QUEERING ONLINE SPACES: LGBT+ PERFORMANCES MOTIVATE SOCIAL MEDIA DESIGN

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite political advances, LGBT+ experiences on social media are affected by a history of marginalization. LGBT+ people adjust the presentation of their gender and sexual identities in response to social pressures, but their level of visibility differs between social media. We interviewed seventeen LGBT+ students at a socially-conservative university to investigate: (1) how do social media affect LGBT+ user experience of managing self presentation; and (2) how do social media affect participation in LGBT+ communities?

We found that LGBT+ users prefer to present their identities through sharing photos and political articles. LGBT+ users benefit from impersonal communities on reddit and more personal bonds on Tumblr. LGBT+ users rely on the *perceived difficulty-of-use* of a social network to an intolerant audience to gauge how visible they can be.

We develop implications for design that motivate *queer* social media, which give people abilities to define their visibility on social media, in contrast with the HCI design principle of indiscriminate 'making visible'.

DEDICATION

To Lady Gaga and every queer soul out there.

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NOMENCLATURE

LGBT+	Umbrella term for people with non-normative genders and sexualities
Queer	Post-essentialist identity
Cisgender	non-transgender
Transgender	gender does not match assigned gender
Asexual	rarely if ever experiences sexual attraction

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND WORK

1.1 Introduction

As LGBT+ people manage the presentation of their identities on social media, their performances are effected by a history of marginalization. We view their experiences as an opportunity to investigate self-presentation from a political and social perspective on marginalization. We conducted an ethnographic investigation of how LGBT+ students use social media. We discovered how their performances subvert site policies. We take an interdisciplinary approach to framing this research.

Eminent sociologist, Goffman, describes everyday self-presentation as performance with an audience. Different audiences demand different performances. Doctors, for example, wear white robes to signify the hospital's sanitation and so that patients treat them as a health authority [13]. In social situations, people adjust their self-presentation for their audience. Goffman calls this *impression management*.

We connect queer theory and sociology. To *queer*, as articulated by Jagose, is to criticize and "dramatize" [21] *heteronormative assumptions*, i.e., those made on gender, sexuality, and assigned gender[31]. Through our ethnographic investigation, we discovered how participants queered the design and policies of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, when they performed their LGBT+ (and other, intersecting) identities on social media.

LGBT+ people remain a set of marginalized groups despite winning marriage equality rights. Access to correctly-gendered bathrooms, legal protections in the workplace, and education on sexual health are unavailable in most states in the U.S. Young LGBT+ people face drastically higher rates and higher severity of suicide compared to straight peers: there is an eight percent prevalence of suicide attempts that require professional medical

care, compared to two percent for heterosexual youth [6]. Transgender people face a forty-one percent prevalence of suicide attempts [14]. When the community wins rights, the pendulum can swing back: despite the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, the executive branch is attempting to deny transgender people the ability to enroll in the United States' armed forces [25].

We describe LGBT+ people as *performing* their identities to tie their choices about everyday visibility into sociological theories of self-presentation and the *performative* creation of gender [8]. We refer to *visibility* as the degree to which that an LGBT+ identity is legible to an audience. Adjusting one's self-presentation, that is, engaging in impression management, can make one more or less visible.

In spite—or perhaps because of—the marginalization faced in everyday life, LGBT+ people benefit when they feel safe and can be visible on social media. For example, LGBT+ people explore their identities as they participate in queer fandoms (online communities of fans of some media) online [29]. Furthermore, participating in online spaces can enable people to perform as queer without the need to constantly articulate their identity; a rare context where queer identities have the "partial privilege" to exist without being explicitly signified [30]. Within social media that represent real-life relationships, such as Facebook, being out online can help users to identify supportive friends within their existing social networks [5].

LGBT+ people have different experiences than cisgender (a term for non-transgender) and heterosexual youth when they present themselves and perform their identities on social media. However, we found scarce prior CSCW research that addresses LGBT+ identities. For example, we found only nine search results for 'lesbian' on the ACM and ten for 'LGBT' [1].

We conducted semi-structured interviews with seventeen college-aged LGBT+ people. We investigated the following research questions:

- How do social media affect LGBT+ user experience of managing self presentation?
- How do social media affect participation in LGBT+ communities?

We contextualize our qualitative research by connecting queer theory, performance studies, HCI, and CSCW. We synthesize concepts of place, networked public, and online communities from the ACM with self-presentation and performativity.

We describe our qualitative methodology, positionality, and study context. We make the methodological move to describe our participant's identities in their own words to more richly describe their experiences. We categorize findings according to three themes: showing and interpreting Identity; challenges and experience of participating in LGBT+ Communities online; and managing multiple Audiences. We use our findings to motivate new implications for the design of social media, which foster a positive experience of impression management for LGBT+ identities by legitimizing the use of multiple profiles and sharing fewer user activities by default.

1.2 Related Work

We begin by presenting *networked publics* as way of describing the situated context where we perform our research on *impression management*. We use theories of *performativity* to connect *impression management* to practical concerns about *heteronormativity*, both on social media. We use *queer theory* as an analytical lens to contextualize our research and discussion.

1.2.1 Place, Networked Publics, and Community

According to Harrison and Dourish, *space* refers to how media are organized in collaborative graphical user interfaces [18]. Place addresses how spaces support contextualized human activity. Whereas spaces describe potential interactions, "place is the understood reality." Places address the norms and behaviors of people. Harrison et. al phrase the dis-

tinction aptly: "a house [space] might keep out the wind and the rain, but a home [place] is where we live."

Not all places have a space. A *spaceless-place* is a place where navigation is defined by social ties and interests, such that "placeness builds upon the tension between connectedness and distinction...but, critically, it emerges without an underlying notion of space' [18]. We consider social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and reddit, to be spaceless social media places.

danah boyd develops the contextualizes interactions in particular social media contexts as participation within a *networked public*. boyd avoids a strict definition, instead focusing on how networked publics are characterized by four structural affordances: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability [10]. Each affordance has significant repercussions for how information flows within these social media contexts.

As Marwick and boyd later note, "the technical affordances of networked publics are insufficient to protect privacy." Instead, they emphasize that when privacy is desired, "the only guarantee ... may be shared social norms and social ties" [24].

We argue that boyd's concept of a networked public is useful for understanding how privacy works in social media places. The norms and acceptable behavior of a social media place involve how users prevent content from being overshared in response to the particular affordances of a networked public.

Within networked publics, users form online communities. Defining community on social media is difficult, in part because community itself has many definitions. Parks argues that although a strict definition may be difficult to come by, "a group might qualify as a virtual community if its members engaged in collective action, shared in rituals, had a variety of relational linkages, and were emotionally bonded to others in a way that conferred a sense of belonging and group identification" [28].

The social media places we expected our participants to interact within were not obvi-

ously communities. On Tumblr, it is difficult to describe the boundaries of a place and or community. Individuals feel as though they are a member of a community when they have participated "enough" within that community [20].

1.2.2 Presentation of Self / Impression Management

Goffman analyzes impression management in terms of the front-stage and back-stage. On the front stage, a publicly acceptable performance is maintained; whereas backstage, the performance may be subverted. Professors, for example, must dress a certain way and treat students professionally during class (the front stage), but may relax and be more informal in their offices (the back stage).

Different groups demand different performances. boyd describes *context collapse* as occurring when a social media "flattens multiple audiences into one." Context collapses can be embarrassing and damaging. In a study on how teenagers manage privacy online, Marwick and boyd found they would "ignore the technical features of social media altogether and instead, focus on encoding the content itself in order to limit the audience" [24]. They refer to this as *social stenography*, wherein the same content has different meanings for different groups.

LGBT+ people have been found to use a multiple-site strategy for preventing context collapses: "Participants use of multiple SNSs ... allow for different types of identity expression, while maintaining Facebook as front stage to their entire network" [12].

1.2.3 Performativity and Heteronormativity

1.2.3.1 Theories

Butler considers self-presentation a performative act that has discursive ramifications for how we conceptualize identities, including sexual and gender identities [8]. She observes that gender is performed and created simultaneously. She claims there is no "interior truth" to gender, because gender is not a natural phenomenon. Instead, gender is an

effect constructed by an unconscious attempt to recreate it. The everyday performances that Goffman describes generate gender; society mistakes gendered performances as evidence of the truth of gender. Performances of gender “congeal over time”, until they come to be seen as natural and essential, so that, “the construction ‘compels’ our belief in its necessity and naturalness” [8].

Heteronormativity is the pervasive assumption that individuals are straight and cisgender. Cisgender people were assigned a gender at birth that matches their personal identity[31]. Waner describes heteronormativity as “heterosexual culture’s exclusive ability to interpret itself as a society” [32]. He claims “even when coupled with a toleration of minority sexualities, heteronormativity has a totalizing tendency that can only be overcome by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world” [32]. In his view, tolerance of LGBT+ people does not erase the primacy of heterosexual people in society.

Heteronormativity has dire ramifications for transgender people. In a study on how cisgender coworkers respond to transgender coworkers, Schilt et. al found that, “Women regender transmen as biological females passing as men in an attempt to trick women into homosexuality” [31]. This is a light example. Their paper continues to describe how cisgender men who sleep with transwomen “feel ’raped’ and feminized through their connection to homosexuality. To repair this breach, they respond with violence.”

1.2.3.2 On Social Media

Heteronormativity is the pervasive context for social interactions that affects how LGBT+ people present themselves online. In a study on LGBT parents, the parents were explicitly chastised for being too out, even by individuals who were unable to see their social media profiles. One participant’s (heterosexual) mother was explicit in sanctioning her LGBT child for not for being gay, but for being publicly gay: “If you’re happy, that’s great, but you don’t need to post about it” [5]. Champagne, et. al found that LGBT organizations

used multiple Facebook pages to avoid outing closeted members [9].

Their findings demonstrate how heteronormativity affects LGBT+ people on social media.

Despite, and in some ways because of, heteronormativity, it is important to the mental and social well-being of LGBT+ people to be out on social media. The same researchers found that LGBT parents are incidental activists, who are perceived as advocating for their marginalized identities merely by representing them online [5]. In a study on gay youth, ages 15-23, researchers found that "youths who are more secretive about their same-sex sexuality might be particularly likely to experience compromised relationships and expectations" [11].

Participating in online communities is a critical element of how queer identities are performed online. Participation in fandom communities, for example, is an important avenue for LGBT identity development [29]. Social media potentially provide LGBT+ people with opportunities to represent themselves on their own terms. However, because they lack specific control of information flow in a networked public, self-representation can lead to harmful visibility.

1.2.4 Queer

Queer is a mode of identifying that is in opposition to essentialist notions of gender and sexuality. Unlike identities based on belonging to a category, "Queer is by definition, whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence" [16]. It promotes a "non-identity—or even anti-identity—politic" [21].

Queer theory is a critical theory that troubles (or 'queers') essentialist and cis/heteronormative assumptions of gender, sexuality, identity, and history. More simply, it challenges and critiques gender and sexuality. Jagose articulates queer as a theory that can "dramatize in-

coherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire” [21].

We are by no means the first to use queer for human-computer interaction.

Hardy et. al *queered* gay location-based dating apps by criticizing how they produce a "desiring user..a user whose desires and sexuality are mediated through technological devices in conflicting ways "[17].

Light’s *HCI as Heterodoxy* criticized design as a tool for reinforcing problematic power structures. She contrasts this with egalitarian possibilities: while, “HCI approaches may conservatively reflect existing values without harm," it’s applications are, "Charged with political possibilities” [23]. In particular, she notes that, “Digital tools play a part in defining identity by enabling certain practices and ways of thinking.”

However, the subject of power is not helpless. She articulates ways of “troubling” HCI, so that users have the power to subvert the power interfaces hold over them. She articulates design goals that empower users rather than designers: designing for ***forgetting*** (the system intentionally loses information about a user); ***obscuring*** (the system helps users to hide their activity); ***cheating*** (the system lets users break its rules), and ***eluding*** (the system intentionally does not include some data in a census).

These strategies are at odds with the design of social media platforms. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, have extensive privacy settings, they also promote groups, events, and even people that may be of interest to a user; this is potentially at the expense of privacy.

We use queer theory as a lens to analyze and discuss our findings on self-presentation and impression management on social media platforms. We explore not only how users reclaimed power within existing systems, but also how systems can be designed to support their practices.

2. METHODOLOGY

We discuss how we created a methodology that would allow us to flexibly and richly answer our research questions. We introduce the study participants and how we worked with them. We describe our approach to letting the participants describe themselves in their own words. We present the coding process in-depth in the *Qualitative Methodology* section. We describe the author's relationship to the work, and how their queer worldview effected and motivated this thesis.

2.1 Study Participants

The participants that we recruited were students of a university in the Southern United States with a reputation of being socially conservative. Although the university offers services for LGBT+ people, the campus as a whole does not offer much support, especially for transgender students.

Participants were recruited face-to-face from the university's LGBT center and largest LGBT+ club. We recruited a diverse set of gender and sexual identities - including transgender, genderqueer, and asexual identities. We did not record participant's demographic information in order to reduce the risk of accidentally outing them, though participants were informed that they must be at least 18 to participate in the study. We worked with our university's IRB to develop a study protocol that minimized risks to our participants.

2.1.1 Interview Procedure

We conducted semi-structured interviews with seventeen university students. Interviews took place in a private setting. They ranged from 20 to 50 minutes. An audio recording was made for all but one interview.

2.2 Self-Identification of Gender and Sexuality

We made the methodological choice to ask our participants how they identified with an open question as opposed to a series of closed questions. We asked participants "how do you identify?" If they asked what we meant, the interviewer would respond with their sexuality and gender.

Letting participants describe themselves is in keeping with grounded qualitative methods which prioritize the participants' experience. Because gender is an effect rather than scientific truth [8], relying on pre-generated labels could potentially exclude experiences. Responses, such as P14's self-description as an "asexual lesbian", validated that our strategy could lead to interesting responses that might have otherwise been excluded.

We report our participant's gender, sexuality, and visibility on social media in Table 1. Any label with quotes is reported in the participant's exact words. Responses without quotes are labels we generated. The gender field describes the participant as either transgender (they identify as a gender other than the one they were assigned on their original birth certificate), cisgender (identify as the same gender as their birth certificate), or genderqueer (some other relationship to gender). If a participant did not say they were transgender or genderqueer, they were listed as

We asked whether or not participants felt they were visibly LGBT+ on the varying social media sites they used and why. Because their level of visibility varied meaningfully between Facebook and other social networks, we chose to separate that data into different columns. Because visibility on "other" social media platforms varied, we chose label the column by the participant's greatest amount of visibility. All of our participants are out in the sense that they were willing to identify as queer or as an ally in this study, but their level of visibility differs on online.

We used the following labels in Table 2.1 to relate our participant's visibility on social

id	gender	sexuality	Facebook	other social media	note
p1	cis male	gay	semi-open	out	
p2	cis male	gay	semi-open	out	
p3	trans male	lesbian	not out	out	
p4	trans male	straight	out	out	
p5	cis male	gay	out	out	
p6	cis female	lesbian	out	out	
p7	cis female	lesbian	open	out	
p8	cis female	straight	out	out	'ally'
p9	cis male	gay	semi-open	semi-open	
p10	cis male	gay	not out	open	
p11	cis male	bisexual	not out	out	
p12	genderqueer	gay	out	out	
p13	cis male	gay	semi-open	out	
p14	"genderqueer guy"	"ace-lesbian"	out	out	asexual spectrum
p15	cis male	asexual	not out	-	
p16	cis female	lesbian	not out	out	
p17	cis male	gay	semi-open	-	

Table 2.1: An overview of study participants, addressing their self-identifications of gender and sexuality, and visibility on social media. Quoted text is reported in the participants' words.

media as follows:

1. Out: they make it unambiguous they are LGBT+
2. Open: they imply they are LGBT+
3. Semi-open: they neither try to show or hide that they are LGBT+
4. Not-out: they avoid any implication they are LGBT+

The labels used in the table should not be mistaken for absolute descriptions of the participants' experiences or identities. The table is intended to be descriptive and succinct rather than absolute and authoritative.

2.3 Study Context

Our study population is interesting, because many students are living apart from their families for the first time and must navigate entirely new social circles. We expect their experiences differ greatly from professionally-established LGBT+ people and younger teenagers.

We do not claim to represent the entirety of LGBT+ or queer, but instead describe the practices and needs of LGBT+ people in an interesting context. These interviews took place during a time of deeply-contentious United States politics. The political context was brought up in the interviews and likely influenced our findings.

2.4 Qualitative Methodology

We utilize qualitative methods because they are ideal for formative investigations into areas where the phenomena at play may be unclear [4] and they can discover deeper truths and reasons behind phenomena. We took an approach informed by grounded theory methods.

As part of our process, the constant comparative method[4], the authors of this paper met together and revised our codes and refined research questions

For P2-P6, we recorded and later transcribed the interviews in full. We performed an en vivo coding of the notes/transcripts for P1-P6 by going line-by-line and writing down interesting phrases and words. We then picked the most interesting codes and performed a second round of selective coding for P1-P6. The first author performed all interviews.

For P7-15, we adjusted our interview questions to ask more about how our participants used Tumblr and reddit. We listened to the full audio for the interviews. We transcribed and made en vivo codes sections that were relevant to our research questions. We reviewed our collection of live and selective codes and generated theoretical coding categories, such as Community and Audience.

In order to saturate these categories, we interviewed P16 and P17 and asked specifically about our theoretical codes. For example, we had the theoretical code for 'Sharing Politics', so we asked P16 extensively about how she shared politics on Facebook. The last two interviews were short (20 minutes and 17 minutes).

2.5 Self Positioning

As a researcher conducting qualitative work, I am inextricable from the process of data generation [4], and as such the work will be more valuable if I make my relationship to the subject and to the participants visible. I personally identify as genderqueer and gay, and have experienced first-hand the stress and difficulty of presenting myself across social media. As a member of some local LGBT+ communities around the university, I conducted the interviews as peer. The participants may not have been so vocal about their identity politics (or, on two occasions, disclosed about using Tumblr for pornography) if they did not see me as a peer. However, they may have limited their responses to prevent telling me information that may be incriminating within our social circles.

This paper's perspective comes form experiences as a queer person. Because of my own experiences, I assume that queer people should be able to chose their level of visibility. When a participant said they were uneasy putting their sexuality in on online profile, my reaction was not to continue the interview in a clinical way; I could not stop myself from saying, "I get that" or "I've been there too." Conversations would drift into talking about the difficulty of talking about sexuality with family. My subjectivity impacted data collection, analysis, and writing —or rather my subjectivity *enabled* data collection, analysis, and writing.

3. FINDINGS

Through the qualitative analysis process, we identified three categories of findings: Identity, Community, and Audience. *Identity* describes how LGBT+ people show, interpret, and reason about sharing their identities on social media. *Community* describes how LGBT+ people participate in and benefit from online communities, as well as discrimination and issues experienced by those communities. *Audience* describes how LGBT+ people manage activity differently between their social media accounts to present themselves as more or less visibly-LGBT+.

3.1 Identity: Showing and Interpreting

Our participants preferred to be visible by utilizing implicit cues as opposed to explicitly stating their identity. During coding, we focused on two means of implicit expression: sharing political articles and posting pictures of themselves. We also discuss their motivations for choosing implicit (as opposed to explicit) means of presenting themselves as LGBT+ on social media.

3.1.1 Sharing Politics

Sharing articles about political and social issues is a way of affirming both one's political and sexual/gender identity. Though not the only reason they shared political articles, participants felt that sharing them would let other people identify them as LGBT+.

Articles which explore both politics and LGBT-rights were particularly valuable as a means of self-presentation. One user saw herself and other LGBT people sharing, "sharing really LGBT-related articles, or sharing opinions on Trump that are really related to the LGBT related experience as opposed to some other experience that could be affected by politics" [P6]. Sharing articles on the intersection of politics and LGBT experience pro-

vided her with a way to share her experience as a lesbian woman with her social network.

Facebook was used to record real-world activism. A participant who generally does "not like to think about politics" maintained an active record of his political activism on Facebook.

> "I'm more professionally-politically active on Facebook, just because I am a student leader. I am publicly in the public sphere involved in multiple student organizations and with multiple different events and protests and stuff." [P14]

This contrasts with how he uses tumblr, which he describes as an escape from the "real world." He "doesn't like to get on tumblr and get into politics really."

Others are staunchly opposed to appearing visibly political online, especially on Facebook. I asked P10 if he would consider sharing political articles on Facebook, and P10 outright refused.

> "I would never share something political on facebook. I would never share something political attached to my own name" [P10].

Because he wanted to avoid being political, P10 would not like or follow politicians on Facebook, despite following them on Twitter. P2 manages his profile similarly.

> "I try to keep myself more neutral...I do not like to talk about politics [online] even though that's what my major is in" [P2]

However, if he was trying to see if a user was LGBT he "would definitely check to see if they've been sharing articles on social issues."

Sharing political articles and activism is not conducted casually, especially on Facebook. For some LGBT people, their political visibility is inextricable from their sexual and gendered identities. For others, they reject a public political self-representation so strongly

that they do not follow political pages on Facebook to prevent being identified with an ideology. Sharing political articles and activism provides a means for LGBT people to show a mixed personal and political identity online.

3.1.2 Pictures: Posting and Gazing

Participants show their identity implicitly by posting photographs of themselves and utilize photographs of others to figure out who is and is not LGBT+ in their social networks.

Participants paid attention to posture, identifying gay men by how they pose with other men in photos. P2 becomes curious, “If it’s two guys with their arms around each other I start thinking...maybe you [are gay].”

P12, a drag queen, looks for “Like, really nice hair.” Additionally, participants look for indications of behavior that is uncommon or stigmatized, for men. P12 continued,

> “Any kind of gay that does drag or some kind of performance at a bar will wear makeup. I do the same thing - I post pictures of me in makeup.”

However, sharing pictures that seem very queer to a queer audience are easily misinterpreted by people unfamiliar with LGBT+ culture. Photos of a lesbian couple may be misinterpreted as a sign of sisterhood.

> “If you look at like my profile pictures or my cover photos, they all have one girl, and they’re all very intimate. We’re very close, like our body language in pictures is, I think, obvious...People who aren’t as exposed to lesbians might be able to write things off as ’gals being pals.” [P6]

LGBT+ participants found that photos of two women together were less informative than pictures of two men.

> "It's more common...for a woman's profile to include her best friend or her sorority sister or her actual sister" [P2]

Stereotypical LGBT+ emblems —rainbow flags and photos at a pride celebration —can also be inaccurate. One participant, a straight woman raised since adolescence with two moms, posted a picture of herself and her mother at a pride parade.

> "I've had people in person - it was really awkward - they thought I was my mom's girlfriend...bitch thought my mom was a cougar!" [P9]

An asexual participant described his identity as difficult to see.

> "People don't think to look for a lack of something...if you don't post things about sex...they don't think about it all. For my asexuality, I don't see it as being visible on social media" [P15].

P15 did not want to be visible as asexual on social media, but he was no less introspective about the way he was seen.

3.1.3 Explicit LGBT+ Presentation

LGBT+ people do not reliably use explicit forms and fields —whether free-form like Twitter and Instagram or with set fields like Facebook —to present their sexual/gender identities.

Although participants would check to see if someone said they were LGBT+ in a bio, they did not rigorously use Facebook's forms for gender and sexuality.

> "If they gave me the transgender option I might put it there, I might not. Either way people are going to know that I'm trans and not full cis male. So like I guess that's a feature that I could use if I wanted to" [P4]

> “On Facebook you can put interested in women, men, both. There might be more options now. Look for that if it’s posted. I know for me as someone who has not been so visible on Facebook, I don’t have that part posted” [P5]

Because LGBT+ people do not always update fields in the profile, they can be unreliable. I asked P5 if he trusted Facebook’s “interested in” section.

> “not 100 percent...they could be closeted and say interested in women...if they said interested in men I would obviously believe” [P5]

He later changed his own settings to make his sexual orientation private on Facebook. He was worried that if he changed his sexuality to “interested in men,” Facebook would announce it to his friends as, “hey this is a life change!” Although P5 has never seen Facebook announce a change in sexuality, he “didn’t want to take the chance” that changing his sexuality field would be announced like a marriage or the birth of a child.

Because explicit fields can be unreliably updated and users are unsure of whether or not changing a field will attract too much attention, they are not consistently used to record sexuality.

3.1.4 Motivations for Implicit vs Explicit Presentation

Implicit cues are a safer way to be visible than posting explicitly about being LGBT+, especially where extended family are concerned.

A participant explained that he was not out on Facebook, because he maintains a plausible deniability to his extended family about being gay.

> “I have a cousin and then there’s me. My cousin’s not out, but he is 110 percent gay. He calls himself Madonna and me Lady Gaga because I’m like the new version of him. But no one asked about it, no one says anything, and

> we're not officially out. We're just strange men because then it won't be weird if they see us in person again and they know we're gay" [P13]

In his case, being gay is not as likely to incur social sanctions as being out.

LGBT+ people prefer to present themselves as such via implicit means such as sharing political articles and photos. Although explicit biography fields are still used, they are not necessarily as safe or as rigorously managed as implicit means of self presentation.

3.1.5 Why Look: Checking, not Cruising

LGBT+ people use social media to identify LGBT+ people for multiple, potentially-overlapping reasons. The gay men interviewed has all used Facebook to see if a potential crush was LGBT+, as well as to satiate their own interest. P10 claimed he would look at Facebook "out of curiosity. Attempting to find somebody to get into a relationship with."

However, not all investigations has sexual/romantic undertones. P7 found a sense of discovery when finding queer users.

> "Once you find out that's someone's queer, there's this feeling of, I don't want to say camaraderie because that sounds stupid. But like yeah, you're part of the fam, you know the struggle" [P7]

3.1.6 Accidental Disclosure

Facebook feeds (as opposed to Facebook groups) are spaces without many barriers. Users are aware of how actions such as going to an event or liking a page can out them.

> "I would not click interested or going to the event because I know other people could see it" [P15]

> "They would know I was queer because of the events I'm interested in going to. Events like roller derby and Pride and like drag shows" [P7]

This does not stop all users from saying what events they're interested in, but they are aware that clicking on 'Interested' on a Facebook event that is LGBT-related can imply that they themselves are LGBT.

In summary, sharing political articles and photographs provides LGBT+ people with the ability to be visible as LGBT+ online. Although implicit means are unreliable, participants use them because they are safer and more reliable than explicit user bios. Their motivations for identifying other LGBT+ users varied from finding partners to enjoying a sense of camaraderie.

3.2 LGBT+ Communities Online

Social network activities are not limited to self-representation, but interactions with and between communities. During our investigation, we coded responses into two categories: how users participated in a community, and why that community existed. However, we later revised the categories to better match our data. We split codes into two categories: issues faced in online communities, and why users spent the effort to participate in those communities.

3.2.1 Issues

Support groups and safe spaces may provide places for identity negotiation, but they are not impermeable. Transgender spaces in particular are at a constant risk of invasion from malicious actors. P4, a transman, managed a Facebook Group for transgender people. Although all members who enter the group must be approved by administrators, transphobic users penetrate the community. P4 has to manually remove them after they've left a hate post.

> "We get a hate post and we're like, 'how in the heck did this person get in.' ... very like cis-male, they've got beards, they obviously don't belong in the group. That happens once a day. We'll get people trying to join like that all of

> the time" [P4]

Despite Facebook Groups providing a place for transgender users to support each other, the barriers into entry for that space are lacking.

3.2.2 Comparing LGBT+ Communities on Reddit and Tumblr

We asked our users what interactions they performed to participate in LGBT+ communities online. We focused on their contrasting descriptions of how communities and bonds are formed on reddit as opposed to tumblr.

On reddit, most interactions take place with the community at large rather than between individual users. P2 and P10, were active users of reddit They regularly checked in on /r/askgaybros, a site for gay men to ask their peers questions. P2 goes there to read not only for gay-specific discussions, but also general interest chatter.

> "I find it really fun when people will submit questions to that subreddit of things completely unrelated to being a gay man. One post there the other day was an all caps 'THE SOUNDTRACK FOR CIV VI is awesome.' And it was just this whole thread just talking about the Civ VI soundtrack" [P2]

He would also look at "questions that I've had, [which] somebody's already asked... just using it as a way to indirectly get a second opinion."

Neither of our participants went on /r/askgaybros with the intention of connecting with any particular user.

> "They're a persona on a screen, why would I be familiar with them?" [P10].

Although P7 would form friendships over tumblr, on /r/actuallesbians (a community so-named because /r/lesbians is full of porn) she said, "I don't really interact with people on reddit just because there are so many people." Forming bonds with individuals is not necessarily part of how queer people users seek support online, particularly on reddit.

On tumblr, our participants felt there was a general sense of a LGBT+ community. We asked what interactions took place that made our tumblr users feel they were part of an LGBT+ community. P7 would look up selfies tagged as "queer or queer woman of color" and would "talk to people on tumblr because I reblog their selfies" [P7]. She would occasionally create and maintain bonds over tumblr. Half-jokingly she said, "I have queer friends in different cities so I can go sleep at their house." P13 and P14 also participated in both queer and fandom communities oriented around tagged photos. P14 is an artist and would produce drawings for fan communities.

> "Mainly that's what I do - I look at a lot of art and a lot of fandom created content and I also use tumblr mainly for memes and jokes and stuff - honestly. It's a nice escape" [P14]

Real-world social networks are not normally reproduced on reddit, but are partially represented on tumblr. P7, P2, P14, and P13 all had some friends they knew in-person as part of their tumblr networks. However, their criteria for having a mutual (someone whom you follow and who follows you back) differed from their criteria for having a Facebook friend. P13 would add acquaintances from classes, whereas P2 and P7 would add LGBT friends. P5 and P14 would mostly add friends who shared an interest in art or video games. In contrast, it is uncommon for reddit users to know each other's account names. P2 stated this norm as fact, "We don't talk about each other's screen names."

LGBT+ people experience community on reddit without forming individual social bonds, but carry existing social ties and form new ties on tumblr. Although our finding is certainly not universal (someone must have made a friend over reddit), we emphasize that the expectation and experience is that LGBT+ communities on reddit are less personal than those on tumblr.

3.3 Audiences and Accounts

LGBT+ people use multiple social media platforms to mange their audiences. To avoid intolerant friends and family, our participants preferred to set a whole account to be private, make a new account, or use new social media platforms.

3.3.1 Security through Difficulty

User choose to be visible on social networks based on the the *perceived difficulty-of-use* of a platform to an older and less-tolerant audience. In particular, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr are seen as safer than Facebook.

> "I guess maybe out of ignorance, that my family probably doesn't know how to work an Instagram or twitter, so they're not going to be able to find it." [P5]

His Instagram is not private, and he doesn't use any privacy features to obscure his real name - he strictly relies on the perceived difficulty of accessing the platform.

When a family member may reach a previously inaccessible platform, a closeted user may react quickly and impulsively. P16, a lesbian who at the time was financially reliant on her parents, posted pictures of herself with her girlfriend on Instagram. Her mother mentioned in passing that she was curious about Instagram.

> "I deleted my Instagram 2 years when I thought that my mom had seen it because I was super out on my Instagram, so I deleted it in a moment of panic. It was a moment of panic [P16]"

Now that the panic is over, P16 uses privacy features on Facebook to block unsupportive family and friends. However, in a moment of crisis, a big, dramatic act such as deleting her account was preferrable.

3.3.2 Multiple Profiles

Social ties can motivate the creation of multiple profiles, even on sites such as Facebook where having multiple profiles is not allowed. At first, pressure from P3's mother led him stop sharing LGBT-related media. P3, a transman, created a second, hidden Facebook profile to present as male with a male name.

> "I would retweet and post a lot of things about lgbt stuff - it was very upsetting to my mom. LGBT stuff makes her very uncomfortable. She was worried 'oh other people are going to see this' and like people are going to judge you and blah blah blah" [P3]

He kept his original Facebook exclusively for the benefit of his family and added all of his friends to a new account. Removing friends from the old account was not done for the sake of articulating an identity, but instead to save face.

> "So I unfriended everyone who wasn't family - I wasn't going to unfriend some people but not others because that's how you cause drama. There's still drama. I unfriended everyone who wasn't family. So I made a new Facebook account, and that's my gay Facebook." [P3]

Using multiple accounts is against Facebook's policy, but there was no other way for P3 to please both his family and use Facebook to connect with friends.

3.3.3 Remodeling Profiles

Transgender users create new profiles when they transition, because manually remodeling a profile to fit a new identity is too cumbersome. Removing pre-transition photos of themselves to too time intensive.

P4 deleted their old profile and started again.

> “If I still had the old one I would have had to go throw and get rid of all my old pictures and that kind of stuff. And it wasn’t worth that much to me, so why not just create a new one? There were multiple issues about it.”

Removing pictures from before a transition is important to him, “because that’s not the person I identify with anymore. And I didn’t want people to see that” [P4].

Managing a public representation of the self online is not a matter of picking the right privacy settings. It requires careful, but fuzzy reasoning about who is likely to see content, and what the profile as a whole means to the individual.

4. DISCUSSION

Visibility —being visible as LGBT+ —matters to our participants. They prefer selective visibility: to be 'out' on their own terms, i.e., generally more out to their LGBT+ audience, and less so to cisgender/heterosexuals.

We discuss how social media platforms presently succeed and fail at supporting a selective and intentional process of LGBT+ self-presentation. We then discuss how social media platforms can be *queered* to better promote selective and intentional LGBT+ self-presentation by legitimizing the use of multiple profiles and obscuring user activity by default.

We are particularly concerned about the ways in which real-name, single-user policies limit how participants can identity themselves, because those policies seem to encourage publicly-sanitized self performances. Butler's theory of performativity suggests that the sanitized performances could become new norms that reify the performances Facebook (and other sites with similar policies) allow. Policies that inhibit day-to-day queer performances limit queer culture.

4.1 How Social Media Already Support

While LGBT+ users face issues presenting their identities online, each of the five platforms that participants talked about most often provide some support for selective self-presentation. Specifically, they support some combination of banning bad actors from groups, pseudonyms and multiple profiles, obscured communities with fuzzy boundaries, and broad privacy toggles.

- Bad actors can be banned through moderation tools provided by Facebook Groups. They prevent bad actors from both reading and posting content once they're discovered.

- Twitter, Instagram, tumblr, and reddit all support the use of pseudonyms and multi-profiles. reddit, in particular, has a culture of single-use throwaway accounts [22].

- Communities on tumblr have fuzzy boundaries [20] that obscure LGBT+ communities; our participants found it difficult to follow negative comments coming from outside a particular community. The tumblr "bubble", as one user put it, fosters a sense of safety for LGBT+ users. Bad actors have a more difficult time finding a LGBT+ community in the first place.

- On Instagram, users can easily switch an account to be private in order to prevent unwanted visitors. Facebook and Instagram let users temporarily deactivate their accounts. These features appeal to LGBT+ users who panic in the face of a potential outing.

4.2 Implications for Social Media Design

We discuss implications for using *cheating* and *obscuring* as desirable practices for promoting the selective self-presentation of LGBT+ identities. Although our data and emphasis is on LGBT+ people, we believe that our findings would support selective-self presentation for a general audience.

4.2.1 Multiple Profiles: Legitimizing Cheating

LGBT+ social media users already subvert the rules of single-profile social media by using multiple profiles to reclaim agency in their self-presentation.

Facebook has introduced a new appeals process for LGBT+ users who have issues using a preferred name [27]. Their official policy is that "the name on your profile should be the name that your friends call you in everyday life" [2]. This policy does not address transgender experiences of abuse and harassment from their social circles that stems from using a correctly-gendered name.

Goffman discusses how every person uses different "faces" for different audiences [13]. Transgender people in the closet use different names when presenting as their assigned gender. Using multiple names/faces is a legitimate characteristic of how LGBT+, and particularly transgender people, navigate their social realities.

Light describes cheating as "an acknowledged phenomenon supported by developers" [23]. Facebook and social media with single-profile policies should publicly sanction *cheating* by using multiple profiles. This will be especially impactful for transgender users, who use multiple names for their own safety.

Social media platforms that allow multiple profiles give LGBT+ people more agency in their self-presentation.

4.2.2 Opt-in: Obscuring by Default

LGBT+ social media users are less able to choose their level of visibility, because social media platforms over-share their actions by default. Here, we specifically mean liking or following actions, which express interest, but are not explicitly meant to socially share information (e.g., following a politician's page as opposed to sharing a status).

Whereas prior studies on teenage-users found their perceived audiences are often smaller than their actual audience [19], we found that LGBT+ college students over-estimate their audience, particularly on Facebook. Because liking, friend-making, and attending public events are shared by default, users feel uneasy participating with these features.

Facebook allows users to prevent their name from being searched, but it is unclear if a user can excuse themselves from Facebook's People You May Know feature, which can out people as LGBT+ by showing mutual, LGBT+ friends.

We agree with previous studies that find, "It is in Facebook's best interest to improve its privacy features before users further disperse their activity across platforms" [12]. At the same time, we emphasize that adding privacy features will not necessarily change the

user experience and expectations. Public-by-default inhibits LGBT+ people's ability to use certain features, because even with detailed privacy settings, they feel uneasy with how their actions are shown to and beyond their social circles. The social media platform must take an active role in changing user expectations by changing default settings to be less permissive.

Light describes *obscuring* and opting-in as design which, "Panders to the desire for image management that gives people some control in terms of identity" [23]. Obscuring extends beyond opt-in design. It suggests that a core affordance of networked publics, *searchability*, may be bad for LGBT+ visibility.

"Good design" in HCI typically implies using the capabilities of technology to make features and information visible [26]. However, good design should prioritize the experiences of users rather than the capabilities of a technology. Too much visibility can make LGBT+ people feel unsafe if they are visible online. This finding extends Bellotti and Edwards prescription for providing user control regarding human consideration of intelligibility [3], shifting from context-aware to social media systems.

To support selective self-presentation for LGBT+, we recommend that social media *obscure* user activities by default, instead letting users opt-in to share certain activities.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Conclusions

We interviewed seventeen LGBT+ students from a conservative town in order to see:

- How do social media affect LGBT+ user experience of managing self presentation?
- How do social media affect participation in LGBT+ communities?

We described our participants with their own words to more richly capture their experiences. From our findings we developed implications for design that emphasize the value of legitimizing the use of multiple profiles and obscuring activities by default.

Although our findings are from a small group of LGBT+ students in a conservative town, they are informative about how LGBT+ users manage their self presentation online. By using qualitative methods, we had an opportunity to discover findings—such as an asexual experience of visibility —that we did not anticipate. We join other research that privileges LGBT+ experiences as informative for design [15, 17].

In networked publics, it is impossible to prevent the spread of information. Although obscuring user activities with opt-in design cannot prevent all unwanted disclosure, changing the default behavior in a networked public may create a new *social media place*, where LGBT+ users can relax about their visibility. We are optimistic that social media can be (re)designed to provide LGBT+ users with a better experience.

Despite the appearance of fairness, insistence on the ideal of a single, 'real' and self-representative profile is, in practice, discriminatory. It seems to best serve more privileged (in this context, cisgender and straight) groups. We are not the first researchers to note that Facebook favors privileged groups. danah boyd found that mySpace was seen as "tacky" by white youth, but was embraced by black youth who enjoyed the customization

[7]. Facebook was favored the white youth, who are more privileged groups. We do not intend to discredit Facebook as a social network, but rather emphasize how social media can unintentionally replicate systemic gaps of privilege.

We support Light's claim that HCI reinforces the biases and beliefs of interface designers, especially where those biases can reify gender and sexual identities. Because sexuality and gender are social constructs, there is a risk associated with presenting any sexuality or gender as unproblematically real. Butler's assessment of sexual and gender identities as social constructs in does not diminish the power that sexual and gender identities hold on an individual and societal level. Putting signifiers of identity (gay, straight, male, female, trans, etc.) in a drop down menu or on a questionnaire sheet tells users and participants that those are the acceptable identities within a particular digital experience or study. They also force participants to identify with a gender or sexuality, which may be uncomfortable. Forcing users and participants into certain modes of identification is antithetical to queer design ethic. Queer design should support messy and incomplete means of identification, because the alternative is to play into the patriarchal systems that created the inherently problematic categories of gender and sexuality.

We are especially concerned about the ways in which real-name, single-user policies limit that ways in which participants can identity themselves, because those policies seem to encourage publicly sanitized performances. Butler's theory of performativity suggests that the sanitized performances could become new norms that reify the performances Facebook (and other sites with similar policies) allow. Policies that inhibit day-to-day queer performances limit queer culture.

Our discussion of privilege on social media is incomplete without also considering race, class, religion, and immigrant status. However, we speculate that work exploring self-presentation on other groups will find similar gaps in privilege.

Broadly, our design implications contribute to an underlying principle of giving people

abilities to define their visibility on social media, in contrast with the HCI design principle of indiscriminate 'making visible'. Designers of social media systems need to be discriminating in what they make visible and how, alternatively, they give users agency to contextually define their visibility. In the same vein, ethnographers need to give study participants agency in defining their gender and sexual orientations. On the whole, designers need to be sensitive, giving marginalized participants agency in vital aspects of self presentation.

Queer seeks to "address the margins, but not perhaps as conceived, since it deals with them by repositioning them" [23]. We address the margins by privileging LGBT+ experiences as informative for the design of social media.

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