsiung City in 2015

Queer people, particularly queer Black and Brown people, also began to reclaim *queer* in response to a perceived shift in the gay community toward liberal conservatism, catalyzed by Andrew Sullivan's 1989 piece in *The New Republic*, titled *Here Comes the Groom: The Conservative Case for Gay Marriage*.<sup>[17]</sup> By identifying themselves as *queer* rather than *gay*, LGBTQ activists sought to reject causes they viewed as assimilationist, such as marriage, military inclusion and adoption.<sup>[12]</sup> This radical stance, including the rejection of U.S. imperialism,<sup>[12]</sup> continued the tradition of earlier lesbian and gay anti-war activism, and solidarity with a variety of leftist movements, as seen in the positions taken at the first two National Marches on Washington in 1979 and 1987, the radical direct action of groups like ACT UP, and the historical importance of events like the Stonewall riots. The radical queer groups following in this tradition of LGBTQ activism contrasted firmly with "the holy trinity of marriage, military service and adoption [which had] become the central preoccupation of a gay movement centered more on obtaining straight privilege than challenging power."<sup>[12]</sup> Commentators such as Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore have argued that it was exactly these "revolting queers" (who were now being pushed aside) who had made it safe for the assimilationists to now have the option of assimilation.<sup>[12]</sup>

This radical political stance has remained embedded in the reclaimed use of the word *queer*. Ever since the early 1990s, *queer* has been used as both an umbrella term and as a distinct self-identity term by people for whom no other label better describes their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.<sup>[6][9][36][5]</sup>

As an umbrella term, *queer* is often used to describe all people who are non-heterosexual and non-cisgender,<sup>[1][2]</sup> but it is alternately used to describe all people who defy or deviate from sexual and gender norms and share radical anti-assimilationist politics.<sup>[5][9][6][37]</sup> For many people, the word *queer* is a political identity—one that is characterized by solidarity across sexual, gender, racial, class, and disabled identity lines.<sup>[7][8]</sup> The Trans Language Primer notes:

While it has gained relatively wide usage in the present, there are still many that maintain that in order to be queer, one must be invested in liberation beyond respectability and assimilation. "We're here! We're queer! Get over it!" and "Not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you," are popular in the queer community precisely because they capture this spirit of radical liberation.<sup>[38]</sup>

As a distinct self-identity term, *queer* is defined by a rejection and disruption of binary categories, particularly man/woman and gay/straight,<sup>[9][10]</sup> and for many people it is an intentionally politicized identity that exists in opposition to identities such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual.<sup>[6][11]</sup> Recent studies have found that 5–20% of non-heterosexuals identify as queer.<sup>[22]</sup> Trans and nonbinary people are more likely to identify as queer than cisgender people, with recent studies finding that 21–36% of trans, nonbinary,

and gender nonconforming people identify as queer.<sup>[22][9][39][40]</sup> As a self-identity label, *queer* can encompass sexuality and/or gender;<sup>[36][38]</sup> in a 2025 international survey of more than 40,000 nonbinary people, more than half reported that they use the word *queer* as a self-identity term in relation to gender.<sup>[41]</sup>

## Other usage

The term may be capitalized when referring to an identity or community, in a construction similar to the capitalized use of Deaf.<sup>[42]</sup> The 'Q' in extended versions of the LGBTQ acronym, such as *LGBTQIA+*,<sup>[43]</sup> is most often considered an abbreviation of queer. It can also stand for questioning.<sup>[44][21]</sup>

## Reactions

Reclamation and use of the term *queer* is controversial; several people and organizations, both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ, object to some or all uses of the word for various reasons.<sup>[45]</sup> Some LGBTQ people dislike the use of *queer* as an umbrella term because they associate it with political and social radicalism. Sociologist Joshua Gamson argues that the controversy about the word also marks a social and political divide in the LGBTQ community between those (including civil-rights activists) who perceive themselves as "normal" and who wish to be seen as ordinary members of society and those who see themselves as separate, confrontational or not part of the ordinary social order.<sup>[15]</sup> Other LGBTQ people disapprove of reclaiming or using *queer* because they consider it offensive, in part due to its continued use as a pejorative.<sup>[14]</sup> Some LGBTQ people avoid *queer* because they perceive it as faddish slang or as academic jargon.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Scope

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### Intersex and queer identities

Scholars and activists have proposed different ways in which queer identities apply or do not apply to intersex people. Sociologist Morgan Holmes and bioethicists Morgan Carpenter and Katrina Karkazis have documenting a heteronormativity in medical rationales for the surgical normalization of infants and children born with atypical sex development, and Holmes and Carpenter have described intersex bodies as *queer bodies*.<sup>[46][47][48][49]</sup> In "What Can Queer Theory Do for Intersex?" Iain Morland contrasts queer "hedonic activism" with an experience of insensate post-surgical intersex bodies to claim that "queerness is characterized by the sensory interrelation of pleasure and shame".<sup>[50]</sup>

Emi Koyama describes a move away from a queer identity model within the intersex movement:

Such tactic [of reclaiming labels] was obviously influenced by queer identity politics of the 1980s and 90s that were embodied by such groups as Queer Nation and Lesbian Avengers. But unfortunately, intersex activists quickly discovered that the intersex movement could not succeed under this model. For one thing, there were far fewer intersex people compared to the large and visible presence of LGBTQ people in most urban centers. For another, activists soon realized that most intersex individuals were not interested in building intersex communities or culture; what they sought were professional psychological support to live

ordinary lives as ordinary men and women and not the adoption of new, misleading identity. ... To make it worse, the word "intersex" began to attract individuals who are not necessarily intersex, but feel that they might be, because they are queer or trans. ... Fortunately, the intersex movement did not rely solely on queer identity model for its strategies.<sup>[51]</sup>

## Queer heterosexuality

*Queer* is sometimes expanded to include any non-normative sexuality,<sup>[52]</sup> including (cisgender) "queer heterosexuality". This has been criticized by some LGBTQ people, who argue that *queer* can only be reclaimed by those it has been used to oppress: "A straight person identifying as queer can feel like choosing to appropriate the good bits, the cultural and political cachet, the clothes and the sound of gay culture, without ... the internalized homophobia of lived gay experience."<sup>[53]</sup> Many queer people believe that "you don't have to identify as queer if you're on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, but you do have to be on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum to identify as queer."<sup>[18]</sup>

## Academia

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In academia, the term *queer* (and the related verb *queering*) broadly indicate the study of literature, discourse, academic fields, and other social and cultural areas from a non-heterosexual or non-cisgender viewpoint. Though the fields of queer studies and queer theory are broad, such studies often focus on LGBTQ+ lives, and may involve challenging the assumption that being heterosexual and cisgender are the default or "normal". Queer theory, in particular, may embrace ambiguities and fluidity in traditionally "stable" categories such as *gay* or *straight*.<sup>[54][55]</sup>

Queer studies is the study of issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity, usually focusing on LGBTQ people and cultures. Originally centered on LGBTQ history and literary theory, the field has expanded to include the academic study of issues raised in biology, sociology, anthropology, history of science, philosophy, psychology, sexology, political science, ethics, and other fields by an examination of the identity, lives, history, and perception of queer people. Organizations such as the Irish Queer Archive attempt to collect and preserve history related to queer studies.

Queer theory is a field of post-structuralist critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer studies and women's studies. Applications of queer theory include queer theology and queer pedagogy. Philosopher Judith Butler has described queer theory as a site of "collective contestation", referring to its commitment to challenging easy categories and definitions.<sup>[56]</sup> Critics of queer theory argue that this refusal of straightforward categories can make the discipline overly abstract or detached from reality.<sup>[57]</sup>

Queer theorists such as Rod Ferguson, Jasbir Puar, Lisa Duggan, and Chong-suk Han have critiqued the mainstream gay political movement as allied with neoliberal and imperialistic agendas, including gay tourism, gay and trans military inclusion, and state- and church-sanctioned marriages for monogamous gay couples. Puar, a queer theorist of color, specifically coined the term homonationalism to refer to the perceived rise of American exceptionalism, nationalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy within the gay community, catalyzed in response to the September 11 attacks.<sup>[58]</sup>

In their research on the queer movements of [Indonesia](#) and [Malaysia](#), scholars Jón Ingvar Kjaran and Mohammad Naeimi have said that the "localization of modern queer identity", rooted in local interpretations of queer theory and "Muslim modernism", has helped queer Indonesians and Malaysians to "promote their self-construction and organize a collective mobilization for their rights". They contrast this with the rhetoric of those conservative Muslim homophobes who portray "gay" or "LGBTQ" identities as a form of Western imperialism, as well as the "Eurocentric discourse", homonationalism and homonormativity of "LGBTQ politics" in the global north.<sup>[59]</sup>

## Culture and politics

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Several LGBTQ social movements around the world use the identifier *queer*, such as the [Queer Cyprus Association](#) in Cyprus and the [Queer Youth Network](#) in the UK. In India, pride parades include [Queer Azaadi Mumbai](#) and the [Delhi Queer Pride Parade](#). The use of *queer* and *Q* is also widespread in Australia, including national counselling and support service Qlife<sup>[60]</sup> and [QNews](#).

Other social movements exist as offshoots of queer culture or combinations of queer identity with other views.<sup>[59][61][62]</sup> Adherents of [queer nationalism](#) support the notion that the LGBTQ community forms a distinct people due to their unique culture and customs. [Queercore](#) (originally *homocore*) is a cultural and social movement that began in the mid-1980s as an offshoot of [punk](#) expressed in a do-it-yourself style through zines, music, writing, art and film.<sup>[63][64]</sup>

The term [queer migration](#) is used to describe the movement of LGBTQ people around the world often to escape discrimination or ill treatment due to their orientation or gender expression. Organizations such as the [Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees](#) and [Rainbow Railroad](#) attempt to assist individuals in such relocations.<sup>[65]</sup>

## Flags

A pride flag for the queer community was created in 2015, though it is not widely known.<sup>[66]</sup> Its colors include blue and pink for [attraction to the same gender](#), orange and green for [non-binary](#) people, and black and white for [agender](#), [asexual](#), and [aromantic](#) people.



Queer pride flag

## Art

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The label *queer* is often applied to art movements, particularly cinema.

New queer cinema was a movement in queer-themed independent filmmaking in the early 1990s. Modern queer film festivals include the [Melbourne Queer Film Festival](#) and [Mardi Gras Film Festival](#) (run by Queer Screen) in Australia, the [Mumbai Queer Film Festival](#) in India, the [Asian Queer Film Festival](#) in Japan, and [Queersicht](#) in Switzerland. Chinese film director Cui Zi'en titled his 2008 documentary about homosexuality in China [Queer China](#), which premiered at the 2009 Beijing Queer Film Festival after previous attempts to hold a queer film festival were shut down by the government.<sup>[67]</sup>

Multidisciplinary queer arts festivals include the [Outburst Queer Arts Festival](#) in Northern Ireland,<sup>[68]</sup> the [Queer Arts Festival](#) in Canada,<sup>[69]</sup> and the [National Queer Arts Festival](#) in the US.<sup>[70]</sup>

Television shows that use *queer* in their titles include the UK series *Queer as Folk*<sup>[71]</sup> and its American-Canadian remake of the same name, *Queer Eye*,<sup>[72]</sup> and the cartoon *Queer Duck*.<sup>[73]</sup>

## See also

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- [Gay Shame](#) – Radical queer collective and movement
- [Heterosexism](#) – System of bias and prejudice in favor of heterosexuality
- [Homophobia](#) – Negative attitudes towards homosexual people
- [Queers \(TV series\)](#)
- [Sexual minority](#) – Individuals with a minority sexual orientation or gender identity
- [Sexuality and gender identity–based cultures](#)
- [Queerplatonic relationship](#) – Non-romantic intimate partnerships

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- [The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society](http://www.glbthistory.org) (<http://www.glbthistory.org>)

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