

# Queer Visibility: Supporting LGBT+ Selective Visibility on Social Media

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## ABSTRACT

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 develop implications for design to support *queering* social media. (1) Give people abilities to present themselves with *selective visibility*, enabling choices about privacy and sharing, in contrast with the HCI design principle of indiscriminate ‘making visible’. That is, enable participants to define their social media identities in their own ways. (2) Conduct studies, with a methodology likewise ensures that participants can define their gender and sexual identities in their own ways, rather than according to a predetermined vocabulary.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information Interfaces and Presentation: Misc.

## Author Keywords

queer, impression management, social media, LGBT, networked public, privacy

## INTRODUCTION

As LGBT+ people maintain their presence on social media, their activities are affected by a history of marginalization. However, social media sites provide limited support for the need of LGBT+ people to have their identities be only *selectively visible*. We conducted an ethnographic investigation of how LGBT+ students use social media in order to see how social media site policies affect both the performance of an LGBT+ identity and participation within LGBT+ communities online. We refer to an LGBT+ person’s control over being more or less legible as LGBT+ as *selective visibility*. We use our grounded findings and Light’s theory of *Queer HCI* to motivate implications for the design of social media that support *selective visibility* for LGBT+ and other marginalized people.

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CHI 2018, April 21–26, 2018, Montreal, QC, Canada

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ACM 978-1-4503-5620-6/18/04 \$15.00

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3173824>

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 [15]. 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 [27].

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) [30]. 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 [31]. 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].

Considering “users” privacy needs is important to allow safe and comfortable participation...online” [3]. We consider *selective visibility* to be a type of “safe and comfortable participation” for LGBT+ people.

Because there are benefits to being visible as LGBT+ and social pressures to remain closeted on social media, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seventeen college-aged LGBT+ people. We investigated these research questions:

- How do social media affect LGBT+ user experience of selective visibility?
- 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 synthesize our findings with Light's *Queer HCI* to motivate new implications for the design of social media: how social media can foster a positive experience of *selective visibility* for LGBT+ identities by legitimizing the use of multiple profiles and sharing fewer user activities by default.

## RELATED WORK

In this section, we establish both a technological context for LGBT+ decisions about visibility and a theoretical context for our Discussion on how to improve the experience of selective visibility on social media. The technological context is the *networked public*, a characterization of social media as a *place* where information flow becomes bounded by social norms.

We transition from technology to theory by discussing *impression management*, the theory of how people adjust their self-presentation/performance in regard to social norms. Because the Discussion develops implications for design by synthesizing Light's *queer HCI* with our grounded findings, we present theoretical constructs behind *queer theory* (of which *impression management* is the first), *queer theory* itself, and finally, Light's *queer HCI*.

### Place, Networked Publics, and Community

We present a technological context for LGBT+ *selective visibility* by first introducing how the flow of information can (and often, cannot) be controlled on social media that function as *networked public*. We discuss how the *place-ness* of social media, through informal expectations of others' behavior, provides some assurance over information flows.

danah boyd contextualizes interactions in particular social media contexts as participation within a *networked public*. boyd avoids a strict definition, and instead focuses 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" [26].

In their highly-cited work, Harrison and Dourish explore a similar gap between the technical affordances of collaborative media and the actual behavior of users. They refer to how media are organized in collaborative graphical user interfaces as *space* [20].

More importantly, they describe the socially-constructed relationship between a population and a *space* as *place*. Place addresses how spaces support contextualized human activity. Whereas spaces describe potential interactions, "place is the understood reality." Harrison et. al phrase the distinction aptly:

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

Because *place*—including social norms, as well as the properties of *space*—affects how information will actually be shared in *networked public*, users make choices about what to share and what activities to partake in based on social norms.

### Presentation of Self / Impression Management

We present *impression management* as a theory that explains how people adjust their *self-presentation* in regards to social norms, and also as a theoretical bridge between our discussion of social media and *performativity/heteronormativity*.

Goffman analyzes *impression management* in terms of the front stage and backstage. 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 backstage) [14]. Throughout this paper, *impression management* refers to the decision-making process behind acts of *self-presentation*.

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, because they expose a performance, which is acceptable to some audience(s), to other audience(s) that find it unacceptable.

Social stenography is one means by which people maintain an acceptable performance to multiple audiences on social media. 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" [26]. They refer to this as *social stenography*, wherein the same content has different meanings for different groups.

Impression management on social media involves not only choosing what to share, but also where to share it. LGBT+ people have been found to use a multiple-site impression management 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" [13].

### Performativity and Heteronormativity

We describe *performativity* and *heteronormativity* to provide a necessary theoretical background for *queer theory* and eventually *queer HCI*. We present examples of how *heteronormativity* affects LGBT+ peoples' decisions about *impression management* on social media.

#### *Performativity*

Butler considers everyday *self-presentation* as performative acts that have 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. Butler says 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*

*Heteronormativity* is the consequence of a societal assumption that there are two, unproblematically-real genders: it is the pervasive assumption that individuals are straight and cisgender (cisgender people were assigned a gender at birth that matches their personal identity[32]).

Waner describes heteronormativity as “heterosexual culture’s exclusive ability to interpret itself as a society” [35]. 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” [35]. In his view, tolerance of LGBT+ people does not erase the primacy (and privilege) 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” [32]. 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.”

Heteronormativity is the pervasive context for social interactions that affects how LGBT+ people conduct self-presentation online. A study found that LGBT parents are 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 are an example of how heteronormativity affects LGBT+ people on social media.

Despite, and in some ways because of, heteronormativity, it is vital 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” [12]. Transgender social media users leverage support from “close friends and anonymous strangers” to perform social searches and curate objects that represent an idealized self and style [16].

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 [30]. 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.

#### **Queer**

We discuss both *queer-as-in-identity* and *queer theory* before describing Light’s application of *queer theory* to HCI design principles.

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” [18]. It promotes a “non-identity—or even anti-identity—politic” [23].

Queer theory is a critical theory that troubles (or ‘queers’) essentialist and cis/heteronormative assumptions of gender, sexuality, identity, and history. More simply, queer theory challenges and critiques gender and sexuality. Jagose articulates queer as a theory that can “dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire” [23].

Others have applied *queer* to HCI. Hardy et. al *queered* gay location-based dating apps by criticizing how they produce a “desiring user ... whose desires and sexuality are mediated through technological devices in conflicting ways” [19].

#### **Queer HCI**

Light’s *HCI as Heterodoxy* criticizes 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,” its applications are, “Charged with political possibilities” [25]. 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 that 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 typically 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 may compromise privacy.

In the discussion, we use queer HCI as a lens to analyze and discuss our findings on self-presentation and impression

management on social media platforms. It is not only how users reclaimed power within existing systems, but also how systems can be designed to support their practices.

## METHODOLOGY

We describe our methodology in detail. In particular, we discuss how conducted our interviews and asked for participant's identities with the goal of allowing for unanticipated response. We present our qualitative coding process in-depth in the *Qualitative Methodology* section. Finally, we describe the first-author's relation to the work, so that the reader may better informed of the interviewer's relationship with the participants and also their perspective on the work as a whole.

### Study Participants

The participants that we recruited were students of a university in the south-western 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.

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.

### 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.

### 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 own 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), cis-gender (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 cisgender.

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 to relate our participant's visibility on social 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.

### 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.

### 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.

id	gender	sexuality	Facebook	other social media	note
p1	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	male	gay	out	out	
p6	female	lesbian	out	out	
p7	female	lesbian	open	out	
p8	female	straight	out	out	'ally'
p9	male	gay	semi-open	semi-open	
p10	male	gay	not out	open	
p11	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	male	asexual	not out	-	
p16	female	lesbian	not out	out	
p17	male	gay	semi-open	-	

**Table 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.

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).

### Self Positioning

As a researcher conducting qualitative work, I (the first author) 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. As Denzin writes, "Interpretive research begins and ends with the biography of the self and the researcher" [11]. My subjectivity impacted data collection, analysis, and writing—or rather my subjectivity *enabled* data collection, analysis, and writing.

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 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.

### 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+.

#### Identity

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.

#### 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 provided 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 political arguments, 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” [P2].

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 —being visible politically is part of how they are visible as LGBT+. Others 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.

#### *Pictures: Posting and Gazing*

Participants show their identity implicitly by posting photographs of themselves and utilizing 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...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.

Visibility it accomplished and desired differently by intersecting LGBT+ identities. It does not follow a linear spectrum of disclosure from closeted to open, but rather participants accomplished different levels of visibility to their audiences by intentionally sharing photos and political articles.

#### *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.

#### *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.

#### *Looking for “The Fam”*

LGBT+ people use social media to identify LGBT+ people for multiple, potentially-overlapping reasons. The gay men interviewed have 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]

#### *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.

#### **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.

#### *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.

#### *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 they 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 (it seems unlikely that no one has ever formed a personal bond over reddit), we emphasize that the expectation and experience is that LGBT+ communities on reddit are less personal than those on tumblr.

### Audiences and Accounts

LGBT+ people use multiple social media platforms to manage 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.

### 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 preferable.

### 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.



### Remodeling Profiles

Transgender users create new profiles when they transition, because manually remodeling a profile to fit a new identity is too cumbersome and removing pre-transition photos of themselves is 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” [P4].

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]. Our findings echo prior findings, that removing pre-transition photos and old accounts is part of a process of transitioning online [17]. At the same time, we observe that P4’s motivation was not only to remove their old profile because of dysphoria, but also because it was more *more convenient* than removing photos manually.

## 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 compare our findings on LGBT+ *selective visibility* to studies on how other groups handle impression management.

Finally we 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.

### How Social Media Already Support Selective Visibility

While LGBT+ users face issues presenting their identities online, each of the five platforms that participants talked about most—Facebook, Instagram, tumblr, reddit, and Twitter—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* in social media are malevolent users who undermine community, rather than supporting it. Transphobic bad actors can be banned through moderation tools provided by Facebook Groups. These tools can be used to prevent known bad actors both from reading and posting content.
- Instagram, tumblr, reddit, and Twitter all support the use of pseudonyms and multi-profiles. reddit, in particular, has a culture of single-use throwaway accounts [24].
- Communities on tumblr have fuzzy boundaries [22] 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. As a result, on tumblr, bad actors have a more difficult time finding LGBT+ communities, in the first place.

- LGBT+ users sometimes panic, such as in the face of a potential outing. Social media features that enable broad and immediate privacy controls—i.e., manipulation of visibility—are helpful. On Instagram, users can switch an account to be private, to prevent unwanted visitors. Facebook and Instagram let users temporarily deactivate their accounts.

### Comparisons with Other Groups

We compare LGBT+ experiences of *selective visibility* with how other groups balance expression through social constraints on social media. LGBT+ people often use multiple profiles (both within and between social media) in order to maintain acceptable performances for their families. In Qatar, some women maintain multiple accounts, so that they may show their face and body (or platonic male friendships) to supportive friends, but not family members [33]. This practice is similar to how LGBT+ people use multiple accounts in response to social pressures from families.

In a study on political sharing on Facebook, Wang et. al. found that users would share political articles and “form a personal connection with the news”[34]. Some shared articles to reinforce a political identity, while others would avoid sharing articles to prevent conflict. However, they did not report in their paper that users would share political articles to create (or hide) a sexual or gender identity.

Despite the appearance of fairness, Facebook’s insistence on a single, ‘real’ and self-representative profile is, in practice, discriminatory. It serves straight and/or cisgender people that do not have a need for *selective visibility* because of their identity. boyd et. al found that mySpace was seen as “tacky” by white youth, but was embraced by black youth who enjoyed the customization [7], whereas Facebook was favored by more privileged white youth. We do not intend to discredit Facebook as a social network, but rather emphasize that social media can unintentionally replicate gaps in privilege.

### 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. While our data and emphasis is on LGBT+ people, we believe that our findings would support selective-self presentation for a general audience.

#### 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 [29]. Their official policy is that “the name on your profile should be the name that your friends call you in everyday life” [1]. This policy does not address transgender experiences of abuse and harassment, from their social circles, which stems from using a correctly-gendered name.

Goffman discusses how every person uses different “faces” for different audiences [14]. 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” [25]. 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.

#### *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 [21], we found that LGBT+ college students overestimate their audiences, particularly on Facebook. Because liking, friend-making, and attending public events are shared by default, users feel uneasy about participating.

We build on the findings of previous studies, which find, “It is in Facebook’s best interest to improve its privacy features before users further disperse their activity across platforms” [13]. 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” [25]. Obscuring extends 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 [28]. However, good design should prioritize the experiences of users, rather than technological capabilities. Too much visibility can make LGBT+ people feel unsafe, when they are visible online. This finding builds on Bellotti and Edwards prescription—give users control of intelligibility by letting them easily attain desired outcomes [2]—while shifting from context-aware systems to situated contexts of social media.

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.

## CONCLUSION

We interviewed seventeen LGBT+ students in 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 prevent our assumptions from limiting their responses. 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. We join other research that values LGBT+ experiences as informative for design [16, 19].

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 new *social media places*, where LGBT+ users can relax about their visibility. We are optimistic that social media can be (re)designed to give LGBT+ users more agency to be *selectively visible* so they are more able to gain the benefits of participation on social media [31, 5, 30].

We are especially concerned about the ways in which real-name, single-user policies limit that ways in which participants can identify themselves, because those policies seem to impose publicly sanitized, heteronormative performances. Butler’s theory of performativity suggests that the sanitized performances could become new, problematic norms that sanction only the performances Facebook (and other sites with real-name policies) allow.

Broadly, our design implications contribute to supporting user’s *selective visibility* on social media via increased default privacy in contrast with the HCI design principle of indiscriminate ‘making visible.’ Through selective visibility, users are empowered to make decisions regarding sharing vs. privacy of potentially sensitive aspects of their identities.

These findings were supported by a study methodology, in which we intentionally enabled participants to define their identities in their own ways. During interviews, we avoided giving users a set vocabulary by which they could identify, and participants described identities we did not anticipate. We suggest that other researchers allow participants to identify freely whenever possible, so that they do not limit participant’s answers to the researcher’s expectations. 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” [25]. We address the margins by privileging LGBT+ experiences as informative for the design of social media.

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