Research Article

CONVERGENCE

Social media affordances of LGBTQIA+ expression and community formation

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–22

DOI: 10.1177/13548565241296628
journals.sagepub.com/home/con


Carolina Are
Northumbria University, UK

Catherine Talbot
Bournemouth University, UK

Pam Briggs
Northumbria University, UK

Abstract

Faced with offline discrimination, LGBTQIA+ users frequently turn to social media to find role models, build social networks and test out new forms of self-expression. Each platform has its own affordances and governance processes which can, in turn, facilitate or impede self-expression and community growth. Through a survey of 120 LGBTQIA+ participants, this paper considers which social media affordances facilitate the creation and development of LGBTQIA+ identities, support online and offline community formation and peer-to-peer learning, whilst limiting opportunities for online abuse. While previous research has so far largely focused on younger LGBTQIA+ users' experiences on SM, we found that broadening our sample to include older participants can lead to novel reflections on platforms' potential and/or challenges towards expressing one's queerness online. For example, while users young and old found the visibility of other LGBTQIA+ accounts inspiring, entertaining and reassuring, particularly within previously stigmatised expressions of bisexuality, we found that older participants preferred to be selective about their outness, or sometimes to not be out at all, not simply for fear of harassment or context collapse, but also because of historical factors around family and friend relationships or because their identity experimentation had already happened offline. We also identified contrasting views about outness and the use and visibility of pronouns, reminding us that the online LGBTQIA+ community is not a monolith in its beliefs and practices, particularly when different life stages are considered.

Keywords

LGBTQIA+, affordances, social media, online communities

Corresponding author:
Carolina Are, Innovation Fellow at the Centre for Digital Citizens, Northumbria University, UK.
Email: carolina.are@northumbria.ac.uk

Social Media (SM) can provide useful spaces for LGBTQIA+ communities (Miller, 2016) offering opportunities to find role models, build social networks and test out new forms of self-expression (Bates et al., 2020; Fox and Ralston, 2016; Talbot et al., 2022). Whilst SM platforms can support users in exploring their sexual and gender identities and in finding like-minded individuals (Cavalcante, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2015; Rambukkana, 2015), they can also provide heightened opportunities for abuse, including sexual harassment, the non-consensual sharing of intimate photographs and sustained bullying (e.g. Formby, 2022, Thomas et al., 2021). This means that finding the right balance between authenticity and personal safety can be a struggle. While SM provide opportunities for authentic self-expression (Coker et al., 2023), members of the LGBTQIA+ community are at risk of experiencing hate and harassment as the price to pay for authentic online disclosure (Perrett, 2021), and this trade-off is influenced by the particular affordances of each SM platform. Critical factors include the extent to which a platform is prepared to protect LGBTQIA+ users against harassment, the presence of affordances that allow users to choose which aspects of themselves to reveal in certain contexts, and affordances that facilitate self-expression and community growth (e.g. Schoenebeck and Blackwell, 2021).

Many authors have written about the importance of SM for LGBTQIA+ communities, often with a positive focus on the ways in which different SM affordances can both protect and promote queer identities and facilitate learning at a critical stage in people's lives (via e.g. Fox and Ralston, 2016; Kitzie, 2019). However, this work has predominantly focused on young people. For example, a recent systematic review of the health and wellbeing implications of SM use focussed entirely on adolescents (Berger et al., 2022), the mean age of participants in the Fox and Ralston's (2016) sample was 21 and the 'older' category in Robards et al.'s *Scrolling Beyond Binaries* survey was 31-35 (2018). Whist there are some investigations that specifically target older LGBTQIA+ users (e.g. Jarnet-Lange and Duguay, 2024; Marciano and Nimrod, 2021), there are relatively few that take both a broad approach to gender and sexual identity and that also investigate a broad spectrum of ages. Therefore, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of how queer users across diverse demographics and life stages navigate these platforms. This is important when we consider not only the changing landscape of digital platforms across the life span, but also the varying social obligations that come with these different life stages (Dhoest, 2023).

With this in mind, our study targeted a wider age range of LGBTQIA+ participants, asking about their experiences of platforms, to determine which known SM affordances facilitate the creation and development of an LGBTQIA+ identity, support online and offline community formation and peer-to-peer learning, whilst limiting opportunities for online abuse. This paper therefore provides novel findings on LGBTQIA+ users' favourite platforms in an ever-developing, crowded SM space, highlighting their reflection on platform governance and their different relationships with online self-presentation, sometimes influenced by demographic factors such as age, sexual orientation and gender identity. Our findings show contrasting views about outness and the use and visibility of pronouns, highlighting how, just like offline, the online LGBTQIA+ community is not a monolith in its beliefs and association and self-presentation practices.

LGBTQIA+ identity management on social media

The past few decades have seen significant progress towards LGBTQIA+ rights and acceptance in many parts of the world, though this varies globally. However, gender and sexual minorities – and particularly transgender individuals – continue to face discrimination, harassment, and violence (Bayrakdar and King, 2023; Hanckel et al., 2019). This can lead to a decline in mental health (Charmaraman et al., 2021; De Lange et al., 2022; Halliburton et al., 2021), bringing vulnerable

individuals to often hide their gender and/or sexual identity (Miller et al., 2019; Schrimshaw et al., 2018).

The support of peers, family, and the wider LGBTQIA+ community can help mitigate these adverse effects (Johnson and Rogers, 2022; Snapp et al., 2015), yet not everyone has access to such offline support. Online LGBTQIA+ spaces can be helpful, with studies indicating that LGBTQIA+ participants find it easier to be themselves on SM in comparison to offline environments (Coker et al., 2023; Hillier and Harrison, 2007). These spaces provide opportunities for identity exploration, connection with peers through online groups and dating apps, access to information and to role models through SMs, forums and websites (Bates et al., 2020; Craig and McInroy, 2014; Fox and Ralston, 2016; Talbot et al., 2022), resources that can be particularly important for LGBTQIA+ people who are geographically isolated, not 'out', or otherwise unsupported (Higa et al., 2014). This is a particularly critical issue given that 39% of sexual minorities (in the USA) report having no one to speak openly with about their sexual orientation (Charmaraman et al., 2021). On SM users can 'access resources, explore identities, find likeness, come out digitally prior to coming out offline, and subsequently expand their new identities into their offline life', experimenting with coming out to strangers before sharing this element of their identity with friends and family (Craig and McInroy, 2014: 105).

In addition, SM can provide LGBTQIA+ individuals with a means of accessing self-relevant information which may not otherwise be available offline (Chen and Ding, 2020; McInroy, 2016). These online spaces also yield social benefits by providing opportunities to connect with the LGBTQIA+ community, access peer support, and develop friendships and romantic relationships (Craig and McInroy, 2014; Fox and Ralston, 2016; Goedel and Duncan, 2015; Hanckel and Morris, 2014). SM can also contribute to self-discovery and identity construction (Talbot et al., 2022). Bates et al. (2020) found that some SM platforms also facilitate safe spaces for identity formation and exploration – for example, Tumblr and Twitter can facilitate diverse expressions of gender and sexuality (Talbot et al., 2022) – whilst others, like Facebook, can sometimes constrain LGBTQIA+ expression, in part because the presence of immediate offline connections such as friends or family who are unaware of sexual or gender identities (ibid).

In response to this, LGBTQIA+ individuals employ various identity management strategies on certain platforms, such as creating multiple accounts, using privacy and security controls, managing friendship networks, curating and editing personal photographs and restricting LGBTQIA+-related content to spaces that are more anonymous (Duguay, 2016a; McConnell et al., 2017; Talbot et al., 2022). These users employ 'strategic outness' (Orne, 2011), managing the information they release about their sexuality and/or gender – a strategy that can be critical during the process of 'coming out'. Yue and Lim (2022) describe these practices as acts of digital sexual citizenship, noting that they are becoming more prevalent in countries with no sexual rights. However, the extent to which people can employ such citizenship practices is critically dependent upon the affordances of the platforms themselves. Indeed, as Duguay argued, SM and their affordances provide several opportunities for context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011), and their 'features combine with stigmatising social conditions so that experiences of homophobia or fears of being discredited shape online self-presentation decisions' (Duguay, 2016b: 892).

In a recent review, Berger et al. (2022) noted that LGBTQIA+ youths felt a much stronger need to actively manage their audiences by limiting access via privacy settings, or by removing friends, noting that the platforms' affordances made it possible for these young people to connect with similar others (often strangers) and disclose their sexual and gender identities regardless of physical location, whilst also noting that, in contrast, non-LGBTQIA+ individuals reported sufficient support offline and did not see the need to add strangers to their SM networks. It is therefore particularly

relevant to examine the ever-developing affordances of LGBTQIA+ expression on SM platforms, but with some recognition that the need to connect with like-minded others online is not something confined to adolescence and early adulthood.

SM platforms and the affordances of LGBTQIA+ expression

Born in the field of ecological psychology (Gibson, 2000) and then adopted in design studies (Norman, 1988) sociology (Goffman, 1990) and communications (Graves, 2007), the term 'affordance' is often used describe what media technologies allow people to do (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). SM affordances are the perceived, actual or imagined properties of social media that both enable and constrain the user (Karahanna et al., 2018; Nagy and Neff, 2015). However, individual users will shape their use of these affordances and will have very different experiences and freedoms dependent upon their choice of SM platform (Ronzhyn et al., 2022).

Various authors (e.g. Karahanna et al., 2018; Nagy and Neff, 2015; Ronzhyn et al., 2022) have noted the difficulty of providing a systematic definition of affordances, leading to vague and abstract conceptualisations that can make research findings ambiguous. Some authors have categorised SM affordances in terms of the opportunities they offer for psychological growth. For example, Karahanna et al. (2018) developed a needs-affordances-features (NAF) perspective on SM use which relates SM affordances to psychological needs, captured in terms of both self-determination (need for autonomy, competence and relatedness) and psychological ownership (need for self-identity, need for a place of one's own and need for efficacy). They give examples of how these psychological needs map onto SM affordances of self-presentation, content sharing, interactivity, relationship formation etc., noting that affordances of certain platforms (e.g. the non-anonymity of Facebook) can inhibit freedom of expression and authenticity online. Other authors, such as Treem and Leonardi (2013: 146), examined affordances from a relational perspective, arguing that 'affordances of an artifact can change across different contexts even though its materiality does not', and that some people may not find objects – or platforms – of use at all. For them, the relational aspect of affordances is crucial, because the communications generated by the relationship between technologies and people may enable actions that would have not been possible without said relationship and each player. This is consistent with research surrounding the LGBTQIA+ community, outness, self-presentation and connection.

Kitzie (2017, 2018, 2019) was one of the first researchers to categorise critical affordances for LGBTQIA+ users across three papers that primarily focussed on the ways that SM offered opportunities to find relevant information about their gender or sexuality (visibility) and connect with similar others (association), and offered ways to both protect and explore one's identity (anonymity), using previous pillars of affordances literature such as visibility and association (Treem and Leonardi, 2013) in a queer context. Hanckel et al. (2019) subsequently described the tensions around anonymity, identifiability, and visibility (particularly on Facebook), recognising that the need to identify with an online community can sometimes be problematic for LGBTQIA+ users who wish to retain a degree of anonymity to 'feel safe'. As noted, both the Kitzie studies and the study by Hanckel and colleagues focussed on younger people (the maximum age of participants across these papers was 35, but most were in their early twenties) thus ignoring the possibility that affordances may impact LGBTQIA+ users of diverse ages, backgrounds, and life experiences in different ways.

The interpretation and perception of affordances is key when examining the LGBTQIA+ community's SM use, given that the same identity and profile-building affordances that benefit heterosexual people on platforms may directly hinder queer users. A classic example here is

Facebook's requirement to sign up with one's 'real' name, which can be difficult for those who have transitioned into a new gender identity without changing their documents (Levin, 2017). Users have their own agency in utilising and interpreting affordances: Norman (1988) distinguished between *real* and *perceived* affordances, as the latter are more likely to impact the experiences of the user. Essentially, affordances become intermediary tools that allow some flexibility in the way people manage their digital lives (Davis and Chouinard, 2016). The agency to interpret and shape affordances is key for LGBTQIA+ users, whose needs, concerns and desires are not always at the forefront when SM platforms are developed (Miller, 2016). SM affordances can support community building and offer opportunities for 'followership' or flexibility around identity issues such as anonymity, pseudonymity, image sharing, identity building or even allow for the possibility of multiple identities. These have been found to be tenets of LGBTQIA+ digital spaces (e.g. Coker et al., 2023; Duguay, 2016; Fox and McEwan, 2017). However, community-building affordances are connected with self-presentation, which for DeVito et al. (2017: 741) raises challenges on SM, since it 'occurs through complex socio-technical interactions involving the self, empowered other actors (i.e. contacts or friends), and computational systems that can obscure understanding of the audience'. For LGBTQIA+ users, identities and expression often need to be *adapted* to the affordances provided by the digital world, the perception of which differs around queer users due to fears surrounding context collapse or abuse. Context collapse, or 'an event through which individuals might intentionally or unintentionally have their identity redefined across audiences' (Duguay, 2016:892) is a particular challenge that leads LGBTQIA+ users to perceive affordances differently. For example, as Fox and McEwan (2017: 298) write, 'a comment on a social networking site profile has a far greater reach than a text, an email, or even a face-to-face comment'. Affordances are therefore multidimensional and relational, connected not just to the single user but to the communities they are addressing (Evans et al., 2017), and therefore need to be examined with the different platform communities and affordances in mind (DeVito et al., 2017).

LGBTQIA+ users and platform governance

Affordances' relational and multidimensional nature means that the creation, change or addition of an affordance to a platform can greatly affect users' permanence on a SM site, bringing new users in or driving people away (Fiesler and Dym, 2020). Design changes – for example, increased censorship of words or content, or a shift to algorithmic promotion of certain content over another (e.g. see: Are, 2022; Silberling, 2022) – can be unpopular and are sometimes conceptualised as an 'attack' against a platform's user base or community (ibid), particularly when connected with platform governance, or 'the international regulatory dynamics that currently delineate the freedoms, responsibilities and liabilities of platform companies' (Tiidenberg, 2021: 2).

Platforms stringently govern their spaces (Diaz and Hecht-Felella, 2021), particularly when their affordances facilitate 'visible network relationships, quantified social endorsement (e.g. "likes" and follows), and algorithmic feeds designed to maximise social engagement' (Schoenebeck and Blackwell, 2021: 2). Unsurprisingly, this governance has become an increasingly hot topic in politics, technology and civil society as increasing concerns about online harms (e.g. misinformation, hate speech and online abuse, the visibility of sexual content to younger audiences) have gained ground (ibid) and as the management of shared personal data becomes subject to algorithmic rather than personal control.

Content moderation is a crucial aspect of platform governance, without which most social networking sites would be unusable (Diaz and Hecht-Felella, 2021). However, studies have shown that content moderation has disproportionately targeted marginalised communities, including

LGBTQIA+ users, replicating offline inequalities (Haimson et al., 2021). Indeed, the experiences of LGBTQIA+ users on social media, and the affordances they are allowed to use and interpret, are strictly connected with how platforms *view* LGBTQIA+ content, and by whether they allow it in their spaces, meaning that platform governance can greatly affect the way these users interact and present themselves.

Previous studies found platforms' content moderation negatively affected the wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ content creators, who experienced shame, judgement, sexualisation and homophobia in a space that had previously felt safe for self-expression and connection (Are and Briggs, 2023). These negative experiences gained a personal dimension because users felt targeted by platforms and online harassers alike for their specific LGBTQIA+ identity (ibid). Inevitably, then, while SM can provide the queer community with a wealth of affordances for connection, self-expression and community formation (Cavalcante, 2019; Rambukkana, 2015), they also become a space where LGBTQIA+ users must negotiate their expression, presentation and even their identity. For instance, Talbot et al. (2022), found that since platforms like Facebook generate information that is public-by-default, LGBTQIA+ university students had to employ a series of protective strategies to manage their online performances in the face of families, friends, employers and platforms. Haimson et al. (2016), too, found that picture tags and strongly shaped Facebook identities constitute an issue for trans users post-transition, forcing them to constantly face a no longer representative identity without always being able to control it. Similarly, 'throwaway' anonymous accounts (Leavitt, 2015) and 'Finsta' (fake Instagram) profiles (Huang and Vitak, 2022) show how the networks gained on a platform thanks to its affordances may influence users' need to create multiple identities with different levels of privacy and different followers.

These strategies, which are time-consuming and often relate both to their privacy settings and to the communities users joined, included: self-censoring; not tagging themselves in certain photos; refraining from joining LGBTQIA+ student groups or liking their pages; adjusting their privacy settings; opening multiple accounts; and looking for alternative online spaces where they could express their authentic selves (Are and Briggs, 2023; Talbot et al., 2022).

On top of this, the constantly evolving platform rules, their effects on affordances and the similarly evolving and developing affordances platforms create force users to adapt their content, identity and community-building abilities, something that threatens the hard-earned trust in the connection and visibility potential of spaces (Silberling, 2022).

Mindful of the intersecting power of perceived affordances and platform governance of LGBTQIA+ content production and interaction, we were interested in asking participants of all ages about their experience of the increasing breadth of SM platforms' affordances. Note that the spread of ages in our study represents a recent move in LGBTQIA+ work towards recognising that individuals from different generations may exhibit different kinds of 'strategic outness' online. Dhoest and Van Ouystel (2023) make the point that whilst the literature highlights importance of digital and social media for younger people, it rarely discusses older age groups and differences between age cohorts, thus ignoring the way that digital platforms intersect with the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals at different ages and life stages. Campbell et al. (2023), for example, found their older cohort exclusively raised the problem of exploring their gay identity later in life, whilst being in a heterosexual marriage, and although this might resonate with other work on guarding identity from family and friends, this adds further layers of complexity to queer self-expression.

With this in mind, we recruited adult participants up to and beyond the age of 55, asking how our participants use SM affordances to (i) facilitate the creation and development of an LGBTQIA+ identity, (ii) support online and offline community formation, whilst (iii) limiting opportunities for online abuse.

Methods

Data for this study was gathered through a survey among 120 participants, hosted on Qualtrics and distributed solely via Prolific Academic to reach a wider, diverse group of participants and to prevent bias originating from recruitment via a specific SM platform. Recruitment took place through Prolific's pre-selection tools, allowing to select participants through their sexuality and identification as LGBTQIA+. Screening questions were informed by previous research on LGBTQIA+ users' online experiences (Haimson et al., 2021), and therefore asked participants to specify their profiles' aims, their age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ethnic background.

The survey included a series of multiple choice, scale and open-ended questions. In this article, we focus specifically on a qualitative analysis of responses to open-ended questions, which produced rich accounts of participants' experiences (Braun et al., 2021). This method is particularly appropriate when conducting research with stigmatised groups, affording a greater sense of anonymity (Braun et al., 2019). Multiple choice and scale questions were used as prompts for participants to later reflect upon and provide explanations in their responses to open-ended questions.

Participants were first asked to choose their favourite mainstream social media platform among Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, Pinterest, Snapchat, with the option to add a platform that we had not mentioned, and then explain their choice. They were then asked about particular platforms where they felt they needed to hide their true selves; how their favourite social media platforms helped them build an LGBTQIA+ identity and allowed them to engage with the LGBTQIA+ community; and any changes in social media usage as an LGBTQIA+ person over time. Based on previous research on self-presentation affordances (Gerbaudo, 2015), we also asked participants to share which platform features they preferred using towards self-expression, community and identity building, among the following: pronouns choice; profile picture; cover picture; bio; links; feed posts, with the option to add other features we did not mention and with the request to explain the reasons behind their choices.

We analysed the survey's results through a combination of deductive analysis, based on the existing LGBTQIA+ affordance literature, and a more inductive, reflexive form of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which can be 'illustrated by vivid and compelling excerpts from participants' responses' (Braun et al., 2021: 650). This inductive analysis captured users' relationship with affordances and allowed us to tease out some of the concerns and experiences of older participants, which as we've noted earlier, are less visible in the available literature.

To analyse the data, after gathering all responses into an Excel spreadsheet, the three authors met and thematically grouped them through the online collaboration software Miro. Quite quickly, the deductive analysis generated three overarching themes, tied to the affordances of (i) visibility (the ease of finding relevant people and information about gender and sexuality online); (ii) association (the ability to create social ties, build networks and/or a following); and (iii) anonymity (making choices to withhold or reveal names, photos, information or presence altogether). Separately, we noted the different reflections participants made about their SM use depending on their life stages, reflections that provided a fourth (iv) theme of the same name.

We conclude our methodology with some reflections on positionality. We come to this study as academics and as social media users. We are three White women – one of us is a bisexual cisgender woman in her early thirties, while two identify as cisgender heterosexual women, one in her early thirties, and one in her mid-sixties. These experiences shape our SM use, our platforms of choice and

our own opinions on the affordances allowing us to present our identity and engage in community-building.

Participant demographic and SM preference

Towards our survey, we recruited 120 participants. Most of them were aged 25-34 years old (44), closely followed by 18-24-year-olds (25) and 35-44-year-olds (24). 12 participants fell into the 45-54 year age band, and five were aged 55 and over. Note that we did not engage in representative age sampling, partly for pragmatic reasons as Prolific's recruitment platform requires a minimum of 300 participants for representative sampling, which we deemed unrealistic for qualitative research.

Most respondents were White (98), with a small set of participants coming from Black (5), Asian (3) or mixed (4) backgrounds. No participants mentioned being LGBTQIA+ in connection with legal or governmental persecution, and so we conclude that they work and live in a context where queerness is legal. This means that our survey data is more representative of the Global North, failing to capture practices and challenges of community building in countries where being LGBTQIA+ is illegal. However, given the aforementioned challenges the LGBTQIA+ community continues to face worldwide (e.g. see: Bayrakdar and King, 2023; Hanckel et al., 2019), and given significant participation in our study, we are confident that our survey can provide at least a snapshot of LGBTQIA+ users' experiences with identity and community building on social media.

Most participants were cisgender women (43), closely followed by cisgender men (35), with a small section of our participants identifying as trans women (4) and trans men (3), intersex (1), non-binary (6), and gender fluid (6). Most participants identified as bisexual (53), with the second-to-highest sexual orientation being lesbian (13) or gay (23), and a small subset of users identifying as pansexual (8), asexual (5) or queer (8). Participants found the ability to share links to important causes to be the main driver of their LGBTQIA+ identity and community formation on SM, together with the opportunity to self-define through bios, profile pictures and pronouns choice. Many, however, preferred not to post, or to closely curate their privacy settings to determine the viewership of their LGBTQIA+ expression. Towards this, participants preferred avoiding the use of their legal name or having to manage separate accounts to be able to choose where and with whom to share their queer lives.

Themes

Our deductive analysis was guided by the affordance literature and by the principles described by Ronzhyn et al. in their 2022 systematic review. This was relatively straightforward for two of our affordances: 'visibility' and 'association', which are commonly found as key affordances more generally in the SM literature (e.g. Kitzie, 2017; Treem and Leonardi, 2013).

More complex was the categorisation of affordances around anonymity and its corollary, self-disclosure (described by Ronzhyn et al. as a specific or 'lower level' affordance). Within each of these themes, we've provided an additional label that captures the result of our inductive analysis (and where we've paid particular attention to some of the issues raised by older participants). These themes of *self-discovery, authenticity* and *self-labelling* capture the ways participants have uniquely responded to the available SM affordances, using them to produce very different individual representations of their own queerness. Given our interests in the experiences of some of our older adults, we have also included a section where we

consider how the availability of different SM opportunities at different life stages is also an important issue.

Visibility and self-discovery

Although previous research on social media affordances (e.g. DeVito et al., 2017) and on LGBTQIA+ expression focuses on the issue of context collapse and presenting oneself to the wrong audience (Duguay et al., 2016), our participants greatly appreciated the bravery and efforts of other LGBTQIA+ users – high-profile or not – for allowing them to see, learn from and engage with LGBTQIA+ content on SM. Consistent with previous research (e.g. Bates et al., 2020; Fox and Ralston, 2016; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Talbot et al., 2022), they discussed the ways in which they found like-minded others online describing the kinds of content they found, typically in terms of being 'entertaining' and 'educational', but also 'relatable' and 'inspirational'. For some, this was simply a matter of being directed to online resources, or being able to read posts about others' experiences:

> 'Seeing other people's feed posts and stories have helped me verbalise and understand aspects of myself that I didn't know about before, or didn't know I could apply to myself, etc' (P10, 35-44, White queer cis woman).

Many users described the benefits of finding positive LGBTQIA+ role models to feel validated and build confidence about their chances to live a full queer life. These role models were often found in the various content creators operating in platforms such as TikTok or YouTube. They were sometimes chosen because of similarities in lifestyle, age or attitude, and participants would often have followed such creators from a young age:

> 'Seeing other lesbian Youtubers for example from a young age helped normalise and come to terms with my own identity. It offered role models for me' (P41, 18-24, White, queer cis woman).

While other researchers have critiqued the neoliberal ideals implicit in LGBTQIA+ influencer and celebrity SM content (see Lovelock, 2016), these role models can represent a brave act of defiance against widespread offline and online LGBTQIA+ harassment (e.g. Bayrakdar and King, 2023) and a normalisation of a queer life. As such, they were valued by many participants because they introduced new realms of possibility, that is, with celebrities foregrounding and thus 'legitimising' their LGBTQIA+ relationships, allowing them to become more accepting of and comfortable with themselves:

> 'It's showcased some famous lgbtqia+ [sic] which has encouraged me to build confidence in myself, had me meet people with similar thoughts/feelings/stories and I've become much more comfortable in who I am' (P102, 18-24, White bisexual cis woman).

> 'It's nice for me to see what a LTR gay relationship looks like and it makes me feel nice to see how happy they are and to see how they navigate their relationship. I believe it's possible for me' (P109, 34-44, White lesbian cis woman).

Inevitably, those platforms provided a space for individuals to express their gender or sexuality and could therefore be used by others to learn about LGBTQIA+ issues. This was particularly

important when addressing topics that were considered 'difficult' even within the LGBTQIA+ community. For example, older participants sometimes needed guidance about how they might let people know about their sexuality:

> 'It has given me the freedom to talk and engage openly with the LGBTQIA+ [community]. I have felt safe to leave comments on posts from other people like me, and be open about my sexual identity. I have also felt able to create my own posts, talking openly about my sexuality and how I want to live and identify' (p17, white cisgender bi woman, 45-54).

Another 'difficult' issue concerned the prevalent myth that bisexuality is somehow a 'temporary' or 'confused' state (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Some bisexual participants drew comfort from seeing celebrity endorsements of bisexuality as a deliberate and lasting choice, as the following quote attests.

> 'There are a lot of pages centered around bisexuality on Instagram, likely because among my generation (gen-z) there's a lot more pride around being one of us, and less of the biphobia that was so prevalent in the 90/s/00/s. I can follow famous bisexual celebrities like Megan Fox, Madeline Argy, Renee Rapp and be validated that people like me speak loudly about their bisexuality and are praised and revered for it, instead of shunned. It gives me feelings of security in numbers almost, and pride in who I am', (P52, 18-24, Black bisexual cis woman).

These experiences show the importance of visibility of diverse sexualities on SM particularly in the context of bisexuality, which contrasts with pervasive offline and online biphobia in previous years. In such instances, visibility fostered self-acceptance for some participants by providing opportunities to encounter positive representations of their identities in media, empowering them to embrace their identities with greater confidence. However, that is not to say that all SM spaces are supportive of bisexual users: indeed, other researchers have noted how harassment and exclusion remain commonplace (Nelson, 2024), but this was not reflected in our data. In short, the visibility SM afford to like-minded role models and celebrities seems to be fostering self-acceptance for users, meaning SM visibility of queer content creators or celebrities can encourage LGBTQIA+ users to come to terms with their emerging identity. Knowing that there are people like them out there resulted in feelings of self-confidence, acceptance, and even hope that there may be a joyful queer life or a happy relationship for them in future, showcasing the benefits of role models in a digital queer setting.

Selective association

In addition to learning from others, participants sought a sense of association or belonging to a particular group. They expressed the need to develop relationships with like-minded people and to contribute to the LGBTQIA+ community. As a result, they praised platforms that allowed close group interaction, benefiting from curated and well-managed spaces to express and disclose their identity and to share stories about their lives and interests, choosing where and to whom to disclose their true selves in line with previous work on 'selective outness' (Orne, 2011). As noted elsewhere (Kitzie, 2017, 2018, 2019) affordances that support association tend to be those that encourage a greater amount of self-disclosure, posting about lifestyle, habits, feelings and hobbies to a range of 'friends' or to a community group. Inevitably, this can generate tensions around self-revelation and context collapse (DeVito et al., 2017; Duguay et al., 2016) that can be resolved in different ways across different platforms. For example, we can see some discussion about the way that platforms

such as Facebook and Tumblr can provide ways to connect with different audiences, including, but not limited to LGBTQIA+ communities.

> 'I choose Facebook as I use it mainly for the groups, I'm a member of many groups on there, including a couple of LGBT groups and other health related groups. I appreciate these as I feel able to connect with others like me or who may be going through something similar. They are a good support' (P82, 35-44 White bisexual cis woman).

> 'We would use [Tumblr] to share our stories, our art, etc, and people with similar mindsets would discover them and share them, and so on and so forth. In this way, we were able to build our own little community of friends on Tumblr' (P.107, 18-24 White lesbian trans woman).

In keeping with previous research, we observed a wide range of strategies around group membership. Some participants sought a full segregation between online and offline communities, to the extent that people would only be 'out' online, making their SM communities the *only* places where they felt able to meet like-minded others. Surprisingly, we found quite a lot of support for Facebook as the platform of choice for LGBTQIA+ community-building, to the point where an over-55 cisgender white participants told us he prefers it as it allows him 'to chat freely and openly with LGBTQIA+ friends' (P44). In other studies, Facebook has often been cited as problematic in terms of context collapse (C Talbot et al., 2022; CV Talbot et al., 2022; Duguay et al., 2016) and transitions (Haimson et al., 2016), but as noted, those studies have primarily focussed on younger users, while Facebook tends to be favoured by older users (PEW, 2023)

> 'I can be my true self on Facebook but this is because I only use the platform for groups and not to connect with those I know in "real life" … My circle of friends in real life is very heteronormative, so I don't feel like I have the release there to fully be myself sometimes or open up about some of my feelings and experiences' (P84, 35-44, White lesbian cis woman).

> 'I can be my true self on Facebook but this is because I only use the platform for groups and not to connect with those I know in "real life"' (P82, 35-44 White bisexual cis woman).

In contrast, some participants didn't view SM as an appropriate space to seek out queer communities, but instead sought out online spaces that simply replicated their offline interests, disclosing nothing about their sexuality or gender.

> 'I don't engage with the online LGBTQIA+ community. I don't feel the need to, and my gender identity is not relevant to what I post. I find it easier to not use social media as an LGBTQIA+ person' (P79, over-55 White trans lesbian woman).

> 'I only need to talk about my [ornithology] interest with them, they don't need to know much about me as a person, and nor do I to them' (P97, 45-54, White pansexual cis woman).

> 'I find it easier to not use social media as an LGBTQIA+ person. I like to blend in with my anonymity and not be identified as anything out of the ordinary. No one knows who or what I am and I prefer it that way. Unless someone knows me personally, in real life, I see no need to reveal anything about myself' (p84, white lesbian trans woman, over 55).

As noted, a full segregation between offline and online communities is not easily achieved and sometimes platform affordances can play out in unfortunate ways. On Facebook, for example,

participants would strive to keep groups separate, but would sometimes be exposed by the visibility of 'likes' or comments.

> 'When I comment on unrelated posts on Facebook, Facebook shows my comment to random friends, even if those friends aren't following that content! That's horrible...Instagram doesn't do that, which I'm very thankful for! I can interact with LGBT content, without that interaction being paraded around to randoms on my friends list. This makes it feel much safer, and I feel more like part of the community' (P181, 35-44 White lesbian cis woman).

On other platforms, the ability to view someone's posting history can also become a problem, resulting in harassment and inadvertent disclosure of LGBTQIA+ identities:

> 'When I first found Reddit I made a post on a trans group asking about sources of wigs. A few months later, someone checked my posting history, found that post, and posted in another group I was posting to saying "Guys! He's a trannie! After that, I kept myself to myself and only posted funny comments or quotes from movies, never anything about me personally"' (P80, 18-24, White bisexual trans woman).

Given these examples, we can see how choosing the right platform for community engagement can be an onerous, complex task involving careful decisions about who to follow or add as a friend.

> 'Anyone who I deem to potentially be a risk I don't let follow me. If I get new followers I will immediately look at their content they have posted in the past and see if it fits the mould of being pro or against the LGBTQIA+ community. Blocking features then come in handy if they are deemed to be against' (P74, 25-34, White bisexual cis man).

The cognitive and emotional workload associated with choices around which aspects of self to share to whom is made more burdensome by the need to attend to the specifics of platform governance and the moderation policies which have been set in place. This is particularly tricky for LGBTQIA+ participants who sought content moderation policies that would both control the amount of hate speech they were exposed to, but that would also allow them to post honestly about their sexuality. This was a difficult task, given that some of the more forgiving platforms in terms of content would also be those where hate speech proliferated.

> 'Twitter also has less moderation and censorship which allow for some more adult themed content' (P103, 35-44, White gay cis man).

> 'You do have to be careful what you post on Instagram as they are heavy on moderation and censorship to make sure no adult themed images appear even if they are perfectly harmless' (P103, 35-44, White cis gay man).

> 'There is very little tolerance of hate on [Tumblr], which is also comforting. Unlike something like Reddit, which naturally sequesters communities and encourages division, or other social media websites which encourage toxicity through predatory algorithms' (P107, 18-24 White lesbian trans woman).

Selective outness (Orne, 2011) shines throughout our participants' choice and mode of engagement with social networks and their LGBTQIA+ identity, painstakingly curating the spaces, and spaces within spaces, where they can communicate it. Similarly to DeVito et al.'s (2017) findings, we therefore found that each platform and its affordances highlight heterogeneous opportunities that users take up depending on their relational needs (Treem and Leonardi, 2013).

In the example above, this individual uses a false name to engage with the Tumblr communities described. This kind of anonymity is an interesting affordance when considered in terms of community building. Whilst offering some protection to vulnerable individuals (particularly those who've recently come out as LGBTQIA+ (e.g. Bayrakdar and King, 2023; Hanckel et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2019), it can also be used to hide the identity of an abuser and thus facilitate hate speech (e.g. Schoenenbeck and Blackwell, 2021).

A fuller discussion of anonymity affordances is given below, but for the present, it is useful to note that anonymity affordances can sometimes impact on community-building in surprising ways. For example, people are more inclined to post honestly if given the protection of anonymity (Coker et al., 2023; Duguay, 2016; Fox and McEwan, 2017), although they are also more prepared to post hurtful or aggressive material (Moore et al., 2012).

Anonymity and self-labelling

Participants found that certain SM platforms offered a space where they could begin interrogating, questioning and discovering their queer identities without revealing too much about themselves, reflecting previous work showing that anonymity is an important affordance, particularly when creating an online LGBTQIA+ identity (Duguay, 2016a; McConnell et al., 2017; C Talbot et al., 2022; CV Talbot et al., 2022; Kitzie, 2019).

> '[Reddit] has the advantage of being pseudonymous, which means I can ask questions and discuss topics which would be embarrassing or too personal to talk about on other social media where, for example, my family will see my posts and associate them with me' (P105, 25-34 White gender queer bisexual cis man).

Participants felt protected by the relative privacy and anonymity granted by platforms whilst exploring LGBTQIA+ content and this level of protection also allowed for experimentation. In many cases, users could 'try out' different personae or styles, without tying their comments or their images to any identifiable account, which allowed for the possibility of quietly 'practicing' the queer life, before making a commitment to it, and we noted participants willingness to use a variety of platforms for this type of experimentation.

> 'I make boards on Pinterest of androgynous clothes/haircuts/styles and explore queer artwork. The ability to have secret boards also helps me collect ideas without my family seeing them and questioning me on it. I don't have to use my real name and I can fully explore different queer styles and subcultures' (P78, 25-34 White transmasculine bisexual non-binary participant).

As in the quote above, for some, the ability to post anonymously allowed for greater authenticity:

> 'I wouldn't need to feel like having different identities because I am 100% original and authentic. My sexuality has absolutely nothing to do with my personality and therefore wouldn't need to have anything to do with my social media' (P16. 18-24 White bisexual cis man.)

> 'I am not someone who feels the need to develop my LGBTQIA+ identity. It's part of who I am but it doesn't define me… I don't hide my true self, but I don't project myself. I haven't really addressed my relationships in social media' (P6 45-54, White bisexual cis woman).

Participants evidenced a range of attitudes around the need to protect or present their identity. Those who did want to forego anonymity and who wished to reveal their sexual or gender identity, to build it online, had access to a great many tools to help this process. Participants shared that many SM platforms offered a rich testing ground to experiment with different forms of identity expression. For those most concerned with their gender identity, the ability to choose pronouns was particularly important, as it normalised their experience and affirmed their gender identity, positively contributing to their wellbeing:

> 'Sharing pronouns gives people information on how to refer to you in a respectful way, while also normalising the process of asking people what their pronouns are, making things safer for people who use different pronouns. It can also help reaffirm people's gender identity, or encourage them to experiment with their gender' (P106, 25-35 Black bisexual cis woman).

> 'Being able to choose pronouns on Discord has allowed me to consider my gender identity more thoroughly and consider what feels most comfortable. It was through discord that I learned I am comfortable with both she/her and they/them pronouns, and I find that the ability to put this prominently on my profile has led to more people using they/them pronouns and has contributed to my sense of gender euphoria' (P96, 18-24 White gender fluid bisexual participant).

Similarly, participants found SM biographies helpful, not just to express themselves but also to limit the laborious and emotionally taxing process of coming out, or of removing potentially anti-LGBTQIA+ opponents:

> '[The bios] feel like features which allow a modicum of (albeit curated) self-expression in a way that one doesn't have to announce, which is helpful as a queer person who is tired of verbally confirming/defending my identity'. '[Bios] can also be a useful red flag, as if someone has bigoted or offensive things in their bio, you can block them instantly, making your experience safer' (P106, 25-35 Black bisexual cis woman).

Pronouns and bios are valid examples of Nagy and Neff's (2015) imagined affordances in action: by making the choice of pronouns accessible, SM platforms have inadvertently provided terrain for users to question and experiment with their gender identity and self-presentation. In this sense, users' creative, interpretive and personal choices are elevating platforms' affordances.

Images and profile pictures were also considered to be important vehicles of self-presentation, consistent with Gerbaudo's work (2015). This extended to Stories on platforms such as Instagram which allowed 'highlight' reels to remain visible at the top of a feed, as well as profile pictures which allowed Pride or Bisexual flag overlays. Such tools offered a prominent way of signalling LGBTQIA+ identities.

> 'As for profile pictures, I am able to include colours and symbols relating to the identities I have labelled myself with (e.g. a bisexual flag in the background) – this allows me to clearly connect with other LGBTQIA+ individuals and establish my identity within a group with a level of shared identity' (P96, 18-24 White gender fluid bisexual participant).

Not all users however agreed with the ease with which pronouns and identities could be declared, shared and utilised: some viewed them as a source of pressure, or as excessively performing gender

in a way that did not resonate with identity building. Indeed for some, and particularly for older users, identity experimentation had already happened *outside* of SM, so much so that they even challenged our questions about a SM identity, questioning its usefulness.

> 'I personally think pronouns are private, and resent the immense social pressure to "declare." I should be able to chose who and when I declare anything about my identity' (P76, 35-44 White bisexual woman).

> 'I don't like the widespread declaration of pronouns on social media because I feel it normalises gender, which [is a] sexist way of conceptualising what men and women are. I feel that the popular embrace of gender these days is paradoxically making it harder for people to be nonconformist' (P76, 35-44 White bisexual woman).

Participants recognised that the LGBTQIA+ community is not a monolith: different understandings of gender and sexuality, as well as different users and different demographics, translate into different acceptance and/or uptake of certain affordances. Although some may be mistaken into thinking that LGBTQIA+ people always share values and beliefs, the community is instead made of diverse individuals with conflicting perspectives on what is 'acceptable' self-expression and who is 'allowed' to adopt certain labels (Lovelock, 2016). This means users may react differently to identity building, sharing and presentation norms depending on their beliefs and stance on crucial issues the LGBTQIA+ community face, such as gender identity, even presenting views that are frowned upon within the queer community itself and that border on the gender critical (Zanghellini, 2020).

A consideration of life stages

In the themes above we've discussed the ways in which platform affordances impact on the expression of gender and sexual identity, capturing views across a range of ages. This section instead teases out some of the issues around older adults who may share gender and sexuality information more cautiously, in part because of the obligations that exist at different life stages, but also because of age cohort effects. Indeed, the oldest participants had no opportunities to engage in social media discourse in their youth and so would often describe the long wait for opportunities to self-disclose or find like-minded others:

> 'No-one really knows much about my sexuality, I previously didn't really have a voice, or my own personal voice for who I really am in my 30's and 40's... Some of the posts on Facebook have really resonated with all the feelings I have had all of my life, it's good to feel a part of something', (P77, 45-54 White Pansexual Cis Woman).

Many of our older participants were only to fully engage with SM at a point in their lives when certain barriers to self-expression had already been created. For example, it can be hard to share new information about gender or sexuality with children or former partners, but challenges also exist for those who are in a stable and long-term work environment. For such individuals, selective use of SM platforms became paramount.

> 'I can't share most of myself such as pronouns or sexuality as members of my family follow me on there' (P9, white gender queer participant, 35-44)

> 'As I have started to use new accounts, I have developed a new identity which is my "gay" identity and not known to my family and work colleagues. I have therefore move to a split personality on social media depending on which platform I use and who I am engaging with' (p59, white pansexual cis man, 45-54).

Concerns about the work environment were predominantly expressed by older adults who would sometimes seek the support of others in understanding how to reveal aspects of themselves to colleagues.

> 'I have been able to engage with like-minded people with a similar background and been able to seek very answers specific to questions regarding my sexuality as an older man. An example: how do you broach this with younger colleagues in a new work environment' (P65, White bisexual cis man, 45-54).

Older individuals inevitably acquire more 'baggage' and it is interesting to consider which, if any, platform affordances respond to this. It is well known that SM can be challenging following a relationship breakup, but relatively little attention is given to the ways in which the past can come to haunt the present. Researchers have explored the kinds of platform affordances that might support 'undoing' (Herron et al., 2017), a process that could be crucial, for example, for trans individuals who wish to remove their 'dead name' and assert the 'right to be forgotten' (Correia et al., 2021; Haimson et al., 2016). Nevertheless, acts of SM memory excision, in relationship to work or sexual partners, are not easily supported and hence the need for 'split personality' decisions where individuals operate parallel but different SM accounts.

Conclusions

We surveyed a broad spectrum of LGBTQIA+ SM users, in terms both of age and of gender and sexual identity, asking how social networks' affordances may help or hinder their community and identity formation.

While previous research has so far largely focused on younger LGBTQIA+ users' experiences on SM, we found that broadening our sample to older participants can lead to novel reflection on platforms' potential and/or challenges towards expressing one's queerness online. For example, while users young and old found the visibility of other LGBTQIA+ accounts inspiring, entertaining and reassuring, particularly within previously stigmatised expressions of bisexuality, we also found that older participants preferred to always be selective about their outness (Orne, 2011), or sometimes to not be out at all, not simply for fear of harassment or context collapse (Duguay et al., 2016), but because of complex family arrangements and associations and also because, for many, their identity experimentation had already happened offline. Their life stage was, therefore, crucial in their choice to harness a platform's affordances towards their expression and community-building or not.

We observed signs of an age split between users up until their early thirties wanting to use affordances like pronoun choice and outness in their bios to highlight and develop digital queer identities, versus 35+-year-olds finding little interest in digital queer identity formation. These users would rather acknowledge their queerness privately, for example, in closed groups or DMs, or not at all: in these cases, our findings veer away from work highlighting the context collapse caused by Facebook leading to it being shunned by LGBTQIA+ users (C Talbot et al., 2022; CV Talbot et al., 2022; Duguay et al., 2016), simply because we focused on older demographics as well as on younger ones. Our older participants found using SM towards learning and entertainment useful, but

simply sought out digital spaces replicating their offline interests, disclosing nothing about their sexuality or gender.

Still, we found, consistent with other work, that SM affordances of visibility, association and anonymity were crucial to queer users' discovery and management of their identity, and to their wish and ability to present said identity and share it with like-minded communities. However, we found that our participants used these affordances in very particular ways. Being able to see content showing LGBTQIA+ situations and life experiences allowed our users to go on a journey of self-discovery, helping them better understand the different ways they could embrace their gender identity and sexuality and gave them hope about their future freedom, joy and relationships. Finding other communities online through SM platforms such as Tumblr, Discord or Facebook offered the opportunity of authenticity, but we note that the ability to be one's 'true-self' online was not always expected or desired, and found that the available affordances didn't always guarantee that one could find an online community that felt like a good fit. Further, our participants were often wary, recognising that the feeling that one could express oneself freely could lead to problems, sometimes simply because of simple but unconsidered affordances such as unconstrained access to a 'comment' or posting history. We noted the particular care that some of our older participants would give to their community choices, recognising the ways in which their decisions might affect family members in the longer term.

The relative anonymity provided by SM spaces allowed many users to experiment with their identity and sexuality without judgement, and platform affordances such as pronoun choice sometimes had the generative, inspiring effect of giving users the chance to interrogate their identity. For many, the digital expression of their LGBTQIA+ identity lay on a continuum, starting with lurking and consuming content, progressing with some tentative public engagement with content via liking and commenting, and ultimately blossoming into full self-expression and use of SM affordances allowing LGBTQIA+ expression. And, while some users preferred to hold onto their anonymity, or did not believe in publicly expressing their gender identities or sexual orientation, we found that participants *elevated* SM affordances such as pronouns, which were seen not just as a means to express an identity and preference they already had, but also as a means to interrogate those same identities and preferences.

Lastly, participants' relationship with the visibility, association and anonymity affordances we described is strictly connected with their understanding of platform governance. Our data shows that, while SM can provide a crucial, generative space for LGBTQIA+ users, who are able to legitimise and explore their identity, and to connect with communities of like-minded people, users are deeply aware that these opportunities are part of a larger platform ecosystem made of rules and platform interests, and entirely dependent on platform companies. They were, in short, operating in environments where they had relatively limited control – mirroring previous accounts of disempowering SM governance (Are and Briggs, 2023). Still, within these affordances, users found community and freedom to explore their identities and communities, providing us with the opportunity to interrogate the concept of affordances more deeply in the first place.

In a sphere where there is much confusion about values and definitions, our paper provides clarity on the benefits of certain SM affordances to members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Our LGBTQIA+ participants are not passive consumers or recipients of platform affordances, but they become creative in adopting, interpreting and adapting them to their needs, illustrating that affordances are not simply about something done *to* users *by* technology (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). Instead, affordances are open to interpretation by the user, who can elevate them by using them to interrogate their identity and community, turning them into something users can do *with* technology. LGBTQIA+ users therefore respond to the user norms created by platform affordances

by harnessing these in their own way, to their own advantage, to self-narrate new and developing sexual identities. This is particularly true for older users, who decide to ignore, dispute or challenge the same affordances that may help younger LGBTQIA+ users thrive, showing how the digital queer community is not a monolith, but a blend of different offline experiences that generate different SM behaviour, identity management and presentation.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council; EP/T022582/1.

ORCID iD

Carolina Are https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1110-3155

References

Are C (2022) An autoethnography of automated powerlessness: lacking platform affordances in Instagram and TikTok account deletions. *Media, Culture & Society* 45(4): 822–840. DOI: 10.1177/01634437221140531.

Are C and Briggs P (2023) The emotional and financial impact of de-platforming on creators at the margins. *Social Media + Society* 9(1): 5. DOI: 10.1177/20563051231155103.

Bates A, Hobman T, and Bell BT (2020) "Let Me do what I Please with it. Don't decide My identity for Me": LGBTQ+ youth experiences of social media in narrative identity development. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 35(1): 51–83. DOI: 10.1177/0743558419884700.

Bayrakdar S and King A (2023) LGBT discrimination, harassment and violence in Germany, Portugal and the UK: a quantitative comparative approach. *Current Sociology* 71(1): 152–172. DOI: 10.1177/00113921211039271.

Berger MN, Taba M, Marino JL, et al. (2022) Social media use and health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth: systematic review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 24(9): e38449.

Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 77–101.

Braun V and Clarke V (2019) Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise & Health* 11(4): 589–597. DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806.

Braun V, Clarke V, Boulton E, et al. (2021) The online survey as a qualitative research tool. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 24(6): 641–654.

Bucher T and Helmond A (2018) The affordances of social media platforms. In: J Burgess, T Poell, and A Marwick (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Social Media*. London and New York: Sage, 233–253.

Campbell CK, Hammack PL, Gordon AR, and Lightfoot MA (2023). "I was always trying to Figure it out… on My own terms": Structural barriers, the internet, and sexual identity development among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people of different generations. *Journal of Homosexuality* 70(11): 2560–2582.

Cavalcante A (2019) Tumbling into queer Utopias and Vortexes: experiences ofLGBTQ social media users on Tumblr. *Journal of Homosexuality* 66(12): 1715–1735. DOI: 10.1080/00918369.2018.1511131.

Charmaraman L, Hodes R, and Richer AM (2021) Young sexual minority adolescent experiences of self-expression and isolation on social media: cross-sectional survey study. *JMIR mental health* 8(9): e26207.

Chen Y and Ding R (2020) What are you looking for? Understanding the uses and gratifications of blued in Mainland China. In: SS Lam (ed) *New Media Spectacles and Multimodal Creativity in a Globalised Asia. Digital Culture and Humanities*. Singapore: Springer. 3: 227–249. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-15-7341-5_12

Coker M, Quinn S, O'Neil G, et al. (2023) "It allows me to be 'me'": self-presentation, authenticity, and affordances among LGBTQ+ social media users. *Human Communication & Technology* 3(2): 2. DOI: 10.17161/hct.v3i2.18641.

Correia M, Rêgo G, and Nunes R (2021) Gender transition: is there a right to be forgotten? *Health Care Analysis* 29: 283–300.

Craig SL and McInroy L (2014). You can form a part of yourself online: the influence of new media on identity development and coming out for LGBTQ *youth*. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 18(1): 95–109. DOI: 10.1080/19359705.2013.777007.

Davis JL and Chouinard JB (2016) Theorizing affordances: from request to refuse. *Technology in Society* 36(4): 241–248. DOI: 10.1177/0270467617714944.

de Lange J, Baams L, Bos H, et al. (2022) Moderating role of coping in the association between minority stress and suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among sexual and gender minority young adults. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 52: 1178–1192. DOI: 10.1111/sltb.12913.

DeVito MA, Birnholtz J, and Hancock JT (2017) Platforms, people, and perception: using affordances to understand self-presentation on social media. In: CSCW '17: Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, 740–754. DOI: 10.1145/2998181.2998192.

Dhoest A and Van Ouytsel J (2023) Negotiating platforms and sexual identities: digital and social media use in four generations of Flemish MSM. *Sage Open* 13(4): 21582440231218085.

Diaz A and Hecht-Felella L (2021) *Double Standards in Social Media Content Moderation*. New York: Brennan Centre For Justice.

Duguay S (2016) Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer visibility through selfies: Comparing platform mediators across Ruby Rose's Instagram and vine presence. *Social Media + Society* 2(2): 25. DOI: 10.1177/2056305116641975.

Duguay S (2016) "He has a way gayer Facebook than I do": investigating sexual identity disclosure and context collapse on a social networking site. *New Media & Society* 18(6): 891–907. DOI: 10.1177/1461444814549930.

Evans SK, Pearce KE, Vitak J, et al. (2017) Explicating affordances: a conceptual Framework for understanding affordances in communication research. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 22(1): 35–52. DOI: 10.1111/jcc4.12180.

Fiesler C and Dym B (2020) Moving across lands: online platform migration in fandom communities. *Proceedings of the ACM in Human Computer Interaction* 4: 1–25, CSCW1, Article 42. DOI: 10.1145/3392847.

Formby E (2022) LGBT 'communities' and the (Self-) regulation and shaping of intimacy. *Sociological Research Online* 27(1): 8–26. DOI: 10.1177/1360780420974031.

Fox J and McEwan B (2017) Distinguishing technologies for social interaction: the perceived social affordances of communication channels scale. *Communication Monographs* 84(3): 298–318.

Fox J and Ralston R (2016) Queer identity online: Informal learning and teaching experiences of LGBTQ individuals on social media. *Computers in Human Behavior* 65: 635–642.

Gerbaudo P (2015) Protest avatars as memetic signifiers: political profile pictures and the construction of collective identity on social media in the 2011 protest wave. *Information, Communication & Society* 18(8): 916–929.

Gibson E J (2000) Where is the information for affordances? *Ecological Psychology* 12: 53–56.

Goedel WC and Duncan DT (2015). Geosocial-networking app usage patterns of gay, bisexual, and other men who have Sex with men: survey among users of Grindr, A mobile dating app. *JMIR Public Health Surveill*, 1(1):e4. DOI: 10.2196/publichealth.4353.

Goffman E (1990) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Psychology.

Gomillion SC and Giuliano TA (2011) The influence of media role models on gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity. *Journal of Homosexuality* 58(3): 330–354.

Gonzalez K A, Ramirez J L, and Paz Galupo M (2017) "I was and still am": Narratives of Bisexual Marking in the #StillBisexual Campaign. *Sexuality & Culture* 21: 493–515.

Graves L (2007) The affordances of blogging: a case study in culture and technological effects. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 31(4): 331–346.

Haimson O, Brubaker J, Dombrowski L, et al. (2016) Digital footprints and changing networks during online identity transitions. In: Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems. New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2895–2907. DOI: 10.1145/2858036.2858136.

Haimson O, Delmonaco D, Nie P, et al. (2021) Disproportionate removals and differing content moderation experiences for conservative, transgender, and black social media users: marginalization and moderation gray areas. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5: 1–35.

Halliburton AE, Hill MB, Dawson BL, et al. (2021) Increased stress, declining mental health: emerging adults' experiences in College during COVID-19. *Emerging Adulthood* 9(5): 433–448. DOI: 10.1177/21676968211025348.

Hanckel B and Morris A (2014) Finding community and contesting heteronormativity: queer young people's engagement in an Australian online community. *Journal of Youth Studies* 17(7): 872–886. DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2013.878792.

Hanckel B, Vivienne S, Byron P, et al. (2019) That's not necessarily for them': LGBTIQ+ young people, social media platform affordances and identity curation. *Media, Culture & Society* 41(8): 1261–1278. DOI: 10.1177/0163443719846612.

Herron D, Moncur W, and Van Den Hoven E (2017) Digital decoupling and disentangling: towards design for romantic break up. In: Proceedings of the 2017 Conference on Designing Interactive Systems, 1175–1185.

Higa D, Hoppe MJ, Lindhorst T, et al. (2014) Negative and positive factors associated with the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. *Youth & Society* 46(5): 663–687. DOI: 10.1177/0044118X12449630.

Hillier L and Harrison L (2007) Building realities less limited than their own: young people practising same-sex attraction on the internet. *Sexualities* 10(1): 82–100.

Huang X and Vitak J (2022) "Finsta gets all my bad pictures": Instagram Users' Self-Presentation Across Finsta and Rinsta Accounts. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 6(CSCW1): 1–25. DOI: 10.1145/3512916.

Jamet-Lange H and Duguay S (2024) "How do we do that?" An analysis of TikToks by lesbians over age 30 representing sexual identity, lived experience over time, and solidarity. *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 1: 1–19.

Karahanna E, Xu S X, Xu Y, and Zhang A (2018) The Needs–Affordances–Features Perspective for the Use of Social Media. *MIS Quarterly* 42(3): 737–756.

Kitzie V (2017) Affordances and constraints in the online identity work of LGBTQ+ individuals. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 54(1): 222–231.

Kitzie V (2018) "I pretended to be a boy on the Internet": Navigating affordances and constraints of social networking sites and search engines for LGBTQ+ identity work. *First Monday* 23(7): 21. DOI: 10.5210/fm.v23i7.9264.

Kitzie V (2019). "That looks like me or something I can do": affordances and constraints in the online identity work of US LGBTQ+ millennials. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 70(12): 1340–1351.

Leavitt A (2015) "This is a throwaway account": temporary technical identities and perceptions of anonymity in a massive online community. In: Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing (Vancouver, BC, Canada) (CSCW '15). New York, NY, USA: ACM, 317–327.

Levin S (2017) *As Facebook blocks the names of trans users and drag queens, this burlesque performer is fighting back*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/29/facebook-real-name-trans-drag-queen-dottie-lux

Lovelock M (2016) Is every YouTuber going to make a coming out video eventually?': YouTube celebrity video bloggers and lesbian and gay identity. *Celebrity Studies* 8(1): 87–103.

Marciano A and Nimrod G (2021) Identity collision: older gay men using technology. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 26(1): 22–37.

Marwick AE and boyd danah. (2011) I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society* 13(1): 114–133. DOI: 10.1177/1461444810365313.

McConnell EA, Clifford A, Korpak AK, et al. (2017) Identity, victimization, and support: Facebook experiences and mental health among LGBTQ youth. *Computers in Human Behavior* 76: 237–244.

McInroy LB (2016) Pitfalls, potentials, and Ethics of online survey research: LGBTQ and other Marginalized and hard-to-access youths. *Social Work Research* 40(2): 83–94. DOI: 10.1093/swr/svw005.

Miller B (2016) A computer-mediated escape from the closet: exploring identity, community, and disinhibited discussion on an internet coming out advice forum. *Sexuality & Culture* 20(3): 602–625.

Miller RA, Wynn RD, and Webb KW (2019) "This really interesting juggling act": how university students manage disability/queer identity disclosure and visibility. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 12(4): 307–318. DOI: 10.1037/dhe0000083.

Moore MJ, Nakano T, Enomoto A, et al. (2012) Anonymity and roles associated with aggressive posts in an online forum. *Computers in Human Behavior* 28(3): 861–867.

Nagy P and Neff G (2015) Imagined affordance: Reconstructing a keyword for communication theory. *Social Media + Society* 1(2): 6. DOI: 10.1177/2056305115603385.

Nelson R (2024) Deconstructing the Clinging Myth of 'Straight-Passing privilege' for bi+ People. *Journal of Bisexuality* 24(3): 303–324. DOI: 10.1080/15299716.2024.2332873.

Norman DA (1988) *The Psychology of Everyday Things*. New York: Basic Books.

Orne J (2011) 'You will always have to "out" yourself': Reconsidering coming out through strategic outness. *Sexualities* 14(6): 681–703. DOI: 10.1177/1363460711420462.

Perrett C (2021) *TikTok's Algorithm Is Promoting Homophobia and Anti-trans Violence on for You Pages, Experiment Finds*. Business Insider. https://www.insider.com/tiktok-algorithm-promotes-transphobic-homphobic-content-fyp-experiment-finds-2021-5

Pew Research Centre (2024) *Social media Fact Sheet*. Pewresearch.org. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/

Rambukkana N (2015) *Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks*. New York: Peter Lang.

Robards B, Churchill B, Vivienne S, et al. (2018) Twenty years of "cyberqueer": the enduring significance of the internet for young LGBTIQ+ people. In: P Aggleton, R Cover, D Leahy, et al. (eds) *Youth, Sexuality and Sexual Citizenship*. Milton Park: Routledge, 151–167.

Rogers BA (2022) Trans manhood: the Intersections of Masculinities, queerness, and the South. *Men and Masculinities* 25(1): 24–42. DOI: 10.1177/1097184X20927058.

Ronzhyn A, Cardenal AS, and Batlle Rubio A (2022) Defining affordances in social media research: a literature review. *New Media & Society* 25(0): 3165–3188. DOI: 10.1177/14614448221135187.

Schoenebeck S and Blackwell L (2021) Reimagining social media governance: Harm, accountability, and repair. *Yale Journal of Law and Technology* 23: 219–233.

Schrimshaw EW, Downing MJ, and Cohn DJ (2018). reasons for non-disclosure of sexual orientation among Behaviorally bisexual men: non-disclosure as Stigma management. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 47: 219–233. DOI: 10.1007/s10508-016-0762-y.

Silberling A (2022) *Instagram responds to criticism with shocking revelation that it will 'continue to support photos*. TechCrunch. https://techcrunch.com/2022/07/26/instagram-feed-changes-adam-mosseri-reels/

Snapp SD, Hoenig JM, Fields A, et al. (2015) Messy, Butch, and queer: LGBTQ youth and the school-to-prison pipeline. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 30(1): 57–82. DOI: 10.1177/0743558414557625.

Talbot C, Talbot A, and Briggs P (2022) The management of LGBTQ+ identities on social media: A student perspective. *New media & society* 24(8): 1729–1750. DOI: 10.1177/1461444820981009.

Talbot CV, Talbot A, Roe DJ, et al. (2022) The management of LGBTQ+ identities on social media: a student perspective. *New Media & Society* 24(8): 1729–1750. DOI: 10.1177/1461444820981009.

Thomas K, Akhawe D, Bailey M, et al. SoK: hate, harassment, and the changing landscape of online abuse. In: *42nd IEEE Symposium on Security and Privacy*. https://par.nsf.gov/servlets/purl/10295029

Tiidenberg K (2021) Sex, power and platform governance. *Porn Studies* 8(4): 381–393.

Treem JW and Leonardi PM (2013) Social media use in Organizations: exploring the affordances of visibility, editability, persistence, and association. *Annals of the International Communication Association* 36(1): 143–189.

Yue A and Lim RP (2022) Digital sexual citizenship and LGBT young people's platform use. *International Communication Gazette* 84(4): 331–348.

Zanghellini A (2020) Philosophical problems with the gender-critical feminist argument against trans inclusion. *Sage Open* 10: 1–14.